

Q & A with Terra Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow at Northwestern University Melody Deusner

Melody Deusner is the Terra Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow in American Art from 1600–1950 in the Department of Art History at Northwestern University. Dr. Deusner shares some of her experiences in working with students and developing scholarship.



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What initially drew you to the field of American art? How has your interest/focus changed or developed throughout your career?

My interest in art history was originally grounded in nineteenth century French painting and developed through my graduate career into modern European art generally, but I tended to have ideas of work I wanted to do only to find that something similar had already been done. I think it was largely the openness of the American field that was so attractive to me. It seemed that on the American side there was so much accessible visual culture to work with, and that was, and is, really exciting. I began learning that there were all of these other visual objects that really enriched the fine art world and how I saw it—what is immediately available to you in American museums and archives, in person and online, is astounding. Because of my early training I still think of myself as a nineteenth century person in broad terms, but I try to use that grounding to look at American art as part of a continuum.

What have you learned about the process of teaching and learning in the field of art history through your fellowship?

It's certainly one thing to study this field, and quite another to put it into practice. Being in a post-doctoral environment has been so interesting because I'm not just talking to art historians or historians of American art. Being embedded in a group of engaged faculty working on other specialties has greatly enriched my work. With my students, I work on such an interdisciplinary level and have students contributing to discussions from perspectives of business and economic history, American studies, and many other fields. Because of all this interpenetration of American visual culture from all different points of scholarship, there is so much going on that as a graduate dissertation fellow I didn't necessarily have the opportunity to see. The students ask different questions than I would; they approach the material from different directions. They really inspire me to ask different questions of the material than I would otherwise. One of the challenges of teaching an expanded approach to art history is making sure students understand the full context—the outliers, *and* the mainstream that those outliers were responding to. There is a process of infinite discovery that drew me to American art that is really nurtured in a teaching environment.

What are some emerging trends in American art (in terms of subject, methodology, etc...)? In what artists or topics do your students appear to be interested the most?

I've really developed an interest in approaching the art object as something that is surrounded by a whole network of visual culture and have also been drawn to studying the object's afterlife. The making of it was only part of its story, and I'm really interested in the rest of that story. It is also fascinating to me how much of the dialogue going on today regarding crucial issues in the American art world of the present still involves nineteenth century objects. I would love to teach a class about American art in exhibition, mostly studying nineteenth century art but through contemporary practices. In my teaching, I am eager to discuss what connects past to present and to bring those connections forward in a way that allows students to think about these issues as still vital and relevant. For instance, if we can go back and examine intersections between art and money in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries—how and why artists and museums have been federally supported, or not, or how the demands of patronage have shaped artistic production in America—we can learn to talk more carefully and specifically about what individual and national investment in the arts might look like today, and what its possibilities and terms might be. Students seem interested in anything that helps us connect the past to the present in that way.

How do you feel about teaching a subject so dependent on visual analysis at a time when digital reproductions are replacing the objects themselves?

There is something so amazing within the multiplicity of materials and resources we have right now. Students seem to like this, and I think it gets them closer to things that they may not have had access to earlier. In terms of digital-age technology specifically, I always incorporate an assignment that requires my students to see the object in person. I think you have to help them see for themselves the differences between what they're encountering and what is available online. Exploring those flashes of inspiration that come from working directly with an object is one of my favorite parts of teaching and that's something that I really want them to experience. There's no way to shut out how much and what kind of material they're going to be accessing, but if I can give them the tools so that they can understand the differences between those many types of objects and sources that they're looking at, then I will have done my job. They are going to be exposed to everything from scholarly writing to the casual internet commenter; I want them to be able to better parse what they're reading and understand the difference between those materials. Rather than fight it, I want to give them a critical eye for object and text.

Where do you think American art specifically finds relevance in the field of art history overall?

Certainly right now, the field feels like "American art *and* . . ." Current trends certainly suggest that for many people it finds its relevance most when presented in conjunction with another field. Scholars seem excited to see that concepts of American art are now being complicated and expanded. If at times in the past it has seemed like American art didn't have a place, then the

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challenge is to underscore that it does, now more than ever. For my students, American art is the envelope in which we experience art: we live here, we work here, we have museums here. The challenge is underscoring that and examining how this art is being talked about in America—not simply taking that discourse for granted, but seeing it critically. There is also the question of how American audiences access art even when it's not American art, and that is one area where the vitality of the field can get a boost. If we can think about projects that point to American culture as a connective tissue as opposed to a separate field, there are some very exciting avenues that can be explored.