

Q & A with Terra Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Chicago Sarah Miller

Sarah Miller is the Terra Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow in pre-1945 American Art in the Department of Art History at the University of Chicago. Dr. Miller shares some of her experiences in working with students and local art historians to pursue original research in the field of American Art.



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

I began my studies in the history of photography and architecture and urbanism, but I almost always worked on American subjects. I didn't deliberately set out to study American art history specifically, but was always drawn to the areas of art history that are most closely related to cultural history and social politics, and my interests in those fields were usually American. I started out being most interested in contemporary art, and then steadily worked backwards. By the time I wrote my dissertation I knew I wanted to work in the pre-1945 period of American Modernism and that I generally thought of myself as a modernist, more than a contemporary, scholar.

Do you feel that you've been able to approach your scholarship from a different perspective as a result of your time studying and working as a fellow? What have you learned about the process of teaching and learning in the field of art history through your fellowship?

Once you start teaching you have to broaden your purview to many kinds of material. The nineteenth century is so rich, especially in terms of social history (from which the art is inseparable). Teaching really requires a diversity of knowledge that writing a dissertation does not necessarily prepare you for. This is especially true teaching a survey course—it requires a willingness to construct a big-picture cultural history narrative that underlies what you teach, so that you can effectively make connections across many topics. And that's exactly what we're trained *not* to do in graduate school!

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

I think among graduate students and scholars there's a huge push to make American art less provincial and more international. American art is not a closed cultural system where everything has to be treated as unique to America. In my own work, I try to contextualize according to international artistic, intellectual, and political concerns, while also taking pains to particularize how such concerns are adapted and instantiated in specifically American circumstances. For example, I taught

an upper level course on gender and sexuality studies, and that proved a really good forum for taking an internationalized view of American art.

Gender and sexuality studies have come a long, long way since the first burst of enthusiasm for them in the eighties, and students are still very interested in the topics. They've become much less ideologically rigid and much more attuned to historical and class specificity. I've also found students consistently interested in photography, even when I'm not teaching a photo-centered class.

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 are pros and cons. Digital projection can be pretty terrible, while a 35mm slide can convey a lot more detail. That said, teaching with digital tools is a million times easier; you can rescale, move things around easily, keep your library on your computer. It's easy to give students visual references and resources. Nothing, of course, would ever replace going to a museum. I send students to museums all the time; it's an obligation of art history to teach our students how to use their local institutions. I want them to feel comfortable going to a museum. I want them to be able to walk in and find a painting and spend more than thirty seconds in front of it, because they've learned what questions to ask.