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## *Bully Pulpit: Is American Art History Conservative?*

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The conservatism of American art history runs along many lines, most of them endemic to academia, where, unless a field is very large (such as American history), things generally run on a limited number of tracks; conservatism as a form of conventionality. In fact, historians of American art tend to be a good deal less conventional in their choice of subjects than colleagues in other areas, if slightly more narrow in their methodologies, no doubt a result of the perpetual second-class status of American art in relation to European or contemporary art (we have less of “importance” to defend). I offer five aphorisms to combat complacency.

1. Museums are much more inclusive than universities; auction houses more inclusive than museums. The objects that are discussed and reproduced in books are a tiny subset of the art produced by artists in any period. Museums represent a much larger set, and auctions offer a fairly good map for actual production. As historians, we should be responsible for the totality of production, instead of a carefully curated canon. Those who do not actively seek out untouched material run the risk of trying to wring blood from stones. Instead all you get is dust.

2. Theories are like automobiles: most cars will get you to your destination; it is the driver that counts. Beginning by choosing a theory to frame your question and your results usually reproduces the answers you would expect that theory to produce. A great theoretical performance is a delight to witness, but most of us are merely users of theory, not producers, and few of us are so good as to perform theory brilliantly. Significant new evidence, however, remains significant at the end of the day. And, the great thing about American art is that there is no shortage of material out there to examine and ask questions of (see point 1).

3. Quality is largely a product of sustained attention. One of the reasons, subliminal or explicit, that art historians give for working on the same canonical set of objects and artists is that they are better than the works ignored. But significance is created by attention, through scholarship, exhibitions, reproductions. The more we look at something, the more important it will seem and the better it will look. French Impressionism—without the trillions of dollars worth of advertising in the form of exhibitions, books, and reproductions in all media over the last century—would look a lot like American, or Australian or South African Impressionism.

4. The dominant art form in American culture is American politics. One’s work should always be considered in light of the reasons for doing it, and the most important reason is that it should make a difference in the leading questions of our day: the issues dominating any presidential campaign provide a handy summary.

5. Communicating clearly what we think is the best thing we can do. There is a very large audience out there for intelligent and accessible discussion of why art matters, why artists are so important and what American artists have to say about the issues that confront our society. Ignoring that public is like cutting off your nose to spite your face. I have never understood why anyone would spend most of a decade in graduate school to talk to an audience only of one's peers. It is a pretty small group. A useful corollary to remember is that no writing is perfect, but ideas that are not read or heard do not exist: it is always better to get something out there than to try to make it perfect (see point 2).

And one final, unsolicited prescription: the only reason to go into academia is that it should give one pleasure, since it is unlikely to be financially rewarding. Conservatism is often a product of timidity or dullness. Why be undercompensated and boring?