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Teaching with Primary Sources

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Several years ago, inspired by the Brooklyn Historical Society’s award-winning project devoted to teaching effectively with primary sources, I began to consider a radical idea—that the Archives of American Art be included, in some way, in every single undergraduate course and graduate seminar in the history of American art. This, in fact, is the promise of our digitization program, funded by the Terra Foundation for American Art—that anyone can have free access to a wealth of primary sources online. Now with nearly three million archival documents pictured on our website, what could be more authentic to Generation Z (and so easy to download) than the personal letters of Jackson Pollock or the illustrated postcards of Lenore Tawney? What could be more transformative for the field of art history than empowering students to seek their own answers, through the critical and creative reading of primary evidence?¹

Archives are not easy. The paper remnants of the past are fragmentary and often inscrutable. Nevertheless, a note from Frida Kahlo signed with a lipstick kiss (fig. 1), a faded snapshot from an East Hampton pool party, a to-do list of daily tasks, or a financial accounting of studio expenses offers a human connection across time and space that compels new questions. As Anne Goodyear noted in a recent commentary, “The correspondence preserved at the Archives must be understood not to supply certainty but to spark new queries, not to dampen the proliferation of meaning, but to propagate it.”²

While I pondered an archives-centered world, of equal parts clarity and complication, I learned that teaching the history of American art with primary sources was already happening at the University of Denver, University of North Texas, Middlebury College, Oklahoma State University, Ferris State University, and elsewhere. Americanists were using archival materials in

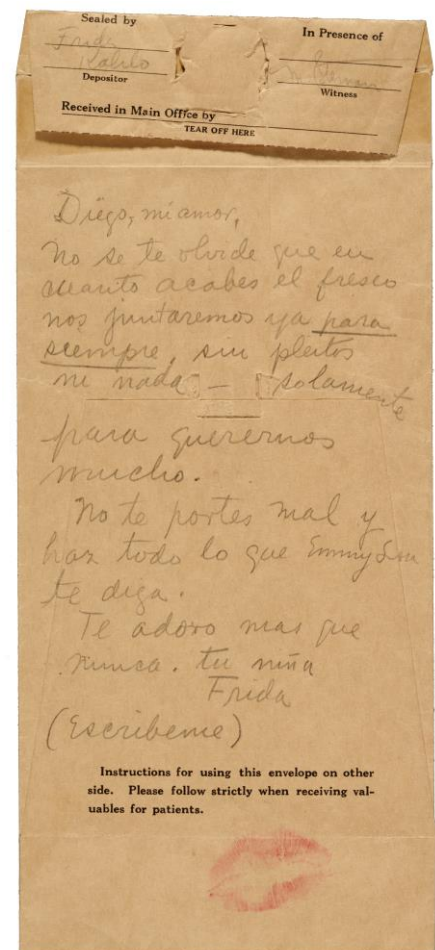


Fig. 1. Frida Kahlo, letter to Diego Rivera, 1940. Emmy Lou Packard papers, 1900–90. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

extraordinary ways. The following essays by Akela Reason, Andrew Wasserman, Miriam Kienle, and Janice Simon provide four outstanding examples.

Akela Reason, associate professor of history at the University of Georgia and director of museum studies, has been teaching with archival materials for more than eight years. In her case of "Heritage and Hate," she focuses on the few extant documents associated with the establishment of a Confederate monument near the main entrance to her university in Athens. It is the kind of public sculpture, now stuck in a traffic median, that barely registers notice, but under close inspection and reading between the lines of the written records, students' assumptions are upended about the origin of the monument, its meaning then and now, and even the permanence of its physical placement in the community. Professor Reason shines a light on the very current "heritage vs. hate" debate over Civil War monuments, but she also uses primary sources to pose real-world research problems—what do you do when the documentation is scarce; how do you grapple with unanswerable questions?

In his essay, Professor Wasserman highlights similar issues by focusing on what is not there, approaching primary sources in the classroom as a catalyst to curiosity, an "extended 'I wonder' exercise." The students in his graduate-level survey of Architecture and Urban History in the United States used the papers of Marcel Breuer, available online through the Archives of American Art, as a useful frame for narrowing an impossibly broad topic and as a starting point for class discussion, questions, and expanded archival research. Instead of looking for a smoking gun to support their ideas, students were encouraged to embrace the unexpected and question what was missing. Professor Wasserman also underscores the practical value of digitization. Though Pratt Institute is close to any number of world-class archival repositories, digitized collections that are available 24/7 on a laptop are the easiest and most convenient option for graduate students pressed for time, with family obligations, full-time jobs, and other constraints..

Miriam Kienle, assistant professor of art history and visual studies at the University of Kentucky, offers a most ambitious program for teaching with primary sources, resulting in a once-in-a-lifetime, collaborative learning experience for her students. In her undergraduate seminar on the mail art movement, Professor Kienle melded her ongoing scholarship with a student-directed focus on mail art collections at the archives to develop an exhibition for the Lawrence A. Fleischman Gallery at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian. The exhibition, *Pushing the Envelope: Mail Art from the Archives of American Art*, opened in Washington, DC, in 2018, and traveled to the University of Kentucky Art Museum earlier this year. Such an elaborate project could only be possible in partnership with the archives, and through the on-the-ground efforts of Mary Savig, the curator of manuscripts at the archives, who embraced and guided the project to its realization in the museum. It was a first for us, and as you will learn from Dr. Kienle's essay, a resounding success.

Like her colleague Akela Reason, Janice Simon also teaches at the University of Georgia and has years of experience crafting innovative archival assignments. Here she outlines creative journeys in which students are assigned an artist; they study their artist; and then they respond to either the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition or the 1913 Armory Show (depending on the class), in their artist's voice. Professor Simon uses primary sources as the catalyst for conjuring the past. Through the imaginative reading of firsthand accounts, students learn to inhabit another world. In another example, students create a "visual essay

exhibition," combining images with archival texts to construct new meanings, and, in so doing, art history becomes vivid and personal.

The four essays presented here evolved from the panel Case Studies: Teaching the History of American Art with Primary Sources, held at the 2018 Association of Historians of American Art (AHAA) Biennial Symposium in Minneapolis/St. Paul. The panel also included Erika Doss, professor of American studies at the University of Notre Dame, whose talk on incorporating letters written to Lucy Lippard in her Art in America course enhanced the original proceedings. I wish to thank all the participants, AHAA for hosting the session, and *Panorama* executive editors Lauren Lessing and M. Elizabeth Boone for offering this platform to continue the conversation.

Most recently, the Archives of American Art has joined forces with the Lunder Institute for American Art at Colby College and the Cleveland Museum of Art to take a leading role in promoting the use of primary source in teaching the history of American art. To learn more, see <https://www.aaa.si.edu/news/teaching-with-primary-sources>.

Notes

¹ The Brooklyn Historical Society project *Students and Faculty in the Archives*, from 2011 to 2013, is well documented at <http://www.teacharchives.org>. Their success was measured by independent evaluators from the Education Development Center, who collected evidence of student engagement, student performance, student skills, and student retention. Chief among their findings was a correlation between visits to the archives and increased student engagement: "After visiting the archives, participating students were more engaged with and excited about their coursework, showed improvement in key academic skills, and achieved better course outcomes than their peers." See Alice Anderson, Julie Golia, Robin M. Katz, and Bill Tally, "Our Findings," TeachArchives.org, accessed September 11, 2019, <http://www.teacharchives.org/articles/our-findings>.

² Anne Collins Goodyear, "In Conversation: Art Is Not the Archive," *Archives of American Art Journal* 57, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 64–65.