The Use of Archives in the Field of Art by Graduate Students and Researchers

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ELSEWHERE in this issue of the *American Archivist* the types and sources of art archives are discussed thoroughly. "The Archives of American Art . . . may be original letters, manuscripts, notebooks, sketchbooks, catalogues, cash books, clippings, etc., by artists, dealers, collectors and historians—documents of an ephemeral nature and often difficult of access. To the student this . . . material is of inestimable value."[1] To this list may be added inventories of estates, correspondence, bills for the sale of paintings or sculpture, and even the paintbox and palette used by the artist. At some time or another, in some way, all these archives have contributed to the total knowledge available to the researcher in the field of art.

Given the above definition of archives of art, how have they been used by graduate students and researchers? The Albany Institute of History and Art, founded in 1791, is fortunate in possessing among its archival material many of the less public, more intimate ephemeral material of such local but nationally famous artists as Thomas Cole, Sanford R. Gifford, John Quincy Adams Ward, Erastus Dow Palmer, and Thomas Kirby Van Zandt, to mention but a few. The uses made of these resources by students and researchers are almost as diverse as the archives themselves, and the end results of the research are infinitely varied. We shall try in the next few pages to explore some examples of research, each different in purpose and method.

Early in 1967 the New-York Historical Society, the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection at Williamsburg, the Museum of Early American Folk Arts, and the Albany Institute of

The author became assistant librarian of the institute in November 1964 after retiring from 38 years of public school administration, 21 of them spent as Superintendent of Schools of Rensselaer, N.Y. In July 1966 he was appointed librarian of the Albany Institute. He wishes to acknowledge the generous suggestions and assistance of Norman S. Rice, director, and Edna L. Jacobsen, manuscripts librarian, of the institute in the preparation of this article. Special thanks are due Mrs. Harold P. Curran of Schenectady and Lt. Col. Edmund J. Evans of Albuquerque, N. Mex., for their gracious permission to quote from their theses.

[1] The Archives of American Art, *Bulletin*, vol. 1, no. 1 (May 1960).

History and Art cooperated in a joint exhibition of portraits of Hudson Valley people of the period 1715–50. In May 1967 the New-York Historical Society held a seminar that discussed the various paintings in the exhibition and the research performed for it, in the hope of developing some useful scholarly knowledge, of identifying hitherto unknown artists and if necessary their sitters, and of establishing relationships between the painter, his sitter, and the community concerned. Eighty portraits out of a possible hundred or so were involved in the show. Though most of the research was done by the curators concerned and their staffs, much of the research required for one part of the show was done by Mrs. Harold P. Curran of Schenectady, a graduate student at the State University College of New York at Oneonta in the Cooperstown Graduate Programs.[2] Mrs. Curran's thesis, on portraits of Schenectady residents, illustrates some of the problems confronting the researcher in the field of art and some of the methods of research used by the graduate student in this field. Mrs. Curran says: "Art is a product of its environment. Its direction of development is determined by its purpose. . . . The primary area of concern [in this study] is the identification of artists . . . . Conclusions in this study are based on several methods of research, e.g. genealogical and historical research using both primary . . . and secondary sources; photographic studies and physical examination of the original portraits."[3]

Several problems arose in the research phase of Mrs. Curran's study. One of the foremost was the scarcity of records for the 1700's and the widespread dispersal of what records still exist. Finding the whereabouts of records and paintings involved travel from Vermont to Virginia and from Boston to Buffalo. Only one portrait remains in its original home, Schenectady. Correspondence went out to California, Florida, and Canada in an effort to identify sitters, authenticate paintings, and trace the artists if, as is so often the case, the painter is unknown. Catalogs of past art exhibits, estate inventories, and wills over this wide area had to be carefully scrutinized for any clue to the various owners of a portrait or to the artist who might have painted it. An example of diligent research is the documentation in Mrs. Curran's thesis on the portraits of Caleb Beck and his wife, Anna Harley Mol Beck. These portraits passed from the Beck family into the Van Cortlandt family when

[2] Ona Curran, "A Study of Portraits of Schenectady Residents, 1715–1750," thesis submitted to the Faculty of State University of New York College at Oneonta at its Cooperstown Graduate Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, August 1966.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Catherine Beck, daughter of T. Romeyn Beck, married Pierre Van Cortlandt in 1836. T. Romeyn Beck was the grandson of Caleb Beck. When the Van Cortlandt Manor estate was sold, the paintings were sold too, and they passed through the hands of several owners before being bought by Sleepy Hollow Restorations.

Another example of the peculiarities of research in the field of art occurs in connection with a painting that appeared in the exhibition "Merchants and Planters of the Upper Hudson Valley." The whereabouts of a portrait of Jacob Ten Broeck had for a long time been unknown. A casual reference to this portrait at a dinner party was noticed by Norman Rice, director of the Albany Institute of History and Art. A telephone call to a newspaper editor in the general area of the painting's location brought the name and address of the possible owner. A letter to this man produced a cordial invitation to view the portrait and permission to include it in the exhibition. Thanks to research, a portrait that last appeared on public view over 50 years ago was once more seen with its contemporaries, and its location and ownership are now on file for all researchers.

An example of a different purpose in research and the way in which the archives of art can assist in that research is manifested by the experience of Ila Weiss, a graduate student at Columbia University. Mrs. Weiss is attempting to establish a checklist of all the paintings of Sanford Robinson Gifford, a 19th-century artist of Hudson, N.Y. The procedure followed in this case aptly illustrates the variety of material that a researcher in the field of art not only encounters but must examine if he is to have a complete knowledge of his subject.

Among the archival materials on Sanford R. Gifford in the library of the Albany Institute are included a number of sketchbooks in which, in pen and ink, pencil, and water colors, Gifford recorded his impressions of people, places, scenery, and events from 1848 to 1862. These sketches, most of which were later the basis of oil paintings, covered such subjects as the Catskill and White Mountains, the Hudson River, Gifford's experiences as a member of New York's famed 7th Regiment in the Civil War, and his several journeys to Europe, particularly Italy. The notes accompanying these sketches were most helpful to Mrs. Weiss in authenticating the paintings she would include in her checklist. One sketchbook in particular, watercolor sketches of Italian peasant costume as observed by Gifford in 1856–57, helped to answer the question, posed by some of his critics, why his paintings of people in Italian scenes

seemed so authentic. Gifford's paintbox, carried with him on an earlier trip abroad, shows, by the colors left untouched in it, just what shades and tints he found most valuable in recording the scenes that became the basis for his later oils.

Correspondence in the Gifford files at the Albany Institute dealing with the long-drawn-out controversy over Gifford's painting "The Palisades" helped in the search for the present whereabouts of that painting. And an article on Gifford in the *Art Journal* for 1876, the proceedings of the Century Association for November 19, 1880, and a series of newspaper articles in the Chatham, N.Y., *Courier* in May 1966 provided the researcher with many hitherto unknown details of Gifford's life and work.

Ordinarily we associate research with the actual physical examination of archival material of whatever type. But in the field of art much research is carried on successfully by the use of the mails, the telephone, and the photograph. An interesting example of this type of research by a graduate student is the thesis prepared by Lt. Col. Edmund J. Evans, U.S.A.F. (Ret.), of Albuquerque, on "Thomas Kirby Van Zandt, Primitive American Painter."[4] Colonel Evans was attempting primarily to authenticate a story behind the subject of a painting by Van Zandt entitled "Mazeppa Among the Horses."

Evans' research led him first to correspond with the director of the Albany Institute, Norman S. Rice, to establish biographical details about Van Zandt, who was born in and worked in Albany most of his life. Evans was given clippings from Albany newspapers concerning Van Zandt and the name and address of Van Zandt's granddaughter, a resident of Albany, who was able to furnish more details of Van Zandt's life and work.

Letters to and information from the Old Print Shop in New York City, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, the Musée Calvet (Avignon, France), the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Tate Gallery (London), and the Bibliothèque de Chambre des Députés (Paris) all helped Colonel Evans establish the sequence of paintings and prints on the subject of Mazeppa by various artists. A secondary result of this research by mail is that the Albany Institute has increased its efforts to locate and authenticate Van Zandt's paintings and to bring its information on this painter of animals and their socially prominent owners up to date. In a letter dated May 26, 1966, Evans wrote: "This will be a start on your own more exhaustive research on this interesting artist of your

[4] Edmund J. Evans, senior thesis, Art 499, University of New Mexico, 1966.

area. . . . This was the first of this sort of research I had ever tackled, and I was impressed by the courtesy and cooperation . . . displayed by everyone I approached. This was particularly unique, I felt, in that all my research, other than local library visits, was done by mail."[5]

Research can be stimulated by accident, as witness the problem that the library staff at the Albany Institute is at work on now. Recently, when the staff was sorting and cataloging the papers of Erastus Corning I, a bill was found, dated December 14, 1838, from one Thomas Monk to Erastus Corning for "painting portrait in oils, $40.00; sketch in crayons, $10.00."[6]

Here we had stumbled on an artist, previously unknown to us, who apparently worked in Albany in the first half of the 19th century. Search of the Albany city directories for the period beginning 1837 revealed that Thomas Monk was listed as "portrait painter, engraver on wood and lythographic printer." He appears in the directories as a resident at several addresses with a studio on State Street until 1845, after which his name disappears. No Albany newspaper of the period contains any reference to him, nor do any of the local histories that cover the period 1837–45. The Frick Art Reference Library, the New-York Historical Society, and the New York Historical Association had never heard of him. He is not listed in Groce and Wallace[7] or in Mantle Fielding.[8] Yet here is a man who actually lived and worked, produced an unknown number of paintings, rendered and was paid his accounts, but who, except for the accident of research, would have remained completely unknown. No trace of the portrait for which he billed Corning has been found among the several portraits of Corning still in existence. No further reference to Thomas Monk appears in any of the Corning papers.

What may be a further clue, however, has been found in two letters from F. F. Fargo, the son of William G. Fargo, founder of the Wells-Fargo Express Company, a business associate and friend of Erastus Corning I. These letters were found among the papers of Erastus Corning's son and are quoted below.[9]

[5] Evans to Norman S. Rice, director, Albany Institute of History and Art, May 26, 1966.

[6] Erastus Corning papers, in Albany Institute of History and Art.

[7] New-York Historical Society, *Dictionary of Artists in America, 1564–1860*, comp. by George C. Groce and David H. Wallace (New Haven, 1957).

[8] Mantle Fielding, *Dictionary of American Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers. With an Addendum Containing Corrections and Additional Material* . . . , comp. by James F. Carr (New York, 1965).

[9] Corning papers.

The furniture, fixtures and decorations of the "Fargo Mansion," so-called, the home of the late William G. Fargo, will soon be offered for sale. Among the oil paintings is a portrait of the late Erastus Corning which is apparently of some value, at least to the immediate friends of the subject. If any of them desire it I shall be glad to hear from them.

F. F. Fargo.

I do not know the artist and do not care to buy without seeing the painting. [Note attached by Erastus Corning to the above letter.]

The second letter from F. F. Fargo to Mr. Corning reads in part: "In reply will say, I do not know the name of the artist who painted the Corning picture . . . The picture has always hung in Mr. William G. Fargo's private room . . . ." Mr. Corning has written across one corner of this letter, "Have 2 by Elliott and do not care for a third portrait."

Could this portrait, by an unknown artist, be the one painted by Thomas Monk in 1838? Since the second Erastus Corning refused to buy the portrait it has presumably disappeared into the limbo of someone's attic or the backroom of a secondhand dealer somewhere.

The good researcher, like the good detective, never gives up, never closes a case until all possible leads have been thoroughly explored; so some day we may know more about Thomas Monk, and he, like many others of similar anonymity, will become one of the "rediscovered painters."

Problems like those described above make research in the field of art fascinating, stimulating, and almost always thoroughly rewarding not only to the researcher but to the annals of art everywhere.