
Visiting Fellow 2017: Prof. W. Silverman

Every year, a leading art historian is invited to lead a seminar as part of the programme 'Van Gogh Museum Visiting Fellow in the History of Nineteenth-Century Art'. This year it was Willa Silverman, Professor of French and Jewish Studies at Penn State University, Pennsylvania, USA.

The seminar took place from May 28th to June 2nd 2017 and was entitled *Art and Life in Belle Époque Paris: Collectors, Decorative Artists, Esthetics*. Among the themes explored in this seminar were French book and print collectors and the culture of print; the field of Japanese art collecting in fin de siècle Paris; and the decorative arts at the World's Fair of 1900.

Programme

The program included a public introductory lecture, three sessions that consisted of presentations by Professor Silverman and students taking active roles in discussions about the various topics and finally a guided tour of the Prints in Paris 1900 exhibition by Van Gogh Museum curator of prints and drawings Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho. The aim was to encourage students to perform in-depth study of an important theme relating to the Van Gogh Museum's collection.

Introductory lecture

Professor Silverman introduced four key terms for understanding the different topics that were being discussed: newness, modern and modernity, collaboration and competition.

- **Newness:** applies to new art collectors, new bibliophiles, new art objects and of course Art nouveau. Throughout the seminars the audience was asked to keep in mind what newness entailed for subjects, for materials used for new objects and newness as a marketing strategy during the fin de siècle.
- **Modern and modernity:** everything had to look modern during the fin-de-siècle, but what does that entail, what exactly was the modern look, the modern book and especially the new modern French style?

- Collaboration seems to be at the centre of the themes discussed since many of the art created during this time was the result of collaboration between different artists. Art nouveau and new types of luxury book editions meant artists from different disciplines were working together democratically, but which collaborations existed exactly?
- Competition (as counterpart to collaboration) was an important element: competition among artists, art dealers, collectors and among countries through the different world's fairs.



The first session: French books and the culture of print

The first session entitled *The New Bibliopolis: French Book and the Culture of Print, 1880-1914* presented results of the latest publication by professor Silverman. We discussed fine book and print production and the associated collecting practices which arose when a new bibliophilic society was created that turned against the aristocratic bibliophilic traditions. The new books that were produced had a different way of binding that constituted a stimulus to the imagination, a décor and an invitation to start exploring, simultaneously changing the ways of reading, drawing more on imagination than on intellect. Main topics included the l'art pour l'art ethos of the bibliophiles versus the mercantile considerations of artists needing to make a living. Interesting discussions followed on gender and the role of woman in the milieu of rare book collectors, which was almost exclusively male, and the aversion the bibliophile society had towards women. A few examples of rare books and their productions were discussed through certain key figures in the

¹ Georges de Feure, Frontispiece of the Artist's book *La porte des rêves* by Marcel Schwob, 1899. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Library).

field such as Octave Uzanne, Georges de Feure, Charles Meunier and Marcel Schwob.



The second session: Japanese art collecting

The second session discussed *The Great Wave: The Field of Japanese Art Collecting in fin de siècle Paris*. The 1880's and 1890's were an important period for legitimizing Japanese art in the eyes of collectors, museums and dealers, marked by the opening of the department of oriental antiquities at the Musée du Louvre in 1881. We discussed who might be the agents for collecting, for merchandizing and for legitimizing in this field, the kind of objects people were collecting and the networks and social practices they used along the way. Professor Silverman introduced the protagonist of her next publication Henri Vever: one of Europe's finest jewellers, an avid collector of Japanese art, a print collector, a bibliophile and a major proponent of Art nouveau. He is an excellent representation of the milieu at the time and his diaries, conserved at the Freer and Sackler Galleries, will be published by professor Silverman next year. She concluded that while 1900 marked the apogee of art nouveau and Japonism, it also marked the decline of Japonism, in part because several of the key figures, like art dealer Siegfried Bing, passed away. Meanwhile collectors like Henri Vever moved to more affordable Islamic arts. Throughout the different lectures several excerpts of Henri Vever's diary were read in groups followed by discussions around four focus points in the text: marketability, sociability, the importance of display and the private diary aspect.

² One of the highest valued prints in Vever's collection: Torii Kiyonaga, Bathhouse women, 1787.



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The third session: The apogee of Art Nouveau

The third session treated *The Apogee of Art Nouveau: French Decorative Arts at the 1900 World's Fair*. The 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle was discussed through the diaries of Henri Vever. The history of decorative arts and especially exhibition studies were an important part of this final lecture in exploring the role of exhibition professionals like Henri Vever who were heavily invested in the creation of the 1900 World fair. He perceived the 1900 Exposition Universelle as a watershed moment for Art nouveau, that signified rejection of older styles and an introduction of the modern. Art nouveau was both national and modern, and therefore this style was used to stress the superiority of France.

Conclusion

Professor Silverman concluded by summarizing the main theme of the different lectures: print culture is indeed interdisciplinary. Print culture in the larger context of the decorative arts shows the interrelation between print making and other decorative arts, for example print makers who design jewellery, print makers who are also collectors and print makers who design book covers. The fin de siècle was such an important moment for print culture. Prints not only educated but also seduced, functioned as a fetish, decorated, created desire, competition and collaboration and reflected on the print society itself.

³ The Palais de l'Electricité for the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris.