

*Art Museum Schools: The Rise and  
Decline of a New Institution in  
Nineteenth-Century America*

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PROFESSIONAL ART SCHOOLS formally attached to fine art museums emerged as a new institution for training aspiring artists during the nineteenth-century industrialization and urbanization of America. In the school unit of the early institutions, training usually was limited to one general studio art program where persons seeking careers in fine art, commercial art, or teaching received instruction together. Study focused on copying the museum component's typical collection of classical European paintings hung in tightly-packed multiple rows alongside antique statuary casts. This new hybrid institution provided a structured alternative to the apprentice system, and became a significant presence in the nation's growing urban centers well before college art departments developed as primary suppliers of post-secondary art training.

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These school-museum combinations apparently had been adapted from three separate European models. The first model, academies offering fine art instruction, existed in Europe since the sixteenth century as an option to customary apprenticeship training in master artists' studios. These academies had been founded by collaborating guilds that not only sought to increase artists' status by raising their occupation above the level of a craft, but had an added missionary goal of reforming taste and dominating the aesthetic environment.

Another model was the Louvre in France, the first public fine art museum to exhibit masterpieces formerly seen only in private, royal, or church collections. The Louvre opened in 1793, and began to provide limited art training assistance by the early part of the next century. Although the museum offered no accompanying instruction, its galleries were reserved in alternating five-day periods for art students to study and copy the collection. At that time in nineteenth-century Europe, usually only industrial design museums such as those in the German cities of Dresden, Stuttgart, Leipzig, and Hanover were establishing formal affiliations with training schools—a combination that was a third model for the new American institution.<sup>1</sup>

In the process of transposing these European models, the word 'academy' became a general designation for various forms of newly emerging art organizations in America. Samuel F. B. Morse noted this confusing practice during the early 1800s while serving as president of the National Academy of Design in New York and offered this definition: 'An Academy of Arts is an Association of Artists for the purpose of instruction and exhibition.' Although Morse's description fit some academies, others were founded as

1. Peter Marzio, 'A Museum and a School,' *Chicago History: The Magazine of the Chicago Historical Society*, VIII (Spring 1979), 20. Ephraim Weinberg, in 'Art Museums, Museum Schools & Studio Related Programs,' *Report of November 1982 AAMD Education Committee Conference* (Savannah, Ga.: Association of Art Museum Directors, n.d. [1983]), 33. Blanche Carlton Sloan and Bruce R. Swinburne, *Campus Art Museums and Galleries* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 8-9. Lois Marie Fink and Joshua C. Taylor, *Academy: The Academic Tradition in American Art* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1975), 14, 22.

schools only or museums only, and many were organized and managed by the social or financial elite of a community who often were not artists. For example, the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, now known as the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, was founded by a combination of civic leaders and artists in 1862 as a museum only. Another exception was the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, reputedly the nation's oldest continuing art organization. Although the 'instruction and exhibition' part of Morse's definition did fit this institution, it had been founded in 1805 by community leaders, not artists; however, the governing board which oversaw both the museum and school subsequently arranged for a group of distinguished painters, sculptors, engravers, and architects to actually administer the school.<sup>2</sup>

This new institution of art school-art museum had various organizational structures. Usually a professional art school was founded as a supplement to the museum's primary functions of collection, conservation, and exhibition, and was the accepted interpretation of an educational function specified or implied in a museum's charter. For example, the Buffalo Academy added a school in 1878, sixteen years after the museum's founding. Sometimes, however, these symbiotic school-museum combinations developed in another way: the art school came first, with the museum added afterward often as an appendage in the form of a teaching collection, as happened at the Art Institute of Chicago. Still another pattern was the founding of institutions to function dually as mutually supporting units of school and museum, which was the intention at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.<sup>3</sup> In addition, a rare approach to creating a museum school occurred toward the end of the century when the University of

2. Winifred E. Howe, *A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1913), 152; Weinberg, 'Art Museums, Museum Schools & Studio Related Programs,' 37.

3. Theodore Lewis Low, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Art Museums in the United States* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1948), 9-26; Joyce Lehmann, 'The "Albright Art School" of the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy: 1887-1954' (Ph.D. diss., SUNY Buffalo 1984), 29; Marzio, 'A Museum and a School,' 21; Weinberg, 'Art Museums, Museum Schools & Studio Related Programs,' 34.

Cincinnati transferred its School of Design to the Cincinnati Museum Association.

It appears, then, that these school-museum institutions did not follow any consistent form, but evolved in different ways from a general expectation that a fine art museum and a professional art school were an appropriate combination in nineteenth-century America. Similarities did exist, however, in the types of classes available at these schools. In addition to instruction in drawing from antique statuary casts and the copying of paintings in the affiliated museum's collection most schools added clay modeling and sculpture. Also included at some institutions was a frequently controversial class in painting or drawing from a live model—usually taught separately for male and female students (fig 1). Some schools offered mechanical drawing, woodcarving, fabric design, and similar specialized subjects, a practice which became increasingly common by the end of the century. Tuition ordinarily could be paid by the term or the month for each individual course, with an overall registration fee of five to ten dollars.<sup>4</sup> Most museum schools provided scholarships for those unable to pay, with some customarily reserved only for males. Often scholarships were provided by art patrons whose attitude of Christian stewardship toward their wealth prompted its use for others but did not necessarily preclude the conspicuous and often less altruistically-motivated philanthropy that sometimes underwrote early museums and the affiliated schools.<sup>5</sup>

Several conditions in America during the nineteenth century evidently supported the development of art school-art museum combinations. Probably the most important was the need for student access to original art at a time when travel even for short distances generally was difficult, reproductions were scarce and usually of poor quality, and copying the art of the past was a necessary

4. Lehmann, 'Albright Art School,' fns. 170 and 171; Peter Marzio, *The Art Crusade: An Analysis of American Drawing Manuals, 1820-1890* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976), 7-9.

5. Low, *Educational Philosophy and Practice*, 1; Florence Levy, ed., *American Art Annual*, xii (Washington, D.C.: The American Federation of Arts, 1915), 235.



Fig. 1. The Art School—Portrait Class from *Report Covering the Year 1910, The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, Albright Art Gallery* (Buffalo, N.Y. 1911). Photograph courtesy of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery Archives, Buffalo, New York.

part of art training.<sup>6</sup> Additional factors relating to art school-art museum combinations reflect complex and contradictory attitudes toward fine art relating to industrialization and urbanization during this period. The deeply-imbedded Puritan tradition that considered fine art 'useless' and relegated it to a peripheral position in education began to be replaced, at least temporarily, by the belief that the study of fine art could be a valuable and transferable basis for improving industrial product design. Along with this were prevalent beliefs that the presence of cultural institutions could attract new industry and business to urban centers, and that public access to fine art per se would serve as an uplifting moral force for urban workers. At mid-century, other circumstances developed to further support school-museum combina-

6. Kenyon Cox, 'Museums of Art and Teachers of Art,' in *Art Museums and Schools—Four Lectures* (New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1913), 62; Marzio, 'A Museum and a School,' 23.

tions. American manufacturers were embarrassed by the poor quality of their products at the 1851 Exposition of the Industry of All Nations held in London's Crystal Palace. This, together with the upcoming Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, prompted those who previously had been interested in industrial arts education to found the Pennsylvania Museum and its School of Industrial Arts in 1875, with the expectation that industry in the city and state would benefit. The Pennsylvania institution was modeled after the South Kensington Museum of London, now the Victoria and Albert Museum, which had been established a year after the Crystal Palace Exposition to encourage industrial arts there.<sup>7</sup>

The practice of displaying industrial products alongside fine art in museum galleries further linked museum and business interests. These mixed exhibitions and a growing obligation felt by museums to offer instruction in applied arts continued through the last half of the nineteenth century and into the first decades of the twentieth century and appeared to be part of a pragmatic justification for public funding of fine art museums.<sup>8</sup>

Also evidently contributing to art school-art museum combinations were private expectations of the mercantile and industrial nouveau riche who generally provided the wealth to found and sustain early cultural institutions. As a group, this new American gentry was much more city-oriented and pro-urban than most Americans; and having increased leisure, many sought ways to test and prove their social capabilities in a manner acceptable to their peer group. In addition to political, charitable, and other pursuits, some also developed mechanisms within cultural institutions for establishing social status—in art museums usually through self-perpetuating governing boards. Ordinarily these were composed of successful merchants, industrialists, bankers,

7. Sherman E. Lee, 'Art Museums and Education,' in *Art Museum as Educator*, ed. Barbara Newsom and Adele Z. Silver (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 23; Jane H. Shikoh, "'The Higher Life' in the American City of the 1890s' (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1972), 275.

8. Low, *Educational Philosophy and Practice*, 26-27; Newsom and Silver, eds., *Art Museum as Educator*, 7.

and urban professionals who were able to use their positions to sponsor elaborate social occasions at the museum, as well as to provide studio art classes that acceptably filled the premarriage years of adolescent daughters of social elites or those aspiring to that status. Some skills in sketching and drawing by the daughters and young members of this group were expected, and it was fashionable after a formal or informal 'graduation' to belong to art clubs sometimes affiliated with the art school or museum.<sup>9</sup>

It may be that pressure to provide some suitable training within a protected cultural setting for all women was an additional impetus in establishing museum schools, as female students often were the majority at many of these schools. The Buffalo Academy's school, for example, had female enrollments ranging from an original two-thirds to one-half during the first few decades of its existence. Although some women at that school and elsewhere may have been elite dilettantes, it seems evident that many of them were serious students. Art training was needed by women expecting to teach in public schools, by participants in the arts and crafts movement, and by those involved in cottage industries. Professional training also was important for women in sectarian and utopian communities that marketed products such as Oneida Community tableware, as well as for those in art potteries, like Rookwood in Cincinnati, that developed after the Civil War. Some of the products exhibited in the women's pavilion at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia were outstanding, especially hand-carved furniture produced by several Cincinnati women who had been taught by wood-carving faculty at the University of Cincinnati School of Design. Apparently, as a result of the success of this exhibition, a lively debate arose about whether furniture or ceramics offered greater promise for the employment of skilled women. This seems remarkable at a time when women could enter London's Royal Academy only by sub-

9. Shikoh, 'The Higher Life,' 377-78; Francis J. Walter, 'A Social and Cultural History of Buffalo, New York, 1865-1901' (Ph.D. diss., Case Western University, 1958), 165.

terfuge and were actually excluded from enrolling at the French *École* until the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

Accompanying the factors that supported founding of art school-art museum combinations was an optimistic and, perhaps, naive spirit of social reform and competitive civic-mindedness that developed in America during the nineteenth century. This, together with sufficient wealth to support it, led Americans to establish multitudes of community, regional, and national organizations to provide culture, education, recreation, social welfare, religion, and community life in new urban centers. Amidst this phenomenon, where the didactic urge was strong, the art school-art museum combinations flourished.<sup>11</sup>

Typical comments relating to the value of these art schools during the final decades of the century appeared in the 1879 annual report of the University's School of Design in Cincinnati just preceding its transfer to the city's museum. For example, one person stated:

I am informed by a member of a leading publishing house, that, within the last ten years, a marked change has taken place in the book trade of the city. There is a largely increased demand for illustrated works, and a much greater refinement of taste displayed in the choice of such, not only in regard to the illustrations themselves, but even to the style of binding and finish. This change, my information says, is directly traceable to the influence of the School of Design. An examination of any show-window in the city will reveal the same thing. In no specialty is the change more marked than in that of wall papers and wall decorations, to which the school has given particular attention of late years. In fact all the industries of Cincinnati in which artistic decoration is employed to enhance the value of the manufactured article are indebted to this school, not merely for the general improvement of taste, but for the education of many of the skilled artisans who produce the work.<sup>12</sup>

Commercial interests also increasingly seemed to be served at

10. Lehmann, 'Albright Art School,' 70; Robert Vitz, *The Queen and the Arts: Cultural Life in Nineteenth-Century Cincinnati* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1989), 4, 191-94; Fink and Taylor, *Academy*, 33, 62.

11. Walter, 'Social and Cultural History of Buffalo,' i.

12. College of the City of Cincinnati. Ninth Annual Report for the Year Ending December 31, 1879; Cincinnati Museum Association 1884-85 Report, 7.



the school attached to Buffalo's art museum. Although the fine arts aspect never became eclipsed, toward the end of the nineteenth century its director stated that training there was intended for

Artistic workers in iron, brass and bronze, gold and silversmiths, jewellers, decorative house and sign painters, ornamental wood workers, designers of dress goods, upholsterers, wall-paper designers, carpet and oil-cloth designers, stained-glass workers, lithographers, engravers, printers, florists, stone-cutters, masons and monumental designers, mechanical and architectural draughtsmen, illustrators, artists and sculptors.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, a history of the Art Institute of Chicago indicates that courses offered there before the turn of the century included architecture, newspaper illustration, and wood carving along with drawing, painting, sculpture, and anatomy. Although the theory still existed that basic fine arts training was directly applicable to designing practical objects, particularly textiles, carpets, wallpaper, crockery, glass, and jewelry, this 'derivative philosophy' began to be questioned. As pressure mounted for even more practical courses, the emphasis gradually centered on originality in industrial design itself; and by the 1920s the Art Institute had recognized the split and established an industrial arts curriculum leading to a degree.<sup>14</sup>

This increasing tendency toward practicality no doubt created philosophical incompatibility between some art schools and the affiliated museum; however, changes leading to the decline of these combined institutions already were occurring by the final decades of the nineteenth century. Colleges and universities had begun adding art departments, often aided by donated campus art collections that sometimes rivaled or surpassed those in public art museums. Also, credentialing and accreditation movements were growing, and the value of a standardized degree from an accredited institution tended to diminish the appeal of art education offered by a specialized postsecondary museum school.<sup>15</sup>

13. Clipping from *Express*, February 2, 1896, in Art Students' League of Buffalo Scrapbook of Newspaper Clippings, 1896-1909, 75-76.

14. Marzio, 'A Museum and a School,' 45.

15. Lehmann, 'Albright Art School,' 166; Marzio, 'A Museum and a School,' 46.

Furthermore, after 1900 most fine art museums developed new educational philosophies directed at interpreting museum collections for the general public. This included planned spacing and explanatory labeling practices, docent guides, lectures, publications, and other extension services often coordinated through an education department; and the new educational activities usually covered in the museum's general budget tended to supersede its commitment to separately subsidize a postsecondary school as an educational function.<sup>16</sup>

An additional development was a significant change in American art styles generally traced to the 1913 Armory Show in New York City. This show, considered the 'watershed' between classic, academic art and new contemporary styles, affected methods of art instruction as well as altering museum collection patterns—often leading to more specialized acquisitions and elimination of the antique statuary casts or decorative friezes that constituted the core of many early museum collections. Somewhat preceding the Armory Show, and accelerating during the decades that followed, the old practices of copying masterpieces and drawing from plaster casts gradually were replaced by art instruction emphasizing creativity and individuality, with the result that proximity to an art museum seemed less important.<sup>17</sup>

In the same period, better traveling conditions facilitated visits to more-distant collections, and increasingly refined photographic and printing techniques improved the quality of reproductions available for classroom teaching. Also, the use of art school-art museum combinations as social arenas by urban elites began to diminish when studio art training became less fashionable for its younger members and alternative educational and career opportunities seemed to interest the group more.<sup>18</sup>

This combination of circumstances led some museum schools to develop cooperative arrangements for standardized degrees at

16. Lehmann, 'Albright Art School,' 176.

17. Joshua C. Taylor, 'The Art Museum in the United States,' in *On Understanding Art Museums*, ed. Sherman E. Lee (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1975), 38.

18. Lehmann, 'Albright Art School,' 175-76.

nearby colleges and universities, while some others became individually certified through specialized accrediting organizations such as the National Association of Schools of Art; however, many ended their museum affiliation by transferring into higher education institutions. Outcomes for some art schools that ended their museum affiliation after the mid-twentieth century were: the Albright Art School merged into the Art Department at the University of Buffalo in 1954; Herron School of Art merged into Indiana University at Indianapolis in 1967; Dayton Art Institute closed in 1974; and Columbus College of Art and Design became independent in 1982.

The institutional union of a professional art school with a fine art museum, which seemed appropriate in nineteenth-century America, had become almost an anomaly in the middle of the twentieth; and by the closing decade of the current century, only an estimated dozen schools continue their museum affiliation. Among them are the Art Institute of Chicago, the School of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Art Academy of Cincinnati, Cranbrook Academy of Art, Corcoran School of Art, and The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts School.<sup>19</sup>

Persons associated with the remaining institutions express concern about this continuing trend toward separation and its possible adverse effects on the training of artists, art historians, and art instructors. Their concern is that art schools not affiliated with a museum tend to depend on book illustrations, slides, or other reproductions, thereby minimizing the important experience of studying original art that usually is taken for granted in the art school that is combined with an art museum.

Despite changing conditions that precipitated the movement's decline, these combined institutions still are considered valid; and

19. Bret Waller in 'Art Museums, Museum Schools & Studio Related Programs,' 22, 23; Lehmann, 'Albright Art School,' 16; the author gratefully acknowledges telephone conversations during April 1993, with Roy Slade, President of Cranbrook Academy of Art; Bret Waller, Director of the Indianapolis Museum; and Ephraim Weinberg, former Director of The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts School.

20. Marzio, 'A Museum and a School,' 20, 49, 50.

the belief continues that this relationship is essentially invigorating. In a history of the Art Institute of Chicago, Peter Marzio writes that the presence of an excellent art collection makes the educational experience richer and deeper; and regardless of differing purposes and difficulties innate to the relationship, a strong bond persists between a museum and an art school. He suggests that 'perhaps a feeling for art itself is the cohesive force.' Marzio apparently speaks for the art schools still affiliated with a museum when he indicates that 'This belief in the value of art, past or present, has been the cornerstone of the school-museum relationship, and despite the eroding force of numerous problems, an essential strength remains.'<sup>20</sup>

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