A History of Art at Rhodes College, 1942-1998

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If we would understand man, either in society or as an individual, a study of the fine arts is essential. The great value of art to civilization makes it obligatory for the student of the liberal arts not only to study the symbols of the past but to help clarify his understanding of today by making his own personal statements.

Published in a 1947 catalog, the above quotation neatly summarized the perspective that Southwestern at Memphis had regarding the visual arts. The statement reflects the long-standing desire of several presidents and deans to establish an art department, as well as general discussions taking place across the country about what role, if any, the fine arts should have within a liberal arts education. The present-day Department of Art at Rhodes—two full-time art historians, two full-time artists, and two part-time faculty—is well beyond what was considered possible for the nascent department in the forties. Although it took more than four decades to achieve the current numbers and balance in studio and art history faculty, the department has nonetheless fulfilled its mission of educating both majors and nonmajors in the visual arts with marked success for decades. To understand how the department got to its current state, one must start with the evolution of the earliest courses.

Initially, art history classes were taught in the Department of Philosophy. Aesthetics classes began in 1926-27, and over the next several years, Theory of Art and the History of Art were developed. In 1934-35, two philosophy classes were created—Aesthetics and History of Art, and the History of Modern Art. The Department of Fine Arts was finally formed in 1942-43 out of the philosophy classes and cross-listed classes from the Spanish, History, Theater Arts, Greek and Latin departments. For example, classes in Greek art and architecture were taught as tutorials within the Greek Department. Along with the formation of the new department came the addition of the first studio class to the curriculum. In 1942, Robert McKnight, director of the Memphis Academy of Arts (today, Memphis College of Art; hereafter, “Academy”), taught an art and design class. However, the new department was not strictly a visual arts department as it also included music and theater arts.

Despite the establishment of the Department of Fine Arts, the annual reports in 1944, 1946, and 1947 all discussed the necessity of a department of art. Typical was the October 1944 dean’s report that stated, “I believe that one of our greatest needs is a further extension of opportunities for artistic expression. Greater opportunities in the dramatic arts and the addition of an art department provide our best possibilities in art at this time.” The 1947 annual report stated that the long recognized need for an art department was impossible to fill because of financial limitations.

To solve the problem, an affiliation was established with the Academy whereby Southwestern students could take a maximum of twelve semester hours at the Academy, which at that time was located at 690 Adams Avenue. Approved classes included Design Program and Picture Building Program. Eight students signed up the first year and the affiliation was off and running.

A large boost was given to the developing department when John Osman became involved in the process. Assistant to the president and part of the committee that developed the Man in the Light of History and Religion course (today known as Search), Osman had the ear of the president and was deeply involved in the pedagogical discussions underway at the college. Osman wanted to “outstrip the University of Mississippi, Memphis State, and the City of
Memphis with our program. He wrote detailed memos to President Peyton Nalle Rhodes and Dean A. Theodore Johnson outlining the courses that would be needed and how many faculty would be required, and came up with recommendations for spaces that could only have been encompassed within a separate building for the department. With five faculty, multiple studios for every media (more than thirty work areas), and an exhibition gallery, the department he envisioned was ambitious.

In 1950, Osman named the new Department of Art and took the title of associate professor of art history. As chair and sole professor of the department, he would teach two courses each semester and would develop—besides a History of Art survey—Renaissance Art, Modern Art, Michelangelo, and Art and Society courses, among others. The emphasis placed on art history reflected Osman’s belief that, at the beginning at least, “... the historical approach in which works of art are treated as the documents which contain the ideas of and reflect the civilizations which created them will provide the wisest program. The creative phases should follow but not overshadow the historical approach.” Finally, he felt it was desirable to establish a studio course as soon as possible so a minor in art could be offered. President Rhodes responded positively to the memo, saying, “[T]he Art field...must develop into something better than anything else in the South...” Osman’s beliefs were reflected in the 1950-51 catalog—art history predominated, although the studio classes offered at the Academy continued to be available for credit. Not satisfied with sending students over to the Academy, the college also hired Mario Baccelli (who was later replaced by Ted Faiers) from the Academy to teach on campus. This reliance on high-quality teachers from the Academy, which began in 1950, would become essential to the Department of Art as it expanded to satisfy a growing desire for studio art classes over the years.

President Rhodes, who was still exploring the appropriate direction for the newly formed department, wrote to Lamar Dodd, professor of art at the University of Georgia, for advice in February 1952. Rhodes felt that a major could finally be offered by adding an artist to the department. He was interested in Dodd’s thoughts and also was seeking recommendations for this new position. Dodd wrote back and suggested that if the department could not be large enough to offer a wide variety of courses, then the college should limit itself to drawing, painting, and art history, which he saw as a unified area. President Rhodes spelled out his own feelings in a letter to Dodd: “[O]ur thinking is that art belongs in a liberal arts curriculum not so much as a means of producing professional
artists, but to acquaint presumably liberally educated people with a number of phases of artistic effort.”

The discussions about the department’s future temporarily ground to a halt when Osman departed in the fall of 1952. Unfortunately, departmental offerings dwindled once again to cross-listed classes and the three studio classes. President Rhodes had not given up, however, and brought Dodd to visit the campus in 1953. Dodd advised the college to develop its own art program integrated into the liberal arts, starting with one art professor and eventually expanding to a second. At this juncture, the emphasis in the department shifted to studio art. Dean Johnson, who felt that “[a]rt, like religion, should not be exclusively a spectator sport,” was adamant about hiring an artist, with the hope of offering a major. The goal was realized when Henry Madden was brought in as artist-in-residence and associate professor of art in 1956. With the hiring of a full-time artist, the college was finally able to offer a major in art in 1959-60; a minor was offered in 1991. When Madden left in 1962, he was replaced by sculptor Lawrence “Lon” Anthony, the chair of the department until shortly before he retired in 1995.

Under Anthony’s guidance, the department became what was envisioned by so many before him. The classes filled with majors and nonmajors who were excited to learn about art making, even if they did not intend to pursue it as a vocation. He understood the issues involved in teaching art within a liberal arts curriculum, and struggled to offer as broad a range of studio and art history classes as was possible, given that for most of his tenure he was the department’s sole full-time faculty member. In order to fill the demand for classes, the department depended on many of the artists and art historians in Memphis to teach as part-time instructors. Among the former art faculty are Murray Riss, Dolph Smith, Peter Bowman, Mary Radakovic Sims, Martha Christian, and Betty Gilow. The department did not have a full-time art historian again until Anne Robbins was made assistant professor in 1978, although she, too, soon departed. The art history side of the program also benefited from adjunct faculty, such as Dorothy Ross, Patricia Bladon (Lawrence), Christina Dinkelacker, and Alice Hyland. Stability in art history did not return until the nineties with the hiring of David McCarthy and Victor Coonin.

When painter Betty Gilow retired after many years of service to the department in 1994, a second full-time artist, painter Diane Hoffman, was brought in. After Professor Anthony’s retirement, sculptor Carol Stewart was hired and the department grew to its largest size since its founding. Finally, Hallie Salky Charney took over teaching photography in 1996, bringing the department to its present configuration. Over the years, the department has offered painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, photography, architecture, filmmaking, weaving and fiber arts, and calligraphy, as well as a comparable range of art history and theory classes.

Despite the fact that Osman’s grandiose plans for a future art building never materialized, the department has flourished. During the fifties and sixties, classes were taught in what was called the art shack. One of the leftover World War II barracks located where Robinson Hall is today, the building was unheated and without air-conditioning. The budget was so small that Anthony—along with President Rhodes, Physics Professor Jack Taylor, and Johnny Rollo, who was head of physical plant—would drive to Nashville to an army
surplus depot to buy equipment and supplies. Among the many materials Anthony got from the depot over the years were the foundry he built, welding equipment, and scrap metal. Undeterred by the lack of amenities, both the students and Professor Anthony were prolific in producing art from the studios. There was, in fact, a certain sadness when the department moved out of a space that was perceived as an open, comfortable place full of creative energy that was conducive to work.

The art shack was replaced by the Hugo Dixon wing of Clough Hall in 1970, which included three art studios, an art history classroom, and the Clough-Hanson Gallery. Although the new quarters brought some physical comfort, they also brought new pressures. Peter Bowman, notorious for his generous use of paint that accumulated all over him and the studio, was forced to wear booties whenever he left the painting studio to protect the rest of the third floor. After years of sharing a photography lab in a closet with the physics department, a new lab was created for the exclusive use of the art department in 1994. Improvements also came in other areas. The small collection of black-and-white lantern slides was replaced with a professional, state-of-the-art Visual Resources Collection housing more than 60,000 slides cataloged on a computer database. Students now study images for their examinations on Web pages. Holdings of art books in the library have also increased dramatically.

From the earliest days, it was understood that access to original works of art was essential for the department. Osman included in his wish list for the department “[a]n exhibition gallery (reasonably large) as every department of art should bring exhibitions to campus.” The first exhibit space on campus was the main room that the Adult Education Center occupied in the basement of Burrow Library. Although exhibition needs were taken into account when the space was designed, it was not the full-fledged gallery that Osman had lobbied for. The Jessie L. Clough Art Memorial for Teaching, which came to the college in 1951, was exhibited there and in what is now the rare book room. When Frazier Jelke opened in 1968, the department took over the hallways surrounding the rose garden, where the large walls and indirect natural light provided a wonderful space for exhibits. With the opening of the Clough-Hanson Gallery
and Anthony’s appointment as gallery director in 1970, an exhibit schedule was established of regional and national artists as well as student shows. Upon Anthony’s retirement, a part-time gallery director was hired. With increased financial support from the college, the space has been renovated and is now climate controlled with a security system in place so that national traveling exhibitions can be scheduled regularly. This has meant that the range of work available to both the campus and the Memphis community has increased.

The department’s educational mission extends beyond the classroom and the gallery. In 1985, the Lillian and Morrie Moss Endowment for the Visual Arts began funding lectures by internationally known artists and art historians such as Michael Fried, Linda Nochlin, Faith Ringgold, Fred Wilson, Janine Antoni, and Leo Steinberg. The Moss Endowment now supports a biennial artist-in-residence who works with the students over two weeks in creating an installation in the gallery. Because of the gallery’s glass walls, the whole campus can watch the process of art making firsthand, rather than just experiencing the finished product. The Clough-Hanson Gallery has begun sponsoring lecture series with speakers from both on and off campus. Working in conjunction with the Department of History, the gallery is organizing a series on Peruvian art and culture in the spring of 1999 that will bring nationally known speakers to campus. This year, in conjunction with the Sesquicentennial Committee, the gallery sponsored the installation of an outdoor sculpture, Mississippi artist Greg Shelnutt’s *A Garden of Manual Text*, in front of Briggs Hall.

On the 150th anniversary of the college’s founding, it is fitting to celebrate the history of this relatively new department. Many of the department’s graduates have continued to make art. Whether they are able to work full-time at art making or not, they are successfully exhibiting regionally and nationally and winning important commissions. As can be seen from the exhibition *Looking Back: Rhodes Faculty and Alumni Exhibit, 1946-1998*, a wealth of work in a variety of media is being produced by former students and faculty.

Art history majors have gone on to graduate programs, museum careers, and publishing. Within the department itself, increased full-time faculty means there can be more class offerings covering a wider range of topics and subjects, and indeed, classes and enrollments are growing. Studio classes regularly close out with long waiting lists for admission. The department is graduating more majors and minors than ever before.

Programming is expanding. This present-day health, however, rests on the vision, stamina, conviction, hard work, and concern of the many people who have passed through the department. Thanks go to all of them—those named here and the many more who could not all be listed.

Marina Pacini
Clough-Hanson Gallery Director
1. “Southwestern at Memphis announces its affiliation with The Memphis Academy of Arts and in cooperation with it offers these courses of study in 1947-49,” announcement, Charles E. Diehl Papers, Rhodes College Archives.


4. John Osman to Peyton Nalle Rhodes, memorandum, 7 February 1950, John Osman Papers, Rhodes College Archives.

5. John Osman to Theodore Johnson, memorandum, 30 May 1950, Peyton Nalle Rhodes Papers, Rhodes College Archives.


10. Lamar Dodd to Peyton Nalle Rhodes, 1 March 1952, Rhodes Papers.


12. Lamar Dodd to Peyton Nalle Rhodes, 1 March 1952, Rhodes Papers.


15. John Osman to Peyton Nalle Rhodes, 12 February 1951, Osman Papers.
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