1-1-2010

Discovering the Hill-Stead, Interview: Cindy Cormier

Philip Eliasoph
Fairfield University, pieliasoph@fairfield.edu

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Repository Citation
http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/visualandperformingarts-facultypubs/31

Published Citation

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Hill-Stead is much more than a comfortable country house. It is a work of art, a museum in 1947; since then, for many of its visitors, Hill-Stead has been less important as a work of architecture than as a collection of pictures. Even Philip Johnson, one of America’s most important architects of the post-World War II era, failed to see its value for a very long time. Johnson, another self-inventing Cleveland, was an occasional visitor to his “Aunt Effie’s” house. Philip Johnson’s mother, Louise, was Theodate’s first cousin. But to the young Johnson, in the 1920s and 1930s when he was a passionate Modernist singularly committed to the International Style, the house was not even to be considered as a work of architecture. Moreover, it was just “a collection of bad pictures. It was very unfashionable [then] … to like the collection of art at Hill-Stead. Haystacks, by the way, had become a provincial—a man of the prairie which he loathed but couldn’t escape. Theodate was cosmopolitan but longed to be provincial—to mythologize the prairie, but on his own artistic terms, Theodate was embracing New England vernacular, not seeking to reinvent it, but to explore its nuances.

Theodate deeply believed that historical allusion could give meaning to the present. In rewriting her past she cast her parents in the role of New England gentry, just as she had once reformulated herself as a provincial—a man of the prairie which he loathed but couldn’t escape. Theodate was cosmopolitan but longed to be provincial—to mythologize the prairie, but on his own artistic terms, Theodate was embracing New England vernacular, not seeking to reinvent it, but to explore its nuances.

Hill-Stead was another impetuous self-inventor, the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, with whom she shared a birth year. Wright also hated the Midwest and was able to escape it—in his case only by petitioning wife and six children and fleeing to Italy with a lover. More importantly, he too was intent on creating the quintessential American house. Like Wright, Theodate rejected the European palazzo model popular in the late nineteenth century, which for her reeked of the nouveau money and pretensions she had detested since childhood. While Wright’s commanding talent propelled him toward abstraction and innovation, Theodate’s more modest gifts led her toward an architectural expression of pictures. Even Philip Johnson, one of America’s most important architects of the post-World War II era, failed to see its value for a very long time. Johnson, another self-inventing Cleveland, was an occasional visitor to his “Aunt Effie’s” house. Philip Johnson’s mother, Louise, was Theodate’s first cousin. But to the young Johnson, in the 1920s and 1930s when he was a passionate Modernist singularly committed to the International Style, the house was not even to be considered as a work of architecture. Moreover, it was just “a collection of bad pictures. It was very unfashionable [then] … to like the collection of art at Hill-Stead. Haystacks, by the way, had become a provincial—a man of the prairie which he loathed but couldn’t escape. Theodate was cosmopolitan but longed to be provincial—to mythologize the prairie, but on his own artistic terms, Theodate was embracing New England vernacular, not seeking to reinvent it, but to explore its nuances.

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Hill-Stead is once again to be appreciated as architecture—indeed as among the most representative examples of the American architecture of 100 years ago.
ART REALLY MATTERS: DISCOVERING THE HILL-STEAD

INTRODUCTION

A Little Known Treasure Hidden in Farmington, Connecticut

by Philip Eliasoph

CATCHING UP WITH HILL-STEAD’S CHIEF CURATOR, CYNTHIA CORMIER, VENÜ’S SENIOR ARTS EDITOR PHILIP ELIASOPH PROBED INTO THE ENDLESS TASKS AND DUTIES FILLING HER HECTIC DAILY SCHEDULE. SHARING HER STORY, CORMIER HIGHLIGHTS THE CHALLENGES AND PLEASURES OF CARING FOR SOME OF THE WORLD’S PREMIER IMPRESSIONIST PAINTINGS IN THE CONTEXT OF A RELAXED, COUNTRY HOME. CURATING THIS MAJOR MUSEUM COLLECTION IN AN HISTORIC RESIDENTIAL ESTATE IS HER SPECIAL TALENT.

What do you consider the most important qualifications to be a curator? What do you rely upon most in your skill set?

I think to be a curator you must have a deep understanding of the history of art, and you must always be looking at great art to develop your eye. I spend lots of my free time visiting other museums to do just that. At Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington, the art collection is largely from the 19th century but there are important objects from as far back as the 6th century B.C. If you can place the Pope family’s art collection within a broader time period, you can understand it better and ultimately better share it with museum visitors. In addition, the collection at Hill-Stead was amassed by Alfred Atmore Pope, his wife Ada, and their daughter Theodate, so Hill-Stead’s curator needs to wrap her mind around why and how they collected what they did and explore the ways their collecting tastes were similar to and different from others collectors in the era. Knowing about the family’s interests helps me share the collection with visitors. To do this I read family letters and diary entries that discuss what they bought and why. For a broader understanding of the family I also investigate aspects of American history in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including industrialization, urbanization, education, immigration, and women’s studies. A curator needs to be inquisitive and enjoy learning. The other qualification you need as a curator is to have an appreciation for the value of original works of art. This is paramount, as I need to make sure that the collection is secure, the environment is safe, and the lighting is appropriate. You must always consider the safety of the object in its setting because ultimately your job as a curator is to ensure that nothing is damaged and that the collections remain intact for the enjoyment of future generations.

What pathway did it take for you to arrive at your position?

I’ve always loved art and I started my college career thinking that I might be an art major, but I quickly realized I didn’t have the talent so I got a business degree instead, in health-systems management and computers. Upon graduation, I immediately got a good job. I found the project work to be gratifying but not all that intellectually stimulating. I didn’t want to read about business happenings and computers in my time off. So I went back to graduate school where I learned you could study art history. Who knew there was such a thing? At UMass Amherst, all of my classmates were as interested in the history of art and in visiting museums as I was. Who knew you

INTERVIEW: CINDY CORMIER

1) Fishing Boats at Sea, 1868, Claude Monet (French, 1840-1926) Oil on canvas, 37 ½ x 50 ¾ inches. 2) Dancers in Pink, c. 1876, Edgar Hillaire Degas (French, 1834-1917) Oil on canvas, 23 ¾ x 29 inches. 3) THE BLUE WAVE, Biarritz, 1862, James McNeill Whistler (American, 1834-1903) Oil on canvas, 25 ¼ x 35 inches. 4) The Tub, 1884, Edgar Hillaire Degas (French, 1834-1917) Pastel on paper, 27 ½ x 27 1/2 inches. 5) The Guitar Player, Edouard Manet (French, 1832-1883) Oil on canvas, 25 x 31 ½ inches.

Right: Curator Cindy Cormier examines Monet’s Graintsacks after the installation of new picture light, Fall 2009.
could make a career working in museums? My kids make fun of me because I’m so interested in art; they say that as adults they plan to never visit another museum again. I only hope that one day they too find their passion. As a graduate student I did an internship at Wadsworth Atheneum and was hired as curator of a small historic house-museum in Holyoke, Massachusetts, called Wisteriahust Museum. These were my formative experiences—one at a large art museum with a vast and important art collection, and one at a small historic house that was once home to a wealthy industrialist and his family. Then I landed a terrific job in the education department at the Wadsworth Atheneum. As a museum educator, I developed my passion for the visitor experience and personally took thousands of people, young and old, around the museum. I spent eight years at the Wadsworth Atheneum and I’ve been at HSM for 12 years. HSM is an incredible historic site with buildings, grounds, architecture, and interior design filled with world-class art. We have what I think is the perfect mix of everything, and with a smaller staff—as both curator and educator—I have more diverse responsibilities and get to learn about art and so much more.

At Hill-Stead I find it interesting to think about living with great works of art as the Pope family did. In an art museum it’s more about what the exhibition curator wants you to know, but at Hill-Stead it’s a family story. You can imagine yourself curled up on a sofa with your favorite novel in front of a painting by Claude Monet. It’s a complete immersion in the world of art—in many ways connecting to something from the past. They had their art all around them, both inside their house and outside it, in their garden, and around the estate. You can really feel it when you walk around the site. Now that I’m a homeowner, everything I’ve learned at Hill-Stead—be it art history, garden and landscape design, architecture, geology, botany, history—all of that knowledge I take home to curate my living room or design my garden. It is really fun to take that experience home with me.

What are the most significant changes you have seen in your 12 years at Hill-Stead?
I have seen the museum become a greater force in the Greater Hartford cultural community. I’m also convinced more people...
wanted to install bright, cooler lights that illuminate the paintings better. For this project, we had to first find a good supplier for the picture lights. Then we had to put together a budget and raise the money for them. We got 15 of our best friends to donate the money to buy the fixtures and then installed them. A small project like this took months of preparations in terms of the research, fundraising, and installation, but the benefits will last for years.

We operate on a very limited budget so once you decide on a project you have to raise all the money to make it happen, and sometimes you never finish the project because the money doesn’t materialize. We’ve been trying to raise the funds for new carpeting for several years now but still have a long way to go.

There’s cleaning that happens on Monday. People are always asking who dusts and who vacuums. All this happens on Mondays. It’s also the day to upgrade the mechanical systems, such as heating and air condition and fire detection and suppression. Just like at your home, there’s always something that needs fixing, painting, or oiling. There’s a lot of caring for the home.

How has the museum been affected by the economic downturn?

The economic downturn has certainly been difficult for the not-for-profit cultural communities. We’ve always lived on a very, very tight budget and we have a small endowment. Unlike large art museums, we don’t actively collect and so we don’t have the expenses of adding to our collection, nor do we host big exhibitions. It’s really our public programs that keep the public coming back to HS. Take our farmers market. In hosting this, we partner with more than 15 local farmers who come here once a week and set up tables. They bring quite a few people onto our property to experience the beauty and to support HS by making people more aware of this beautiful place.

We have to continue to find a way to remain vital so people will want to visit our site and continue to support us. The farmer’s market has done that, as has the annual poetry and music festival. That’s a whole group of interns that come all summer long to listen to music and poetry in our Sunken Garden. In presenting the festival we partner with local and national poets, which is really a blessing. It’s a great way to support and bring bigger visibility, public interest, and public support.

I am very fortunate to come to work here every day, and it is a privilege. But the responsibility of making sure we have the resources to keep this place up requires a lot of support from friends and members who love you, care about your mission, and want to make a donation to help keep this going here.

Can you share some of the most rewarding experiences you’ve had?

First I would like to say that to be able to walk through HS all by myself as the curator where there is no one else in the house, when the light is coming through the window illuminating Monet’s Grainstacks, White Frost Effect, is magical. You gain an immense appreciation for the beauty of such a picture. Every time you see it it’s different, every day it’s different.

My real passion, however, is giving tours. Once a person steps across the threshold and into the dining room he or she is transported. The china sparkles on the table, paintings are illuminated by their gift frames, and the scale of the rooms is both grand and intimate. For many people it stimulates memories of a fancy dinner they went to or silverware their grandmother had or the carpeting in a hotel they stayed at. People find a connection to it and often feel privileged to be in such a beautiful place. I lean quite a lot from the people I take around as they share what they’ve learned about different things or about their experiences. It really is a great place for exchange of ideas and knowledge.

What sorts of activities are going on this Fall?

Leaf peeping is in high gear and it’s the perfect time to visit Farmington, a quintessential New England town. George Washington called Farmington the village of beautiful homes and the description remains true today. Coming up the hill from the village and down the driveway to Hill-Stead you travel down a maple-tree-lined driveway ablaze with yellows and oranges. In fact there are more maple trees on the property than any other kind of tree and it’s the maple tree that gives New England its distinct fall foliage.

We have a fall Hay Day with hayrides, scarecrow making, and trail walks so you can celebrate the season. The Sunken Garden first something in bloom throughout September. HS has it all: woodlands, meadows, beautiful architecture, and gardens.

It’s not just a walk in the woods, it’s not just a fine arts museum—it really will appeal to more people in your family than just a hike or just an art museum.

I love hiking and I love art museums, but if you’re trying to appeal to many people HS really does have it all, or more to offer than a strictly art museum.

Philip Eliasoph, Ph.D. is a Professor of Art History at Fairfield University. He teaches a spectrum of classes on Italian Renaissance, and American art. Among his favorite courses is the “Museum Studies” class—calling it: “a museum without walls.” Experience, he has introduced generations of undergraduate and lifelong learning students to the special collections and paintings at Connecticut’s museums and history sites. This is one of only two sites from his “unsurpassed pleasure whenever I drive students through the stone gates of the Hill-Stead up a winding lane in Farmington—we always come away refreshed in the knowledge that Art Really Matters.”