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Talk for Bill Clark's dinner, Dec. 7, 2000: In Praise of Archives

Original intention to speak of Addiss/Seo ptgs. and calligs. – made list of twenty-odd that seemed to me of special importance and Quality. But an experience some months ago trying to show slides in banquet hall –

(Introductory remarks. A long time since I've attempted to talk w/o slides: too awkward in banquet hall. Etc.)

Instead, unillustrated talk titled "In Praise of Archives."

Of all the types of scholarly production, archives are probably, in the general view, the least attractive. I 've sat listening to a candidate being interviewed for a teaching job shoot down all his chances by describing the main project he was working on as a kind of archive. I served for some years on a committee, the Getty Publications Committee, which gave subventions to enable art history books to be published, or to be published with more ample illustration; lowest in the ranking of the kinds of books we aimed at supporting were archives. (We ended up supporting more than we wanted to, since other, sexier kinds of books typically had less need for outside funding, and could make it on their own.)

Archives are commonly thought of as the products of hugely time-consuming expenditures of patient, more or less mindless work, the accumulation and organization of data, whether written or pictorial. Archives on the old model may seem even further reduced in value in the age of the computer, since they are half of what computers do best: databases are essentially electronic archives. The other thing that computers do best is an equally mindless kind of analysis, which takes on significance only when a human mind derives from it ideas and meaningful observations. My son Nicholas, an archaeologist, began his doctoral dissertation by spending two years feeding data from the excavation of an ancient city, Olynthos, into an enormous database on his MacIntosh; he could then use it

to call up patterns in the distribution of certain types of finds in houses and districts, which in turn permitted some groundbreaking conclusions about the economic layout of the city, and more broadly, about the economy of the ancient world. (His book based on all this will be published in two versions, one scholarly and the other readable, by the Yale University Press. Meanwhile, the database, quite unreadable but nonetheless useful, will be made available on the internet.)

An archive, then, is only the grounding, but very often an indispensable grounding, for two further operations: analysis and interpretation. For western art history the archival compilations have usually been carried out and published long enough in the past that, while new data is forever appearing, scholars can for the most part draw on the painstaking work of predecessors in producing writings of a more analytical and interpretative character--or, as more commonly today, specially slanted revisionist readings of the works of art.

Anyone who has been seriously engaged in studies of Chinese and Japanese art over the past half-century, on the other hand, knows that the same is far from true for us. The Chinese have produced "encyclopedias" of excerpts from older writings, in a scissors-and-paste fashion, on most any subject one can think of, including art; but these are compilations, not archives. Photographic archives for Chinese painting have, to be sure, been undertaken in recent years, and exist in three places: Ann Arbor, Tokyo, and (potentially) Beijing. Brought together (a dream I've long entertained) and

computer-indexed by various criteria or fields, they could permit studies of a kind not possible now, studies based on a comprehensive grasp and control of a major segment, at least, of the extant body of material. But this is still far in the future, if it ever happens at all. For Japanese painting, despite a few recent starts at archive compilation, the situation is worse: it's often difficult, in studying an artist, to get beyond the so-called *daihyôsaku* or "representative works" that are reproduced over and over, or regularly borrowed for exhibitions.

I myself, from the time I entered the field a half-century ago, have been a persistent compiler both of indexes of paintings (taking up from where Osvald Siren and others left off) that were then published or made available as databases, and of huge cardfiles of a kind that the computer has now supplanted. So far as I know, only Howard Rogers has done this more obsessively than I, over many years, and drawn on them very productively in his writings, which are accordingly deeply informed.

But what we are chiefly celebrating here tonight is still another kind of archive, the kind made up mainly of color slides. In principle, this kind could also be carried on a computer, but the amount of storage space needed to store sharp images of thousands of slides is for now beyond the individual user's reach. (Project Perseus, which stores and makes available both classical texts and images of classical archaeology--Nicholas was for several years in charge of the latter, and showed me how it works--is an example we may someday imitate.) Individual scholars, then, make their own slide

archives as they go about seeing and studying works of art; these typically go far beyond what any departmental or museum slide collection would want to include, for reasons of space and the cost of cataloguing.

As a footnote to the history of slide use, I would note that slides were not always recognized as suitable for teaching and study: I recall being told, in the early 1950s, that the Institute of Fine Arts in New York had decided not to use them, since the colors could never be quite true to the originals, and black-and-white slides (big glass ones) at least did not deceive the viewer. Lectures on Chinese art history through the 1950s, such as those by my teacher Max Loehr, were illustrated mostly with slides made from the fuzzy black-and-white reproductions in *Ku-kung shu-hua chi* (the Palace Museum Monthly) and other publications; we had, for instance, no sense of the delights lurking in odd crannies of the Fan K'uan and Kuo Hsi landscapes. The massive slide-making project that accompanied the Chinese Art Treasures exhibition of 1960-61, with sets of original slides distributed at cost to a large number of teaching institutions and museums that were seriously engaged with Chinese art, changed all that forever.

I myself began what turned into a kind of archive for Chinese and Japanese painting when I realized, some time back in the late 50s or early 60s, how easy it is to make slides from Far Eastern paintings. Our colleagues who work on oil paintings have a much harder time, since the varnished surfaces of their pictures reflect the light back into the camera, causing glare. Those who work on

medieval manuscripts, or prints, are more in the situation we are, and are likely therefore to be prodigious slide-makers, as some of us are. With my trusty Nikon and its Speedlight and ringlight, and a rechargeable battery pack, I could make slides of most everything I saw on numerous trips to Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, or (later) China, along with western museums and collections. With a close-up lens one could shoot seals and signatures, or small details of drawing, to be studied at leisure later. The old slow Kodachrome film, completely without grain, allowed this--at least so long as my eyes were good enough (as they ~~are not now~~ no longer are) to get the focus exactly right.

Slides are ideal for the handscroll and album forms used in Chinese and Japanese painting, since you can shoot them as fast as you can turn the leaves of the album or roll the handscroll, section by section, and then shoot details as you turn or roll back. With hanging scrolls, you can make an all-over and a series of details, a grouping which, in turn, lends itself to the double-projection system that is standard today, with the viewers seeing the whole composition on one side while being drawn in to move over its surface (led by the lecturer) and look at details up close on the other. And, as all good lecturers on art soon discover, we have an important advantage over those who talk about other subjects: where the musicologist must play the piece or excerpt and then talk about it (or the other way around) and the literary scholar must read his poem or quotation and then comment on it, we have a perfect, simultaneous triangular relationship between the work of art on the screen, us talking about it, and the viewer/listener

absorbing both, sight and sound, all at once. Any art historian who does not make full use of this very special capacity is sacrificing one of our principal strengths.

Color slides have also become, for many of us, the best access to the works for purposes of research and writing, for studying the paintings and formulating our analyses and commentary. The heavily visual approach that some of us adopted early in our careers was partly the outcome of the technical ease and inexpensiveness of slidemaking. Slides are small, and easy to sort and lay out on slide-tables. (A story I was told from the age of black-and-white photograph-based art history illustrates the difference: the great medievalist Charles Rufus Morey at Princeton laying out a large number of mounted photos for a certain project on the floor of a gymnasium, then sitting on a tall ladder with binoculars, calling down to students who scurried around arranging them in the patterns he directed.) I myself typically begin a project, whether an article or a lecture or the chapter of a book, by pulling out the relevant slides and arranging them on the slide viewer. Beginning a seminar, I would lay out labeled boxes of slides in the seminar room, cautioning the students against getting scratches or fingerprints on them. The big problem comes, as we all know, when one wants to turn the lecture or symposium paper into a publishable article, and realizes that one cannot simply send off one's slides to the publisher and have them all reproduced. Assembling photos and publication permissions is the drudgery part of an operation that up to that time had been a pleasure. Slides can, however, be used effectively for reproduction, although

publishers typically prefer larger transparencies made by professionals in the museums. In my *Compelling Image* book published by the Harvard University Press, the best of the color reproductions are the ones made from my 35 mm. slides, and the worst (quite bad) the ones ordered at some trouble and expense from the Palace Museum in Taipei, or the Boston Museum of Fine Arts just across the river.

Now I want to suggest, in an ideal and schematic way, how one *uses* an archive. In the course of my many years of teaching and lecturing I've offered several metaphorical models for how art-historical scholarly projects are planned and undertaken. Usually they were presented with blackboards, but since a blackboard is as unsuited to a banquet hall as slide projectors are, I will again have to ask you all to imagine or envision my diagrams, like members of an esoteric Buddhist cult making a mandala appear miraculously in the air before them, by a collective effort of visualization.

In the first model, we are embarking on a large-scale study of an individual painter--as dissertation writers in certain graduate programs typically did in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s--less frequently after that, when interests turned to topics of other kinds. Let's say the artist is Ni Tsan, who is represented in our diagram by a big circle with an N in it, in the exact center (like Vairocana Buddha in a proper mandala.) Around this one organizes one's data, which one takes from an archive, from cardfiles, whatever is available. On one side are a lot of little numbered circles with NP in them, for Ni Tsan paintings; some are NDPs, for Ni Tsan dated paintings. On the other

side are more numbered circles, with NB in them for items of biographical information on Ni Tsan, again with some of them dated. NWs, above, are writings by Ni; NOs (O for opinions) below, writings about him by others. And other cluster-categories of data concerning Ni Tsan, as one wishes. And surrounding all these are potentially much larger clusters of bits of data that make up Ni Tsan's surroundings, comprising the political, social, economic and intellectual history of his time, as well as the artistic, the total context within which he worked.

Now, once this mandala is complete, the N in the center can be rubbed out, since the totality of all the rest, for our purposes, *is* Ni Tsan, as we can recover and know and study him. This mandala without a center serves as a gameboard on which one plays the Ni Tsan games that one chooses. One can take a needle and thread and go through all the NDPs, Ni Tsan's dated paintings, attach to these in some way the NPs, the undated ones, pull the thread out straight, and presto, there is the outline of Ni Tsan's stylistic development over his career. Similarly, all the NBs or bits of biographical information can be threaded in order, the thread pulled straight, and Ni's biography written. But these are linear, one-dimensional games, the simplest and dullest. Two-dimensional games make the obvious connections on the flat surface, joining adjacent fields, linking Ni's style to other painting of his time, placing the circumstances of his life within contemporary political-economic history, and so forth. These are the stuff of most doctoral dissertations. Three-dimensional studies, the most interesting, become possible when one can lift out over the surface in great

arching movements, making connections that are not obvious at all between seemingly far-spaced circumstances, relating some element of style or motif in Ni Tsan's painting, perhaps, to a development in late Yüan literary theory, or some religious doctrine of the time, or an historical event. (I am talking of a process something like the so-called New Historicism devised by my friend and colleague at Berkeley Stephen Greenblatt.) When such relationships are convincingly argued, so that the masonry of the arches is solid, our two-dimensional mandala becomes only the base, or flooring, for an awesome ~~three-dimensional~~ architectural structure like that of a gothic cathedral.

In the other model, which I will describe only briefly, the game-board is replaced by a three-dimensional, spatial environment within which one plays one's game spatially from the beginning, as in three-dimensional chess. Here my idealizing metaphor is the movements of a gibbon--my favorite animal, the most pleasurable to watch, as I can do for long periods without boredom. The gibbon's cage has been installed with bare trees with branches, or with an elaborate structure of bars and rings, and the gibbon plays in it, purposelessly, purely for the joy of exhibiting its complete mastery of ~~the~~ its three-dimensional world--launching itself into space, reaching out at the last moment without looking, in the confidence that a branch or a bar will be there, swinging about on that to launch again and swing again, criss-crossing the intervals, creating intricate and beautifully fluid patterns in time and space, always with the insouciant air of someone willing to devote all his time to a totally unproductive activity. The closest human equivalents may be serious skateboarders or surfers, but even they are no match for the gibbon in its easy grace. And although in another context I would

argue passionately for the social and other values of scholarship, even art-historical scholarship, I believe also that the best of it is carried out in some part in this spirit of play, where the rewards are mainly in the doing.

But this is possible only when the gameboard is complete, the mandala laid out with all the data under control and in place, the gibbon's cage installed with its framework of tree trunks and branches. Now at last we come to the point, or, if you will, the pitch. If the Addiss-Seo collection of materials for research in Nanga painting can be joined to the present holdings of the Clark Center's Ruth and Sherman Lee Institute for Japanese Art, scholars working in the field of later Japanese painting, and of Nanga painting in particular, will have a near-ideal place for carrying out their projects, playing their games. With a good library (still, of course, to be augmented), a huge corpus or archive of slides, another of photos of signatures and seals, files and boxes of research materials, and (for when they tire of slides and reproductions) a collection of original paintings and calligraphy by artists both famous and obscure to turn to, they can--I started by writing wallow, but that introduces another metaphor, the pig--they can play (or sport, romp, cavort, revel, gambol, as the thesaurus in my computer informs me) with most of what they need--and a great deal they didn't realize they needed--close at hand. And if Bill Clark walks into the Institute and sees one scholar laying out slides and papers in intricate patterns on the floor, and another swinging and jumping freely about the bookcases and lighting fixtures, he can smile and blink and realize that it was only a metaphorical vision, existing only

momentarily in his mind's eye; they are really hard at work at their desks.

What they will be doing, we can be sure, is carrying studies of Nanga painting into another, higher phase. And it is time, I think, for a Great Leap Forward in this field, in which the work that I and Steve Addiss and quite a few others have done, as well as the work of the Japanese specialists, is expanded with new approaches and new insights. My own contributions began with the catalog of the Nanga painting exhibition held here in New York, at Asia House Gallery, nearly thirty years ago, in 1972, and were continued with studies of, among others, Sakaki Hyakusen and Yosa Buson. Steve's major study of Uragami Gyokudô, published in **fill in**, was followed by studies of other artists (Bôsai, Taiitsu) and other kinds of problems and topics, making up an impressive body of scholarly writing on Nanga that has greatly enriched the field. But now both of us have chosen to relinquish the stuff of our mandalas, the bases for our studies. If Shakespeare and Marlowe were writing today, perhaps Prospero would not drown his books in the sea as he prepares to leave his magic isle at the end, or Faustus promise to burn his when he runs out of time and must descend into hell. Instead, they would give or sell them to non-profit institutions, to form archives that could be used by other, younger magicians and philosophers. It is in that spirit that I offer my hopes that the Addiss-Seo materials can be acquired for the Ruth and Sherman Lee Institute for Japanese Art at the Clark Center. Thank you.