Wednesday March 18th, 2015

Designing Methods Colloquium

Minutes by Annika Johnson

Intro remarks - KS

Methods course – rethinking with Shirin for a number of months

Goals

* discuss course and broader core curriculum
* Methodological training isn’t something that can be put in a box and taught as a course, it’s a life-long process
* We have productive research, this is because faculty have been re-tooling themselves constantly over time!
* Learning methods for dealing with different kinds of questions
* Unrealistic to present a methods course as a fixed tool kit (even though metaphor is used a lot). It doesn’t describe what people in the field have ever actually done
* Example: Panofsky is well recognized but his followers stuck to a narrow idea of an iconographical method because that is what could be taught as a method. There’s a protocol – looking for a text that matches a motif. It became a desiccated field because of this
* We can’t map methodologies of all of art history (become like Borges map! A never-ending course!)
* Goals of the course: help graduate students (many for the first time, many with MA) produce their own questions and their own methods
* Shift from consumer to producer
* Broad pedagogical goal of the course is to make that shift – want to do this by working from the objects themselves
* Students can use constellations to generate research questions about objects, and use objects to generate questions that can be tied to constellations

SF

* how do you jumpstart our newest graduate students to thinking/articulating in terms of methods.
* How do you get methods to be something that comes from you and objects that you’re looking at
* In the past – 100s of pages of reading a week, but it falls apart when you get in front of the object
* Course that pushes confrontation with the object

Layout

* September – KS and SF pick objects from Pgh collections, they choose readings, whole class goes in front of the objects
  + Direct conversation towards e.g. “what are the methods that have been used to discuss ivory Madonnas?”
  + Push students to think about what are the questions we ask and how are those questions driven by the objects
* October – turning point. Want students to hone in on specific object that they’ll use as their test case
  + Class field trip to DC (open to other graduate students?)
  + Purpose to give every student a moment where they are leading a discussion live in front of an object (as opposed to seminar talks where they tell the group everything they know), rather they ask what are the problems, the questions?
  + Students should work on well-known objects to help them grapple with larger body of literature that surrounds it (i.e. *Watson and the Shark*)
  + KS and SF intervene less in the discussion
* November: Students continue to workshop students’ individual objects, assemble 3-4 affinity groups based on a constellations (preferably have students from disparate fields in each group)
* December colloquium, students present their papers to one another
* Goal is to make the class as a laboratory for understanding methods
* Leading us towards question of core courses

Discussion

* Problems – what is the relationship between historiography and methodology? How do we set an agenda for instructors of this course in the future (so professors can tailor it to their interests)?
* NC: how much is this class a “method”? Is it actually a methods class? Often in other classes students define themselves against other fields based on method. This object-centered process is a “method,” right?
* SF: yes, we can say that working in an object-oriented way is not the only way that art historians practice. What is it that makes art and architecture historians unique and special? There are overlaps with other disciplines…but a core question we have to deal with is “where is my method and my discipline?” It must begin in encounter with objects/sites and being able to use them to generate inquiry.
* TS: How do people in the course articulate this sense that a method is being applied as distinct from a response or a description?
* KS: Great question, our idea was that we’re going to be doing that in the first part of the course, we’re gravitating towards methods that we are interested in/have our own investments in. We would begin with description/response and move outwards – what would be the method to answer the question, what would you need to read? Refine method after questions. They’ll choose case studies that model that.
* TS: you don’t feel an obligation to expose students to an array of methods? KS: yes, benefit of team-taught course you can see clashing and overlapping methods.
* AL: are students using one method throughout the term to address the object? Or different questions different methods? KS: we’re into the idea of evolving. AL: Pat Manning methodology class, he asks students to switch fields and asks the to investigate methods of other fields…What happens when you make everybody switch (make environment affinity groups do identity for a day)?
* KS: Should definitely consider that, when do students work in affinity groups and when do they work across affinity groups. We had thought about mixing it up in the first half and moving into affinity groups in the second half but we could reconsider.
* BMc: How do you envision this working with historiography class? I feel anxiety perking up in questioning this course, but there is a toolbox that the discipline has recognized. An argument could be made that there is value to drawing on this toolbox….that’s not to say the course is a bad idea, previous methods classes have been object-poor…but this still leads to larger question of how core curriculum will be changed.
* KS: in some ways it would free the course up a little bit if we had course called historiography that would take care of this. Grad students were clear that sitting in on undergraduate foundations course isn’t going to cut it.
* MN: the class is good, I see flexibility in the core courses – students could take methods as often as they want, right? But is there going to be a continual exploration of various methodologies? It’s not a fear, but I could see how Marxism or feminism could be placed aside – this isn’t bad, but is there going to be a core set of texts?
* KS: not in our course! But the question is, could there be in another course? There’s no master reading list.
* SF: Yes and no, we won’t have traditional master list, but it is inevitable that certain things will come out. I would be shocked if nobody has raised a Marxist method by mid-semester – it’s up to instructors to bring this up.
* KS: I don’t consider feminism to be a method. It’s an orientation that includes a lot of different methods.
* BMc: it’s this I’m worried about, understanding the difference between a method and an orientation, it can become confused.
* KL: Methods and what is a method has been a problem as long as I’ve been an art historian, but if students come out of the class saying that feminism is a method, that’s your problem. Other questions – what is your part in selecting for them objects to respond to? What is clear is that students need greater diversity in what they’re studying in order to have a more successful career path. If there are students working with ancient materials, what you’ve described won’t suit them very well in relation to what they’re working on in early China / ancient studies in general…we don’t deal with collections but cultural patrimony….I would suggest my students do a methods course elsewhere. Would this course be voluntary?
* SF: Kathy’s points are useful for thinking about “should we require the course”
* KL: should we have selective choice?
* SF: where that takes me, one of the points of core courses is not just question of a method but of a discipline, whatever our projects are on we still have to be able to talk to one another. We still want students in first and second year of the program to be ready to come out as professors in American institutions and teach in American collections…at least be able to engage in conversations with other art historians.. if someone is an archaeologist interested in the pre-Columbian world, the Dumbarton oaks collection will be a problem. As a medievalist, Washington is a fascinating choice because medieval art isn’t really represented at the NGA – students of medieval studies should be forced to ask this…every graduate student should have to deal with museum spaces – what are the benefits and problems of having to deal with the museum space? This is a place where we can have some kind of common ground – all of us have to deal with the fact that objects get bought and sold.
* CN: don’t say anything is inevitable! Are there certain methods/orientations that are a part of the field….it might be fine to say that feminism will come up, etc., but is there something to be said for methods/orientations that we individually don’t want to advocate for that the field advocates for, that we can maybe critique them…do these need to be addressed (KS happy to trash psychoanalysis!)
* SF: I’ve been asked to write chapter on iconography in medieval methods book – I’m happy to trash it, but that’s an example of look, this method has a huge historical footprint in the field, it’s not one that grad students have worked on intensely – this is the critical distance where we can assess what is iconography, how can we use it. What are the meaningful methods in the past that we don’t pitch for, what are the new ones that we’re still assessing?
* NC: I feel cheated that I haven’t been taught Marxism! It seems necessary to have that type of awareness of what orientations/methods are, how they arise, people do better with historiography if they already have methods - every text we would ask “what is this telling us to do” and then taking historiography after that was useful, it could probably be the more useful way to do it, but also presents a practical problem of order.
* GB: Why can’t we have one in the fall and one in the spring? – it’s staffing and enrollment
* KS: it should be methods first, no question, but that’s how it goes.
* GB: there is still a canon, and we feel as if we have to be competent in understanding a core set of key texts written by important people. The names flutter around the ether, and we admit we haven’t read XXX we think she’s incompetent as an art historian. It is a problem that the canon of key thinkers get longer, do we just come to terms with that anxiety? *[AJs thoughts – this is part of what comprehensive exams are for, at least honing the canon in relation to your own work. But also, why can’t we collectively come up with a canon? A list top 20, top 100 as a department? Or is this what the constellations bibliography is already for? It would be interesting to poll everyone about the books they think are essential. I think we would be surprised how many seemingly essential texts are not included on those lists. Perhaps it’s phrased differently than the “canon” – just an idea]*
* SF: part of this is us trying to stir the pot – what is methods and what is historiography. But part of it is always circling back to the question – the canon is a Eurocentric canon! Object-oriented study gives room for students to gravitate towards objects, rather than to force objects upon them. Real goal is to provoke students into choosing objects that are provocative. There’s a difference between reading Panofsky for the sake of reading Panofsky and reading Panofsky for your own work!
* BMc: students can’t be caught in a conversation where they don’t know Clark, Wolfflin, Said….I think we can rationally arrive at a list that summarizes array of canonical thinkers.
* KS: but it’s such a moving target…
* BMc: If I don’t know the theme I can’t understand the variation.
* Alan: Course should be two semesters! Second semester is where students pick their own objects
* *[AJ’s thoughts – it has been suggested to grads who come in without an MA that they develop their MA paper out of a seminar. I had success with this model, but a problem for other students might be that there are few seminars each semester, especially considering that their topic should be nailed down by the second semester. If all new students had to take this object-based methods course their first semester it could very productively lead to an MA thesis or dissertation chapter. I think it’s worth retooling the calendar. Perhaps a way to solve enrollment issue is to open up the course to other HAA grads (the course will never be the same!), other dept. grads? I would certainly take this course my 3rd year if I had the opportunity to do so]*
* Co’R: If grads have anxieties, we’ve talked about idea of consistency, we feel confident if we know how we’re going to be equipped by this course. What’s going to be consistent about them year to year?
* KS: if we’re thinking about it in terms of how pedagogy divides up learning outcomes, this is about a skill set, we want them to produce excellent research.
* NC: one of skills is being able to answer these questions on our own.
* SF: recalling moment in seminar where faculty member yelled at students, they said art history is not going out and reading everyone else’s opinions and comparing them but producing your own – revolutionary moment. If I want to write a paper, the point is to define my questions and take ownership of them. It seems obvious, but art historians should be able to deal with any visual thing. What if instead of thinking about methods and historiography we thought in terms of theory and practice? Both have to do with methods/historiography, but what if one of them was mostly in the classroom and the other one mostly in the field.