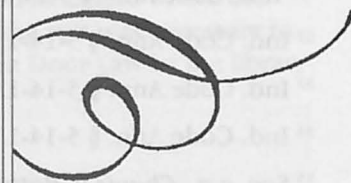


# ART HISTORY DISSERTATION TRENDS AS A SELECTION APPROACH FOR ART HISTORY COLLECTIONS

by Jean-Pierre V.M. Herubel



**C**ollection management in art history requires a diverse and multifaceted approach to collections activity. Not only does the librarian require a strong grounding in art historical and fine arts librarianship, but a sound appreciation of research and publishing trends inherent to art history. Among various approaches to selecting for art history, mapping dissertation research trends may not always come to mind. Often the art history or fine arts librarian relies upon publishers' catalogs, book reviews, and other library-related venues for making decisions and final selections for inclusion. Not to be forgotten are museum catalogs and the contemporary art press, where advance notice of fine arts books and other materials appear in timely fashion. Reliance on these canonical collection tools is to be encouraged as they have proven to be core tools and approaches to collection activity in the fine arts in general and art history in particular. For the librarian dedicated to art history, there is another possible approach for useful collection oriented knowledge.

In academia, dissertations represent research contributions that meet the disciplinary criteria required of doctoral students who have been exposed to sustained acculturation in a given specialization. Often, these include demonstrated language skills, mastery of methodologies and techniques, and the completion of an advance research project culminating in a dissertation. For this reason, dissertations provide a verifiable measurement of research agenda and direction, as well as possible future research (Buchanan & Hérubel, 1995). For this reason, dissertation research offers the librarian a complementary tool for collection management. Knowledge of research trends in art history dissertations constitutes another tool librarians can use to keep abreast of art historical scholarship.

In art historical learning, research, and scholarship, as well as in historical scholarship in general, historians tend to utilize periodizations to better appropriate the past (Hérubel & Goedeken, 1993). Often periods are based upon chronology that is characterized by overarching definitions. The Enlightenment or the

Romantic Period, Dark Age Greece, or the European Medieval Ages are examples of periodizations commonly used in historical discourse. Without these useful perspectives and conceptual frameworks, historical, let alone art historical, knowledge would be less readily understood (Elkins, 2002). With this in mind, periodizations offer the librarian an important tool for interpreting general research trends in art history. Periodizations as understood and utilized in art history dissertations provide an intellectual and library collections framework within genres, aesthetic movements, etc., in the context of collections, selection, and future acquisitions activity. Collections can be honed for specialization as well as for pedagogical and research support.

## APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

To ascertain trends in art historical research, *Art Bulletin* was consulted for its annual listing of on-going and completed dissertations in art history. This particular listing is valuable since it offers verifiable information on dissertations that fall under art historical rubrics. Additionally, they are collected only from departments of art history for purposes of this illustrative examination. The target years 1990-2004 were chosen since they reflect the latest dissertations and recent trends. Only selected rubrics were chosen to further illustrate the usefulness of this approach; consequently, several rubrics were randomly chosen as further illustrations and only for 2000-2004; only dissertations that were completed were collected and tabulated. Data were triaged and tabulated according to period of interest and year of completion as the primary indicator of research specialization. Additionally, a general *de visu* examination of subject orientation of periods was noted for overall research specialization.

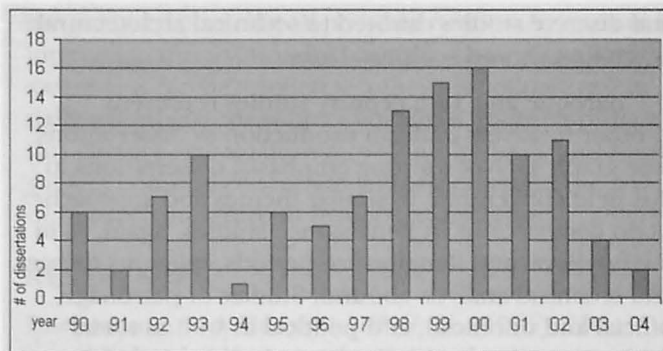
## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Although cursory, this brief examination revealed trends in dissertation research that offers a spectrum of concentrations and emphases. The data revealed disparities in concentrations of research emphasis as well as dominance over art historical research. For this

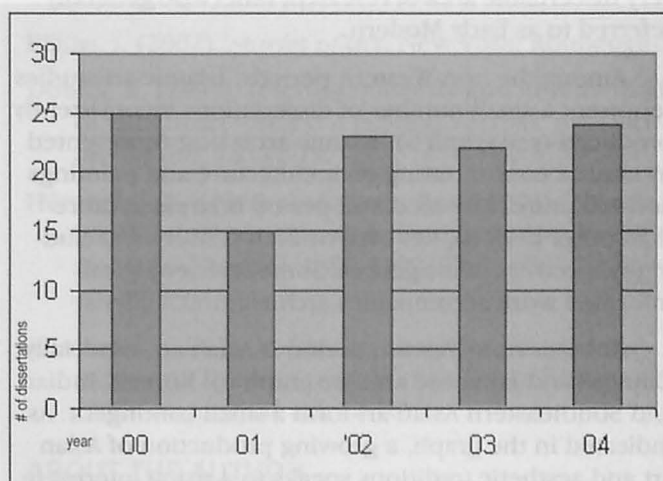
illustrative study, the rubrics representing the periods, Egyptian, Ancient, Near Eastern, Classical Art, Islamic Art, Medieval, Art, Renaissance, Baroque, 19th through 20th century Europe, and U.S. and Canada illustrate how relevant trends in art historical dissertations can be used for revealing trends for collection purposes. The following graphs elucidate a general tendency in research concentrations that may guide the librarian toward collection emphasis. A caveat is required as art historical scholarship is more and more interdisciplinary, incorporating valuable methodologies, techniques and tools, as well a philosophical and literary theoretical perspectives (Dowell, 1999). Although specializations can be identified, often art history evinces greater interdisciplinary influences (Korenic, 1997). As examples, ancient art history research comprises a discrete and highly honed field, where subjects reflect strong disciplinary concerns (see graph 1). Within this sample, ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern civilizations form a small grouping of emphasis in relation to the larger interest in ancient classical civilizations. Often archaeological and close material culture studies complement stylistic and pre-iconographic studies. Architecture and sculpture form a strong emphasis, while painting represents a smaller sample of dissertation work. Neither Egyptological nor classical studies dissertations are included, but research is informed by both disciplines.

Larger than the ancient period, the medieval period, especially Western European, constitutes a very tightly honed specialization, with strong and competing concentrations in architecture, paintings, and sculpture (see graph 2). Without qualification, these areas are informed by close articulated readings and analyses of individual works, often entertaining individual artists and architects. In order of numbers, studies focused on topics in Central Europe are followed by Russian and by Byzantine art and architecture. Concerned with religious and iconographic readings, various techniques utilize the latest approaches to medieval studies, including humanities theories. Not surprisingly, Romanesque and Gothic art and architecture are strong loci of concentration. This sample reflects the strong and uniform production across 1990-2004, without interruption.

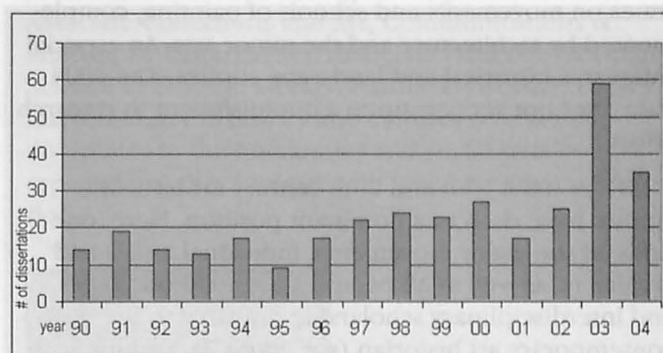
Although approximating the medieval sample in number, Renaissance studies reflect a trend that is uniform, except for the 2003 spike in dissertation production (see graph 3). Often dissertations reflect concerns with individual artists and architects and their works. As patronage in the arts was so critical in this period, such studies are heavily represented. Concerns with humanities theories, literary studies, and newly emerging methodologies and perspectives show up in these dissertations. Studies in newly emerging perspective complement closed iconographical examination



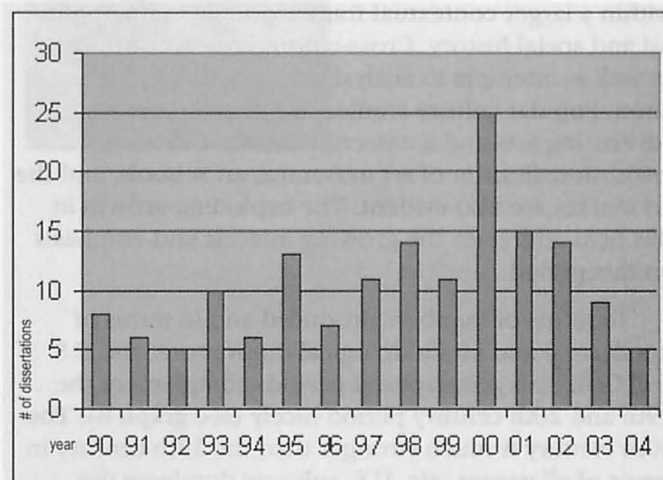
Graph 1 - Egyptian, Ancient, Near Eastern, Classical Art



Graph 2 - Medieval Art



Graph 3 - Renaissance



Graph 4 - Baroque & 18<sup>th</sup> Century

and discrete studies devoted to technical architectural and painterly and sculptural arts.

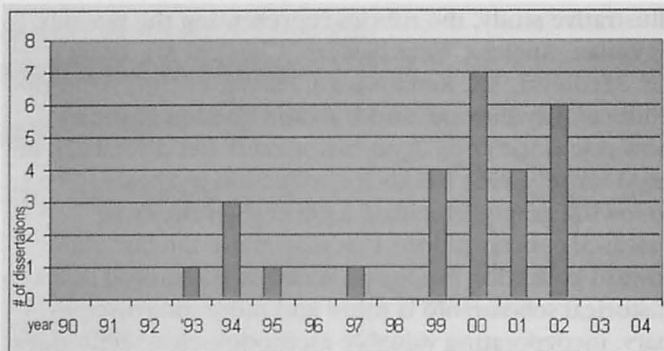
Baroque and 18th century studies represent another relatively uniform production of dissertations (see graph 4). Not a strong emphasis, dissertations in this field concentrate in similar themes and approaches as do dissertations in Renaissance studies. Again, as in the medieval and Renaissance periods, religious themes and technical analysis abound. Studies of patronage, official and unofficial, and political as well as social forces are represented. Together these periods form a very discernable area of research, otherwise generally referred to as Early Modern.

Among the non-Western periods, Islamic art studies represent a small number of dissertations inconsistently produced (see graph 5). Islamic art is best represented by studies concentrating on architecture and paintings and sculpture. The medieval period is stressed more than other periods, i.e. 19th or 20th centuries, including respective artistic genres. Some archaeological informed work accompanies architectural analysis.

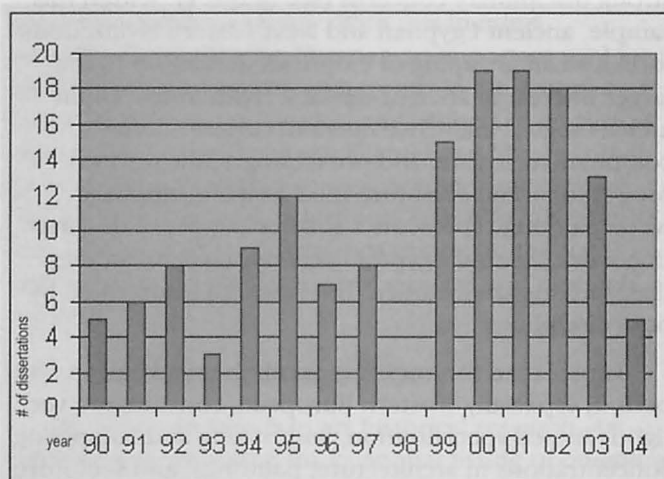
Another non-Western period is Asian art, especially Chinese and Japanese art (see graph 6). Korean, Indian, and Southeastern Asian art form a small contingent. As indicated in the graph, a growing production of Asian art and aesthetic traditions speaks to a rising interest in Chinese and Japanese. Japanese in particular, concentrates on movements and schools of painting, complemented by architecture and the minor arts. An especial interest is historical and landscape studies. The 2004 data does not yet constitute a diminishment in research effort.

Over time, 19th and 20th century art historical studies have risen to a dominant position. Here, one finds all the major movements, individual artists and architects, as well as all perspectives, methodologies, and interdisciplinary scholarship available to the contemporary art historian (see graph 7). Various studies attempt to situate art and aesthetic movements within a larger contextual framework, including political and social history. Cross-cultural research appears, as well as attempts to analysis art as cultural phenomenon. Popular culture studies bridge photography, advertising arts and a nascent consumer society; institutionalization of art museums, art schools, and the art market are also evident. The exploding growth in this field addresses the growing interest and emphasis on this period.

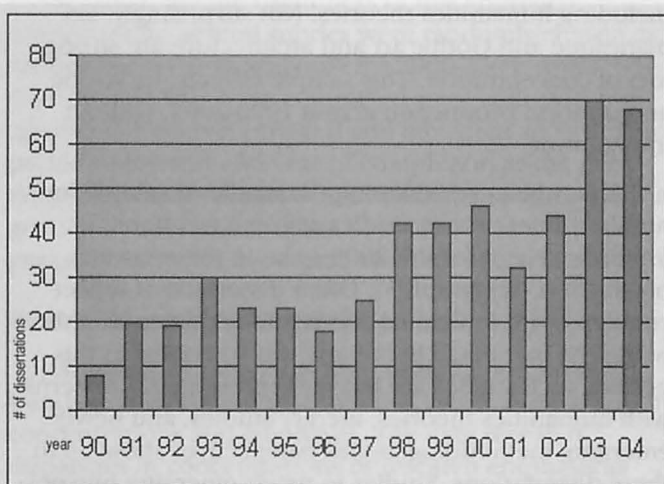
In terms of numbers produced and in terms of intellectual and methodological innovations, the U.S. and Canadian geographical periods complement the 19th and 20th century period nicely (see graph 8). The 20th century is much stronger than the 19th century in terms of all genres, etc. U.S. subjects dominate the sample by 90% and above, as opposed to Canadian



Graph 5 - Islamic Art



Graph 6 - Asian Art

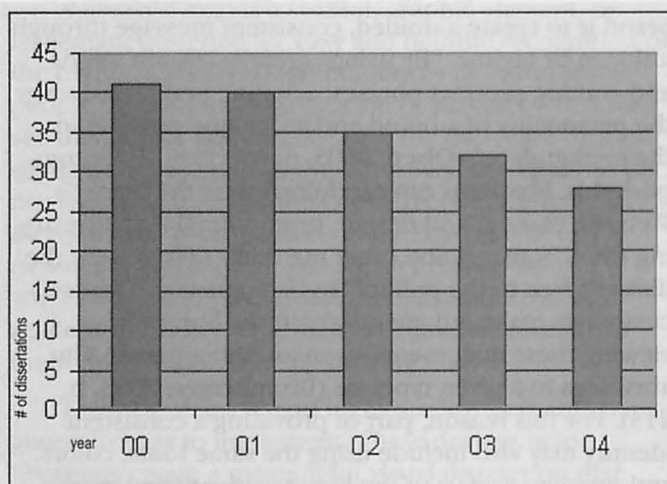


Graph 7 - 19th-20th Century Europe

subjects. Again, all manner of genres are entertained, reflecting the highly creative, intellectually vibrant, and necessarily innovative aesthetic experiments so much bound up with late 19th and 20th century artistic endeavors. Studies include philosophical, as well as social historical examination of artistic production; gallery, museum, and artist-societal interactions are well represented. A further permutation is interest in newer forms of aesthetic expression, i.e. computer and digital, as well as mixed media. Studies devoted to photography as technology and art form appear regularly. Forms of discourse, exploration of the meanings of aesthetic expression with the fast-paced settings of 20th century life and society find resonance in these dissertations. An indication of reduced interest in this period seems to be offset for 2000-2004 for the U.S. and Canada.

### CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Without overstating this approach, knowledge of art historical dissertation trends via art history periodizations can be useful to librarians. Within the context of this cursory study, general trends and specific orientation of art historical doctoral research permits the librarian significant information that can be used for ascertaining the state of advanced and formalized art history research expressed in dissertation research. Since dissertations represent and reflect the latest intellectual and methodological concerns in art historical disciplinary acculturation, awareness of dissertations research can prove to be an additional tool in collection activity. Often dissertations become articles or even monographic studies, so the use of dissertation research as a kind of bibliographic barometer makes sense. A more thorough examination, replete with nuanced analysis, would reveal more information and would generate more discussion and other possible approaches to effective collection management in art history, especially when yearly totals



Graph 8. - U.S. & Canada

are analyzed covering all possible rubrics. An even more interesting observation is that such dissertation trend awareness can be applied to other disciplines, essentially a template for subject librarians. As an approach, this cursory examination represents another tool for the subject librarian concerned with ascertaining the nature of research literature in respective disciplines.

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