



Derrick Cartwright at the Seattle Art Museum.

PHOTO BY JENNIFER RICHARDS,
COURTESY OF SEATTLE ART MUSEUM

Building a Field

SCHOLARSHIP AND CAREERS IN AMERICAN ART

When Derrick Cartwright decided to pursue graduate studies in American art in the early 1980s, there was little more than his enthusiasm for the subject to fuel his commitment. At the time, American art was a marginalized area of study within the field of Western art history. While scholars of European art had access to major sources of funding for their research and top career prospects, students of American art history received much less academic and financial encouragement.

“The field was very young and students studying American art had a bit of an inferiority complex, wondering if their work would produce the kind of research that could lead to academic appointments,” says Cartwright.

To address this gap in scholarship and promote interest in the study of American art, the Luce Foundation established a fund for doctoral-dissertation fellowships. Since 1986, more than three hundred aspiring art historians have used these fellowships to complete important research that has deepened both the knowledge and the appreciation of American art.

For Cartwright, the Luce fellowship he received in 1991 helped launch a distinguished career as a scholar and museum director. Cartwright’s research focused on mural paintings in U.S. public libraries at the beginning of the twentieth century. This nationwide movement, which preceded the work of both the WPA and the Mexican muralists, had received little scholarly attention—

reflecting, in part, the comparative neglect of American art studies in previous decades. “It was very exciting research, but ten years earlier it might not have been recognized as a worthy subject for a doctoral dissertation. The Luce fellowship allowed me to complete my dissertation in a timely and much more ambitious way.”

The fellowships are one component of the Foundation’s American art program, which also provides support for exhibitions and catalogues and for projects related to researching and presenting the permanent collections of museums. Cartwright has seen the benefits of this funding throughout his career. While completing his dissertation he worked at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco to help prepare a catalogue of its American painting collection, which became part of a series of Luce-funded museum publications. After teaching art history at the University of California, San Diego, Cartwright moved into the museum field, becoming director of the Hood Museum at Dartmouth College, the San Diego Museum of Art, and most recently the Seattle Art Museum. Each of these institutions received Luce support for projects that strengthened their American art programs.

Reflecting on the state of American art scholarship today, Cartwright describes a very different landscape from the one he knew as a graduate student.

“The field has totally changed. American art history is now one of the most competitive and advanced areas of study, and it has a really strong foothold in many top academic departments. It has gone from being one of the least popular fields for dissertation research to becoming one of the most popular. The Luce Foundation has played a critical role in this transformation by making funding available to explore a whole new range of topics. It encouraged bright students who might otherwise have gravitated towards other areas of study to see American art history as a field for cutting-edge research.” ■