new resources in american studies v

visual arts in microfiche

THE ARCHITECTURE IN WASHINGTON, D.C. Edited by Bates Lowry. Washington: The Dunlap Society. 1977. Volume 1. $65.00.

AMERICAN ART IN THE BARBIZON MOOD: A Visual History. By Peter Bermingham. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 1976. $12.50.

AMERICAN PRINTS, 1870-1950. Edited by Robert Flynn Johnson. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 1976. $9.95.

ACADEMY: The Academic Tradition in American Art. By Lois Marie Fink and Joshua C. Taylor. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 1978. $25.00.

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART/Selections from the Permanent Collection. Introduction by John I. H. Baur. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 1976. $14.00.

A COLLECTION IN THE MAKING/Works from the Phillips Collection. Compiled by Kevin Grogan. With a forward by Milton W. Brown. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 1976. $29.50.

Access to good quality inexpensive visual materials in painting, sculpture and architecture could enormously enrich American Studies teaching; if intelligently selected archival art documents were as readily available, they could provide a comparable stimulus to scholarship. For this reason these two new series deserve a serious look. Both are microfiche publications intended to provide access to works of American art. The Chicago project is part of a diversified series of "text/fiche"; I selected the five Chicago volumes listed above because they deal in whole or in large part with the works of American painters, sculptors or printmakers. The volumes are pamphlet-sized, and each comes with a set of fiche bearing color reproductions of the works of art, each from a single American museum. The Dunlap project is different. It is part of a "comprehensive visual archive of American art," underwritten by a grant from NEH. The project seems immense: Volume 1 of *The Architecture of Washington, D.C.* covers just ten buildings, but uses forty fiche to do it. The fiche are in black and white and hold a combination of reproductions of older

documents—blueprints, architects' drawings, old engravings, old photographs of the buildings, photographs of work in progress in different decades, news photographs of the building in use—and new photos produced for the series.

The Chicago phamphlets contain brief texts, some on the history of the particular collection, others on general movements in art history, followed by a catalogue of the paintings and other works reproduced on the fiche.[1] The Dunlap project, in contrast, is designed as a microfiche publication *per se*. The loose leaf binder which houses Volume I does contain a few printed cards giving some "Factual Information" for each building and a one-line description of what is on each fiche. But the fiche are the main show. For example, the card on the Treasury Building says only, "fiche 1# Predecessors; proposals for new building; the exterior and interior of the building designed by Robert Mills [.]"

Some strongly favorable things need to be said about both projects. The Dunlap Society calls its series a "visual documentation program of American art," and it is just that. It provides a wealth of material about the buildings. Thoughtful consideration has been given to teachers as well as researchers. Thus the caption for each frame or each fiche bears a small symbol indicating the availability of color slides, black and white prints, or black and white slides; at least one is available for each frame. (Perhaps as a sample of the quality of the slides, the set of Volume I which I was sent included, mounted in a plastic page at the rear of the loose leaf binder, a group of 20 slides, most of the State, War and Navy Building (1871-88). They were of good quality.) I've been told that its producers worked closely with the manufacturer of the photographic supplies from which the fiche were made to develop new processes which make possible the reproduction of subtle shades of gray—recall that fiche were designed for reproduction of books, in which, generally speaking, one worries only about black type.

The Chicago series is, at the most obvious level, a treat. The Whitney Museum is one of my favorite museums in the world, but I don't get there as often as I'd like, and it was fun to be able to see so many of the goodies in the permanent collection all together. The Barbizon fiche included a series of frames on the installation of the show, photographs showing what the show looked like when it was hanging at the National Collection of Fine Arts. I thought that a fine idea. And I felt that an afternoon spent with *Academy* taught me things about the relationship between "academic" and "avant garde" that I had not known before—Lois Fink's thoughtful essay on the National Academy Design was especially useful.

Having said those things, however, and having said that we should welcome the pioneer efforts of these two publishers, it remains to say that there are a great many things about these projects which are unsatisfactory. Since they're not the fault, generally, of the people who produced the volumes, I intend to be fairly blunt in my observations, and to preface them by noting that staff both at Dunlap and Chicago have been very cooperative; they are eager to have their work reviewed.

My first go at the Chicago volumes was on normal microfiche readers in the microforms room of a large university library. The librarian in charge steered me to the machine which was best optically, but produced images of the wrong size; it cropped most of the paintings. Her second best machine, a Data Terminal 4020, proved a better fit, but came equipped with a black line running across the middle of the viewing

screen.[2] There were other problems, too. Graininess, I suppose, was the most important; because of it, in no case was the quality as high as that of a good slide projected on a normal classroom screen or of a good color reproduction in a book. The graininess was mostly the fault of the microfiche reader, and not the fiche. Most libraries, in short, currently do not have equipment suitable for viewing art fiche.

A second problem is that the quality of reproductions varies a great deal. Some of the works seemed far less satisfactory than others. In the Whitney set, frame 2E9, Joan Sloan's wonderful "Sixth Avenue Elevated At Third Street" (1928) had no magic whatsoever; Jack Levine's "Gangster Funeral" (2A8) lacked the flickering brilliance of the original. A number of the slides from fiche 1 of the Whitney set looked pinkish; the Barbizon show had a greenish fiche. Such problems of hue are common with commercially produced slides—thus the famous "Carnegie Slides" of American art history, produced by Sandak, have long been notorious among art historians; the company was finally obliged to reissue them, but the color of the replacement slides, while better than that of the originals, still was not outstanding. A generation of students in American painting history has been given the impression that American art is mostly brown. These Chicago shots are good for their small size, but not of higher quality than current good commercial art slides.

There are some other technical problems. Some of the frames appeared distorted. Burchfield's "An April Mood," 1B3 in the Whitney, was taller on the right than on the left side. Marks, bits of dust, minute hairs and so forth on any portion of the optical system are bad news, too: because the paintings are reduced to tiny size, small imperfections loom very large.

At our suggestion, the two publishers jointly arranged to lend *American Studies* a microfiche reader specifically designed to provide high quality reproduction of works of art. This is the Bell and Howell SR VIII. Its magnification is correct, and will work for both sets; those on the Dunlap series fill its screen; those in the Chicago series fill a large part of it.[3] The Bell and Howell is designed to be versatile; it will project on wall or screen as well as on its own ground-glass viewer. That view screen, alas, is still grainy. Paintings projected on it have about the fidelity one would expect in a poorly-printed color publication. There is glittery sandiness in everything; the grain moves as the viewer's eye moves. It destroys any record of brush stroke on many frames, and blurs sharp edges. Thus, if the SR VIII is less grainy than garden variety readers, it is still far too grainy to be satisfactory for viewing works of art.

The conversion from viewer to projector is very simple. One simply reaches to the back of the machine and lifts the mirror out of the way. The graininess goes away at once, and edges become appropriately sharp. But the cursed machine is intolerably primitive in most respects. For one thing, it projects on a slant, thus producing distorted images, and doesn't seem to have any adjustment to correct the deficiency. I propped up one end of it with books to get the projected image more or less square, but that is a hell of a way to run a railroad. I can't imagine why it was not provided with adjustable legs.

As anyone who has worked with fiche in a library knows, fiche technology is inexcusably crude at present; these readers are a pain to use even with reproductions of conventional books. One has to jiggle the control mechanism around manually up and down and from side to side to find the appropriate "page." If one is reading sequentially, one begins

at the left side of the card; on reaching the right, one has to slither all the way to the left again and find the start of the next row. (A zigzag pattern might make much more sense, left to right on the first row, right to left on the next. It could be indicated by arrows on the fiche.) Moreover, the control knob, joy stick or whatever it's called does not work smoothly. It takes a certain amount of pressure to operate it, and it tends to move jerkily, going further at any given moment than one wants to go. A couple of set-screws for control, one for vertical and one for horizontal, would be so easy to incorporate into the design, and so inexpensive to reproduce that is beyond me why they are not on all such machines. The SR VIII is no better than others I have used in this regard.

The SR VIII came with a sort of guide plaque showing the numbering system—A-F down and 1-12 across. It seemed to be designed so one could align a pointer on the control mechanism with the frame one wanted to see. When I unpacked the machine, this guide plaque, printed on thick flexible plastic, seemed just to be taped to the frame. It slipped around a bit. This apparently was deliberate, to enable the user to line it up once he had the fiche installed and in focus. This was necessary because the fiche did not entirely fill its frame. A snug fit would solve this, as things now work; after installing the fiche one must jiggle the guide card around until some frame on it matches a frame one is viewing. One can then use it as a guide to go from place to place. Good in theory, but not in practice, for the thick plastic plaque kept catching on the guide mechanism, and within five minutes mine had become bent at the edges and thus prone to foul in the mechanism as one moved it over the plaque. The plaque was marked to match the system of frames used in the Chicago series; its numbered and lettered squares did not work for the Dunlap fiche, which, as I mentioned, used fewer but larger frames per fiche.

Because no one knows very much about the life expectancy of even the best color transparencies, the Dunlap people decided to do their entire series in black and white; these are "positive halide prints of archival quality." That decision results in a marked advantage with whole-tone materials, with black and white photographs and with halftone engravings. Those works in the Chicago series which were black and white were not in the league technically with the Dunlap reproductions. This is simply because color film does not handle black and white as well as does black and white film, especially the custom-processed film used in the archival set. Thus even in what I thought the best reproduced Chicago set, the frames of works in Lois Fink's *Academy,* the black and white looked green and white. Given the limitations of the SR VIII, I thought the Dunlap reproduction quality very good. The combination of the SR VIII and these fiche, however, produced some undesired color; I saw chromatic patterns when viewing a number of frames.

Indexing problems plague both series. If one wanted to lay one's hand on a specific painting or work of sculpture, say, in the Chicago sets, one would need to know which museum owned it. Some sort of union catalogue of the whole series would be easy enough to produce, one would think; it ought to go with any volume purchased, and could be brought up to date every year or so: just an alphabetical list of artists and works, then some numbers to guide you to the volume, fiche and frame, would do the trick. A file card system, one card per frame, would work, too.

Data retrieval (to use last year's buzz phrase) is even more of a pain

in the Dunlap architecture volume. The only thing in "print" to guide you are those general descriptions mentioned above of what is on each fiche. The fiche itself offers little further help: the only detailed information on the fiche applies only to those few frames for which no captions appear; the rest are not indexed or listed in a table of contents. The captions are fine; they appear directly below the plates. But there is no index to them, no way to find what one was looking for but to wiggle frame by frame through the whole set. Worse: the designers of the series deliberately planned these captions so that they are outside the field of view of each frame. The idea is to enable a teacher in a classroom or lecture situation to project the plates without distracting his audience with the caption (though given the crudity of the mechanism, it would in practice be impossible not to jiggle the captions into view from time to time). But the result, for someone using this material in order to find something, is infuriating. With no central guide to tell you what each frame shows, you have to search "by hand" for it. Once you get the desired frame located and in focus, you have to move the whole thing again in order to read the caption-—for many of the frames, frame and caption will not fit on the viewer at the same time. It seems to me that the Dunlap people seriously erred in not providing a printed frame-by-frame guide. It would not have had to be anything fancy. Their captions seem just to have been typed and photographed. I would not have minded if they had taken the same typescripts and mimeographed them.[4] Since a reasonably efficient student assistant, given the typescripts from which captions were prepared, scissors, paste and a budget of $10.00 could produce a viable guide to Volume I of the Dunlap series in the course of an afternoon, I simply can't understand why one was not included. The series lacks and badly needs a paper-printed guide to the fiche panels.

Some final suggestions and observations about the text/fiche series. First: since the Chicago people had the idea of providing general views of the galleries in which one of the shows was mounted, I'm surprised that they did not think also to photograph works of sculpture from more than one angle. Sculpture is three-dimensional; one walks around a statue. Seeing it from one direction reduces it to two dimensions. Since the great reason for going to microfiche in the first place is lower cost—it makes possible a greater number of illustrations than one could afford in a conventionally printed work, I would hope that the editors will see fit to encourage their photographers to walk around works of sculpture, provide viewers with several frames for each work and thus a better sense of its character.

Second: although the notes provided with the Chicago series are very uneven in depth, all seemed very useful to me. I did not check the catalogue information for accuracy; I would assume that it was very good, since those of the people involved with the project with whose work I am familiar are careful and worthy scholars.

Third: it seems to me that it would be a good idea to standardize the size of the pamphlets. The fiche themselves are stored in envelopes which can be kept in a card file or glued to the inside cover of the pamphlets. Either way, one would want the pamphlets, one's guide to the fiche, to fit compactly nearby; uniform dimensions would help.

What, then, of the prospects for these projects and American Studies teaching or research? I can think of several pedagogical situations in my

own courses in recent years in which I would have liked to have had in-depth material of the Dunlap sort available for single buildings; had the right buildings—and good indexes—been available for a fiche set, I would have used it. Some good Dunlap color slides would make the presentation attractive as well as enlightening. I would not use a fiche set in teaching situations without an index, though: who has the time to wade through so much? If, of course, I were involved in scholarship on a building already available in a set, I would be grateful for all this archival material, index or no.

I'm less sure of what we could do with the Chicago text/fiche volumes. One doesn't organize many courses on a museum-by-museum basis. One deals rather with artists and periods. It would be clumsy in the class to jump from an Eakins in one museum set to another in another volume. I do sometimes send students to museums in our region; it would be good, I suppose, to go over to the collection ahead of time to show them what they'll see, and comment on it: several members of a NEH seminar I gave this summer, for instance, travelled to Wichita to see the great collection of American painting in the museum there, and I would have used fiche of it had they been available. That is, however, a limited sort of use. In general, lacking a union list of artists and works in these sets, I can't see many practical ways to use them. But the idea of fiche is exciting; perhaps uses will be found for sets of different sorts.

Our university is fortunate enough to have a full-time curator of the art history department slide collection. I invited her over to evaluate these series and the machine. Like me, she thought the machine far too primitive to be practically useful in most classroom situations, but she very much liked the fiche themselves and wanted to look into the costs of producing fiche to be made available to students for study. These would have to be our own fiche, tailored to our courses, and not, of course, to the collection of a given museum. A major logistical problem in teaching any art history course is providing the students with adequate visual material for study and review. One can't allow students access to the slide collection, and the alternatives I've seen used or used myself in teaching art history courses are simply not satisfactory.[5] I'm sorry to say that most art history courses are given without adequate visual study aids. Fiche would make ideal aids.

I can imagine all manner of difficulties. Even if the production of high-quality fiche were relatively inexpensive, there would remain a terrible welter of problems about rights—one cannot legally reproduce commercial slides; although most art history departments with equipment to do so routinely photograph plates from books, I don't think they are supposed to, and perhaps, with recent tighter interpretation of copyright regulations, they will cease doing so entirely. So where would one get the images to go on home-produced fiche? There's no question, however, that our slide curator is right; clumsy as fiche are to use, a couple of fiche covering the work shown in a course would be an immensely valuable pedagogical study tool. And for an American Studies teacher who uses under 100 or so images a course, a few fiche produced precisely for the needs of his courses would be a great help: store 'em in a drawer and no more annual hassle with the (necessarily) suspicious guardians of slides in other departments. The problem of searching out images would be less serious, since one would have laid out the fiche oneself.

All a pipedream at present, however; technology, law and practical need are not yet in sync. It is good to note, at least, that innovators at

Chicago and at the Dunlap Society have begun to puzzle out ways to use the new tool.

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footnotes

1. Different policies seem to be followed in each volume. The Barbizon collection, for example, contains only catalogued material. The American print volume, in contrast, contains a couple of paragraphs of commentary or quotations from or about the artists for each item reproduced. *Academy* provides brief blurbs for some, just catalogued material for others.

2. I have found that black line useful in dealing with printed matter, it is a terror with works of art, slicing every painting, print and work of sculpture in two. I asked whether there was any way to get rid of it; it turned out that there is: the librarian removed the ground glass screen and peeled from its back a thin black strip of tape. The line, in short, was right on the screen. Your microfilms librarian may not be so friendly. Even this cooperative lady said, "I have no idea whether or not I'll be able to get it back on again."

3. This is because the two series are differently produced. The Dunlap format can handle up to five rows of up to nine frames per fiche; Chicago runs seven rows of twelve smaller frames.

4. It would be troublesome to have to swivel the control back to an index plate on the fiche every time one wanted to look something up, but even this would be preferable to the present mess.

5. For example, when teaching history of American painting in an art history department which did not even have the facilities to put the slides we had used on display in lighted cases (an expedient I've seen used at several schools), I arranged review sessions for my class in which my projectionist would simply crank through, say, the last 150 slides we had studied in the lectures, reading the students the name of the painting, building, or whatever, and leaving it on the screen for twenty seconds or so. That's a lousy expedient, but better than nothing, and typical of the kind of improvisation one has to use. The only alternative would be to have students purchase impossibly expensive books of reproductions, but even those would not do the job, because such books are not tailored to actual courses, and never contain precisely those paintings which one uses to make one's points.