

Preston, George. 2017. "Esther Pasztory and Art History at Columbia in the 1960s: Recollections of a Fellow Graduate Student." In *Visual Culture of the Ancient Americas: Contemporary Perspectives, Online Addenda*, edited by Andrew Finegold and Ellen Hoobler. Columbia University Department of Art History and Archaeology, <<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/arhistory/faculty/Pasztory/Online-Addenda/02-Preston.pdf>>.

ONLINE ADDENDUM TWO

Esther Pasztory and Art History at Columbia in the 1960s

RECOLLECTIONS OF A FELLOW GRADUATE STUDENT

George Preston

In the spring of 1966, I turned from art making and began thinking about art history, and a serendipitous meeting with Douglas Fraser led to my being awarded a Title IV Fulbright for the study of non-Western art and culture here at Columbia. And so it was, on a balmy September afternoon, that I entered Room 934 Schermerhorn [Hall], African Art, Dr. Paul Stover Wingert presiding. About eight or nine students were sitting around that walnut-stained oak table upstairs that so many of you are familiar with. But no one was sitting next to anyone. There was a student, and then an empty chair, and a student, and empty chair, and so on. I said, "What is this, like a men's bathroom? So there was George Corbin, Michael Kan, William Wright, Cecelia Klein, Esther Pasztory. Come on. Life has choices. Where did I sit? Right in the middle, [between] Esther [and] Cecelia. We took an immediate and friendly curiosity in each other, we also studied together. Yes, in those days graduate students were not competitive, and often studied together. Before exams, we did show and tell, and quizzed each other with these now antiquated index cards crammed with notes and sketches. Does anybody use those anymore? Do you even know what they look like?

At that time, rapid changes were taking place in the perception of non-Western, or Primitive, art, as it often was called, changes stimulated by the sudden increase in independent African states, and shifting social values in general. The powers that be at Columbia University seized the moment, and the Art History department here determined to be a leader and innovator of these changes. Douglas Fraser, who I described jovially as a defector from Renaissance architecture, was the head of our program, which in those days was called "Primitive and pre-Columbian art." It wasn't even that long before the political correctness police got mad at the nomenclature. But we were happily studying Primitive art or non-Western art. We knew that the object of our affection was, by any name, just as fair. Our other professor was Dr. Paul Stover Wingert,

another defector, from French Medieval sculpture. Again, nothing bad intended by the word defector. What we need to remember here is that Fraser and Wingert were, from the point of view of a procedural premise, following in the footsteps of Sir Roger Fry, the English lord and specialist in Raphael Sanzio. In his 1920 landmark *Vision and Design*, Fry used the same formalist language and art lexicon that he used to discuss Renaissance art, to describe African and pre-Columbian, and other non-Western arts, thereby implying their equal recognition. Wingert was an advocate of Meyer Schapiro's discussion of objective content and subjective content, as in, the visible elements of style and the subjective elements of style, as in what you objectively apprehend in the eye and sensibility for what is felt. Fraser became increasingly interested in the diffusion of style in iconography on the one hand, and Lévi-Strauss' structuralism on the other. Fraser and Wingert complemented each other in our studies. When the department invited Hans Himmelheber, the German ethnographer, to teach in February 1967, we learned African art from the point of view of an ethnographic fieldworker. In addition to these great minds, we studied pre-Columbian art with Gordon Ekholm, anthropology with Alexander Alland and Elliott Skinner, we had access to lectures and seminars with Margaret Mead, Elizabeth Easby, Douglas Newton, Roy Sieber, Junius Bird, and Robert Farris Thompson. Our mentors introduced us to some of the great collectors, who generously opened their collections to us: Ernst Ansbach, Gillett Griffin, Gaston de Havenon, Klaus Perls, and so many others.

In 1968, the campus was in an uproar. The Vietnam protests were at their peak, a separatist Black Students caucus was formed, and several buildings were occupied by students. This also just happened to be at the time when our Orals were scheduled. And many of our Orals dates were postponed and rescheduled. We stayed out of politics, and kept our focus on what would be our real contributions to society. Under Fraser's guidance, we created two catalogue exhibitions: *African Art as Philosophy*, based on structuralism, and *Early Chinese Art in the Pacific Basin*, based on diffusionism. I'm sure that you can see how this learning environment would eventually lead, in addition to her art historical contributions in pre-Columbian art, to the non-parochial thinking that made possible the leaps of imagination from *Hierarchical and Hieratic Order in Nigerian and Cameroon Art*, to *Thinking With Things*, *Jean-Frederick Waldeck: Artist of Exotic Mexico*, and *Conversations With Quetzalcoatl*. Reading that book made me think of Truffaut's 1973 film *Day for Night*, which as you may recall is a film about itself being made. *Conversations with Quetzalcoatl* has something of this, but as she tries to unravel the many alter egos of Quetzalcoatl / Ehecatl, I couldn't help but think of her own alter egos. Esther is simultaneously Esther and Hadassah, as in Chapter 2, Verse 7 of the Book of Esther, and she is Ishtar as Esther. Last night, Esther gifted me with a copper alloy bracelet that had been given as a gift to her

parents by a diplomat from the former Belgian Congo. As I admired its nearly complete circular form, I thought of an old Negro spiritual entitled “Will the Circle Stay Unbroken.” Alice Walker, the author of *The Color Purple*, speaks of those who love and who seek the path instinctively, but that which leads us to love requires us to become intimate with what is foreign, and helps us to grow. Although she is being celebrated here for the importance of her scholarship, we remember Esther as a beautiful human being.