PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act V, Scene i

What can "the poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling" *possibly* have to do with the Kress Foundation? Admittedly, a clever graduate student would have no problem connecting the two. After all, the notion of the poet's "frenzy" goes back to Italian Renaissance poetics, and it is a small leap from that to Renaissance art theory. And surely the visual artist too, whether frenzied or not, turns "forms of things unknown … to shapes." But in this brief retrospective, I want to focus on neither poets nor artists, but rather on old and new ways in which we in the heritage community seek to assign "airy nothing a local habitation and a name."

As we probe our way into a new millennium already fraught with uncertainty, we are beset by "airy nothings" on every side. As a society, we live and breathe the twenty-four hour news cycle, in which most "breaking news" is in reality, and often by design, still-born, to be immediately superseded by the next opportunistic sound byte. Our characteristic forms of communication, too – email, text- and instant-messaging, and blogging – are as ephemeral as they are faceless. Who would not trade the latest blog, or the contents of their own email in-box, or for that matter the program of the most recent professional conference, for something more considered and enduring, something with "a local habitation and a name"?

Like all institutions and individuals engaged with our shared cultural heritage, we at the Kress Foundation care ultimately about a small universe of things, things made by human beings, things that have a local

habitation and a name. For three quarters of a century the Foundation has devoted itself, and dedicated its resources, almost exclusively to supporting the preservation and study of such things – *of objects made by human beings.* This strong focus on objects is responsible, in part, for the fact that Kress has been relatively immune to fads, fashions, and "mission drift" and that it has achieved as much (and perhaps more) than many philanthropies with greater means at their disposal but less sustained focus on a well-defined mission.

The fact remains that the world around us is turning. The practice of art history is changing both in the academy and in art museums – the two institutional domains with which Kress is most directly engaged. This is true despite the fact that art history, while by no means immune to intellectual fashions, is probably more conservative in its basic methods and practice than many other humanities disciplines.

At our colleges and universities, teachers and students of art history, who not long ago depended exclusively upon 35mm slides for teaching and learning, and upon black-and-white photographs for research, now routinely work with digital images. The latter are now available on a sometimes massive scale from their own institutions, from such third party sources as ARTstor, and from the Internet; and many scholars of course produce their own personal archives of digital photographs as well. Writing nearly a century ago, a great Viennese art historian, Hans Tietze, lamented in the most imposing treatise on art historical methodologies ever penned that "the number of image sources of interest to the art historian is simply monstrous."* Had he encountered Google Images he would probably have fled art history to become a Viennese pastry chef!

These changes affect not only the practice of *academic* art history – how art history is learned, taught, and pursued professionally in our colleges and universities – but also the institutional support structures of the discipline, such as art libraries and visual resource departments (once

*H. Tietze, *Die Methode der Kunstgeschichte* (The Methodologies of Art History) (Vienna, 1913), p.222.

St. Andrew, c. 1505, Tilman Riemenschneider, Workshop of, (German, c.1460-1531); Samuel H. Kress Collection, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA

known as slide libraries), which increasingly offer digital collections and services. It is only in the realm of scholarly publishing that academic art history remains firmly anchored in traditional practices. The reasons for this are many and include: inertia-bound academic criteria and standards for professional advancement and tenure; the fundamental dependence of art history publishing on the licensing of images from all over the world, with all the legal and institutional complexities that requirement brings with it; and the increasingly uncertain economics of scholarly publishing in general. And yet we need not doubt that this landscape will change profoundly in coming years.

Academic art history and its support structures are not alone in undergoing significant transformations. In *art museums*, too, the ground is shifting. *Art conservation*, which a leading practitioner recently described convincingly as being still in its early adolescence, has come to be uniquely dependent upon new technologies developed in other domains. *Art museum educators* now devote increasing attention to a

broad spectrum of technology-enabled applications, from in-gallery audio tours and information kiosks to mobile "apps" that facilitate the navigation of museums both in the flesh and at home. Finally, *art museum websites* – in addition to serving an array of marketing goals – increasingly offer a scholarly window on the collections, alongside and sometimes in lieu of printed collection catalogues, while also inviting the public to articulate and share its own response to the museum's collections. In other key respects, as suggested above, art museums remain inured in conventional practices. This is especially the case with respect to image licensing practices and underlying assumptions about copyright, which as noted is one of the key impediments to online publishing in art history – not only in academe but even for museums themselves.

Such changes pose a challenge for a foundation like the Kress: How can a foundation which cares deeply about the study, teaching, and practice of art history, and about the conservation and interpretation of works of art in our museums, best pursue its mission in such a time of flux? The answer – as easy to formulate as it may prove difficult to achieve – is surely this: to do what it has always done. And that is: to attend closely to the expressed as well as the less-articulated needs of the communities one seeks to serve, to facilitate change where change seems desirable but not assured, to help manage change where change is inevitable, and never to champion change (or for that matter the status quo) for its own sake.

In recent years, the Kress Foundation has sought to strike just this balance between tradition and change. As a philanthropy that is by mission dedicated to cultural heritage – to cultural continuity – we have worked hard to avoid disruptive changes, and even the perception of disruptive changes, in our own funding programs. At the same time, we have supported innovative projects in a variety of arenas, culminating in 2009 with the explicit formulation of a new funding program called Digital Resources for the History of Art. Even in introducing this innovative program, we have sought to underscore the element of

continuity which, we believe, makes this new program continuous and consistent with our previous funding programs and priorities and with the Foundation's long history of supporting the ongoing evolution of the history of art. Our support for digital initiatives has taken several forms, reflecting by design the key ways in which new technologies are affecting the field of art history as practiced in academe and in museums.

In the pages that follow, which list by category the Foundation's grant and fellowship awards in 2010, the interested reader will gain a sense of how the Kress Foundation is responding to the evolving practice of the history of art.

Max Marmor
President

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Portrait of a Woman, 1522,
Lucas Cranach the Elder,
(German, 1472-1553); Samuel H.
Kress Collection, National Gallery
of Art, Washington, DC