Conversations with Alumni

Masaccio to Picabia, Panofsky to Nochlin

An Interview with Philip Pearlstein

In this interview, conducted in May 2021 by the editor of the IFA Alumni Newsletter, Reva Wolf, PhD 1987, the well-known realist painter and writer Philip Pearlstein, MA 1955, discusses his time as a student at the IFA, how he became interested in art history, the portraits he painted of art historians who were affiliated with the IFA, and the relationship between his work as a practicing artist and his study of art history, among other topics. In 2002, Pearlstein gave the Walter W.S. Cook Lecture, the annual talk presented by a distinguished IFA alumnus. His talk, entitled "When the Dada Daddies Got Real," was described by Beth Holman in the 2002 issue of the IFA Alumni Newsletter as "lively," and she noted that Pearlstein "also offered some thought-provoking comparisons to his own paintings."

You have pursued a rich career path that has included both painting and art history. What led you to study art history?

During World War II, I was drafted into the U.S. Army. In June 1943, I made a troop-ship convoy voyage to Italy, where I was in constant training in combat-casualty replacement camps, the first near Naples, the next near Rome. Eventually, I was assigned to painting road signs. The amazing part of that period for me was discovering art history. I learned about Byzantine and Renaissance art in the small churches and town halls of the towns around Naples. Each site had a stack of small pamphlets for the taking, printed in English. These were produced by the British army, which had art historians travelling behind the fighting troops writing about the art in each of these churches or town halls. I still have a few of them. In Naples the Museum of Art and Archaeology was partly open. The Red Cross ran guided tours to Pompeii that I joined on my off-duty weekends, along with other soldiers from the several different allied national armies. So I studied ancient Roman painting in situ and in the newly reopened Naples Museum soon after the German army had pulled out of Naples and took over Rome.

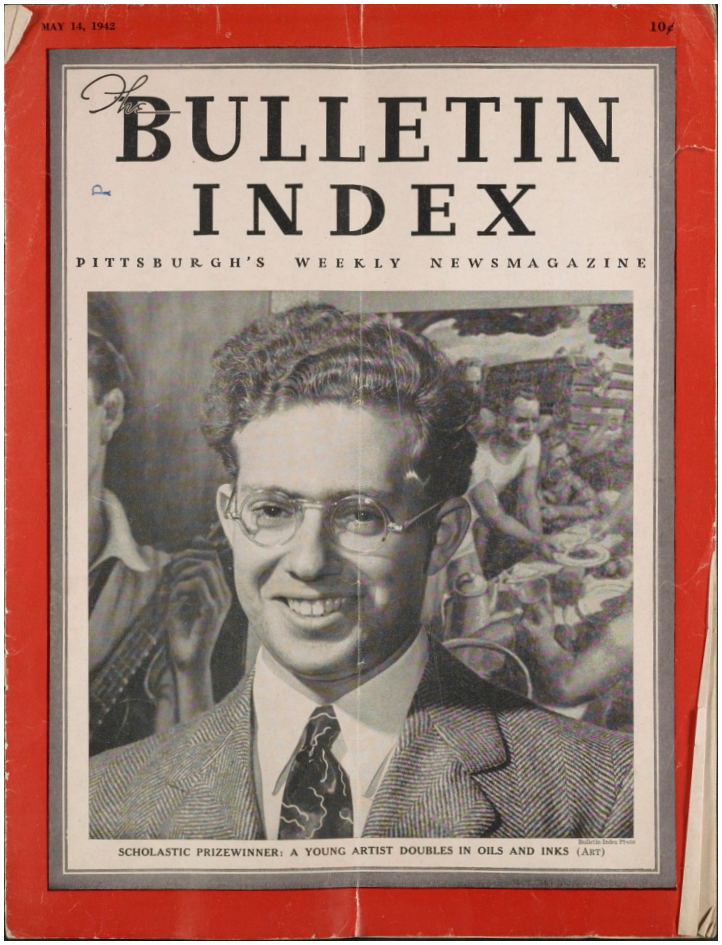
Philip Pearlstein in Italy, 1946. Philip Pearlstein papers, circa 1940-2008. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Later, after the Germans pulled out of Rome, I spent four months at a Mussolini-era built military compound taking combat training all over again. This place was a half-hour truck ride from the city of Rome. The city itself was then still enclosed by its ancient walls, with small neighborhoods surrounding it, and could be walked across in a couple of hours. On my free weekends, along with a couple of other interested, and more sophisticated, new buddies, I explored Rome, spending a great deal of time in the Vatican Museums of Greek, Etruscan and Roman art as well as the Michelangelo and Raphael and other Renaissance masters' painted chapels and rooms. We also visited the newly reopened princely museums. Towards the end of this three-month training program, I was suddenly assigned to work in the motor-pool as a road-traffic sign painter alongside another soldier who had been a professional artist. And I was able to continue exploring the art in the churches and museums in Rome.

When the war in Europe was abruptly declared over, the two of us were sent to a compound near Pisa and assigned as road sign painters to an engineering unit in charge of rebuilding the bombed-out roadways. German prisoners-of-war were doing the labor. There I got rides every week on the truck that took our laundry and mail to Florence, to Fifth Army Headquarters, which was housed in the great Farnese Palazzo. From there it was a short walk to the small church which has the chapel painted by Masaccio that marks a significant early stage of the art of the Renaissance [the Brancacci Chapel in Santa Maria del Carmine]. With nobody else present, I spent much time studying the frescoes, climbing up the mounds of sandbags put there to keep the walls from collapsing during the bombings of the city, and tried to memorize each detail in the dim light that came from the small window at the top of the chapel.

Then I would walk across the Po River on the temporary pontoon bridge to the Uffizi. The museum was only partially reopened, but the first large room was impressive enough, with the Botticelli *Birth of Venus*, Leonardo da Vinci's painting with the drawing in perspective of the immense elongated staircase of a palace, the kneeling Virgin and infant Christ, and the three Magi, mostly unfinished. It is large, and it is a wonderful lesson in drawing, and is still so little known. Other collections of Renaissance art were partly open as well.

During this time a "rest" trip took me and several others of our unit to Venice and Padua. In Venice a massive exhibition of much of the art that had been hidden during the war was installed in a museum that ran around the top floor of the buildings that form the perimeter of San Marco Square. It included many of the most famous altarpieces from the various churches and cathedrals and museums. It was stupendous. Altogether I spent almost two full years in Italy.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The BULLETIN INDEX

PITTSBURGH'S WEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE

SCHOLASTIC PRIZEWINNER: A YOUNG ARTIST DOUBLES IN OILS AND INKS (ART)

Philip Pearlstein featured in the Pittsburgh *Bulletin Index*, 1942. Philip Pearlstein papers, circa 1940-2008. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

I am especially struck by how you found a way to focus on the wonders of human creation—the making of art—even while, or perhaps because, you were surrounded by the horrors of human destruction—war.

You mentioned being responsible for sign painting during your service in Italy. Did you already have experience as a painter at the time?

I grew up in Pittsburgh, PA, in the Hill District. It was a racially and ethnically mixed neighborhood: first- and second-generation European immigrants who were Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic, and Latinos, a few Asians, and many Blacks. All were low to lower middle income. It also was a famous neighborhood of jazz bands. There was no openly apparent hostility among the groups. The kids went to the same public schools and played together. Fortunately, the high school we all went to was oriented toward high achievers, with excellent teachers. Most relevant to me, there were three art teachers who encouraged the interested students to attend Saturday morning art classes at the Carnegie Museum (several years later Andy Warhol—then Warhola—benefited from these classes), and in our junior and senior years we were taught by faculty members of the Carnegie University of Technology Art Department. As an eleventh grader, in 1941, I won both first and third prizes in the Scholastic Magazine National High School Art Contest. That year the contest exhibition was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The exhibition was also written about in *Life* magazine with full color reproductions of all prize winners, at a time when color reproductions of art were still rare. My painting of a merry-go-round was given a full half-page to itself; all the other reproductions were small. I became an instant art star in Pittsburgh. The following year I won a scholarship for my first year of college at the Carnegie Institute, at the end of which I was drafted into the U.S. Army, spending the next four months in a physically brutal training program as a foot soldier rifleman in the infantry's casualty replacement training camp in Alabama.

The day after the training program ended, I was transferred to the headquarters company of a different infantry training camp in Florida where I was assigned to work in a studio shop with a group of older soldiers who had been professional commercial artists. The shop was producing large-scale charts depicting infantry weapons and their parts—how to take them apart for maintenance, how to use them in action, and how to read a compass, map symbols, and so on. These charts were for use in basic field-training programs such as the one I had just finished. These eight men were far more sophisticated than any others I met in the army. They taught me page design, the different styles of typefaces, which we copied as hand lettering, how to use drafting implements, and how to cut stencils, among other skills. We designed and produced large numbers of charts by silkscreen printing. It was an amazing experience that provided me with the craft to have a future career in graphic design. That experience abruptly ended when I was transferred back to the active infantry, took basic training all over again, and was sent to Italy.

Your interests and activities during the war were clearly such that when you returned home you could have pursued either art or art history. Eventually you studied both.

After being discharged from the Army, I returned to Pittsburgh and completed the BFA program at Carnegie Institute on the GI bill, after which I moved to New York City in June 1949 with my classmate Andy Warhola. Pittsburgh seemed to offer limited opportunities for work as commercial illustrators, which we both had ambitions to

pursue. Andy's two older brothers would let him make the move only if Andy and I lived together, since they thought I was, as an army veteran and several years older, an experienced man of the world. Dorothy Cantor, who was a fellow art student and close friend, and who I married the following year, and her older sister Leah, decided to spend that summer in New York as well, as did several other friends from Carnegie. We had a nice social life the first couple of months.

Soon after, in 1950, I enrolled for a master's degree in art history at the Institute of Fine Arts. Meanwhile I continued to work part-time in graphic design, which I had decided was based primarily on the painting styles of Piet Mondrian, for page-layout, and Henri Matisse, for the flat shapes of illustrated material. I worked as an assistant to the well-known graphic designer, Ladislav Sutnar, who had been part of the original Bauhaus and had come to the U.S. during WWII and now was the head design coordinator of Sweets Catalogs for the building industry. A good many of his famous architect and designer friends from Europe and the U.S. visited his office. Among his visitors in the first few months I worked there as a draftsman was Buckminster Fuller, with whom he designed an elaborate pamphlet titled, *Transport: Next Half Century*, as a New Year's gift for the clients of Sweets Catalogs. My job was to develop Sutnar and Fuller's rough sketches into finished art for the printer: meticulously drafted final illustrations and color separations in ink on Mylar sheets (that was the procedure before the age of doing this work by computer). I spent a couple of weeks with Mr. Fuller by my side as I worked while he explained his original drawings. Next, I was asked by the head of Sweets Catalogs, after he read the foreword Mr. Fuller had written, if I could put it into ordinary English, as he could not understand Mr. Fuller's words. I recognized them as being in the style of Ezra Pound, and I re-wrote it in my own way. When I showed it to Mr. Fuller, he said it was OK, but asked why they hadn't asked him to do it. At the end of the project, as everything went off to the printer, both Mr. Fuller and Mr. Sutnar congratulated me on my work.

Mr. Sutnar, who then was also teaching at Pratt Institute, and had noticed that I sometimes looked at the small collection of art books he kept in the office waiting room, said this to me one day: "You told me you still have a couple years of college tuition left on the GI Bill. Most college art students are badly educated in the humanities. Why don't you go study art history, and you can still work for me part-time around your study time." That is when I applied to the Institute of Fine Arts.

What kinds of courses did you take at the IFA?

I took courses in the art and architecture of Egypt, Greece, and Rome, Italian Renaissance, and European modern art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; and Chinese art, including the art produced during the practice of Zen.

Who among your classmates at the IFA especially stand out?

One fellow student I became involved with in my years of classes, 1950 and 1951, was Ad Reinhardt, who later became a very famous artist, who I sat next to through courses on Egyptian art and architecture, Greek and Roman art and architecture presented by Dr. Karl Lehmann, art in Florence in 1420 by

Philip Pearlstein, Sue Foster, Joan Kramer, Elinor Simon, Paul Kuzma and Andy Warhol at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, circa 1949.
Philip Pearlstein papers, circa 1940-2008. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Dr. Richard Offner, and the art of medieval China and a seminar on Zen, both given by Dr. Alfred Salmony, which had a profound effect on the later development on Reinhardt as an artist.

In an oral history interview of around 1964 for the Archives of American Art, Reinhardt recalled an experience overlapping yours of participating in World War II and eventually attending graduate school. He noted that he had been an art history major as an undergraduate at Columbia University, studying with Meyer Schapiro, "and ten years after that, in the Second World War, after that I went back to the Institute of Fine Arts and studied with Salmony there, that was specialization in Eastern Art—Indian, Chinese, Japanese…."

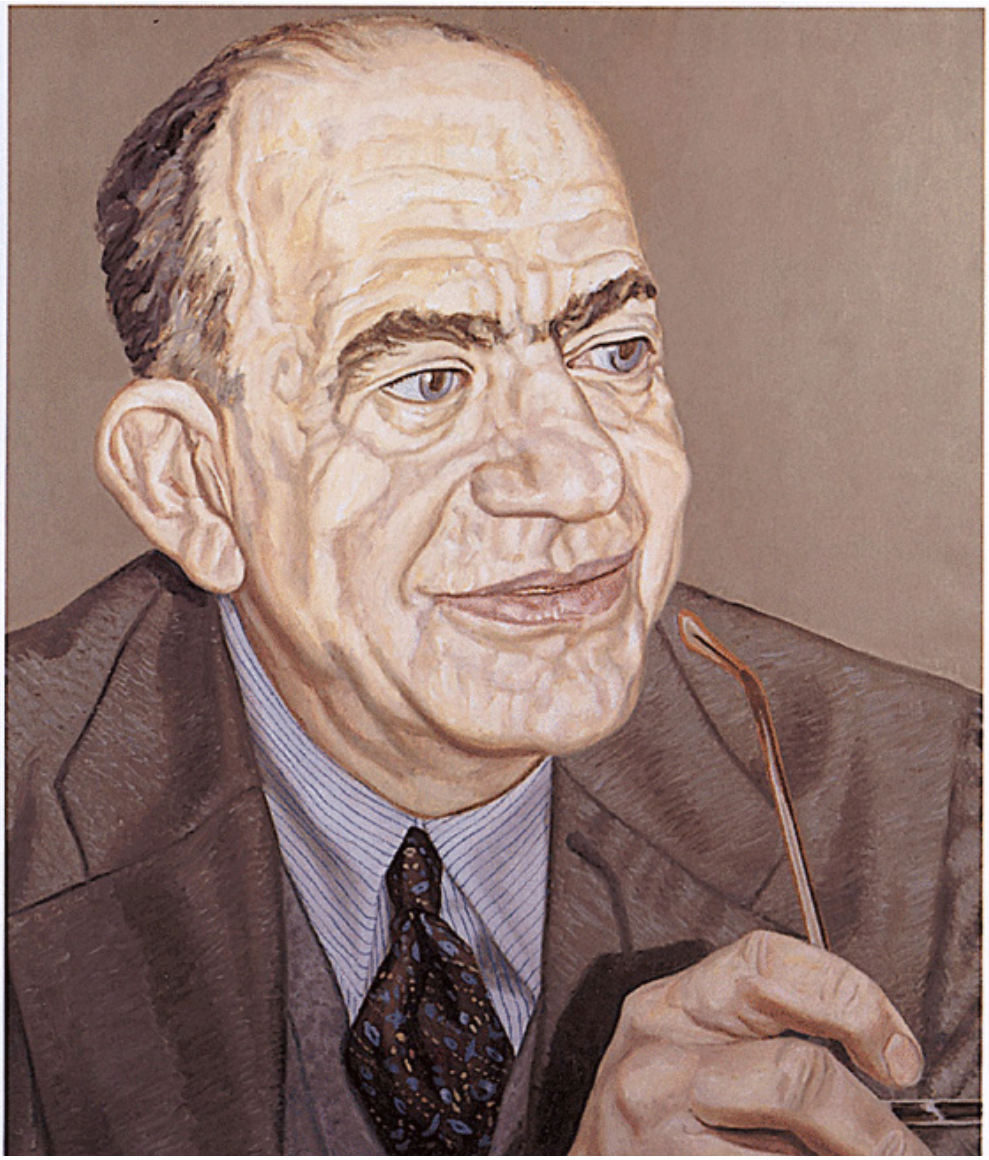
Reinhardt, many years after I graduated, was most helpful to me in getting a tenured position at Brooklyn College.

Did you befriend any fellow students who went on to become art historians?

The two fellow students who I became most friendly with at the Institute were Leo Steinberg and Robert Rosenblum. We had long conversations in the library sitting room at the Institute, which at the time was housed in a small mansion on West 87th Street. And I found out through those conversations just how valuable my firsthand experience was with medieval and early, full, and late Renaissance art in Italy as a soldier in World War II.

I also became friendly with Irving Lavin. We took courses with Erwin Panofsky that included a seminar. Many years later, Irving invited me to do a portrait of Dr. Panofsky that was then reproduced in the publicity for a conference in 1993 held at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, and later used on the dustjacket of the large-sized book he edited based on the conference papers, entitled *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Views from the Outside. A Centennial in Commemoration of Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968)*, published in 1995.

***You described the process of making this painting in a letter to Irving Lavin, which is transcribed for a story by Lavin for the 2010* Institute Letter. *Lavin had lent you some snapshots of Panofsky to use as a model, and, as you described it, you painted the portrait from a projected slide of one of these snapshots: "I tried to paint as if from a still-life. Projecting the slide this way allowed me to keep on the usual studio lights I work with. You can see that I re-positioned the hand holding the eye glasses, to compress the composition, and…I painted the details of the hand from my own hand as a model—there simply wasn't enough detail in the photo—and my hand is just as pudgy as Panofsky's!"* (https://www.ias.edu/ideas/2010/lavin-panofsky-eyck-pearlstein).**



Philip Pearlstein, *Erwin Panofsky,* 1993, oil on canvas, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Previously, you had painted a striking double portrait of two art historians of a younger generation, both likewise affiliated with the Institute of Fine Arts: Linda Nochlin and Richard Pommer. For that occasion, you were able to paint the sitters from life and we see their entire bodies and an interior setting rather than, as with Panofsky, a focus primarily on the face and upper body. In Nochlin's account of this portrait, published in* Artforum *in 1993, she explains that it was a commissioned wedding portrait* (https://www.artforum.com/print/199307/philip-pearlstein-s-portrait-of-linda-nochlin-and-richard-pommer-33860). *How did the commission come about? Were you friends of theirs? And why the particular pose?

I did not meet Linda Nochlin until 1967 when she included a double portrait of my two very young daughters in an exhibition at Swarthmore College. She had organized

that exhibition, called "New Realism," in conjunction with the art critic Irving Sandler, whose wife Lucy Freeman Sandler was also a graduate of the Institute and a friend of Linda. Linda mentioned to Irving that she would like to buy for herself that painting of my daughters. Irving, who was a friend of mine, suggested that Linda should have me do a portrait of herself instead. The following summer, I was scheduled to teach at the Skowhegan art school in Maine, and Linda telephoned me to say she was just married to Richard Pommer and she would like to have me do a double portrait of them dressed in their wedding outfits, but they were leaving for a year's residency in Florence, Italy, at the Berenson Foundation, and they had only a week free before they sailed. They came to Skowhegan, staying at a nearby guest house. They sat for the portrait during the hours around my teaching schedule, in the hot, small wooden cabin that was my assigned studio. As fellow art historians, we decided I would photograph my progress at every twenty-minute rest. I still have the transparencies, though the colors have modified themselves. Many years later I did a second portrait from life of Linda, in which she holds an art magazine, on the cover of which a then recent painting of mine is reproduced.

Philip Pearlstein, *Linda Nochlin and Richard Pommer*, 1968, oil on canvas, Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Estate of Linda Nochlin Pommer, 2018.20.3. © Philip Pearlstein. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

I had met Richard Pommer earlier, on a boat trip in 1958 to spend the year in Italy on a Fulbright fellowship with my wife Dorothy Cantor and our 10-month-old son William, who became the pet of the Fulbright fellowship group on the upper deck. Richard told me at the time that we had overlapped as students at the Institute of Fine Arts in the early 1950s. He had read my master's thesis.

What was the topic of your MA thesis and who was your advisor?

It was on Francis Picabia—and, due to the topic, it had to be equally on Marcel Duchamp. Picabia and Duchamp were close associates from 1910 to 1920. The thesis project took me five years to complete. It had grown to become a study of the various influences from the experimental groups of artists who had been scattered across Europe, then gathered in Paris during that period to collectively create "Modern Art." My thesis advisor was a then young professor who later wrote the *History of Art*, Horst W. Janson, and it had to be approved by Erwin Panofsky (with whom I had taken three courses in total).

What led you to the topic of Picabia and Duchamp?

An unexpected and consequential incident towards the end of my second year at the Institute led me to it. Professor José López-Rey gave a wonderful course on early twentieth-century art that compared the parallel careers of Pablo Picasso and James Joyce, comparing Picasso's blue period to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and then Surrealism and *Finnegan's Wake*, with the students taking turns at reading selected passages aloud in class.

This sounds so adventuresome and ahead of its time for an art history graduate course of the early 1950s!

Then he presented a series of short introductions to other early twentieth-century movements, including Dada, focusing on Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp. I became fascinated, especially with their time in New York City during World War I, when they published their own magazine, *291*, which they illustrated with images taken

from industrial publications similar to what I was then working on myself as a part-time draftsman. One such illustration that Dr. López-Rey showed was of an automobile motor sparkplug labeled as "Young American Girl in the State of Nudity."

That's an especially interesting example given that you would later become well known as a painter of nudes!

I decided to make Picabia the subject of my MA thesis and wrote up my proposal and Dr. López-Rey agreed to be my advisor, but he took a leave of absence at the end of the term and Dr. Janson became my advisor. Then, suddenly Picabia died. He and Duchamp were virtually unknown to the general public at the time, and the publishers of the two major art magazines contacted the Institute to ask if anyone could write an article on Picabia. My name was given, and I wrote a summary for an article based on my preliminary research. The final version, after a time of gathering enough material to flesh out my brief initial version and several re-writes requested by the editor, appeared more than a year later in the first edition of a new glossy art magazine, to which the editor of the magazine that originally had commissioned it had moved and was chief editor. It was a featured piece with several large-scale reproductions that took up several pages. I became instantly famous in the downtown New York art world and had several other articles published over the next decade.

Does anything stand out in particular as a way your two pursuits, studying painting and studying art history, were connected?

They overlapped in my activities as a teacher. In 1958 I began to teach at Pratt Institute in their foundation year (first year) program. The primary course I was assigned was an art history survey lecture, and to fill out my schedule I was also assigned courses in two-dimensional design, illustration, and figure drawing. I decided that all the exercises for the two-dimensional design and illustration courses would have the students develop the same image—a photo of ordinary people in an urban space they would find in a current issue of an illustrated magazine—in different stylistic approaches dealing with the flat rectangle of the paper they were confronting: (1) first style = flat two-dimensional, as in Egyptian art, combined with geometric divisions of the rectangle; (2) second style = the illusion of three dimensions as in Roman and Renaissance art; (3) third style = the use of chiaroscuro—light into darkness, as in the use of fast drying egg-tempera white paint to depict the light falling onto the forms in space, the space and forms are first depicted by thin washes of dark umber oil painting, and after this layer has dried, thin washes of oil-based color are brushed, as in the technique used by Tintoretto and Rembrandt; (4) fourth style is the Zen way of thinking, that the two-dimensional surface on which the marks are made, as universal space, as in Chinese scroll painting, or, later, drawings by Cézanne and the analytic cubist works by Braque and Picasso, or combined with the use of free floating smudges of color as in impressionism; (5) fifth exercise is a geometric analysis of the layout of the painting *Grand Jatte* by the French post-impressionist painter Georges Seurat, of which the underlying geometric design was an exercise in using the strict application of the "golden-section" diagram, a format that had been devised in the Italian Renaissance, used by such artists as Piero della Francesca, and to apply that to their chosen image of people in an urban situation; the final exercise was to freely transform the "golden section" diagram into several Mondrian-like linear compositions.

This assignment reflects well how art and art history are fundamentally intertwined in your practice.

Thank you for generously sharing with us many fascinating glimpses into how the various worlds of art connect, going back to your remarkable experiences in Italy during World War II, studying the art of the Renaissance first-hand while painting signs as your Army "day job." Your reminiscences of these experiences, and of your pursuits while a student at the IFA and beyond, bring to life a wide-ranging openness as you shift easily from Masaccio to Picabia, from Panofsky to Nochlin. We can all learn from the model of expansiveness that your career path and work exemplify.

Philip Pearlstein, *Linda Nochlin*, 2010, oil on canvas, Betty Cunningham Gallery. Reproduced by permission of the artist.