

**Symposium Reflection:****Catherine O'Reilly**

**Serious Fun: Expressions of Play in the History of Art and Architecture – The 32nd Annual Boston University Graduate Student Symposium in the History of Art & Architecture, February 26th & 27th, 2016** *This two-day event was generously sponsored by The Boston University Center for the Humanities; the Boston University Department of History of Art & Architecture; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Boston University Graduate Student History of Art & Architecture Association; and the Boston University Art Gallery at the Stone Gallery.*

The 32nd Annual Graduate Student Symposium in the History of Art and Architecture, “Serious Fun,” invited discussion of the various aspects of play as form, content, and process in visual and material culture. The keynote speaker, Dr. Paul Barolsky, broadened the scope of the symposium’s theme, however, when he made the playfulness of art historical scholarship (or lack thereof) the subject of his talk, titled “The Play of Italian Renaissance Art.” Dr. Barolsky, the Commonwealth Professor of Art History at the University of Virginia, opened his address at the Boston University Art Gallery at the Stone Gallery with his bold assessment that the current generation of art historians does not adequately appreciate the “fun in art” but instead is “so serious.” Citing the extensive historiography related to such iconic paintings as Sandro Botticelli’s *Primavera* and Bronzino’s *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid*, Dr. Barolsky explained that the desire to interpret challenging iconography has led art historians to minimize and even negate the inherent humor presented in these painted compositions. Worried that their scholarship will not be taken seriously, art historians do not allow themselves to indulge in “playful pleasures,” and in this way, they write drab assessments that “take the fun out of art history.” Dr. Barolsky also challenged the frequently mediocre quality of writing in scholarly journals and advised that art historians should think about their writing as a performance and craft, one that, where appropriate, should yield to the expressive and playful qualities of poetry as a method of interpretation. The evocative nature of poetry complements the visual arts more appropriately than the habitually lifeless prose of scholarly articles.

“Serious Fun” continued on Saturday, February 27th, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston with presentations by six graduate students that addressed the full scope of play, in all of its forms, as a vital expressive force. As the symposium coordinator, I worked with discussants Ewa Matyczyk and Joe Saravo to organize the program of papers around some of the common themes presented.

The morning session, moderated by Ewa Matyczyk, brought together three papers that explored associations between play and power in works of art intended for broad circulation to a public audience. Emma Thomas (Boston University) began the day with her paper, “At War and at Play: American Children and the Russo-Japanese War,” which discussed how children in Japan, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United

States were introduced to war through toys, games, prints, and cartoons produced for their consumption during this international conflict. Military-themed board games marketed to children in the United States, which was officially neutral during the war, were both playful and informative, exposing them to the complexities of geopolitics and their potential future role on the international stage. Following Thomas, Asiel Sepúlveda (Southern Methodist University) similarly addressed the dissemination of playful yet serious themes but focused on adult consumers with his paper, "Humor and Social Hygiene in Havana's Nineteenth-Century *Marquillas*." Small, inexpensive

color-illustrated paper cigarette wrappers (*marquillas cigarreras*) were widely circulated in Havana during the second half of the nineteenth century. A cigarette company's success in a competitive market might depend on the popularity of the jokes and visual play printed on these small, brightly colored wrappers. Some of their most interesting subjects, according to Sepúlveda, offered biting commentary on the public interactions of bi-racial women and white men, using humor to ridicule such socially unacceptable relationships. The potentially subversive nature of play was also put forth in the final paper of the morning session, "Monument | Memory | Play: Joseph DeLappe's *Dead in Iraq*" by Will Partin (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill). Like Thomas and Sepúlveda, Partin also focused his research on a medium that is widely available while also being directed to a specific audience. He explained how the artist Joseph DeLappe used the popular video game *America's Army* to memorialize soldiers killed in the war in Iraq. The game, which was created as a recruiting tool by the U.S. Army, invites players to experience simulated combat between American soldiers and insurgent terrorists in a fictional Arab country. DeLappe, who played the game over a six-year period, had enough of his American soldier avatars killed that they came to represent the 4,484 soldiers who had died in Iraq by 2012. The artist entered the name, age, and service information of each serviceperson killed to create a virtual memorial and, ultimately, to subvert the intended purpose of the game.

The afternoon session, moderated by Joe Saravo, brought together three papers that focused on the more light-hearted nature of play while also exploring its role in self-fashioning and social engagement. The panel began with Naomi Lebens (Courtauld Institute of Art) whose paper "Giuseppe Maria Mitelli (1634-1718): Print, Games and the Artist at Play," considered the Bolognese artist's production of printed board games and card games. Lebens explained how the games articulated both the character of daily life in the city of Bologna, as well as the artist's own self-image. Mitelli's printed games referenced his association with the city's revered Carracci Academy, while also promoting his sense of humor and ingenuity in an inexpensive medium with the potential for wide circulation. Lebens was followed by Elizabeth Weinfield (The Graduate Center, City University of New York) whose paper "Isabella d'Este: Patronage, Performance, and the Viola da Gamba," discussed self-fashioning through patronage. Isabella d'Este, the great patroness of art in Renaissance Mantua, included musical instruments in her exceptional, carefully constructed collection. The viola da gamba, Weinfield explained, was a rather obscure instrument when Isabella imported it to Italy from Spain. She learned to play the little-known instrument, expressing her desire to involve herself with

the introduction of a new musical phenomenon. The artistic program of her home also referenced Isabella's musical sense with the commission of paintings, such as Lorenzo Costa's *Coronation of a Lady* (1505-06), that represented music through iconography and metaphor. The session ended with Margaret Frick (Bard Graduate Center) who discussed the fun and games associated with communal drinking in spaces of social engagement with her paper, "A Friend may taste/But dont wast': A Study of Puzzle Jugs and Drinking Culture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries." Frick considered the place of puzzle jugs within a larger drinking culture that promoted play and social interaction among men in taverns and alehouses in Europe and America.

The 32nd Annual Graduate Student Symposium in the History of Art and Architecture was a thought-provoking and lively event that continues to inspire discussion among participants and attendees. In my conversations with other graduate students who attended, we revisit the themes presented by Dr. Barolsky and weigh his call for evocative and playful art-historical writing against our own developing scholarship. His analysis of performance and play in the academic discourse was an unexpected and provocative addition to the symposium theme, and we value its contribution to our event. Further, the six student speakers brought attention to lesser-known and diverse works of art and material culture. Their stimulating lectures developed our understanding of the meaning and function of "play" in the history of visual culture, and furthermore, they signal the rich potential for continued research and analysis of this seriously fun theme.