Assessment Review Report: Second Exam

Ph.D. Program in Art History

March 15, 2017

1. Learning goals

The Second Exam forms one method of evaluation for one of the Program’s learning goals: “to possess professional competence in the areas in which they intend to pursue employment.”

2. Data

Our data collection was multi-pronged:

a) Surveys: We sent surveys that discussed, among other issues, the Second Exam to alumni, to current students, and to faculty. Of our alumni, about 100 out of 330 graduate participated. Of current students, 37 out of 120 participated. Of faculty, 6 out of 16 participated. We also held a ‘town hall’ meeting for students devoted to the issue of orals (about 15 students came), and made orals a major topic of discussion at our annual retreat and two doctoral faculty meetings. Taken together, we felt that we had a robust sense of both faculty and student opinion concerning the Second Exam.

b) Second Exam Review. The doctoral faculty also reviewed all the Second Exams taking place during the past year (spring 2016-fall 2017). Of the 16 students taking the exam, 11 passed and 6 failed (one student took it twice, first failing and then passing on the second try). We were concerned by the high number of failures; to compare, in the last art history program assessment review in 2011, of the 19 students taking the exam, 16 passed and 3 failed. This indicated to faculty that we needed to re-evaluate very seriously our expectations and preparation of students for the Second Exam.

3. Findings

The data suggested a number of areas in need of improvement. Broadly, professors were concerned that students were too focused on bibliography and
could not carry out substantive visual analyses of works of art, while students were concerned that they were not receiving enough guidance from faculty on expectations for the exam. Our conclusions were:

a) **Coursework:**

- Offer more lecture courses on major topics covered in the Second Exam so that students have opportunities to prepare through coursework.
- Encourage students to audit masters-level courses at other CUNY programs, for instance Hunter and City College, that can aid in preparation for the Second Exam.
- Model skills in formal analysis and oral discussion of monuments in all classes, particularly through museum visits.

b) **Communication:**

- Clarify what the expectations are for Second Exam performance in both the major and minor fields — that is, how and to what extent students should demonstrate mastery of each field.
- Provide clearer guidelines on how long students should be expected to study, how much bibliography they are expected to read, and how often they should meet before the exams with their examiners.

4. **Proposed changes.**

The data collected was revealing and suggested a need for further information, dissemination of data, and discussion. As a faculty, we had a number of meetings during the fall 2017 term to discuss changes to the orals process. The result was a revised set of guidelines, disseminated in December 2016, and a pilot program for 2017, to be re-evaluated at the end of the year. We have also taken the data into account and used it to inform course scheduling for the 2018-18 academic year; it has also affected how many professors teach.

5. **Next steps**

**Guidelines**
In December 2016, we published our new set of guidelines for the Second Exam. It is included as an Appendix, below, and focuses on clarifying expectations (a key faculty concern), specifying procedures (a key student concern), and outlining the pilot program for the Art Since 1900 major field (where most of the failures occurred).

Scheduling

We have altered the balance of seminar and lecture courses within our program for next year, incorporating more broad-ranging surveys on key Second Exam topics into the curriculum. These include surveys of nineteenth century art; avant-garde art, 1900-1939; painting since 1900; and modern architecture. We anticipate continuing to schedule with the Second Exam in mind, going forward.


The Second Exam: Expectations, Procedures, and the Pilot Program for Art Since 1900 Majors

Across the board, art historians have recently noted a decrease in the level of critical thinking about the image. Our clarification of expectations and proposed changes to the orals process, described below, address this concern. We hope that the new approach will encourage students to deepen their knowledge of the visual so that critical engagement with images — the central contribution of our field — will continue to play a vital role in graduate training.

A. Expectations:

The Second Exam builds on the material covered during the First Exam. But while in the First Exam calls on students to demonstrate survey knowledge of works of art in a broad area of specialization, and to answer essay questions based on specific, limited bibliographies, the Second Exam has more focused, integrative expectations.

For the Major field, students should demonstrate a deep and sophisticated understanding of the major artists and/or works of art in the field. They should be able to speak about how the particular artworks selected by the examiners illuminate the
conceptual and theoretical issues in their fields, their chronology, and their bibliography.
The expectation is that, upon completion of the Second Exam, students could enter a museum, examine a work of art from their field (even if previously unfamiliar with it), and speak knowledgeably both in terms of formal analysis and issues raised in the historiography of the field; they should be able to situate such an artwork within the larger development of the history of art in their field.

For the **Minor field**, students should be familiar with major artists and/or works of art and important issues within the field as they apply to those works. Through their discussion of images selected by the examiner, students should demonstrate the knowledge appropriate for teaching an upper-level undergraduate survey course in that field.

For the **Focus area**, students should demonstrate a deep knowledge of the major artists and/or works of art, issues, chronology, and key texts within the area. They should be able to give an account of the research leading up to their dissertation prospectus and show that they have the knowledge and are asking the appropriate questions to pursue their particular research inquiry. Through their discussion of images selected by the examiner, students should be able to situate their research within a broader context; their discussion should be akin to that of the teacher of a graduate seminar on the topic.

### B. Procedures

Students studying full time for orals should allow **at least three months** of preparation. For those who need to balance orals with one or more jobs, **four to five months** is appropriate.

In the first **two to three weeks** of studying for orals, students should formulate a bibliography for the major and minor fields and have it approved by each examiner. The bibliography for the major is expected to be about ten to fifteen single-spaced pages long and for the minor about three to five.

For the **Art Since 1900** major, students should use the keyword list to guide them in formulating the bibliography. They should also formulate a list of 50-75 artists and have this approved by the examiners in the major field also. The list should be turned in to the program office and will be placed in the student’s file.

Students are advised to remain in regular communication (email or in-person) with the examiners while studying.

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Two to three weeks before the exam students should check in with each examiner. This check-in may include discussion of the bibliography/artist list as it evolved, a brief practice test, or a museum visit, at the discretion of the examiner.

C. Pilot Program

For students whose major field is Art Since 1900, there will be a one-year pilot program beginning in spring 2017. Students taking orals for the first time will use the keyword list to guide their studying and to formulate an artist list.

After a year, faculty will review the pilot program and decide whether to continue, alter, or abandon it.