

Objects in Space

A Conversation With

Barry
Bergdoll &
Charlotte
Vignon

Bard Graduate Center's board of trustees serves as an advisory body, providing direction, strategy, and support to help us fulfill our mission. We are fortunate to count a number of distinguished scholars and curators among our trustees, including Barry Bergdoll and Charlotte Vignon.

Dr. Bergdoll is the Meyer Schapiro Professor of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University, where he focuses on modern architectural history, with particular emphasis on France and Germany since 1750. He previously served as Philip Johnson Chief Curator at the Museum of Modern Art. Dr. Vignon is the director of Musée Nationale de Céramique at Sèvres. Previously the curator of decorative arts at the Frick Collection, as well as a visiting associate professor at Bard Graduate Center, she is the author of *Duveen Brothers and the Market for Decorative Arts, 1880–1940*.

In June, Drs. Bergdoll and Vignon joined BGC Dean Peter N. Miller, via Zoom video conference, for a conversation as part of the "Three Questions" series. An edited transcript follows. Visit bgc.bard.edu/three-questions to watch the complete video of the conversation.

Miller: Thank you both very much for joining us. A simple question to start: How would you describe the contribution of the BGC to scholarship on decorative arts, design history, material culture? I'm thinking of the exhibitions, the alumni who've gone off to work in museums and in academia and the various publications of the institution.

Vignon: I think the strength of the institution and the biggest impact was actually to put the subject on the map—to have one institution, with a master's and PhD program, that focused exclusively on the study and history of decorative arts and design.

Bergdoll: As a historian, I'm always a little bit nervous about trying to write a history of the immediate past, and particularly something that I participated in. But it seems to me that the BGC both rode a wave very early

and therefore had an impact on that wave. What I see is a very productive blurring of the boundaries between art historical studies and historical studies, between different disciplines within humanities and social sciences that had tended to look at the same objects from very different points of view. And this also troubles the lines between different artistic practices. Inevitably, this gave legitimacy to the study of what used to be called the “minor arts” or “the useful arts,” tags that were meant somehow to put the practices that the BGC looks at in a different category from the fine arts.

Miller: Why do you think that there has been—let’s say in the last 20 years or so—a new interest or certainly an increasing interest in things material and the meaningfulness of things, whether with professors, museums, popular literature?

Vignon: I think it’s a more general movement. Our world is going so fast and especially with the digital that is so abstract. I have the feeling around me that there is a desire of re-centering on the object, on patrimony, on our planet, on simple things. I think it’s a global phenomenon that makes us want to understand where we come from, our history, and learn it from the objects. This green movement of the youth, I think, makes us focus and be interested in all objects—the ones in museums, the ones that surround us, the ones we throw away, the ones that bother us.

Bergdoll: I think, in many ways, it’s a type of reaction formation. As a historian primarily of the years on either side of 1800, I think of the phenomena of the incredible rise of historical consciousness after the French

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Revolution. Charlotte is pointing to this notion that some of these interests are meant to come from anxieties about changes in the present and very rapid changes. Part of it, of course, I think is the digital—everything becomes more and more immaterial. There is a counter-movement towards a fascination with the material, whether it’s

for a sense of loss or whether it’s because these objects seem to be slipping into the past. I think we feel it much more intensely as we’re having this conversation in a very dematerialized or de-spatialized format.

Why is there such a thirst for going to museums? Why have we found the museums not to be places anymore of quiet contemplation but of absolute crowd invasion in recent years? I think the material turn in academic studies is also related to a popular desire for a tactile relationship to the world. I think maybe if we ask this question 20 years from now, or we ask people who weren’t alive or working right now as we’re working and can see us from some distance, I wonder if they will see this as part of a kind of *longue durée* that goes back to the previous generation’s turn in art history, to the so-called institutional turn. So, simultaneously, the material aspects of life but also the institutions in which they grow, separated from an older art history, an older material culture history, that was fascinated with names and makers and individuals operating outside of structure.



Vignon: To go back to what Barry just said about the role of museums...I think this crisis all over the world has really made us think differently of these institutions and the objects within. I thought that the museum can actually close for a couple of months. Why not? But actually, no, it's not possible, because we need to be there for the public. We need to be there and have this connection with objects. We have this social impact. We are part of this landscape of the city that is a reassurance for the public. Even if they don't go in, they know the museum is open, and it's important.

Miller: Does the theatricalization of the museum bother you a little bit? It's great that people like to go to museums, and one could certainly say, "Better to go to a museum for the wrong reasons," because there's still the opportunity to learn things. But in terms of training the next generation, there's a tension, surely, between the museum as a cultural resource and trying to serve that purpose.

Vignon: For many, many years, the reason for a museum or a university to study objects was to do research. Now, you need also to train this generation of young students who are going to need to respond to objects either on the art market or in a museum or in university that have multiple roles. So, it could be the feeling, yes, there is this sense of theatricality, but that means people in museums need to play with that and respond to that need and be prepared to think about these questions. We are not any more the keepers of a collection. We are not only studying objects to learn about them or to write about them for a certain field. Now it's much broader. As professionals or as a university or a place where we learn about objects, we need also to provide all of these different palettes of response and different perspectives that we can have around objects.

■ Photo: Staff Photographer

Miller: That brings me perfectly to my final question: You've been associated with the institution for a long time, and you've had careers outside in museums and other universities. What do you think the BGC could do with and for its students that it doesn't do now, or hasn't done until now? What kinds of things do you think we could do, stuff that you've seen tried in other places or which you've always imagined you would like to see included in the training of students?

Bergdoll: I think I've always wanted to see more of an inclusion of architecture at BGC—not simply as a subject matter but the counterpart to a really important contribution to how we understand things, material

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things, objects and the making of them as central to our study, rather than as illustrations of ideas. But the complement to it, I think, is space, and that is the thing I always think in art history curriculums that architectural historians try to bring is that we are the analysts of visual experience, whose evidence is as much in spatial configurations as it is in physical materiality. I think that you can extend this idea of bringing the spatial into the training of

Photo: Maria Baranova ■



students in every way, from intellectual understanding of how objects work in space but also those social spaces that we're all eager to get back to. The making of exhibitions is a spatial practice. You were asking us about theatricalization earlier, and I was thinking back to Alexandre Lenoir and the birth of the museum. He came out of the world of the theater. There's always been a theatrical aspect to the relatively young institution of the museum. But I think teaching students to think and to work spatially, even bringing in some of the practices of studio architecture into the work of training people who might like to express themselves through curatorial practice would be a wonderful enhancement to a curriculum that I think, under all of your guidances, is continually questioning itself, which is very healthy. But that's the one thing I can think of that I would want to push if I were there on 86th Street with you.

Vignon: I'm very pragmatic. I've worked with many students at BGC: They need jobs. We all know that. And they all want my job. They all want to be curator of decorative arts or in design in one of the top museums. And there are very few of those jobs. But maybe now, because the museum or the art world has such an important place in the world, there are many other jobs. There are always more museum educators than there are curators, and they play a very important role working with curators on how to speak to a larger public. And that comes back to the point that I said earlier, the fact that museums, our cultural institutions, are touching so many different levels, and I think BGC should [prepare] students to take roles in that very large palette of activities or cultural activities or jobs around the world.

Miller: I liked the fact that each of you offers very distinct, complementary ideas—the space studies and

the attention to the more practical elements and the interstitial communication between the academic world and the public, really. I think we're doing some of the latter much more now ... and a bunch of our students now are getting jobs in education departments. When it comes to the space element and architecture as a framework in which to consider the matter, but also the environments in which matter is deployed, I think that is something that we could do much more of. In the early days of the institution, I think there was a certain degree of marking the terrain against art history or against architectural history. I think, with the passage of time and a certain degree of success and self-confidence, there's less of a need for that kind of drawing of boundaries. So, it's a very timely suggestion to start thinking about that.

Bergdoll: I think it is extremely timely. We're having this conversation during a week in which people, even at the peril of their own health, are coming out of isolation to reoccupy urban space to protest racial injustice and social injustice. And so even this is incredibly spatial. It goes precisely to the poignancy of this moment when we are isolated from shared spaces, and yet the way to express something beyond the individual is, in fact, to reconquer that very space from which we removed ourselves.