



Walter Pach. Walter Pach Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

50 YEARS

Researching at the Archives of American Art

Gail Levin

Somewhere along my journey from art history graduate student to museum curator to biographer, I developed a curiosity about artists' lives. Understanding more of what went on became my goal. I wanted to understand their courage to embark on an economically uncertain career in a profession that most of American society views as marginal. I sought to comprehend how social forces affected their lives and looked at how the circumstances of an artist's life might inform the art created at a particular time and place.

As I have watched theoretical fads come and go, nothing has proven as crucial to my research as getting the basic facts. The availability of primary sources at the Archives of American Art has made it an invaluable and unparalleled treasure. The Archives offers a chance to fill in blanks in a field where many unanswered questions remain. One has easy access to a wide variety of papers from artists, critics, dealers, and arts organizations. There, for the conscientious researcher, are unpublished letters, diaries, scarce brochures, obscure reviews,

photographs of lost art works, and a wealth of information detailing how galleries function.

The Archives exemplifies American democracy. Not only does it open its resources to all free of charge, but it collects the histories and papers of artists both famous and obscure. After focusing on all of the art works of Edward Hopper to compile a catalogue raisonné, for example, I began to examine his life as one context for his art. In researching, I find that often it's the obscure sources that surprise us most, and this was certainly true as I worked on my biography of Hopper. Hopper's personal papers never made it to the Archives (and are still accessible only in the copies that I obtained and assembled at the Whitney Museum). As it turned out, though, most of the papers I needed to recreate the larger context of his life (from his best friend Guy Pène du Bois's diary to the papers of the teachers, colleagues, collectors, dealers, and curators who affected his life and work) were easily available at the Archives.

Unlike some institutions, the Archives of American Art has always emphasized accessibility, creating regional branches and affiliated research centers. Now, prompted by new technologies, the Archives has begun to put key materials online. For the first time, we can search for names and terms around-the-clock and even from remote locations around the globe. It's an unparalleled convenience and a workaholic's dream.