The Richard Offner Photo Archives at the Institute of Fine Arts: Seeing Paintings in Black-and-White, or Methodologies of Connoisseurship

Laurence Kanter, Yale University Art Gallery

“We need not even speak of the absence of color. Photography has not yet learnt to reproduce that with any accuracy or reliability,”


Among the least well-known and most under-utilized resources at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York is the photograph collection amassed by Richard Offner during his four decades as Professor there. Offner’s photo archive differs materially from comparable collections assembled by his predecessor, Bernard Berenson, or such collections as those formed by his contemporary, Gertrude Coor, or pupil, James Stubblebine (the latter two also preserved at the Institute of Fine Arts), in that it was not principally meant as a tool for sorting large categories within the history of art but rather as an aid to making fine distinctions within categories, congruent with Offner’s aims as a connoisseur. Also unlike the compiler of any other art history photo archive, Offner was acutely sensitive to the limitations of photography as much as he was to its benefits.

“If photography were an entirely mechanical process it would render the pictorial object with a calculable difference from it. Unhappily, photography is largely an interpretative affair. It has this in common with general artistic practice, that the result is determined by the whim and genius of the operator, and the camera is only one of the determinants of the result.” (Offner, Ibid., 1927)

Thus, Offner’s objection to color was only in part due to the lag in photographic technology. It was more fundamentally an objection to introducing one more subjective, uncontrollable variable to his research material.

Biographical Note

Laurence Kanter is the Lionel Goldfrank III Curator of European Art at the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, and was formerly Curator-in-Charge of the Robert Lehman Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. He received his Ph.D. from the Institute of Fine Arts at New