



## Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History Part III, March 25 - 26, 2011 Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

*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.”

Richard Offner, "An Outline of a Theory of Method," *Studies in Florentine Painting*, 1927

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

York University in 1989. He is the author of the catalogue of Italian paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1994), and co-author of *Luca Signorelli* (2001) and of numerous exhibition catalogues, including *Painting in Renaissance Siena, 1420-1500* (1988), *Italian Renaissance Frames* (1990), *Painting and Illumination in Early Renaissance Florence, 1300-1450* (1994), *The Treasury of Saint Francis of Assisi* (1999), *Fra Angelico* (2005), and most recently *Italian Paintings from the Richard L. Feigen Collection* (2010). He has published widely on specialized problems in fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth century Italian painting, and has organized major exhibitions on subjects ranging from Italian Maiolica (1989) to monographic shows of the nineteenth-century English Pre-Raphaelite artist, Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1998) and the twentieth-century Italian master, Giorgio Morandi (2008).