INTRODUCTION

During the past decade scholars have paid increasing attention to the art history of regions of the United States. Interestingly, in the study of this field, the public is leading scholarship, exhibiting interest and asking for information. Popular interest has grown from several sources. First, it has grown from the increasing accumulation of work that artists have produced. The materiality of this art has created its own place in the cultural fabric: it has been part of lives as it has hung on the walls of homes, places of business, public facilities, museums, and galleries. Each time the art enters a new home or institution, it creates a demand for information about the artist. Second, interest has been inspired by interest in local history that grew in the 1960s and 1970s. Perception that local history is important also suggests that local cultural history is important. Third, even as electronic media and mobility have been blurring the distinctions of regional culture, there has been a resurgent interest in identifying and nurturing those aspects of regional culture that are particular.

Whatever the sources of public interest in the art of regions, scholarship has had difficulties in responding to that interest. The study of the cultural history of places requires a set of intellectual tools that borrows from several disciplines. It is part art history, part local history, part social history, and part cultural geography. The subject asks for a familiarity with the methodology and theory of several or all of these. As a child of an extended family, with multiple possible parents, it is enriched and entertained by all. But it is also, in a sense, a step-child that does not quite fit into any household. Many art historians don’t regard local or regional studies as important because they are focused upon art that has had national or international impact. Historians consider it art. This symposium addressed these issues of methodology and asserted the importance of this art on its own terms.

Among the rationales for interest and study of the art of regions, and this region in particular, is its importance in reflecting and creating regional identity. In Cleveland, this has been more critical than many places. In the 1960s and 1970s the city (and its region) achieved national attention for its declining industrial base, its political escapades, and the spectacle of its river on fire. As this national identity hit, residents on the streets became defensive and officers in the corporate boardrooms started changing names. Some corporations dropped “Cleveland” from their names with the explanation of seeking a “national” rather than a local image (“Cleveland Trust” became “Ameritrust”); but whatever validity, the changes hurt, especially when the “Cleveland Plain Dealer” changed to the “Plain Dealer.” At one time people might have felt comfortable saying they were from “Cleveland” whether from the city limits, or from within the region for which “Cleveland” is the principal city. Again, starting in the 1960s, popular usage looked for other terms to call the region - in an effort to reconstruct our cultural identity in other terms.

An obvious choice, “Western Reserve,” seemed too old fashioned, so people spoke of themselves as from “Cuyahoga County”, or “Northern Ohio” or “Northeast Ohio.” Our organization, in the study of the art of our region, has dropped back to the common usage of mid-century, speaking and writing about “Cleveland” art when we speak of the art of a region for which Cleveland is the center. After some wrangling with possibilities, perhaps the simplest way to describe what we mean by “Cleveland” is that area of the United States whose residents consider the Cleveland Museum of Art to be their art museum.

The construction and maintenance of identity is not a passive task—it requires dynamic effort. Place in history, or art history, texts responds to interest and scholarly activity. The papers from this symposium, and the symposium that preceded it in 1993, help to build a foundation as we define and construct our image and identity past, present, and possibilities.

William Busta