

HARVARD PORTRAIT



Ethan Lasser

When he put the two paintings together, on facing walls of a Harvard Art Museums gallery—Winslow Homer’s *Pitching Quoits*, showing Zouave-inspired Civil War infantrymen in their red seroual trousers, and Théodore Chassériau’s 1850 depiction of actual Arab horsemen carrying their dead from the battlefield—“It was a revelation,” says curator Ethan Lasser. Homer hadn’t yet been to France, but he admired French painters, who themselves were enamored of the Middle East and North Africa. “The vibrant conversation between these two paintings—you really need to see it in the flesh,” Lasser adds. As Stebbins curator of American art and head of the museums’ European and American art division, he tries to make such conversations visible, grouping artworks by theme and period, not country and medium: “a more contextual story.” Lasser’s parents owned a Boston art gallery, and he spent many boyhood hours roaming the city’s museums. Williams College led to a job at a New York auction house, where he was told, “You ask too many questions—go to grad school.” After a Yale Ph.D. and five years at Milwaukee’s Chipstone Foundation, specializing in furniture and decorative arts, he arrived in 2012 at Harvard, where he also teaches, co-leading classes that offer art historians hands-on experience with art-making. “You hear about ideas like ‘flow,’ or that materials always resist you,” he explains, “and here you can get a sense of what those mean in ways that are hard to express.” The museums’ artworks can be similarly elusive. “I’ll never know them fully,” he says. “I’ll be walking up the stairs one day and see something in a work that I’ve never seen before, just because it’s five o’clock in the evening in the summer.” A revelation.

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he calls “brute-force trial-and-error” as they start to work on shows.

“As an undergraduate who came here to pursue a liberal-arts education, I don’t want a class on microphone etiquette or the acoustics of speakers, or a class on the different kinds of lighting instruments,” Stepansky explains. “But *one* class on design, looking at a lot of different kinds of design, or design over time? I think there’s totally interest.” Offering a guided, curricular learning environment, he believes, could build student interest in technical matters, and thus strengthen productions as a whole.

“Am I in the Right Place?”

THOUGH their fellow concentrators’ spirits were high, Laurel McCaull ’18 and Kathryn Kearney ’17, both dancers, stood together at TDM’s celebratory meet-and-greet in October feeling more uncertain. Kearney leaned over to McCaull to ask, “Am I in the right place?” “Please, stick it out with me,” McCaull told her, “We can make it work, and make it better.”

Kearney, a member of the Expressions Dance Company, had pursued her interest in dance studies through a concentration in social anthropology. When TDM was made official, she says, “I knew right away that I wanted to do it.” She will now write her senior thesis, on race and ballet, as a joint concentrator. McCaull, a joint concentrator in English who co-directs the Harvard-Radcliffe Modern Dance Company, says that her initial excitement abated once she read through the course offerings: “I was definitely a little underwhelmed with the representation of dance.” After seeing the concentration’s theater-specific requirements, “I almost chickened out.”

As reflected in the course catalog, dance seems to be a junior partner in the concentration. Aside from the Harvard Dance Project, a for-credit ensemble led by OFA Dance Program director Jill Johnson, the concentration offered no dance classes in the fall, and two in the spring. While thespians may choose from a menu of courses that spans “Acting Shakespeare” to “Practical Aesthetics” (conceived by playwright David Mamet and actor William H. Macy), dancers have tended to go off-campus for similar training. Some enroll in the Harvard Dance Center’s evening classes, which are open to the public and charge undergraduates a relatively low