



A memory

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A Memory

James Cuno



Fine Arts Library reading room, 1970s. Reproduction. Harvard Art Museums Archives, HC.22.44.

AS A GRADUATE STUDENT IN THE LATE 1970S, IT WAS EASY TO FALL IN love with the Fine Arts Library. Its collections were deep and rich—partly cataloged in the library’s mysterious, private way and partly according to the Library of Congress—and chockablock on two floors below ground, surrounded by student and faculty carrels (during my first year, mine was just behind James Cahill’s; he was there for the year preparing and giving his Norton lectures). And there were real characters, too: Wolfgang Freitag, the librarian with a thick German accent and quick smile, and handle-bar mustachioed Richard Simpson behind the counter checking ID cards.

We spent our waking hours in the library, when not in class. We’d descend by a metal, circular stair, like going into a submarine (or like miners to the mine), past a floor dedicated to Visual Collections with row after row after row of files filled with black and white photographs, many taken by Arthur Kingsley Porter and his wife on their annual trips documenting the sculptures and buildings of medieval Spain. There

Konrad Oberhuber could be found searching for the odd photograph of a Poussin painting, or Sydney Freedberg in pursuit of Pontormo.

You could get a book and put it on your carrel shelf, where it could sit for months with photographs, piles of notes, and the odd bit of clandestine lunch leftover. It was a kind of an intellectual biographical statement. You'd walk past other carrels to see who was reading what, or what he or she wanted you to think he or she was reading. Many times, the books never moved; a sign that progress was stalled or the gesture empty. It was a kind of community down there. Students and faculty hunched over their carrels in the greenish/yellow glow of cheap fluorescent lighting. Years later, when I came back to Harvard, I was shocked by how few students now used their carrels. I suppose it had something to do with online resources.

And then there was the reading room. It was open until 10 p.m. and often filled until then. Reserved reading was on shelves behind the checkout counter. Reference books were piled to the ceiling accessible by a balcony that ringed the room. At closing time, we'd go to the Square and the Tasty for grilled bologna sandwiches and sit next to Cambridge cops drinking coffee over the raspy sound of their radios reporting mysterious goings-on about town.

Much of graduate school was spent in the library (the Widener Reading Room was a cross between a public bus station and a fusty men's club; you could smoke and drink coffee or lean back and take a nap; many afternoons were spent there that way). Harvard libraries—and the Fine Arts Library chief among them—were a big part of why so many students found it hard to leave the university. They were spoiling.

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