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Patricia Mainardi, Mentor and Educator: Her Years at the
CUNY Graduate Center

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Patricia Mainardi, Mentor and Educator: Her Years at the CUNY Graduate Center

Pat Mainardi and I have known each other a long time—since the heady, early days of feminism and art history. Both of us were influenced by Linda Nochlin’s essay, which still resonates today, “Why have there been no Great Women Artists?” I went on to work with women artists in Soho for a few years, and Pat to paint and write the influential, “Quilts: the Great American Art,” in 1973 for the *Feminist Art Journal*. Shortly afterward we both began our graduate work at CUNY’s Graduate Center and, luckily and happily, and for the most part, have been there ever since. Academically, however, our paths diverged—I stuck with American art while she embraced nineteenth-century French art, becoming one of the most influential art historians of our generation.

Pat and I reconnected after our appointments in the early 1990s to the faculty of CUNY’s PhD Program in Art History. Here Pat made her mark not only as the most sought-after member of the faculty, but as Executive Officer, aka chair, of the department for nine years. Her teaching and mentorship of students are the stuff of legends. Students flocked to her courses, in which they were introduced to the history of nineteenth-century European painting and its literature. Central to her work with students was her attention to the rules of the game—research methods and the ins and outs of *The Chicago Manual of Style*—because a good work person needs to know her tools.

Pat became chair at the end of the 90s, and among her first assignments was to overhaul the qualifying exams. Students were receiving conflicting advice regarding preparation for their exams, and regulation was needed. The Graduate Center is different from most other art history PhD programs—its focus is on the modern period, and it has traditionally had one- to two-hundred students in its program at any given time. When Pat took over, however, she faced two competing problems. Too many students were what we term, Sat Prog’d; i.e., they had exceeded their time to degree and had not made “satisfactory progress,” and enrollments languished. She tackled both with intelligence, with gusto, and with a dedication to students’ welfare.

While helping delinquent students to get back on track, Pat found that there were no guidelines for tracking students’ progress, so she established guidelines that included annual meetings between students and their supervisors. With Pat’s new policies in place, the Sat Prog problem virtually disappeared. Her engagement with the enrollment process was another area in which she shone. She interviewed each potential student, answering their questions, touring them around, and introducing them to current students and faculty. She made coming to the Graduate Center irresistible, and enrollments soared! She also instituted department-wide meetings for students and faculty to present their works in progress, often the papers they would be presenting at CAA. Among her greatest accomplishments, which benefited both faculty and students, was spearheading the development of CUNYDID, the department’s digital imaging program.

At the heart of all that she did as executive officer, teacher, and supervisor was her commitment to her students. The number of students who worked with her is incalculable, and her involvement with them often extended beyond the walls of the Graduate Center. If

they had fellowships in Paris, she was their guide—not only to good, inexpensive cafés, but to the intricacies of the Bibliothèque Nationale—and she also introduced them to helpful colleagues. Once they started work on their theses, she would read draft after draft of a student's proposal or chapter; again, the craft of presentation was important for the full expression of an idea or thesis. One of her students wrote to me:

Her enthusiasm for her students' work stands out. In her classes, she would mention current dissertations that were changing her thinking on the topic at hand as well as articles her students had published based on seminar research. This enthusiasm for student work and this focus on the potential for coursework to become a contribution to the discipline was inspirational. She regularly called attention to areas of art history that had potential for further research or where there were gaps in scholarship; this focus on art history as full of possibility was motivating as a reminder that it hasn't all been done already.

Even though Pat is moving into full time into retirement mode (actually she is only switching from an academic to a writing life) her commitment to her students will remain. I have no doubt that she and they will find new fields to explore, methodologies to conquer, and new ground to till. We all look forward to her next chapter.

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