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Abstract

“A Singular Cloud”:

Race, Natural Science, and the Origins of Art History in the United States, 1845-1875

The abolition of slavery in the United States incited a social rupture that spread even to the halls of Harvard University. In defense of liberal ethics of equality and freedom, the study of art, previously the domain of private tutors to the elite, was made an official course of study available to the public through lectures and publications. Despite rhetoric on democratization, the first art historian at Harvard, and in the US, Charles Eliot Norton, adopted the methods and findings of scientific racism. Harvard zoologist Louis Agassiz’s claim that races constituted separate species was used by Norton to reify the subject position of his white students as authoritative agents of “civilization” and custodians of the only “human” culture— namely the arts of Western Europe. This microhistory of an aesthetics that simultaneously claimed scientific objectivity and reinforced racist epistemology has yet to be acknowledged in the historiography of art history, although the resulting formalist pedagogy has a lasting legacy at Harvard.

In addition to taking a critical stance on art historical methodologies, my research uncovers the formative influence of Agassiz’s expedition to Brazil on pedagogy in the US. Agassiz went to Rio de Janeiro during the US Civil War and his observation of “miscegenation” there was crucial to his theory of polygenesis. Agassiz’s attempted negation of Brazilian hybridity produced a formalist way of looking that was then applied to biology, art, and society in the US. The broader implication of my project is that, contrary to a center-periphery model of modernization, this modern aesthetic was not simply formulated in Cambridge and exported to Brazil, but rather the aesthetic crystallized around a social changes on an international scale— namely abolitionism.

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Latin American Bodies: On Modernism
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Professor Fabiola Lopez-Duran

This is a story of entangled origins, a preliminary account of the formation of the disciplines of art history and the natural sciences in the United States in the nineteenth century. Although botany, zoology, medicine, and geology reside in research laboratories that are often on the other side of campus from the humanities or art history, the now seemingly unrelated disciplines were considered at their inception to be complementary studies of the natural world.¹ As Barbara Novak summarizes in her book on mid-century American landscape painting, Nature was thought to be illuminated by “the trinity of art, science, and religion.”² There was a belief that divine truth could be observed and documented in plants, animals, and even other humans, and this interest led to the creation of a myriad of new disciplines including biology, paleontology, and archaeology.

The expansion of subjects within the university was facilitated not only by an insatiable appetite amongst academics for empirical evidence in order to support an ideology of the

progress of civilization, but also an unprecedented public interest in and access to academic inquiry. Professors of the arts and sciences would write for popular periodicals and go on speaking tours to explain the order of the natural world to enrapt audiences. The appetite for natural science amongst an educated upper class even managed to attract prominent European scientists to the United States, including the Swiss zoologist Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz. Agassiz's speaking tour on "The Plan of Creation, especially in the Animal Kingdom" in 1846-1847 brought him to New Haven, New York, Albany, Princeton, and Harvard, where the president Edward Everett was so impressed with Agassiz's learned and dynamic lectures that Everett created a professorship especially for him in the newly established Lawrence Scientific School.³ Agassiz's appointment followed a pattern of expansion in large universities, where specialized departments were created in order to offer popular electives to the student body as well as to tutor select graduate students.⁴ The creation of art history at Harvard would also follow this same model thirty years later in 1874 when the editor and art critic at *Atlantic Monthly* and the *North American Review*, Charles Eliot Norton, was asked to become "Lecturer in the Fine Arts and its Relation to Literature."

This paper outlines my preliminary research into the relationship between art history and the natural sciences at this pivotal moment in nineteenth century America (1845-1875), using Harvard University as a case study. I am particularly interested in the ways in which the pedagogy of both science and art history were socially determined and fit the needs and interests of the public around the time of the Civil War.⁵ I believe that the malignant roots of the popularity and professionalization of both art history and the natural sciences lie in the fact that their idealist views of Nature and Culture provided authoritative justification for social

stratification. They also supported the view that white, well-educated upper classes were key agents in the progressive development of modern society.⁶ Art history and the natural sciences seem to have relied on the authority of each others' techniques to verify their respective claims. In addition to this feedback loop, the two subdisciplines also worked in tandem to create the field of ethnology, or the study of the characteristics of various races and the differences and relationships among them. As B. Ricardo Brown acknowledges in his recent study of Darwin and race, "The classification or system of classifications of human variety contributed mightily to the formulation of the concept of race. It is not that science alone gave us our conception of race."⁷ From this premise, I want to look specifically at how art history and the natural sciences worked together to create a modern narrative of white supremacy in the United States.

Representations were crucial to this enterprise. The specificity of their media and presumed clarity of interpretation manufactured the illusion of empirical evidence for racist claims. In other words, ethnology became a self-reinforcing ideology where beliefs determined the discovery of evidence that supported those beliefs. Much research still has to be done on the role of observation and rendering in the classificatory system of the natural sciences as well as art historical pedagogy. However, I will look at Norton's lectures on ancient Egypt as an example of how he used ethnographic research and assumptions to inform his historical narrative.

A Singular Cloud: Why Art History Should Be Repositioned in a Scientific Milieu

Charles Eliot Norton is an enigmatic figure in American intellectual history who lived an adventurous, privileged life.⁸ He was born into an established, wealthy Boston family and through a Harvard education and extensive travels became a very social, public intellectual, who could be described paradoxically as a liberal elitist, agnostic moralist, and anti-capitalist gentleman.⁹ In the 1850s, he abandoned a career in business to travel to Italy and India, writing dispatches for *The Crayon* and *North American Review* along the way.¹⁰ Upon returning home, he edited the *North American Review* and co-founded *The Nation*. He then entered what Richard Teichgraber has called the “academic public sphere” in 1874 when he was appointed lecturer at his alma mater.¹¹ History professor Ephraim Whitman Gurney had wanted to create a position for the editor and essayist and wrote President Charles Eliot suggesting the creation of a department of fine arts.¹² Norton’s appointment to a unique position with obligations only to lecture in the fine arts makes him generally recognized as the first art historian in the United States.¹³ Norton’s dynamic lectures were well-attended, with nearly 1200 students at every class.¹⁴ When he retired in 1898, he had 451 undergraduates enrolled in his lectures, or nearly one third of the student body at Harvard.¹⁵

Norton was widely acclaimed at the turn of the century, with William James believing that he would “dominate all the literary history of his epoch.”¹⁶ Yet, Norton has faded into obscurity over the last century. The strident tone that garnered him followers in his own time may have sounded too much like evangelizing to younger generations.¹⁷ Neither did Norton leave behind a

bibliography of substantial works since he wrote mostly criticism during his lifetime and did not author much scholarship. Some have accused him of not being an original thinker, but I believe that his ability to absorb, respond to, and popularly disseminate contemporary thinking makes Charles Eliot Norton a key figure in the social, intellectual history of late nineteenth century America. As John Jay Chapman wrote after Norton's death in 1908, he was "a key to his own epoch. How well he fit in his own time."¹⁸

To sum up his primary agenda, Norton was profoundly moral and saw his appointment as lecturer in art history as an opportunity to improve not only the artistic culture of the United States but nothing short of the development of human civilization as a whole.¹⁹ In this way, he called upon a tradition dating back to Thomas Jefferson, where art education was considered a sort of moral education.²⁰ Since the eighteenth century, professors of moral philosophy had been asked to teach classes on the fine arts, and Norton followed in their footsteps delivering what his son would later jokingly call "Lectures on Modern Morals as Illustrated by the Art of the Ancients."²¹ For although Norton lectured on ancient and medieval art, his ultimate goal was to modernize his contemporary society through cultivating their appreciation for beauty and art. As Norton said in a lecture on "Morality and Art":

One of the chief motives for the study of the fine arts is not only that we may have a fuller acquaintance with the past, not only that we may learn about the struggle of the race from its barbaric condition up to the partial civilization which the best men have attained . . . The fine arts are [also] the most unimpeachable evidence of the mental and moral condition of a race at the time of their production. They are also *aids* in civilization; like other arts of expression, they help strengthen the qualities from which they proceed.²²

Norton's insistence on correlating the way something looks to the moral character of its socio-political context, and his faith in the agency of art to move history forward and help society progress, would become hallmarks of his popular lectures.

One of his most accomplished students Bernard Berenson would later criticize Norton for his zeal saying, “He lectured his students better on manners, and the values that an educated American should live by, than on art.”²³ Later modernists would also critique Norton’s emphasis on the symbolic meaning of art above its formal characteristics. Behind this modernist criticism was a certain amount of class anxiety, for as Pierre Bourdieu would observe about the cultivation of taste, “Working-class people expect every image to explicitly perform a function, if only that of a sign, and their judgments make reference, often explicitly, to the norms of morality or agreeableness. Whether rejecting or praising, their appreciation always has an ethical basis.”²⁴ Perhaps Norton’s moralism sounded too much like a “working-class taste” for his fellow connoisseurs. Indeed, Norton’s instrumentalization of art as evidence of national and racial character in part undermined distinctions of quality and elegance that would form the basis of twentieth century connoisseurship.²⁵

Historiographers have traced Norton’s version of progressive history and his belief in the redemptive qualities of art to Enlightenment theories such as Winkelmann’s analyses of taste or Hegel’s dialectical understanding of a “geist” or spirit of the times.²⁶ However, these Germanic influences do not account for Norton’s ethical bent.²⁷ In fact, German philosophy since Kant had been moving away from associating artistic judgement with morality, and wanted to make *reason*, not aesthetics, the sole basis for the Good.²⁸ Norton was also the executor of John Ruskin’s will, therefore many historians have connected the art historian’s passion for beauty and morality with transatlantic romanticism.²⁹ But Ruskin’s belief in the unity of nature, religion, and art was colored by a melancholic yearning for past ages rather than an engagement with contemporary social progress.³⁰

I believe that Norton's fervor for social reform and belief that representations could in some way manifest a social reality, by what Georges Didi-Huberman would call a "magic formula," is more appropriately contextualized within a milieu of scientific debates rather than that of German history and philosophy. Norton's relationship to his scientific colleagues in Cambridge after the Civil War is complex, but I will argue crucial to understanding what was at stake for him in visual representations and a progressive view of history. In *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Bruno Latour unpacks the complex bonds between the sciences and society to problematize "the politicization of the sciences through epistemology in order to render ordinary political life impotent through the threat of an incontestable nature."³¹ Framing art history and the natural sciences as contingent, socially constructed bodies of knowledge can be part of what Latour might call the transition from old to new bicameralism, from a value-based assessment of facts to an assertion of the power to rank and order the world.

Art and the natural sciences were understood to be working hand in hand to this end. In 1857, a decade after Agassiz's appointment at Harvard, James Dwight Dana, Professor of Natural History at Yale, proposed the creation of a position in the history of art in the new scientific school, which would also require students to learn drawing.³² Dana believed that artists would also benefit from scientific instruction, "which is necessary to equip him for his best and highest efforts."³³ Norton was a part of the early study of art within the sciences at Harvard as well. Agassiz came to teach there during Norton's senior year, and the young scholar volunteered to collect specimens for Agassiz's museum at Harvard.³⁴ This early experience with the collection, observation, and typological classification of specimens would come to have a profound influence on Norton's art historical methodology and the structure of his lectures.

An excerpt from Agassiz's wife's diary has become a significant image for me as I have considered her husband's influence on the origins of art history. Elizabeth Cabot Agassiz left with her husband for Brazil in 1865 and wrote in her diary the day after their departure of their detachment from the Civil War raging on shore:

We have been on deck reading, walking, watching a singular cloud, which the captain says is a cloud of smoke, in the direction of Petersburg. We think it may be the smoke of a great decisive engagement while we sail peacefully along . . . Mr. Agassiz is busy to-day taking notes, at regular intervals, of the temperature of the water, as we approach the Gulf Stream.³⁵

The cloud she refers to was in fact a plume of cannon smoke erupting from the Battle of Fort Gregg being fought in Virginia as the expedition sailed past. The singular cloud off in the distance as Agassiz sailed along has become an important metaphor for me because it represents the simultaneous willful dissociation and evident deep connection between systems of thought and perceptions of reality-- between elite, academic methodologies on the one hand and the public, political forces they sought to contain and control on the other. I believe that Agassiz is a singular cloud hovering above Norton's construction of art history, one that must be acknowledged in order to destabilize its ongoing legacy.

Truth in Nature: Agassiz, Norton, and Scientific Racism in the Origins of Art History

When Norton was first appointed lecturer in the fine arts at Harvard University, he was a prominent member of the Cambridge Scientific Club, a discussion group of the foremost thinkers of the day. In order to understand the extent to which Norton was immersed in the scientific community, it is important to remember that Cambridge was an exclusive, very wealthy center of learning in the mid-nineteenth century whose small population belied its cultural and economic power. Most residents of Cambridge were related to each other by blood or marriage, and therefore Norton had some personal connection to almost all the scientists working at Harvard at the time.³⁶ Beyond being acquaintances and colleagues, I believe that scientists who were deeply engaged with visual analysis and invested in linking typologies to the progress of the human race created a normative model that Norton could apply to examples of visual art in his lectures, which strongly emphasized the fundamental linkage between race, civilization, and artistic expression.

Although Norton was an active participant in the Cambridge Scientific Club, he considered himself an outsider to a certain degree--a voice of conscience to remind the scientists of their social obligations in interpreting their discoveries. As Norton would remind his students in his lectures, science could merely accumulate facts, it is up to those who are culturally engaged to put that knowledge to good use:

A man may learn all about geology, all about natural history, all about astronomy, and yet remain an ignorant man; but let him use what he learns in these studies for his own discipline, for the development of himself as a member of the great human family, and then his knowledge becomes culture.³⁷

Or as Norton's friend and fellow student of Agassiz, Henry David Thoreau would put it-- science is dry and dull, "it was the observer's perception that could turn this world of fact into a world of beauty."³⁸ Indeed, early advocates of the professionalization of art history argued that it should be made an official discipline within the university because it could offer knowledge beyond strictly empirical evidence. Norton's colleague at Yale University the Reverend James Mason Hoppin described art history as an ethic corrective to science in 1866. He was concerned that lack of an artistic education led to rampant materialism, "we . . . of this age and land, regulate our modes of thought by methods of science . . . to the exclusion of art and benefit of trade."³⁹

The anxiety over the amorality of science in New England after the Civil War may have been provoked by the adoption of prominent scientific theories in the South as a justification for slavery in the lead-up to the war, including those of Louis Agassiz. Shortly before teaching at Harvard in 1847, Agassiz went to Philadelphia to see the physician Samuel George Morton's massive collection of skulls from America, which he had used to create a complex typology of Caucasian, Indian, and African races in a system similar to that of Agassiz's mentor Georges Cuvier. Morton used measurements of the skulls to stake claims for white supremacy with the assumption that the larger cranial capacity of Caucasians correlated with increased intelligence and virtue.⁴⁰ Agassiz wrote an ecstatic letter home to his mother after his visit with Morton, "That collection alone was worth the trip to America!"⁴¹ Using Morton and Cuvier's research, Agassiz came to believe that homosapians were not one species but could be subdivided into Caucasian (which included Arabs, Indians, Turks, Scandinavians) and Negro (which included

Hottentot, Sudan, Congo) species. He lectured widely on the topic, which despite the fact that he did not yet know English very well, gained him a following amongst pro-slavery doctors and scientists.⁴²

Agassiz travelled to South Carolina to photograph examples of what he considered to be “Negro races,” and in 1850, published his findings in the *Christian Examiner*, where he made the radical claim that the creation story in the Bible was incomplete-- that Genesis only told the story of the creation of the Caucasian race. Agassiz believed that God had in fact created many races separately in different climates, speaking many languages, and that their origins could be determined by their facial features.⁴³ It was at this point that Agassiz became a polemical figure at Harvard.⁴⁴ He had recently entered Cambridge high society through marriage to a woman from an elite family-- Elizabeth Cabot Cary. But this alliance was not enough to overcome the fact that Agassiz’s theories were being used to justify slavery and that he was claiming a new story of Genesis. These radical assertions started to make Cambridge society uncomfortable. Even Agassiz’s friend and biographer Jules Marcou felt he needed to distinguish the Swiss scientist’s polygenesis from a pro-slavery stance claiming Agassiz had no interest in politics:

But as regards the servitude of one species to another, and the right of one man to sell another, Agassiz never, for an instant, justified such a proceeding, either morally, socially, or religiously. Science had nothing to do with such iniquity; to deal with it was the work of morality, philanthropy, politics, and religion, but not of a savant, whose domain is entirely outside of all institutions of society.⁴⁵

According to Norton’s letters and diaries, his own views on abolitionism shifted through the 1850s. It is difficult to determine his exact stance on abolitionism but it seems that Norton may have maintained that blacks and whites were created separately, with whites predestined to

rule over blacks. At the beginning of the decade, Norton believed that slavery was mostly benign. He wrote in favor of appealing to the better nature of slaveowners in the *North American Review* in 1853 asking them to be kind and caring, and claiming that Christian masters would redeem the practice of slavery and “save the South from the sweeping condemnation in which she is involved by the deeds of a wretched minority of her population.”⁴⁶ In 1855, Norton went to South Carolina and wrote a friend that slavery seemed most detrimental for the masters, “If I ever write against slavery, it shall be on the grounds not of it being bad for the blacks, but of its being deadly to the whites.”⁴⁷

Amidst the upheaval of the Civil War and his self-examination on the question of slavery, Norton fell back on principles of polygenesis discovered by Agassiz and other natural scientists. Norton reviewed Sidney George Fisher’s *Laws of Race as connected with Slavery* in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1861 to urge others to read the text.⁴⁸ Fisher claimed that slavery was ordered according to divine, natural law and that national policy should be shaped according to the findings of ethnography.⁴⁹ Norton agreed with Fisher’s approach but said he had failed to prove that slavery was necessary. Norton pointed out that in some cases slaves had improved themselves intellectually and morally through education and concluded that although blacks are inferior, “we have no right to assert that slavery is a necessary condition, if in the meaning of necessary we include the idea of permanence.” At the same time, Norton feared that slavery would lead to an “expansion of transatlantic africa” that would mean that the democracy in the United States would be ruled by a “barbarous race.”⁵⁰ In other words, Norton did not allow his growing sense of abolitionism to overturn his belief in fundamentals of ethnographic typologies. On the contrary, he believed that the war clarified polygenesis by putting the moral superiority of

Northern whites in action. As he wrote John Ruskin that same year, “It is a war between two principles of Liberty & Slavery . . . We are gaining through trial clearer view of right & wrong & higher principles of action.”⁵¹

The start of the war was not the only social rupture to occur around 1860. A paradigm shift in scientific thought was taking place simultaneously with the publication of Charles Darwin’s research. Norton was one of the first in Cambridge to receive a copy of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1859, which he shared with his colleagues the botanist Asa Gray and archaeologist Jeffries Wyman. The three men immediately saw the book’s implications for Agassiz’s theories, as Norton wrote “if Darwin is right, Agassiz is wrong.”⁵² Norton, Gray, and Wyman would become foremost proponents of Darwin’s theories in the Cambridge Scientific Club, much to Agassiz’s chagrin. Their disagreements were heated, with one report of Asa Gray and Louis Agassiz getting in a screaming match on the train carrying both men back from a National Academy of Sciences meeting in 1864. Gray had worked closely with Agassiz but then switched allegiances and became close with Darwin sending the British scientist monthly updates on his battles with Agassiz and reviewing Darwin’s books. Darwin would later write “no other person understands me so thoroughly as Asa Gray. If I ever doubt what I mean myself, I shall ask him!”⁵³

Norton had been friends with Gray since college and went to visit Darwin in person with him in 1868.⁵⁴ However, Norton remained skeptical of Darwin’s theory. As he wrote his friend, “I wait to be convinced that I am nothing but a modified fish. . . This book will do much to overthrow many old and cumbrous superstitions, even if it establish but few truths in their place.”⁵⁵ Darwin by contrast was charmed by Norton. He sent a copy of his book *The Descent of*

Man to him in 1873 with the inscription “With the affectionate respect of the Author.”⁵⁶ Four years later, Darwin’s son William married the younger sister of Norton’s wife and the two became family.⁵⁷

Georges Canguilhem observes that “science” becomes “pseudoscience” when a competing way of thinking proves more accurate.

A scientific ideology comes to an end when the place that it occupied in the encyclopedia of knowledge is taken over by a discipline that operationally demonstrates the validity of its own claim to scientific status, its own ‘norms of scientificity.’ At that point, a certain form of nonscience is excluded from the domain of science.⁵⁸

The rise of Darwin and fall of Agassiz was just such a shift, where polygenesis became aberrant as evolution more normative. Agassiz never stopped insisting on the divine separation of species, which made him gradually pathological by association.⁵⁹ Thus he was doomed to, as his biographer recently put it, “a well-deserved descent into insignificance and permanent humiliation.”⁶⁰ Agassiz was seen as stubborn and cruel, and even John Ruskin got into the fray writing essays against Agassiz’s glacier research. Ruskin wrote Norton in 1873, “I’m going to have some larks out of Master Agassiz-- if Adam and Eve Agassiz think their little boys clever-- they’ll be in a state worth seeing-- soon. I do think of all the human stupidities and meanness I have come across in my life-- the Agassiz letter to Forbes about the Riband structure beat.”⁶¹

Unfortunately, Agassiz’s disfavor amongst intellectuals did not spell the end of scientific racism. Categorization and ranking of bodies according to race was adapted to the new normativity. For example, Charles Darwin’s cousin Francis Dalton formulated eugenics to describe how natural selection could be manipulated to purify the Caucasian race, and I will

argue that Norton's art history likewise adapted race-based typologies to a history of social reform and the progress of civilization.⁶² As Bourdieu has shown, the arts stepped in to reinforce social rankings according to race and class, "The socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds to a social hierarchy of the consumers."⁶³ As racial classification became less normative in the natural sciences post-Darwin, art history adopted related classificatory systems. Theories of style and taste allowed art history to reinforce normative social hierarchies in a way that the natural sciences were no longer positioned to do.

From Racial Classification to Progressive History: Ancient Egypt and the Origins of Civilization

Charles Eliot Norton asked his students to make visual comparisons on his final exams, for example requiring a description of “the Doric temple, its chief parts, its general character, difference between early and late examples.”⁶⁴ But little research has been done on what sorts of visual aids Norton would use to teach his students architectural typologies and historical changes in style. A careful reading of his lectures on Ancient Egypt, however, does illuminate what he believed was at stake in formal distinctions and how ethnography informed Norton’s methodology. In this section, I will outline how polygenesis was formative to Egyptology, particularly in the United States. Norton’s lectures drew on the findings of both polygenesis and Egyptology to tell a history of racial domination of blacks in Egypt, which he identified as a fundamental factor in the foundation and continual development of human civilization.

When Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, he brought with him an elite group of scientists and engineers to study ancient monuments and the natural world. Their *Description de l’Egypte* published between 1809 and 1828 sparked an international fascination with the ancient civilization. The founder of comparative anatomy and ethnology Baron Cuvier had refused an invitation to join the expedition, but nonetheless the findings became important for his student Louis Agassiz and follower Samuel George Morton, who would tie a history of the pharaohs in Ancient Egypt to an inevitability and divine sanction of slavery in the United States.

In fact, the most popular book on ethnology in the nineteenth century, *Types of Mankind*

(1854), was co-authored by an Egyptologist, George Gliddon, and a physician, Josiah C. Nott. The book was a compilation of scientific studies of polygenesis, which included Louis Agassiz as one of the co-authors. It was an instant sensation that sold out multiple printings throughout the late nineteenth century. Molly Rogers believes that the book was intended to get the public excited about the classification of races in response to calls for the abolition of slavery: “the book was not meant to break new ground so much as ensure the public continued to discuss ethnology.”⁶⁵ The first page of *Types of Mankind* reads “To the memory of Morton” and begins with a summary of Morton’s *Crania Aegyptiaca: Or, Observations on Egyptian Ethnography, Derived from Anatomy, History and the Monuments* (1844), which used three mummies from ancient Egyptian catacombs as evidence that Caucasians and Negroes were already distinct three thousand years ago. Since Morton believed that the Bible indicated that Noah's Ark had washed up on Mount Ararat, only a thousand years before this, Morton claimed that Noah's sons could not possibly account for every race on earth. Therefore, according to Morton's theory of polygenesis, races have been separate since the start.

Gliddon and Nott used many drawings from Egyptian tombs to elaborate on Morton’s theories.⁶⁶ A mural from the tomb of Seti-Menephtha in Thebes was used to show the Egyptian division of mankind into four species-- red, yellow, black, and white. This iconography was used to read the faces of pharaohs and determine that the rulers of Egypt were Caucasian, namely of Semitic and Hellenic origin. Agassiz’s theories of polygenesis, claiming that God created the races as separate species, were then used to explain the disparate origins of the races and generously illustrated with foldout charts and maps.⁶⁷ In a nod to Morton and Cuvier, Agassiz included skulls shown in profile under physiognomic portraits of the races at the top of his chart.

Curiously, Agassiz included Egyptian pharaohs under column 3, “European,” but subdivided Africans into “Negroes” and “Hottentots.”⁶⁸

This systematic typology based on visual analysis would come to have a profound influence on art history. Although Norton was appointed as lecturer in the fine arts the year after Agassiz died, the Swiss scientist’s theories of polygenesis lived on in the art historian’s lectures. Norton’s class on Ancient Art began with a lecture that acknowledged Egypt as the first civilization.⁶⁹ The domination of the Semitic pharaohs over the black Africans was credited as the factor that lifted humanity out of barbarism:

The Egyptians always considered themselves the original occupants of the land; but recent investigations indicate that the historic Egyptians were a race that migrated into Egypt, and were a people that belonged to the great Asiatic family of the Semitic branch of the human race. . . This, therefore leads to the inference that the Egyptians had, in a prehistoric period, migrated from Asia to Egypt. There it is not unlikely that they found African settlers, negroes, over whom they had the advantage of the white race over the black, and so gained possession of the land.⁷⁰

To allow his students to see Ancient Egyptian sites, Norton collected images of Egypt for the fine arts department including a set of drawings by Charles Herbert Moore, who also taught drawing at the Lawrence Scientific School. Moore did not depict humans but rather fish and birds, which may have been of more interest to his students and may have fit into Agassiz’s research on the distribution of species. Moore also wanted to show the skill of the Egyptians with line and color. He encouraged his students to copy from the Egyptians rather than from Nature itself because seeing a successful representation made an artist more sensitive to the “living qualities of nature and of good art.”⁷¹

Norton likewise believed that contemporary society had much to learn from the ancients and that man could only improve himself by learning about his ancestors. As he explained:

Our civilization is built upon the foundations laid by the Egyptians. To come to the recognition of such facts is one of the great purposes of the study of the arts . . . Our duty is summed up in a single requirement-- a requirement upon each one of us to make the best of himself, that he may show a respectful, a manly gratitude for what has been done for him by those who have gone before.⁷²

Norton's study of ancient art as a discursive field where contemporary issues of mechanization, secularization, and racial politics could trace their roots is evidence of the influence of Darwin's theories. As Georges Canguilhem observes, "Evolutionist ideology was used to justify industrial society as against traditional society, on the one hand, and the demands of workers, on the other. It was part antitheological, in part antisocialist."⁷³ One can find this very ideology at work in Norton's construction of history. Where he credited the genesis of Egyptian civilization to the domination of native Africans by the Asiatic pharaohs, he attributed the downfall of Ancient Egypt to the despotism of religion:

The political system of Egypt was a despotism founded on religious faith-- a despotism of the most relentless kind. Although the religious conceptions were peculiar and interesting, the result of this despotism was that individuality of thought, as well as of action, was suppressed, and the moral life was enclosed in very narrow limits.⁷⁴

In order for Egyptian civilization to survive, it would have instead needed a capitalist sort of competition amongst people and ideas. For Norton claimed that truth can only be revealed through conflict:

They [The Egyptians] were alone in civilization, for they had no intercourse with the Asyrian races; there was no conflict and competition, which the existence of races in similar conditions causes. Progress in truth depends on the conflict of ideas, for the best survives.⁷⁵

Typically, the United States has been mythologized as the new Rome, affluent, imperial, and

corrupt.⁷⁶ Norton went further to claim America as the New Egypt-- founded on slavery, suffering under the tyranny of religion, and with its only hope of redemption in the marketplace of ideas.

Conclusions and Questions for Future Study

The connection between art history and the natural sciences in nineteenth century America comes down to questions of ideal type. Both disciplines attempted to ascertain pattern, structure, and beauty because that believed that to perceive these qualities was to encounter truth and goodness. Norton lectured on art in order to teach his students how to connect physical beauty with moral goodness, as he said “The moral beauty of the soul is expressed in the physical character of the man. . . Everyone carries his own soul written on his face.” Art history promised students physical and moral improvement through the study of art. As Norton would say in his lectures, “Beauty is always a suggestion or type of the best; it includes a conception of the most perfect health, the most perfect adaptation of means to an end. In every organism each increase towards its fitness for work is an increase in its potential beauty.” Only through appreciation of beauty could one understand the ideal, or as Norton also wrote “Suppose we conceive a complete man, with all his functions fully awake. Let us ask what he would consider beautiful. . . Whatever is beautiful in this view is the expression of what is best-- the nearest approach to the ideal in humanity”⁷⁷

Norton collected drawings at the Fogg Museum for his students to study, and his encouragement of object-based formal analysis came to be known as the “Fogg Method.” As Sybil Gordon Kantor observes, this method was a self-conscious adaptation of scientific observations and thus was “under the shadow of scientific inquiries from which it borrowed its vocabulary and organization.”⁷⁸ Scientific racism was indeed a malicious root of the formalist

methodology. Harvard zoologist Louis Agassiz's claim that races constituted separate species was used by Norton to reify the subject position of his white students as authoritative agents of "civilization" and custodians of the only "human" culture— namely the arts of Western Europe. This microhistory of an aesthetics that simultaneously claimed scientific objectivity and reinforced racist epistemology has yet to be acknowledged in the historiography of art history, although the resulting formalist pedagogy has a lasting legacy at Harvard.

¹ Linda C .Dowling, *Charles Eliot Norton: The Art of Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*.

Becoming Modern. Durham, N.H.: University of New Hampshire; Hanover: University Press of New England, 2007: 17-18.

² Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875*. Rev. ed., with a new preface. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995: 47.

³ Christoph Irmscher, *Louis Agassiz: Creator of American Science*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013: 87-95.

⁴ Richard F. Teichgraeber “The Academic Public Sphere: The University Movement in American Culture, 1870-1901,” *Building Culture: Studies in the Intellectual History of Industrializing America, 1867-1910*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010: 82.

⁵ I also agree with Georges Canguilhem’s claim that the “methodical discourse [of science], is secondary to, although not derived from, the initial natural object”, *A Vital Rationalist: Selected Writings from Georges Canguilhem*. Edited by Francois Delaporte. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Zone Books, 2000: 26.

⁶ Gender is likewise an important factor to consider in the growth of the arts and science, but one beyond the scope of this paper since Harvard was an all-male school at this time. Both Agassiz and Norton were interested in applying their pedagogy female education as well. However, I need to do more research on this. For now, we can assume that at mid-century these were strictly men amongst men.

⁷ B. Ricardo Brown, *Until Darwin, Science, Human Variety and the Origins of Race*. Pickering & Chatto, 2010: 149.

⁸ I find his unique antinomies fascinating, which is why I chose him as a case study. I could have also looked at the early art historians James Jackson Jarvis or George Fisk Comfort, see Mary Ann Stankiewicz, “‘The Eye Is a Nobler Organ’: Ruskin and American Art Education.” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 18, no. 2 (July 1, 1984): 56-59. Future study of Jarvis or Comfort would provide context beyond Harvard for future study.

⁹ For more on Norton and intellectual liberalism, see Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860- 1880*. Twayne’s American Thought and Culture Series. Boston, Mass.: Twayne Publishers, 1991: 171-181.

¹⁰ These dispatches were later collected and published as Charles Eliot Norton, *Notes of Travel and Study in Italy*. By Charles Eliot Norton. Boston, Ticknor and Fields, 1860. For more on Norton as an essayist see Timothy P. Duffy, “The Gender of Letters: Charles Eliot Norton and the Decline of the Amateur Intellectual Tradition.” *The New England Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (March 1, 1996): 91-109.

¹¹ Richard F. Teichgraeber “The Academic Public Sphere: The University Movement in American Culture, 1870-1901,” *Building Culture: Studies in the Intellectual History of Industrializing America, 1867-1910*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010: 75-109.

¹² Priscilla Fansler Hiss, *Research in Fine Arts in the Colleges & Universities of the United States*, Fansler, Roberta Murray,; 1903-. New York, Carnegie Corp., 1934: 22.

¹³ Ibid.: 3. Although others had lectured on the history of the arts before him, but always in addition to lecturing on another subject such as philosophy or design.

¹⁴ Agnes Mongan, “Harvard and the Fogg,” in Craig Hugh Smyth, *The Early Years of Art History in the United States: Notes and Essays on Departments, Teaching, and Scholars*. Dept. of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, 1993: 47

¹⁵ Theodore E. Stebbins, Virginia Anderson, Fogg Art Museum, and Harvard University. Art Museums. *The Last Ruskinians: Charles Eliot Norton, Charles Herbert Moore, and Their Circle*. Harvard University Art Museums, 2007: 19.

¹⁶ Timothy P. Duffy, “The Gender of Letters: Charles Eliot Norton and the Decline of the Amateur Intellectual Tradition.” *The New England Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (March 1, 1996): 91.

¹⁷ Brom Weber, “A Noble Moralist and American Culture.” *The Sewanee Review* 68, no. 1 (January 1, 1960): 11.

¹⁸ Ibid.: 11.

¹⁹ Utilitarianism, Edward H. Madden, “Charles Eliot Norton on Art and Morals.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 18, no. 3 (June 1, 1957): 431.

²⁰ Mary Ann Stankiewicz, “‘The Eye Is a Nobler Organ’: Ruskin and American Art Education.” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 18, no. 2 (July 1, 1984): 51.

²¹ Thomas Jefferson expanded the professor of moral philosophy to also cover fine arts at College of William and Mary, and Reverend Joseph Torrey, Professor of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy at University of Vermont, started teaching “Principles of Fine Arts”. Priscilla Fansler Hiss, *Research in Fine Arts in the Colleges & Universities of the United States*, Fansler, Roberta Murray,; 1903-. New York, Carnegie Corp., 1934: 7. For quote by the son see Charles Eliot Norton, Sara Norton, and M. A. De Wolfe (Mark Antony De Wolfe) Howe. *Letters of Charles Eliot Norton, with Biographical Comment by His Daughter Sara Norton and M. A. DeWolfe*

Howe. Boston, New York, Houghton Mifflin company, 1913: Vol. 2, 8.

²² Charles Eliot Norton, Harry Fletcher Brown. *History of Ancient Art*. A. Mudge & son, printers, 1891: 10.

²³ Samuel Eliot Morison and Charles Eliot Norton. "Reminiscences of Charles Eliot Norton." *The New England Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1960): 364-368. doi:10.2307/362234: 367.

²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984: 5.

²⁵ Although Norton himself was a collector and curator, who would invite students and colleagues to his home to study objects in person.

²⁶ Donald Preziosi, *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*. Oxford University Press, 1998: 21-108.

²⁷ Norton wrote that he was against German "erudition," Charles Eliot Norton, Sara Norton, and M. A. De Wolfe (Mark Antony De Wolfe) Howe. *Letters of Charles Eliot Norton, with Biographical Comment by His Daughter Sara Norton and M. A. DeWolfe Howe*. Boston, New York, Houghton Mifflin company, 1913: 319-320.

²⁸ See Kant's writing on the sublime in his Critique of Judgement.

²⁹ Mary Ann Stankiewicz, "'The Eye Is a Nobler Organ': Ruskin and American Art Education." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 18, no. 2 (July 1, 1984): 56.

³⁰ See "Ruskin and the Scientists" in Roger B. Stein, *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840-1900 [by] Roger B. Stein*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1967: 157-185.

³¹ Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge,

Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004: 10.

³² “It is possible that there seemed a certain fitness in putting two queer things, science and art, together, neither belonging in the traditional theological scheme,” Priscilla Fansler Hiss, *Research in Fine Arts in the Colleges & Universities of the United States*, Fansler, Roberta Murray,; 1903-. New York, Carnegie Corp., 1934: 9.

³³ James D. Dana, “XV. EDUCATIONAL MISCELLANY AND INTELLIGENCE . . .” *The American Journal of Education* (1855-1882) 4, no. 12 (March 1858): 829.

³⁴ Linda C .Dowling, *Charles Eliot Norton: The Art of Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*. Becoming Modern. Durham, N.H.: University of New Hampshire; Hanover: University Press of New England, 2007: 18.

³⁵ Louis Agassiz and Guy Davenport. *The Intelligence of Louis Agassiz; a Specimen Book of Scientific Writings. Selected, with an Introd. and Notes by Guy Davenport. Foreword by Alfred S. Romer*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1963: 119.

³⁶ For more on Norton’s blood relations at Harvard, see James Turner, *The Liberal Education of Charles Eliot Norton*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999: 15-19.

³⁷ Charles Eliot Norton, Harry Fletcher Brown. *History of Ancient Art*. A. Mudge & son, printers, 1891: 5.

³⁸ Roger B. Stein, *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840-1900* [by] Roger B. Stein. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1967: 91.

³⁹ James Mason Hoppin, “Methods of Art Education for the Cultivation of Artistic Taste.” *With Discussion* 32 (January 1893): 486.

⁴⁰ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Flamingo’s Smile: Reflections in Natural History*. 1st ed. New York:

Norton, 1985.

⁴¹ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. Macmillan, 2002: 105.

⁴² Jules Marcou, *Life, Letters, and Works of Louis Agassiz, by Jules Marcou*. New York, Macmillan and co., 1896: 288-289.

⁴³ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. Macmillan, 2002: 109-110.

⁴⁴ Ibid: 113.

⁴⁵ Jules Marcou, *Life, Letters, and Works of Louis Agassiz, by Jules Marcou*. New York, Macmillan and co., 1896: 294.

⁴⁶ “Free Blacks and Slaves,” *The North American Review*, 1853: 530.

⁴⁷ Kermit Vanderbilt, *Charles Eliot Norton; Apostle of Culture in a Democracy*. Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press, 1959: 48.

⁴⁸ Ibid.: 48.

⁴⁹ Sidney George Fisher, *The Laws of Race, as Connected with Slavery. By the Author of “The Law of the Territories”, “Rustic Rhymes”, Etc.* Philadelphia, W. P. Hazard, 1860: 7-8. Fisher relies heavily on the popular book *Types of Mankind* to which Agassiz was a contributor, see pg 10.

⁵⁰ Charles Eliot Norton, *Reviews and Literary Notices: The Laws of Race as connected with Slavery* [pp. 252-254] *The Atlantic Monthly* Volume 0007 Issue 40 (February 1861): 253-254.

⁵¹ John Ruskin, Charles Eliot Norton, John Lewis Bradley, and Ian Ousby. *The Correspondence of John Ruskin and Charles Eliot Norton*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987: 65.

⁵² Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, Charles Eliot Norton, and Jane Whitehill. *Letters of Mrs. Gaskell and Charles Eliot Norton, 1855-1865*. London, Oxford university press, H. Milford, 1932: 43.

⁵³ Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place*. Random House Digital, Inc., 2011: 135.

⁵⁴ A. Hunter Dupree, *Asa Gray, 1810-1888*. Atheneum, 1968: 419-420.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, Charles Eliot Norton, and Jane Whitehill. *Letters of Mrs. Gaskell and Charles Eliot Norton, 1855-1865*. London, Oxford university press, H. Milford, 1932: 43.

⁵⁶ Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place*. Random House Digital, Inc., 2011: 386-387.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 449.

⁵⁸ Georges Canguilhem, *A Vital Rationalist: Selected Writings from Georges Canguilhem*. Edited by François Delaporte. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Zone Books, 2000: 35.

⁵⁹ Despite his public disfavor, the Swiss scientist dug in his heels and sailed to Brazil in 1865 in part to retrace a section of Darwin's travels so he might ultimately refute the theory of evolution. On his journey through Brazil, Agassiz continued to photograph people in order to prove their disparate origins.

⁶⁰ Christoph Irmscher, *Louis Agassiz: Creator of American Science*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013: 139.

⁶¹ John Ruskin, Charles Eliot Norton, John Lewis Bradley, and Ian Ousby. *The Correspondence of John Ruskin and Charles Eliot Norton*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987: 301-302.

⁶² Peter C. Hoffer, "Charles Eliot Norton: Aesthetic Reformer in an Unaesthetic Age." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 8, no. 3 (July 1, 1974): 19-31.

⁶³ Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984: 1.

⁶⁴ Priscilla Fansler Hiss, *Research in Fine Arts in the Colleges & Universities of the United States*, Fansler, Roberta Murray,; 1903-. New York, Carnegie Corp., 1934: 179.

⁶⁵ Molly Rogers and David W. Blight. *Delia's Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth-Century America*. Yale University Press, 2010: 260-262.

⁶⁶ Josiah Clark Nott, George R. (George Robins) Gliddon, Samuel George Morton, Louis Agassiz, William Ussher, and Henry S. (Henry Stuart) Patterson. *Types of Mankind or, Ethnological Researches: Based Upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and Upon Their Natural, Geographical, Philological and Biblical History, Illustrated by Selections from the Inedited Papers of Samuel George Morton and by Additional Contributions from L. Agassiz; W. Usher; and H. S. Patterson*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, Grambo & co.: vii.

⁶⁷ Ibid.: lviii.

⁶⁸ Agassiz's photographs in Brazil were intended to prove this subdivision of African races.

⁶⁹ Charles Eliot Norton, Harry Fletcher Brown. *History of Ancient Art*. A. Mudge & son, printers, 1891: 12.

⁷⁰ Ibid.: 15-16.

⁷¹ Charles Herbert Moore, *Catalogue with Notes of Studies and Fac-similes from Examples of the Works of Florence and Venice: And of Fac-similies and Original Studies to Be Used as Exercises in Drawing Belonging to the Fine Arts Department of Harvard University ... Exhibited by the Harvard Art Club, Dec. 1878*. J. Wilson and son, 1878: 25.

⁷² Charles Eliot Norton, Harry Fletcher Brown. *History of Ancient Art*. A. Mudge & son, printers, 1891: 61. This may be a good entry into issues of gender in a future study.

⁷³ Georges Canguilhem, *A Vital Rationalist: Selected Writings from Georges Canguilhem*. Edited by François Delaporte. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Zone Books, 2000: 39.

⁷⁴ Charles Eliot Norton, Harry Fletcher Brown. *History of Ancient Art*. A. Mudge & son, printers, 1891: 21.

⁷⁵ Ibid.: 59-60.

⁷⁶ Smil Vaclav, *Why America Is Not a New Rome*. MIT Press: 2010.

⁷⁷ Charles Eliot Norton, Harry Fletcher Brown. *History of Ancient Art*. A. Mudge & son, printers, 1891: 7.

⁷⁸ Sybil Gordon Kantor, “Harvard and the Fogg Method,” in Craig Hugh Smyth, *The Early Years of Art History in the United States: Notes and Essays on Departments, Teaching, and Scholars*. Dept. of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, 1993: 165.