GSA Conference Travel Funding Application

6. Title of Your Accepted Abstract: Bringing Indian Country to the City: Thomas L. McKenney and New Paradigms of Urban Print Production, 1836-1844

7. Conference Name: 35th Annual Conference of the Nineteenth Century Studies Association

8. Session or Panel Name: Not yet known.

9. Conference Organizer & Contact Information: Dr. Maria Gindart and Dr. Maria Bachman, NSCA2014@gmail.com

10. Location of Conference: Chicago, IL

11. Date of Conference: March 20-24, 2014


Short Answer Section:
21. Please describe the research you will be presenting at the conference in general terms that can be understood by someone outside your field (including definitions of terms, theories, and discipline-specific interests). Also comment on the contribution and importance of your research in the field. Describe in 500 words or less, worth 10 points.

As a student of Visual and Cultural Studies, my work concerns print culture of the nineteenth century that does not find a comfortable home within disciplinary art history or literary studies. I am interested in portraiture outside the strict dictates of “fine art.” Instead, I prefer the cheap, mass-produced representations of individuals that, unlike discrete works of fine art such as paintings, were designed to circulate and be “consumed” in different ways. While my field is rich in scholarship about photography from the mid-nineteenth century on, scholarship on the print culture that existed before and alongside photography is sadly lacking. I believe that further exploring genealogies of picture production and consumption during this period can help vastly enrich not only our understanding of historical experience but also our present day experiences wading through an unceasing flood of digital images.

I am therefore very honored and excited to be presenting this spring on my current research about nineteenth-century American politico and businessman, Thomas Lorraine McKenney and his opus, History of the Indian Tribes of North America. (See attached abstract and also an image I include below). My fascination with this work stems from its in-between status as both mass-produced commodity for popular consumption on the one hand, as well as fine, valuable object on the other. I argue that this duality is related, in no small way, to its author’s in-between status as white, middle-class government bureaucrat struggling to negotiate a position regarding the American Indians whom he was alternately charged with protecting, preserving, reforming and destroying. It is my
preliminary contention that McKenney—not only in the temporal space of his professional tenure but in his attitudes and actions—straddled a period of major transition wherein the last tenuous sands of the middle-ground, were shifting out from under his own feet and the position of US-Native dealings. I propose that History (which has been described variously as “a singular obsession” and “Financial suicide” and the product of the cruel, oppressive and atomizing eye of empire) should also be read as a visual and material manifestation of the crisis in inter-subject relations playing out in McKenney’s own life and on the broader stage of American consciousness.

The cultural significance of this project finds a mirror in its material iteration. As I demonstrate in my research, History was part of an emergent publishing trend fueled by the travels and sketches (both pictorial and written) of artists and nascent ethnographers pushing westward in an effort to explore and document the west (and its native peoples). McKenney’s project, however, blows the others out of the water in scope, expense and complexity. Containing 120 folio sized hand-colored lithographic portraits (each printed in editions of 400) of important Native Americans and accompanied by extensive biographical texts, the project required (and arguably, of necessity even established) unprecedented coordination between heretofore discrete entities in publishing and image production, signaling shifting attitudes and expectations about how portraits could circulate and function. It is this last section of my project that this conference presentation opportunity enables me to develop and share.

Selections from 120 portrait prints in McKenney and Hall’s *History of the Indian Tribes of North America*, 1837-1844.

22. Please describe how your specific presentation at the conference will benefit your graduate work (is it part of your dissertation, something you hope will be published, etc…) and promote your professional career more generally (job prospects, academic standing, etc…). Please list the number of conferences you have presented at already while a graduate student at the University of Rochester, and if you’ve given this particular presentation before. Describe in 500 words or less, worth 10 points.

This conference is a major step for me professionally and academically in that it will be my first conference presentation during my graduate school career here at U of R. Last year, I proposed a different paper to this same annual conference (organized around a different theme) and it was
accepted. However, since the location was Fresno, California, the cost proved too prohibitive for me to attend and I was pretty crushed to have missed out on that opportunity. That the conference meets this year in Chicago puts participation within my reach and the timing couldn’t be more perfect! The paper I will be presenting is derived from work I am doing this fall and winter on my first dissertation chapter. The dissertation, tentatively titled *Lives of the Copyists: Sketching and Replicating the Subject in America’s Early Age of Lithographic (Re)production [1820-1860]*, explores ways in which the actions of writing and drawing became increasingly mechanized and mobilized in antebellum American visual and literary culture, subtly reorienting relationships between self and other. The chapter in progress (‘*These Will Show you What you Are*: Thomas Lorrain McKenney and the Representation of History), explores McKenney’s monumental visual and literary work, *The History of the Indian Tribes of North America*, as a historical, cultural and aesthetic object.

In every way this is an opportune time for me to present at a major professional conference. This conference will spur my writing over the winter months and be a fantastic opportunity to network and workshop my dissertation ideas with colleagues and mentors from around the country.

23. Describe how influential the conference is and the body organizing the conference to your field and research? What disciplines do the attendees come from and how will this connect with your field/discipline? How does your research tie into the conference’s focus? Why is this conference important for you? Describe in 250 words or less, worth 5 points.

The Nineteenth Century Studies Association is an interdisciplinary body of scholars and this varied representation across fields is very important to me as a student of Visual and Cultural Studies. At the University of Rochester I’ve benefitted immensely from interdisciplinary academic exchange and the freedom to work across modes and media is central to my material and my methodologies. At present, I do not possess a strong cadre of colleagues in my graduate program working on early/mid nineteenth-century material the way that I do. It is therefore imperative that I seek and foster connections with other scholars who do.

As my research deals with a changes in technology, specifically, the production and consumption of images, I expect the theme of this year’s conference *Urbanism and Urbanity* to invigorate and expand not only my knowledge in my historical and geographical areas of focus but my methodological and theoretical toolkits as well. Because this is a major professional conference I’ll have the benefit of meeting and being inspired by other graduate students, junior faculty and senior scholars as well. I’m so excited!

**Conference Abstract**

**Bringing Indian Country to the City: Thomas L. McKenney and New Paradigms of Urban Print Production, 1836-1844**

NSCA 2014: “Urbanism and Urbanity”

Drawing on his knowledge and experience as Superintendent of Indian Trade and then Commissioner of Indian Affairs—as well as his connections in government, journalism and business—Thomas L.
McKenney set out to create a “truly national” work of American art and history. The result was the exquisite, multi-volume project, History of the Indian Tribes of North America (1836–1844): a collectible set of one hundred and twenty hand-colored lithographic portraits of notable American Indians, accompanied by biographical texts. Designed to surpass similar projects of the moment in richness and detail, History was unprecedented in its scope and execution. Consequently, it teetered repeatedly on the brink of failure as production costs exceeded estimates and business partnerships dissolved and migrated. Woefully neglected by scholars, the final product is a rich site for exploring anthropology, historiography and politics in early republic and antebellum American history. It also offers a fascinating look into emerging image ecologies and networks of urban industry. Produced largely in Philadelphia but with regular transmission of directives and materials between Washington and New York, History was simultaneously dependent on and responsible for forging new models of collaboration between text and graphic printers, artists, writers, merchants and bureaucrats. Countering claims that History was an endeavor of ambitious folly and “financial suicide,” this paper argues that the logistical and financial struggles involved in producing History are evidence of media in transition, from the work of small-scale artisans to mass production in an urban, industrial context.