

# *A Story Without End...*

**Holly Edwards**

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## **Abstract**

This article traces the impact of 9/11 on my teaching style as an art historian. That trauma has left its marks on all of us, and yet life goes on. My own ‘story’ ranges across time and space, from Kabul decades ago through years in the studio since then. The tale is punctuated with contemplative questions about the therapeutic role of art in a troubled world. Art matters! And the way that we teach it makes a difference by fostering mindfulness in students with interdisciplinary pedagogical techniques, asking them to look, read, make, and talk collaboratively in order to transcend collective suffering.

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A long time ago, on a normal, everyday day, I was frantically pawing through drawers of slides to assemble a lecture about Islamic architecture for an undergraduate art history class. It looked like this: I would grab slide after slide, laying them out on my light table, anxiously hoping that a clear argument would shine through the glass, despite my own murky thinking. If I moved too fast, I might forget to replace a slide with a cardboard marker in the file drawer, thereby incurring the wrath of the slide librarian. I had to be careful. It was early in the fall semester and I was scrambling to launch a career and a new course.

And what did creativity have to do with it? At the time, mainstream art history was a memory game of masterpieces--names, dates, and evolving styles. Europe was the center of ‘culture’, and painting and sculpture were the crowning glories of the tradition. Contextualizing iconic works of art at the moment of their production was a sleuthing operation that involved unpacking history and unveiling meaning. Students were expected to learn canonical artifacts and follow in the footsteps of the experts in an institutionalized discipline. Admittedly, it was a bit more complicated than that for me because I had wandered into the “non-Western” sphere, living for a while in Afghanistan and then doing research in Pakistan. For me, original fieldwork on medieval shrine architecture in the Indus Valley involved a blue jeep, on-site sketching, and lots of photographs. The history of art was (and still is) going global and it remains a fascinating and challenging adventure.

But in that slide room a long time ago, the studious silence was suddenly replaced by gasps and murmurs. News of planes colliding with the World Trade Centers had just erupted. What was going on??

I have no idea what I taught that day. Time and space had come to a standstill and my memory froze, only to be triggered randomly thereafter. Much has been written about those events and the heart-stopping images of planes, flames, fumes...and bodies. Psychologists, spiritual counselors, and social workers helped innumerable people subsequently suffering from PTSD and the story did not end. A decade later, operatives setting out from Afghanistan assassinated Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. That place was familiar territory for me also, and as the millennium unfolded, other conflicts proliferated in the Middle East. Museums and monuments were destroyed in Iraq; it seemed that the “history of art” was being obliterated. I was safely distant but emotionally entangled, ostensibly knowledgeable and yet deeply confused... What was my “job” in such circumstances?

Teaching English in Kabul had enabled me to connect deeply with others. Heading to work every day down Chicken Street was a wonderful wander among carpet dealers, book sellers, and kabob shops. Though a short walk, it offered me life-long learning, thanks to kind, generous, and loving people. It was a *real* education that vastly overshadowed the subsequent PhD. But shortly after I left, the Russians invaded and everything changed. Afghanistan has been a site of conflict and tragedy ever since, subject to seemingly intractable political and religious polarization. As that agonizing story continues to unfold in the general terrain of the monotheism, how shall we think about the relationship between art and the sacred? Where does power really lie?

And now, with the anniversary of 9/11, memories surface and tough questions plague. Surely we have the means to shape the world anew, but is military force necessary to do so? Can people ever set down weaponry to address collective needs collaboratively? There is certainly pain in life; can we metabolize it with creative action? And where does art figure in the turmoil?

In search of answers, I often take refuge in the studio. Making things, after all, is generative in myriad ways though it does not always result in museum-worthy products. Inspired by Peter London, I engage mindfully with nature and let it work on me. Listening, looking, smelling, feeling, making, and just *being* can foster trust, hope, and curiosity. Doing so is not a linear process, but rather a slow spiral of growth, often unconscious. Amazing things can happen in the company of trees!

Along the way, the art historian in me has evolved even as the discipline itself has morphed. When I am teaching, I seldom begin with canonical objects, terms, or assumptions, but rather range more widely across visual culture, from the production to the reception of diverse artifacts. After all, one person’s joy is another person’s quandary and student input here is critical. When I work in museums, I often pose questions about appropriation and destruction, but ultimately, the agency of ‘things’ among living, breathing humans is the real issue.

Any ‘thing’ that outlives generations of makers and users, winning enshrinement enroute, certainly deserves attention. But why is old, damaged or fragmentary stuff deemed frameable, valuable, and teachable for future generations? And what happens when a work of “art” is digitally shared? Answers are elusive. Narrating the potency of material artifacts over time is what ‘art history’ is, but it gets complicated as the boundaries between self and other, here and there, now and then blur. We are living at a technologically-accelerated pace and we are *all* curators now, cameras in hand. Images proliferating

online wield the *power to over-power* in the global arena and those images constitute the lingua franca among people, cultures, and nations. So what qualifies as fluency in such a flooded and often disembodied visuality? And how can we foster such skills to advance peace and understanding? In what follows, I share my own approach, as it has emerged over time and in life's spaces between seeing and making.

When art stops you in your tracks, and makes you question what you have previously trusted, that is instructive and even transformative. Art can also affirm intuition or recalibrate despair. In my opinion, art effectively wields *revelatory* potential and that bears serious scrutiny as we endlessly shape the world anew by what we choose to view or disregard. So I invite students to identify an image or artifact or building that exerts that power palpably, freezing them to the core for whatever reason. Perhaps a past anxiety is comforted, perhaps sheer beauty inspires wonder, or perhaps strange imagery simply defies understanding. That embodied experience effectively erases time and space, postponing analysis, not unlike trauma. And what about the memory of the first encounter? Is it equally forceful?

To gain further understanding, I ask students to draw what they see, even if they resist or claim inadequate skills. Mark-making fosters somatic engagement and demands close looking. Thus, the learning goes deeper. Finally, I challenge them to articulate the power of that chosen piece in collaboration with classmates. One's own experience will always differ from that of others, and the exchange is inevitably horizon-broadening. Along the way, we contextualize the work in art historical terms, to learn the motivation of long-gone makers and the needs of subsequent viewers; the voices of teachers and museum professionals infiltrate and enrich the process as well. My hope is that all of this enables students to see the world more clearly and then re-fresh it mindfully, transcending the past, creating the present, and imagining the future. Again I credit Peter London, who taught me that art enriches consciousness, acting as mirror, lens and sieve (London, 2021), thereby preparing us for the next stage of life whatever that might be.

Self, after all, is the site from which we can view, make, love, and live with integrity and honor. There, real power lies. Studio spaces are where precious things are shaped, called forth from the human heart and kneaded by the careful hand. Those products are discussed in classrooms and enshrined in museums, often grand buildings of awe-inspiring stability. People come and go around those centers of gravity, and shared experience surfaces, generating community one step at a time. Put simply, art matters! But that is not a great revelation. It is simply a story that has no end...

## Reference

London, P. (2021). *The practice of art*. Unpublished manuscript.

### **Author Biography**

Holly Edwards has spent her career employed as an historian of Islamic art at Williams College. Her publications encompass a wide range of topics including American Orientalism, medieval shrine architecture in the Indus Valley, and photographs of Afghan women. Her studies with Peter London have transpired in the context of art-making workshops at Kripalu, with the result that her home now includes a very messy studio. Now she leads an independent artists group in conjunction with ongoing scholarly activities.

### **Acknowledgements and Dedication**

This article is warmly dedicated to Peter London, whose books, wisdom, and personal advice have guided me for decades. My gratitude and awe are simply boundless. He has taught me and so many people to draw close to nature, to be mindful of self, and to see others more clearly. What a gift he is to the world in these challenging times!

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