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STUDIES IN ART HISTORIOGRAPHY

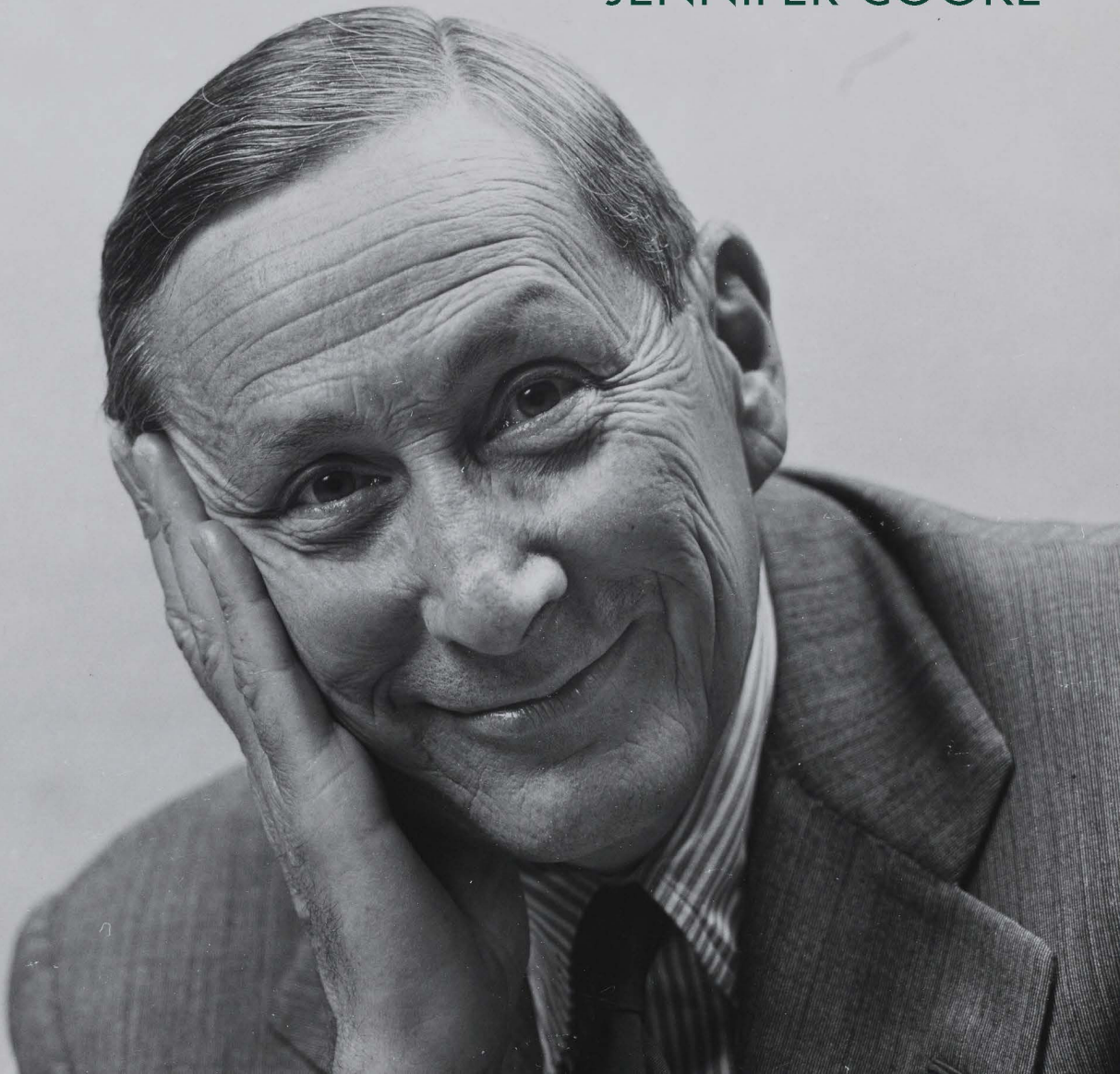
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# Millard Meiss, American Art History, and Conservation

From Connoisseurship to Iconology  
and Kulturgeschichte

JENNIFER COOKE



# Millard Meiss, American Art History, and Conservation

A member of the art history generation from the golden age of the 1920s and 1930s, Millard Meiss (1904–1975) developed a new and multi-faceted methodological approach.

This book lays the foundation for a reassessment of this key figure in post-war American and international art history. The book analyses his work alongside that of contemporary art historians, considering both those who influenced him and those who were receptive to his research. Jennifer Cooke uses extensive archival material to give Meiss the critical consideration that his extensive and important art historical, restoration and conservation work deserves.

This book will be of interest to scholars in art history, historiography and heritage management and conservation.

**Jennifer Cooke** is a researcher in History of Art Criticism and Museum Studies at the University of Turin.

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From Connoisseurship to Iconology and Kulturgeschichte  
*Jennifer Cooke*

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From Connoisseurship to Iconology and Kulturgeschichte

Jennifer Cooke

First published 2021  
by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Cooke, Jennifer, 1983- author. | Cooke, Jennifer, 1983- Millard Meiss.

Title: Millard Meiss, American art history, and conservation: from connoisseurship to iconology and Kulturgeschichte/Jennifer Cooke.

Other titles: Millard Meiss. English

Description: New York: Routledge, 2021. | Originally published in Italy in 2015 by Ledizioni as Millard Meiss: tra connoisseurship, iconologia e Kulturgeschichte. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020025272 (print) | LCCN 2020025273 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780367138349 (hardback) | ISBN 9780367138356 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Meiss, Millard. | Art--Historiography. |

Historiography--United States--History--20th century.

Classification: LCC N7483.M45 C6613 2021 (print) |

LCC N7483.M45 (ebook) | DDC 709--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020025272>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020025273>

ISBN: 978-0-367-13834-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-13835-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon  
by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

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# Preface

Discussing Millard Meiss's studies, his 'modes of approach to works of art', his 'methods of investigation' and his 'critical vision', is the purpose of this book.<sup>1</sup> Originally a doctoral thesis defended in 2013, subsequently published in an abridged form in Italian in 2015, this research on the American art historian is now finally brought to the English-speaking readership.<sup>2</sup> Being a self-translation, its ties to the original are those of a *belle infidèle*, and the hiatus that occurred made a considerable revision of both content and reference literature necessary. The chapters are organised according to Meiss's methodological axes, i.e. connoisseurship, iconology, Kulturgeschichte and the technical study of art, not to further a somewhat schizophrenic reception of his works, but to show on the contrary how these aspects are deeply interconnected in his approach. The final part addresses his critical fortune from a specific perspective, that of Italian scholarship, not only because his studies were primarily concerned with Italian (or Tuscan) art and his personal relations with many Italian art historians, but mainly because the impact he exerted in Italy may be useful to understand the reception of his scholarly work in a broader framework. The reasons for what I termed an Italian 'Meiss-fortune' may be found not only in connoisseurs' conflicts, but also in a widespread myopia towards an approach that combined formal analysis with the interpretation of meaning – a 'slippery word' used by Panofsky for the intrinsic significance of the work of art. Consequently, Meiss was in the best-case scenario identified with the iconological drift of American scholarship, or in the worst, assimilated with an accessory sociological interpretation of art. On the other hand, sharing Panofsky's scepticism towards theory – 'a rather suspect concept, tainted as it was by theories of race (which classified human beings hierarchically) and theories of quality (which classified works of art hierarchically)',

1 Borrowing David Rosand's words: 'If his own scholarship was exemplary, still more so was his critical vision. He never lost sight of what was important. His inquiry began with, was inspired by, the work of art. Even as he located an image in its historical and art historical contexts with convincing exactness, he insisted that we respect it for itself, for its intrinsic aesthetic and expressive qualities', in: Rosand 1980, 447.

2 Cooke 2015.

as Irvin Lavin described it<sup>3</sup> – Meiss did very little to defend or convey his method(s). As a case in point, when asked to define his approach, he replied with his proverbial understatement:

My work is related to that of scientists – you try on hats, you really put the hat on the object. The important thing is to get one that fits.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Lavin was referring to the condition of art history in the United States in the 1950s, and further he wrote: ‘Meaning, in fact, links the formal to the conceptual revolution of my contemporaries’ (Lavin 1996, 13). Incidentally, Irving Lavin (1927–2019) was chosen by Meiss for his ‘wide variety of methods and approaches’ as his successor at Princeton (AAA, MMP. Letter of recommendation by Millard Meiss, August 1972).

4 Quoted in: Glueck 1974.

# Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude goes to the late Gianni C. Sciolla, who first introduced me to American art historiography and directed my studies to Millard Meiss back in 2008, and to Franca Varallo for her unfailing support and advice throughout the last decade. A huge thank you goes to Richard Woodfield for welcoming this book in the *Historiography of Art* series and his invaluable feedback in the writing process. Many dedicated and enthusiastic librarians and research staff have helped me put together this study. Amongst the people I would like to thank are Audrey Avenel, Carla Bernardini, Giuliano Berti Arnoaldi Veli, Marisa Bourgoïn, Monica Cavicchi, Silvia Chiodo, Susan Chore, Marcella Culatti, Ilaria Della Monica, Loisann Dowd White, Ester Fasini, Emanuela Fiori, Sergio La Porta, Luca Lenzini, Julie Ludwig, Elisabetta Nencini, Mirjo Salvini, Giuseppa Saccaro del Buffa and Carla Zarrilli. My thoughts also go to Irving Lavin, or 'IL' as some of us will remember him, and to his memory I dedicate this book. Lastly, my family and my loving partner Michael, many friends and colleagues and a cat named Millard, have all played a part in this endeavour. To them I will always be indebted.

# List of Abbreviations

Here follows a list of abbreviations for the archive collections consulted.

AAA, MMP	Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Millard Meiss Papers, ca. 1918–ca. 1977, bulk 1950–1975
APCG	Bologna, Archivio Privato Cesare Gnudi
APEB	Rome, Archivio Privato Eugenio Battisti
ASTo	Turin, Archivio di Stato
BB	Settignano, Biblioteca Berenson, Villa I Tatti – The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, courtesy of the President and Fellows of Harvard College
BMBP	Bernard and Mary Berenson Papers
CRIA VIT	Committee to Rescue Italian Art, Papers: Villa I Tatti
PITTI	Committee to Rescue Italian Art, Papers: Palazzo Pitti Office
FARLA, FC	New York, Frick Art Reference Library Archives, The Frick Collection
INHA	Paris, Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art
LAELT	Figline di Prato, Laboratorio per Affresco Elena e Leonetto Tintori
PGRI, JHP	Los Angeles, The Paul J. Getty Research Institute, Julius S. Held Papers
UNISI, BLF	Siena, Università degli Studi di Siena, Biblioteca di Lettere e Filosofia

The mammoth volumes of Erwin Panofsky's correspondence edited by Dieter Wuttke that are frequently referred to will be abbreviated as follows:

Panofsky 2001	E. Panofsky, <i>Korrespondenz 1910 bis 1936</i> , vol. I, ed. by D. Wuttke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001)
Panofsky 2003	E. Panofsky, <i>Korrespondenz 1937 bis 1949</i> , vol. II, ed. by D. Wuttke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003)
Panofsky 2006	E. Panofsky, <i>Korrespondenz 1950 bis 1956</i> , vol. III, ed. by D. Wuttke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006)
Panofsky 2008	E. Panofsky, <i>Korrespondenz 1957 bis 1961</i> , vol. IV, ed. by D. Wuttke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008)
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1 For a complete bibliography of Meiss’s works up to 1977, refer to Irving Lavin and John Plummers (eds.), *Studies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Painting in Honor of Millard Meiss*, 2 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1977), xiii–xx.

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# Introduction

Meiss was described as acute, confident, understated, introverted and tactful, but with a sense of humour. John Pope-Hennessy found in him that balance a good art historian needs, and was struck by how his personality corresponded exactly with his intellectual stature:

He could have astonished but refrained from doing so; he could have allowed a powerful imagination to draw him beyond the permissible limits of the evidence; he could have disturbed the careful balance between formulation and the thought that it expressed. But he did none of these things.<sup>1</sup>

Such a balance was also reflected in his approach, successfully combining the analysis of formal values, the knowledge of technical matters and the study of the meaning of works of art within their intellectual, historical and stylistic context. This multi-faceted and flexible *modus operandi* much owed to the complex and multi-layered nature of the discipline as it was in the ‘Golden Age’ of art history in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Millard Lazare Meiss was born into a wealthy Jewish family in Cincinnati, Ohio, on 25 March 1904. In 1922 he attended the Princeton School of Architecture to train as an architect and earned a bachelor of arts in English and Literature in 1926.<sup>3</sup> He then started work as a construction supervisor at Schroeder and Koppel in New York, but not long afterwards realised art history was his true passion. Once he dispelled his father’s qualms about studying history of art, Meiss was then able to resume his education.<sup>4</sup> He chose Harvard instead of Princeton, probably because the New Jersey university was going through a period of economic strain following the death of Allan Marquand, its principal sponsor. This was, however, a thriving period for the teaching

1 Pope-Hennessy 1991, 305–306. Cf. also Glueck 1974 and Coolidge 1975.

2 This expression was famously used by Panofsky in his outline of the development of art history in the United States, ‘Three Decades of Art History in the United States: Impressions of a Transplanted European’, republished in Panofsky 1955, 321–346: 326. Cf. also DaCosta Kaufmann 2010.

3 On Princeton School of Architecture, see Aronberg Lavin 1983 and Van Zanten 1989.

4 ‘The Class of 1926’ 1975: ‘Upon graduation his father told him it was time for him to go to work. He did, in the construction industry, continuing his studies at night. He was construction supervisor on several New York buildings, and he recalled later that the experience of walking steel beams far above the ground conditioned him for later clambering in the upper reaches of Italian churches, studying frescoes up close. After two years, his father agreed to support his graduate study at Harvard and N.Y. University’.

## 2 Introduction

of art history at Harvard.<sup>5</sup> Paul J. Sachs was laying the foundations of a connoisseurship rooted in the scientific examination of techniques and materials and the study of art sources.<sup>6</sup> Meiss later completed his post-graduate work under Richard Offner at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York, a mentor that honed his connoisseurial skills and initiated him to the study of Tuscan primitives.<sup>7</sup> By then the New York institute had become a so-called ‘university of exile’, attracting the most prominent émigré scholars from Europe. Amongst them was Erwin Panofsky, who played a pivotal role in steering Meiss’s interest towards Flemish painting and French illumination. But more importantly, Panofsky encouraged the younger art scholar to shift his attention to the content of artworks. In the course of a professional and personal lifelong relationship, Meiss, in turn, significantly contributed to the Americanisation of the iconological method put forward by ‘Pan’ – as his close friends called the German art historian. After he completed his doctorate, Meiss began his academic career as a lecturer – first at the Institute of Fine Arts in 1931–1933 and then at Columbia University from 1935 to 1937. At Columbia, where his colleagues included the likes of Rensselaer W. Lee, Julius S. Held and Meyer Schapiro, Meiss became an assistant professor in 1937 and was made an associate professor in 1947. Between 1940 and 1942, he took on the prestigious editorship of *The Art Bulletin*, bringing a wind of change to the historic journal by broadening its scope to architecture, portraiture, contemporary art and Oriental and Latin American art.<sup>8</sup> Discouraged by an art department he did not feel was lively enough, Meiss left New York in 1954 and went to teach at Harvard where he also served as curator of paintings in the Fogg Museum. Finally, in 1957 Meiss joined Panofsky at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and ultimately succeeded him as chair of art history in 1962.

Meiss’s name mainly became synonymous with the book *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, whose contextual explanation of stylistic and iconographical changes in art was variously construed as either alternative or akin to the social history of art in the modes of Frederick Antal and Arnold Hauser. Another great scholarly achievement of his was the three-volume corpus, completed over the course of almost two decades, *French Painting in the Time of Jean de Berry*, which analysed French illumination as a crucible for cross-cultural fertilisation between Flemish and Italian artistic civilisations. Most of his body of work otherwise consisted of articles and short essays, thus choosing a form that lent itself to pursuing several threads of research and constantly re-elaborating topics. True to the Offnerian legacy, on the

5 Brush 2003, 200: ‘The other Princeton scholars of the 1920s and 1930s, among them Morey, Ernest DeWald, E. Baldwin Smith, Frank Jewett Mather, Jr. and A.M. Friend, Jr., were not wealthy and did not move in the same circles as their Harvard counterparts; moreover, they did not travel so extensively in Europe during the 1920s. There was clear financial need at Princeton in the years following 1924. [...] As a result, the Princeton department, which has a small art museum and shared quarters with the School of Architecture for much of the 1920s, made do with an additive approach to its physical quarters during the 1920s and 1930s that did not express a single coherent vision’.

6 Meiss would indeed attend Sachs’s famous Museum Course which trained generations of art scholars and museum professionals. On the Museum Course, refer to the recent Duncan and McClellan 2018.

7 Under Offner’s supervision, Meiss ventured into the examination of the corpus of such artists as Ugolino Lorenzetti (active ca. 1320–1360) and Francesco Traini (active ca. 1321–1365); see Meiss 1931 and Meiss 1933.

8 Meiss 1964d. Also see Brilliant 1991; Lang 2013; *Publishing the Art Bulletin: Past, Present and Future* (<http://scalar.usc.edu/anvc/the-art-bulletin/index>).

one hand, Meiss threw his hat into the ring with such prickly matters as the attributive quarrel over the *Frick Flagellation* debated between Cimabue and Duccio (Figure 1.6), and the even more heated problem of Giotto's presence in Assisi. His numerous lectures devoted to the 'neat unravelling of iconographic niceties', like the meaning of the ostrich egg in Piero della Francesca's *Brera Altarpiece* or of slumbering damsels in Venetian painting, concurrently testify to a Panofskyan course of research.<sup>9</sup> These two differing approaches were successfully combined in the study of stylistic trends as embedded in a specific culture, which constituted the main purpose of Meiss's investigations.

Parallel to his scholarly output, Meiss was intent upon preserving artistic heritage and chaired the American committees that helped repair damaged works of art, both after the war and again after the 1966 flood in Florence. The American art historian was also an active member of Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art in the post-war years. In 1961 he brought to the United States its first international art congress, held in New York, and served as the organisation's president until 1964 and as a member of the executive bureau in the following years. The work alongside conservators and restorers further deepened Meiss's knowledge of the technical study of art, particularly as regards frescoes. The examination of the techniques used in mural painting became an engrossing pursuit for Meiss between the sixties and seventies, which resulted in his collaboration with Ugo Procacci and Leonetto Tintori. Dividing his time between conservation work in Florence, his academic engagements in Princeton as well as his institutional role within CIHA, Meiss would often have to defer his research, as was the case with the monumental corpus of French painting, which he began in the 1950s but was able to publish only at the end of the following decade. He retired from Princeton in 1973 and shortly thereafter was diagnosed with lung cancer.

Meiss played the violin; he was fluent in Italian and French, was well-versed in German and spoke a bit of Spanish, too. In his formative years, he spent extensive periods in Italy, Germany and France, and made shorter visits to England, Belgium and Holland. When his hopes to recover from cancer were disappointed, he travelled to Italy one last time and saw the places of what he considered to be his spiritual homeland – Florence, Siena and Venice. Not without strain, he managed to deliver two final lectures in Paris at the Collège de France on his beloved *Très Riches Heures du Duc du Berry* in the presence of a dear friend, André Chastel. Sadly, soon after, his condition grew worse and he died in Princeton on 12 June 1975.

9 Gilbert 1958, 434.



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