

# Jules David Prown Interviews by Jack Meyers

S015



YCBA Library Court. Photograph by Richard Caspole, YCBA, 2016.

Institutional Archives  
1080 Chapel Street  
P. O. Box 208280  
New Haven, CT 06520-8280  
(203) 432-8395  
[ycba.institutionalarchives@yale.edu](mailto:ycba.institutionalarchives@yale.edu)  
<https://britishart.yale.edu/about-us/departments/institutional-archives>

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## Collection Overview

**REPOSITORY:** Yale Center for British Art, Institutional Archives  
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1080 Chapel Street  
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(203) 432-8395  
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**CALL NUMBER:** S015

**CREATOR:** Prown, Jules David, 1930-

**TITLE:** Jules David Prown Interviews by Jack Meyers

**DATES:** September 2004

**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** .417 linear feet (1 box)

**LANGUAGE:** English

**SUMMARY:** This collection consists of three interviews with Jules David Prown conducted on separate days in September 2004 by Jack Meyers when he worked in the Office of the Provost. The interviews cover the establishment of the Yale Center for British Art, as recollected by Jules Prown.

**ONLINE FINDING AID:** To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/ycba.ia.S015>

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## Administrative Information

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### Conditions Governing Access

This collection is unprocessed and may not be available for immediate access.

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### Biographical / Historical

Jules David Prown was born in Freehold Township, New Jersey, on March 14, 1930. He has been a scholar, museologist, and teacher of art history and material culture in the American Studies and the History of Art departments at Yale University. His scholarship and career mark a turning point in the history of art, especially American material culture, and continue to influence the field.

Art history courses at Lafayette College sparked Prown's nascent interest in the arts. In a recent interview for Panorama, Prown recalled, "a friend took me to a lecture in art history, a subject of which I had not heard, that resulted in a moment of epiphany as color-saturated images of impressionist paintings washed over me." Taught by Lafayette College's sole art historian, Johannes Gaertner, Prown was advised by Gaertner and others upon graduating in 1951 to study art history at Harvard University and become an art dealer. Heeding their advice, Prown took courses with influential art historians Benjamin Rowland, William Koehler, and Jacob Rosenberg. Prown's coursework inspired him to devise his own methodologies for

studying objects and images, including systematic and close analysis, which later informed his reinvention of formalism as a historical methodology.

Prown graduated from Harvard with a master's in art history in 1953 and immediately began work as an art dealer with Norman Hirschl, whose New York gallery's American paintings fed Prown's growing interest. Determined to pursue a PhD in American art at a time when the field's leading academics and specialists worked in museums, he enrolled in Winterthur's recently established two-year fellowship in early American art. Prown immersed himself in his studies of early American decorative arts and material culture, taking courses with visiting lecturers, including Anthony Garvan, who were looking for new methods to apply statistical anthropological techniques to the decorative arts and material culture.

After graduating in 1956, Prown returned to Harvard and served as teaching fellow for his dissertation advisor, Benjamin Rowland. He began research in the UK into John Singleton Copley's career and began working as an assistant to Harvard's Fogg Art Museum director John Coolidge.

Prown received his PhD from Harvard in 1961. That same year he became curator of American art at the Yale University Art Gallery (YUAG) and a full-time professor in Yale's Department of the History of Art. In 1967, the Yale Center for British Art (YCBA), then named the Paul Mellon Center for British Art and British Studies, was established with a donation made by Paul Mellon (Yale College, Class of 1929). From 1968 to 1975, during its nascence and construction, Prown served as YCBA director. Though he was an Americanist by nature and training, Mr. Mellon, Yale President Kingman Brewster, and other advisers felt Prown was the ideal director for the institution. He played an instrumental role in selecting modernist architect Louis I. Kahn and in leading the creation of the building through its crucial early stages. After eight years at the YCBA, during which he taught one graduate seminar course at Yale annually, Prown transitioned back to full-time teaching at Yale. In his graduate and undergraduate courses in art history and American studies, he fostered the use of the YCBA's and YUAG's vast resources. Throughout his career as a teacher and scholar, Prown approached the study and teaching of material culture from an object-based approach, feeling it would be the most helpful, insightful methodology for his students. At Yale, Prown was also director of graduate studies, chair of the Department of the History of Art, and director of the American Studies department.

Prown has written, co-authored, and edited numerous scholarly journals, articles, and books, including these selected publications: *John Singleton Copley, Vol. I* (1966); *The Architecture of the Yale Center for British Art* (1977); "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method" (1982); *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West* (1994); "In Pursuit of Culture: The Formal Language of Objects" (1995); *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (2002); and *Louis I. Kahn in Conversation: Interviews with John W. Cook and Heinrich Klotz, 1969-70* (2015).

Prown's professional honors include the George Washington Kidd award from Lafayette College (1986) and the Distinguished Teaching of Art History Award from the College Art Association of America (1995). He has served on multiple boards for institutions including The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, American Art-Smithsonian (1986-2001), Whitney Museum of American Art (1977); and served as associate director to the National Humanities Institute (1977), director of the YCBA (1968-1976), and curator of American art at the YUAG (1963-1968).

Jack Meyers (Yale '72) is currently President of the Rockefeller Archive Center. He is the husband of Amy Meyers, Director of the Yale Center for British Art (2002-2019). These interviews were conducted while he worked in the Office of the Provost.

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## Scope and Contents

This collection consists of three interviews with Jules David Prown conducted on separate days in September 2004 by Jack Meyers when he worked in the Office of the Provost. The interviews cover the establishment of the Yale Center for British Art, as recollected by Jules Prown.

## **Selected Search Terms**

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

### **Subjects**

Architecture, Modern -- 20th Century  
Art historians

### **Names**

Kahn, Louis I., 1901-1974  
Meyers, Jack

### **Corporate Body**

Yale Center for British Art