



Smithsonian American Art Museum

## **Denman Ross and American Formalist Aesthetics in the Early Twentieth Century**

Marie Frank

James Renwick Postdoctoral Fellow in American Craft  
University of Massachusetts, Lowell

The research I plan to do at the Smithsonian will make an essential contribution to my book on Denman Ross (1853–1935) and American aesthetic thought in the early twentieth century. Ross was an influential writer, design theorist, teacher, and collector. He devoted his energies to developing the theory of “pure design,” a pedagogical method that emphasized the abstracted formal qualities of line, shape, and color in an art object. Pure design was intended not only for the study of art but also for the practice of art, and it attracted a wide audience, from Ashcan School artists, Arts and Crafts artisans, Prairie School architects, and art educators at the turn of the century to artists, designers, curators and historians of the 1930s. Because he worked out his theories in such detail, and because his theories were used by such a variety of people, Ross’s contributions provide a concrete means to better understand formalist aesthetics in American visual arts and scholarship—not only with respect to specific artists but, more significantly, also in terms of a larger, interdisciplinary cultural attitude.

At the Smithsonian my research will focus on two specific areas: the historical context for and the application of Ross’s theories. Ross’s interest in science (particularly psychology and the perception of form and color), geometry, and George Santayana’s aesthetics needs to be compared with that of contemporary critics and writers. The application of Ross’s theories is particularly relevant to my study. Significant artists, architects, educators, artisans, and historians knew his work. Documenting Ross’s specific contributions helps us to understand formalism’s presence in the visual arts.