J. Gray Sweeney is part detective, part historian, part teacher, and part cultural entrepreneur. He also has an ambitious goal. A professor in the School of Art at ASU’s Katherine K. Helfberger College of Fine Arts, Sweeney wants to change the direction of American art history.

“I’m different from traditional art historians who seek to show how art reflected the times in which artists lived. I see art as having a critical role in producing culture, both in the past and today,” Sweeney says. “Culture is not only what we live by, but increasingly, what we live for.”

He is quick to add, “I’m still as interested in theory as I am in objects.”
The ASU scholar believes visual art is one of the most productive ways of engaging history. He has built a career around making art come alive for his students and for audiences in art museums around the country. “In the past, art historians focused on styles of art. Formalism and aestheticism dominated the field,” Sweeney says. “Now the buzz is ‘cultural studies.’”

Sweeney has been a cultural historian for a long time, but he thinks new approaches expand the subjects of his investigation to include social, economic, political, cultural, and gender issues that went unnoticed by earlier generations of art historians. Sweeney also has made some original discoveries that are helping to reshape his field and the way in which people think about American art. The result of that early commitment has been an outpouring of books, exhibition catalogues, scholarly articles, and reviews.

Sweeney admits he’s been fortunate. In 1980, he received a phone call from a member of the Des Moines Women’s Club. At that moment, the historian now realizes, he was about to discover “To the Memory of Cole,” a long lost national treasure. The discovery would change his career and help him reshape the history of American visual culture for the period before the Civil War.

The ASU scholar had found references to a lost painting by the Hudson River School master, Frederic Ewin Church. But no one knew where it was located or what it looked like. Sweeney remembers the moment he first saw the painting in the Des Moines Women’s Club. “It was like an electric charge, a powerful moment of recognition,” Sweeney told The New York Times. Almost 20 years later, after a decade of intensive research, Sweeney was able to incontrovertibly identify the picture as Church’s memorial to the death of his teacher, Thomas Cole, a founder of the Hudson River School.

In 1999, Church’s painting was hammered down at auction at Sotheby’s in New York City. A Seattle collector bought the painting for a cool $4.5 million. “It was gratifying to see ‘my’ picture valued by the art market at this level,” Sweeney muses. But what’s really important, he insists, is how the discovery helped him to revise the history of the period and the relationships of the artists.

At the heart of Sweeney’s study is a passionate conviction that his work must be educational and capable of being shared with the general public in addition to academic peers and museum colleagues. Another theme that preoccupies Sweeney is the role art played in helping to settle the West. In 1996, he took a fresh look at the visual history of the Southwest, and of Arizona in particular. He produced an interdisciplinary exhibition called Drawing the Borderline: Artist-Explorers and the U.S.-Mexico Boundary Survey, 1848-1850. The publication brought together political, cultural, and ecological historians of both American and Mexican history. Sweeney studied paintings that visually defined the Southwest for a young nation eager for images of its new territories.

Among the paintings Sweeney found was the first view of the place that we would call Phoenix, Arizona. “I remember first seeing the painting in a palatial office suite in Dallas,” he says. “I thought, ‘I know exactly where that is.’” Eventually, he and the exhibition host, The Albuquerque Museum, persuaded the owners to lend the valuable work to the exhibition.

“The work is an amazing image of this place we now call home,” Sweeney says. “It is a view of this area before development changed it forever. Surprisingly, no one had recognized that the view represented present day Phoenix. It took a bit of geographical sleuthing, but you can easily recognize Red Mountain and Four Peaks on the extreme right side of the painting.”

Sweeney’s freely admits that some of his projects can be traced back to childhood experiences and his love of the environment. He graduated from high school in Gallup, New Mexico, and earned his undergraduate degree from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

Growing up in New Mexico, we visited most of the national parks on extended camping trips,” Sweeney recalls. His interest in these areas deepened, and culminated with a doctoral dissertation on the role played by artists who explored these areas and made them known to the Eastern public through their paintings.

Sweeney’s long-term fascination with how art shapes and controls public perceptions of the natural environment surfaced again in the 1990. He collaborated with one of his art history graduate students, Pamela Brelanger, the curator of American art at the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, Maine.
Together, they produced an exhibition derived from her thesis about artists such as Cole and Church at Mt. Desert Island, Maine. Sweeney’s essay for Inventing Acadia: Artists and Tourists at Mt. Desert Island showed how the field of culture in New York and the production and consumption of landscape paintings was directly implicated in the ... first in the West, and later in Maine, at Mt. Desert Island. The exhibition received a glowing full-page review in The New York Times.

Another of Sweeney’s intellectual obsessions is with, as he calls it, embodiment or personification. “My favorite example is Thomas Moran’s famous painting of the Grand Canyon,” he chuckles. “In a detail that most viewers overlook, the artist included tiny figures in the rocks, like some kind of ancient religious shrine or ceremony.”

Sweeney says his work is far from complete. He is planning what may be his last major exhibition entitled “Fantastic Embodiments.” The signature image of the project is one that Sweeney has been studying for years—a meditation on the deepest connections between human life and the natural life of the world—the web of life.

Sweeney thought he was finished with the subject, until a few years ago. “I got a call from Dr. Michael Schroeder, associate director of Microsoft’s Silicon Valley research group.”

Computer scientist Schroeder had become interested in Munger. He was doing research for a Catalogue Raisonné, a compendium of the artist’s complete work and all related documentation. That initial contact between computer scientist and art historian has now become a long-length collaboration that Sweeney delightedly admits goes far beyond his earlier study.

“Dr. Schroeder found so much new material and so many new paintings that we had to go back in and completely rewrite the story of Munger’s remarkable life as one of the nation’s most respected, but hitherto little appreciated artist-explorers.”

The Gilbert Munger website is a unique on-line, fully illustrated catalogue raisonné and archive of every document ever related to the artist. (Visit http://GilbertMunger.org)

A traveling exhibition of Munger’s work is being sponsored by the University of Minnesota’s Tweed Museum of Art in Duluth. Sweeney and Schroeder’s new study detailing the artist’s lifelong quest for a style will accompany it as the catalogue for the exhibition. Both the Henry Luce Foundation and the Tweed Foundation support the work—R. Davis.

Some discoveries in the field of art history simply have a strange way of sneaking up on a scholar. Just ask ASU’s J. Gray Sweeney.

“The discoveries always come back to get you,” he laughs. “When I wrote my dissertation on the artist-explorers back in the early 1970s, I knew a bit about Gilbert Munger, but decided to edit him out since he wasn’t part of the mainstream as I then understood it.” However, in the early 1980s, I discovered a large cache of Munger’s work in Minnesota. I found the paintings at the University of Minnesota, Duluth in the Tweed Museum of Art. He published the work as part of the first study ever done of the artist. Sweeney’s new study looks at the evidence from art history to see what artists can tell us about the ways in which humans perceive themselves as embodied in the natural world.

“I’m giving myself 10 years to complete this project,” Sweeney says. “I need a gilded angel to support the research. And then there’s the cost of negotiating the loans, gathering the works, and producing the exhibition and catalogue on the scale it deserves.” Sweeney welcomes the challenge. “I guess I’m sort of restless, maybe driven. But this stuff is so exciting, so potent, that once you get into it, it won’t let go.

“Research makes you grow,” he continues. “I’m still working on some of the same things that interested me 30 years ago. But today, I’m seeing them from entirely new perspectives, and revisiting them with a new sense of urgency and value. What always amazes me is how much meaning a great work of art can contain, and how many exciting ways there are of getting at it and of sharing it with students, colleagues, and the public.”

The K.U.L. scholar regularly teaches his research to both undergraduate and graduate students. “Research is the engine that drives good teaching,” Sweeney argues. “It’s important to share with students the most recent findings, the latest and most advanced ways of thinking and practicing our discipline, art history, cultural studies, or whatever we choose to call it.” He also thinks that it is important for professors with national reputations to instruct first-year students. “I want my students to learn to think critically for themselves,” he adds. “To do that, you have to practice it yourself.”

For more information about his work, or about upcoming exhibitions, contact J. Gray Sweeney, Ph.D., School of Art, gray@asu.edu