

Chris Steiner, Lucy C. McDannel '22 Professor of Art History and Anthropology. Transcript of video message.

Greetings Rich and Sally, and everybody gathered in New Orleans for PriceFest!

I am so sorry I am unable to be there with you in person. But I did want to join the chorus of gratitude and praise with this short video message.

As Rich and Sally know, I was an anthropology major at Johns Hopkins from 1980 to 1984. Rich was my official advisor; and Sally was my “unofficial” advisor. The influence they both had on me at the time, and since then, is really nothing short of extraordinary.

When I began Hopkins as a freshman I had absolutely no idea what anthropology was. I remember asking my father when I was signing up for my first semester classes: “What is anthropology?” As I recall, he snorted slightly and then said, “Oh, it’s awful. It’s the study of gorillas. I would not recommend you take that.” So, in an act of teenage defiance I enrolled immediately in “Introduction to Anthropology.” Of course, there were no gorillas to be found anywhere. But I was set on an academic trajectory that would define my entire career.

What stands out for me most in my memories of that time is not only the coursework I did with Rich (I think I took every class he offered), but perhaps more importantly I remember how seriously Rich and Sally (and other faculty I worked with at Hopkins, like Bill Sturtevant and David William Cohen) took me as a student. I (and the handful of other anthro majors at the time, and there were NOT many of us) were made to feel like “scholars,” not just undergraduate students, and we saw ourselves as deeply engaged witnesses, and perhaps even as participants, in shaping the discourse of anthropology during one of its most pivotal moments.

My interest in art and anthropology is of course directly related to the work Rich and Sally did on Maroon Arts in the 1980s. The exhibition “Afro-American Arts of the Suriname Rainforest” opened at the Walters Art Gallery in spring 1981 during my freshman year at Hopkins. And Sally’s *Co-Wives and Calabashes* was published in spring 1984, during my senior year at Hopkins. So, in a very real sense my undergraduate years were bookended by the publication of two landmark books on art and anthropology.

When I went on to Harvard for my PhD in anthropology, I arrived with a clearer agenda of what I wanted to study than perhaps anybody else in my graduate school cohort. While I was in the Cote d’Ivoire in the late 1980s studying the African Art market, Sally was completing her work on *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, which came out while I was still in the field. When writing my dissertation (which would eventually be published as *African Art in Transit*) I purposely framed it as a kind of “prequel” (as they say in the movie industry) to Sally’s book. I was telling the story of how “primitive art” got to those “civilized places”.

In a strange twist of what Jerry Seinfeld once dubbed “When Worlds Collide,” my parents met Rich and Sally in Paris while Sally was writing *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. “One day,” Rich recounts in his 2022 memoir *Inside/Outside*, “we received a phone call from the parents of Chris Steiner, who’d taken a couple of undergraduate classes with me at Hopkins. They gushed that their son had once been an indifferent student [although I suspect they might have used a more colorful word!!] but, inspired by these classes, was now on his way to grad school at Harvard. On vacation in Paris, they wanted to thank me [and] they took us to an elegant restaurant.” When, during dinner, Sally learned that my father had collected modern and contemporary art in Paris in the 1950s, she interviewed him for *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. He is quoted anonymously on page 40 as stating that unlike his son he never was interested in African art because the objects always struck him as dirty, covered “with messy materials like monkey hair and leopard skin.” At least there was no mention of gorillas.

It’s been four decades since my years working with Rich and Sally at Hopkins, and although we have not had occasion to see each other much, they have been present in my life through letters, then emails, and as guiding academic spirits throughout my career.

Let me end with one final memory of my time studying with the Prices at Hopkins. Rich’s book *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* was published in fall 1983. We read the book in a class called “The Caribbean Region,” which I took during my senior year. At the end of the semester, I asked Rich if he would sign my copy of the book, which I had bought for the class. His inscription read: “2 November 1983. For Chris - who I hope will carry on this sort of thing for many years. Rich”.

I can’t tell you how many times I read and re-read those words. It was an endorsement of my future potential and a call to action. Thank you both for helping turn this once “indifferent” student into who I am today. Much love. And happy celebration.