

A STATEMENT ON THE PLACE OF THE HISTORY OF ART IN THE LIBERAL ARTS CURRICULUM¹

BY A COMMITTEE OF THE COLLEGE ART ASSOCIATION

THE war has focussed attention on an issue that has existed in American education for many years. Immediate military necessity has led to technological training on a greatly extended scale. Faced with the urgent demand for this training and with serious economic insecurity, our colleges have had to curtail their program of instruction in all the "useless" areas. In this way the tendency of American education throughout the twentieth century to become more practical and to emphasize science and vocational training has been suddenly and very rapidly accelerated. The great dangers inherent in this tendency—specialization, indifference to ends, disregard of the emotional and imaginative life—have now been magnified. It seems clearer than ever that our educational policies need revision. The growth of a democratic culture requires idealism and a sense of values among the young, and these qualities it is the function of the colleges to promote.

All the humanities are seriously challenged. The history of art has been affected by the general educational trend, and it is faced with some additional problems of its own. The real function of the study of art in the liberal arts college is often confused with professional training—the training of artists or of art historians. When, on the other hand, courses in the arts are designed, as they should

¹As announced in the January 1944 issue of the COLLEGE ART JOURNAL committees were appointed last year to study the function of art courses in university and college liberal arts curricula.

This report is the first to be completed and treats specifically the function of history of art courses. A similar report on practical or studio art courses is being prepared by a committee under the chairmanship of Peppino Mangravite.

These reports are made by independent committees appointed by their respective chairmen and do not express in any way the official attitude of the College Art Association of America.

It is hoped that these statements addressed to deans and other university officers as well as to the membership will help to promote the study of art at the college level and also to clarify the objectives of the different approaches.

There has been no attempt to make the reports exhaustive. The membership is encouraged to express its opinions.

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be, to further understanding and enjoyment, there is considerable difference of opinion as to what method of study best achieves this purpose. And finally, because the visual arts are not as widely understood as literature or music, some colleges have not introduced the study of them in any form whatever.

These problems must be seen, first of all, against the background of an unprecedented popular interest in the arts. The taste for them has spread during the past twenty years to a much larger section of the people, our museums have grown at an unparalleled rate, and the number of our artists is increasing rapidly. In the 'thirties the Government responded to this wide public enthusiasm by supporting the teaching, production, and preservation of the arts. In the last ten years the United States has become a world center in this field. Many of our colleges, often assisted by the Carnegie Corporation, introduced courses in the arts for the first time; others greatly expanded their programs. The increase in the study of art in American colleges has been exceptional, beyond that of any country in the world. Is this development to be checked, or even reversed, after the war? If so, we shall pay heavily for it.

The value of the study of the arts in American colleges assumes to-day a special poignancy. Without the kind of experience which this study provides, the student is abandoned to the blind deforming influence of the mass arts—advertising, popular magazines, movies, and soon no doubt, television. Largely commercial in intent, cynical, blatant, they exert a pressure to which he would be unable to oppose a critical attitude or any sense of values. They would assume, unchallenged, the role of shaping personality which the colleges refused to accept.

Despite the remarkable growth of interest in the arts in recent years, the study of them has remained marginal to the curriculum of some colleges, and in others is not included at all. The attitude towards art in many university circles is still compounded of traditional views which should long ago have been abandoned: one, the conception of art as an imitation of nature, so that it is valued merely for its accuracy of reproduction and its technical sleight-of-hand. According to the other view, art merely decorates or sweetens life, and it may therefore be added to the diet of the college student only after he has assimilated the "solid" courses in science, literature, or philosophy. Art is a frill, a dessert.

But the arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture express, just as do literature and philosophy, human thoughts and feelings, and

they communicate, too, man's most serious comments on his relations with his fellow-men and with the world. They may deal with somewhat different phases of human emotional and intellectual life, but they nevertheless are centered within that life. The history of art is an indispensable part of the liberal arts curriculum because the purpose of that curriculum is the development of wisdom, responsibility and judgment. If these qualities are to be acquired by extending the individual's own experiences into those of human society as a whole, and, more specifically, by a study of the best that has been thought, said, and done in the past, then the student must be given an opportunity to comprehend the masterpieces of architecture, sculpture, and painting. All educated people have read Shakespeare. No person can be called educated unless he knows the sculpture of Michelangelo or the painting of Rembrandt.

This is the fundamental meaning of the history of art in liberal education. It aims to promote enjoyment, insight, and judgment, not the learning of names, dates, and formal peculiarities for purposes of classification. It is not limited to, nor designed for, the training of art historians and it is therefore not intended to impart a professional knowledge of facts and methods of research. The history of art is likewise not intended for the training of artists, any more than the study of English literature is designed for the development of writers. But if art is to have depth of content and meaning, the history of art and liberal education have a special value for the young artist. Enriching the artist's personality and providing an enlightened audience for his work—that is the way in which the history of art can serve the production of art itself.

The objectives of the history of art in liberal education are shared to some extent by non-historical methods of study. Courses in the "appreciation of art" or "the principles of design" may succeed in developing perception, but unless the insight of the student is enlarged and deepened by historical knowledge, such courses must be regarded as essentially introductory and therefore limited. They presuppose the belief that works of art may be fully understood and enjoyed by persons who know nothing of the history of art or thought or society. But how can one perceive the qualities of form and meaning in a medieval painting without knowledge of the artistic and religious conventions of its period? Can a teacher who is ignorant of the religious functions of a Baroque church possibly do justice to the artistic character and expressiveness of the build-

ing? Non-historical study implies a denial of richness of content in works of art. Actually a painting or a statue embodies ideas and attitudes of the most diverse kinds, and these can be ascertained only by comparing it with contemporary and preceding works, and by connecting it with the contemporary cultural and social pattern. Through these relationships new and unique qualities of the work are revealed and evaluated. As the single work is recreated artistically in this way, it in turn illuminates other works of art of the period and other forms of the culture. Without this historical process parts of the work, the symbolism of its forms and color or even the subject itself may be misunderstood, and at best only a limited number of its qualities of form and content are perceived. For the observer then sees only what he is looking for (albeit unconsciously), and his insights are shaped chiefly by contemporary taste and the art of the present or very recent past. Objects made in more remote times are given consideration and valued only in so far as they have, or seem to have, qualities which are congenial to this taste. Since the past is made to seem very similar to the present, it cannot be said to illuminate it. The teaching of art without knowledge of its historical context tends to be indoctrination and rationalization of the preferences of the teacher.

Art historians themselves are also influenced by contemporary art and taste and the contemporary world. But through historical study of the work and the conditions of its production and acceptance, through acquisition of knowledge and the cultivation of a sympathetic imagination, they attempt to surmount the barriers of subjective vision. They try to discover and to demonstrate what the artist intended his work to convey, and what his audience saw in it. Their study extends, therefore, into the history of taste and the history of criticism.

Apart from its general importance, the history of art has a number of special functions within the liberal arts college. Study of the literature of foreign peoples is possible only if students know the languages in which they are written, or if the writings are read in translation. This difficulty, a serious one in college instruction to-day, does not arise in the study of the visual arts, where linguistic barriers do not exist, and where it may be necessary to deal with a reproduction (often nowadays in full color), but never a "translation." This fact, in addition to others to be mentioned below, makes possible an unusually wide range for college studies in this

field. No other discipline can equal its scope nor provide a similar historical synopsis. Courses in the arts can give the student insight into periods remote in time, and into cultures as different from ours as the Egyptian and the Chinese. In institutions which maintain a free elective system, many undergraduates know Greek and Roman civilization only through their statues and buildings. Elimination of courses in these arts would often be tantamount to elimination of these basic cultures from the curriculum. In certain other periods, such as the Italian Renaissance, the visual arts, rather than literature or music or science, were central means of expression. These arts, then, provide the best introduction to the culture as a whole.

Instruction in the visual arts has certain pedagogical advantages over other branches of the humanities. Whereas pieces of music or of literature unfold in time, the objects of painting, sculpture, and architecture exist in space, and each may be seen instantaneously in its entirety, or, in the case of architecture and some sculpture, from a limited number of points of view. Thus it is possible to apprehend the structure and coherence of a painting or a statue more quickly than that of a novel or symphony. In museum or classroom work, the object itself or a good reproduction of it may be continuously displayed, so that a very rapid and constant series of shifts from discussion of the object to the object itself and the aesthetic perception of it may be made. With few exceptions, all parts or qualities of a work are actually present throughout the study—as they cannot be in literature or music. And since comparison is the fundamental method for the discovery and demonstration of the unique qualities of works of art in any medium, instruction in the spatial arts has this peculiar advantage: two or even more works can be seen together. It is thus easier to exhibit similarities and differences between the early and late paintings of Renoir than between early and late novels of Balzac. Juxtaposition of photographs of the Parthenon and of Chartres Cathedral suggests sharp contrasts, which disclose, in a vivid way, distinctive qualities of each of the buildings and of Greek and medieval Christian culture.

The history of art is no less fundamental to liberal education than any other field of the humanities. While the study of literature, particularly English literature, has and should have a certain primacy in the curriculum, educators must recognize that for many people the verbal symbols of language cannot communicate feelings

and ideas with the compelling power of the concrete imagery of the visual arts. To grasp the full range and depth of this content, and the uniqueness and complexity of form, historical study is indispensable. To regard the history of art in the liberal arts college as secondary, ornamental, a luxury to be indulged if surplus funds are at hand, is a relic of outworn notions of culture.

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ART ON MAIN STREET¹

BY LAURENCE SCHMECKEBIER

A LITTLE over a year ago a well-known news commentator published the following remark in a local paper: "On Summit Avenue between Snelling Avenue and the Cathedral, I counted fourteen iron fences. There are hundreds more in St. Paul—some of them rusty, unsightly relics of an unbeautiful past. They do little good. . . ." ² And under the slogan "De-fence for Defence," school children carefully surveyed the field, counted up more than 5,000 iron fences, and prepared for the most gigantic Hallowe'en festival the city had ever seen. For some fortunate reason, possibly conservative caution or simple inertia, the match that here was dropped did not develop into much of a conflagration, but it had significant possibilities.

¹ From an address presented before the Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul on Jan. 10, 1944, and published in part in *Minnesota History*, XXV, 1.

² *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Sept. 22, 1942.