Engagingly Liberal?
The Arts Go to College

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Recognition of the cogency of the matter of fine arts is alone sufficient to insure the status of the field in the liberal arts college... The subject is no longer a cause.
--Agnes Rindge, College Instruction In Art, 1934.

Figures...do not show the failure of colleges and universities to work out any purposeful integration of instruction in academic and arts subjects.

In addition to parking grievances, the only thing that unites the faculty of many educational institutions may be the conviction that no one understands or properly values the importance of their discipline. Unfortunately, while the parking issue may actually unite faculty around a common concern, the sense that one’s work is taken for granted or undervalued only serves to fracture an academic community. That said...I advance the proposition that the place of the fine arts has not, in general, been well understood or helpfully valued in American institutions of higher education. Lest that statement put anyone on the defensive, let me hasten to add that part of the blame for this situation should be placed squarely at our own feet (that is, those of us in the fine arts) and that I am sure, gentle reader, that your discipline is tragically misunderstood and under-appreciated as well.

We in the fine arts have too often taken for granted that a good education requires our involvement (c.f. Agnes Rindge 1934). Any perusal of the literature on art and higher education will quickly yield a copious array of airy and often contradictory platitudes about the benefits of art in an educational program: art is a cultured leisure activity/art is work; art is visual thinking/art is pre-cognitive expression; art is therapeutic/art is political; art is individualistic/art is socially constructed. All too often we have relied on such truisms about art as substitutes for a coherent rationale for our educational role (c.f. James Ackerman 1973). We in the arts, however, are not completely to blame for this state of affairs. Because the arts are more visibly physical and affective than other courses of study, deep biases about what constitutes a liberal arts education have made it difficult for the fine arts to establish themselves, no matter what arguments are presented. If we in the arts may need to be more systematic in positioning ourselves, the academy may also need to be more thoughtful as it defines what it means to become liberally educated.

This essay represents my own attempt to better understand the tangled relationship between the arts and higher education in the United States in the hope that this history will shed some light on present discussions. Because my own training is in the visual arts, I will not address the histories of music, dance, or creative writing. What follows, then, is a brief consideration of the history of the visual arts – both studio art and art history – in American higher education, followed by an attempt to draw some wisdom from this history.\(^1\)

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\(^1\)The thinking reflected in this essay is indebted to my colleagues at Westmont and to two events focused on art and learning. From June 10-14, 2002, the members of the art department met to reconsider our department’s curriculum. Many of the questions I raise here are shared by my colleagues in the art department, and the considerations offered at the end of the essay are indebted to our common conversation. I am thankful for the insights I’ve received from my colleagues in the art department--Susan Savage, John Carlander, Tony Askew, Siu Zimmerman, Scott Andersen,
Two Historical Challenges

Before beginning a thumbnail sketch of the visual arts in American higher education, I want to pause a moment to consider where the arts come from compared to other academic studies. The visual arts were not, of course, present in the medieval university with its trivium and quadrivium. But neither were most other academic disciplines. Chemistry, psychology, biology, sociology, literature, history, economics, among others were all missing. So the arts share this “non-history” – they were not part of the medieval system of knowledge. What might differentiate the arts, however, is that in the Middle Ages most modern academic disciplines did not even exist as distinct sets of cultural practices, whereas the arts did. People were busy making “art” in guilds and in monasteries and in civilizations and tribes all over the world long before any intellectual framework developed that would allow that activity to be studied.

Most modern disciplines were invented by new, emerging intellectual frameworks, which simultaneously helped generate the institutions (universities and scientific societies) that gave them a home. In this respect, art history as a discipline enjoys the same lineage as psychology, economics, or chemistry. Studio art does not. Art as a practice has always existed globally and happily independently of universities and learned societies. As such, the visual arts have been defined as “not-academic.” Painting, weaving, carving, building – all these practices fell into the category of “mechanical arts” and were banned from fellowship with the liberal arts. As a result, while many disciplines face the challenge of defining exactly where and how they fit in an academic program, studio arts need to define not only where and how, but why they belong in the academy in the first place. That is the first challenge. From this follows a second. What is the relationship between the practice of art in the academy, with its unconventional academic pedigree, and art history, with its more conventional academic pedigree? The past, then, establishes two fundamental challenges. First, how does one claim a legitimate, helpful place in the academy for studio art, which can claim no precursors in either the medieval academy or in the early-modern university? Second, what is the relationship between studio studies in art and theoretical and historical studies in art, in an academic program?

The Nineteenth Century: The Arts go to College

Since the earliest institutions of higher learning in the United States were intended to teach clergy and teachers, it is no surprise that art was not a part of the curriculum. Even unofficially, the arts were not considered worthy. At Princeton, in the 1770s, it was not possible for the President of the university to get any reimbursement for a set of engravings he had purchased for his own study and teaching (Rudolph 140). It was often the case that art was not present on campus until an influential donor foisted actual works of art onto the institution. This was potentially embarrassing, as was the case in 1850 at Bowdoin College, when the trustees had to make arrangements to sell two paintings that had been given to the school and were deemed inappropriately salacious – one a copy of Titian’s Danae, another known now only by its title, Nymphs Bathing. This view of art would be consistent with that expressed by a Bowdoin...
undergraduate quoted in their student paper saying “If these pictures are worth as much as claimed, they ought to be exchanged for a decent telescope and observatory” (143).

In many cases these early donations, augmented by later gifts, led to the establishment of college art galleries. The first college art museum in the United States was organized at Yale in 1831 after John Trumbull donated a series of patriotic paintings on the American Revolution (141). At about the same time, colleges began to offer occasional lectures and courses on art (Smyth 5-6), and by the 1860s and 70s actual schools of art appear in colleges and universities. Yale was precocious – founding its School of Fine Arts in 1864, which housed a gallery and divisions of art, architecture and drama (Kubler 69), though Yale didn’t actually appoint a professor of painting until 1869. Syracuse established a School of Fine Art in 1873 (Rudolph 142-43). That same year Harvard inaugurated a department of fine art and appointed Charles Eliot Norton (the cousin of Harvard president Charles W. Eliot) as lecturer in “The History of the Fine Arts as Related to Literature” (Kantor 161). Princeton was a relative latecomer in the field, recruiting Allan Marquand from their philosophy department to begin teaching the history of art in 1882 (Lavin 1993, 7).

The four institutions mentioned above represent two different understandings of the place of art in higher education. Yale and Syracuse established schools of art, which were related to, but independent from, Yale University and Syracuse University. In such a school, the emphasis was on professional training in architecture or painting or drama. Studio practices were fore grounded and the history of art was generally taught by the studio faculty in light of their particular interests. This is one reason why the history of architecture played an important role in many early curricula – the aim was to train architects. Harvard and Princeton took a different route, recruiting professors from other domains and establishing departments (not schools) of fine arts within the university curriculum. In this framework, the emphasis was generally on the history of art and studio practices, if they were present at all, were an optional part of the general curriculum.

Given these two fairly straightforward understandings of art – as a practice somewhat separate from the general curriculum, and as a theoretical or historical study within the general curriculum – one might think that distinctive rationales were offered for each scheme. Interestingly, this does not seem to be the case. At Princeton, where a philosopher was recruited to teach the history of art, there seem to be fairly pragmatic reasons lying behind this decision. One of the engines behind the introduction of art history into the Princeton curriculum was a tract written by two Princeton alumni exposing the gross cultural ignorance of even educated Americans. According to these alumni (the New York lawyer William Cowper Prime, and the civil war general George B. MacClellan), there were pressing reasons to include art in a college program:

Art is, and has always been, a matter of the ordinary business, commercial, industrial, and social life of peoples. Patronage of art means buying and paying for works of art. Greeks would not buy and pay for statues or common household utensils, made in any style but what they admired. The French do not, as a rule, wish to have pictures or dresses in German fashion. For these reasons, works of art are the only trustworthy record of – not alone the history – but of the tastes, the mental character, and the manners and customs of various peoples in various ages. Their study is the study of man in all time…. It is a profound absurdity of our systems of education, that a vast majority of accomplished and instructed men and women, seated at luxurious tables, are unable to tell whether their plates and cups are of pottery or porcelain, and have no conception of the meaning or uses of the enamels which they handle. It is an equal
subject of regret and shame, that neglect of instruction in colleges and schools of learning has left so large a portion of the intelligent men and women of our country at the mercy of ignorant teachers, whose profound absurdities, and jargon of technical terms and phrases have contributed to a prevalent impression that the word Art implies a mystery which can be penetrated by only a few intellects (Eye of the Tiger 10,12).

Prime and MacClellan make a case for a kind of social literacy they would like to see in American college graduates. In their opinion, a college graduate should be exposed to the “tastes, the mental character” of the Greeks, the French and the Germans. This in turn might help them appreciate the difference between stoneware and porcelain, pewter and silver, a soup-bowl and a teacup. Such instruction should also emphasize the correct artistic vocabulary and be taught by sensible, knowledgeable teachers who would make the supposed mysteries of art accessible to all.

At Yale and Syracuse, by way of contrast, more theoretical and ethical reasons were offered for the necessity of the arts – where in the end, however, the arts were lodged in professional schools apart from the general university curriculum. At the dedication of Street Hall, Yale’s new facility for the arts, the Rev. James Mason Hoppin argued for the importance of the arts for integrating the rational and emotional realms of experience and for its central place in the cultivation of the imagination and of the sentiments. For Hoppin, the University’s goal was to graduate students of well-rounded character. In his words, “True aesthetic culture develops those feelings and those tendencies of mind that are thus favorable to virtue, and good manners, and even to a higher faith” (Stankiewicz 185).

At Syracuse in 1867, the Rev. George Fisk Comfort articulated much the same platform in arguing for the importance of the arts in an educational program. Comfort further systematized this theory of art education into divisions of knowledge, modes of knowing, and qualities of knowledge. Thus, theology (knowledge of God), anthropology (knowledge of humankind), and cosmology (knowledge of the universe) formed the three domains of knowledge; each of these entailed three methods of inquiry – theoretical, historical and practical. Furthermore, in following this program one gained insight into three important qualities: the good (religion and moral philosophy), the true (history and science) and the beautiful (the arts). Comfort found the third quality of knowledge – the beautiful – all too often neglected. This is where he thought theoretical, historical and practical instruction in the arts should play an important role (Stankiewicz 187-88).²

Both Hoppin at Yale and Comfort at Syracuse were clergymen, and certainly this profoundly shaped their understanding of the morally formative power of art. Their views were also congruent with the traditional appreciation for ‘history painting’ (paintings of morally formative narratives) in European art theory, and with romantic conflations of culture and religion (Roberts and Turner 113-117). What is equally as interesting is that in spite of these well-articulated arguments for the importance of art and of aesthetic formation, neither Yale nor Syracuse

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² Stankiewicz seems to think Comfort may have actually cribbed much of his theory from Hoppin, which serves to underscore the currency of Hoppin’s morally formative view of art. Comfort’s tripartite division of art education into theoretical, historical and practical is quite close to that advocated by the Getty Foundation throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Their program, called “Discipline Based Arts Education” (or DBAE) argues that art instruction at the primary and secondary level should include art theory, art criticism, art history, and studio instruction.
integrated the arts into their general curriculum. The arts were relegated to separate programs, whose curriculum and constituency were quite different from that of the university at large.3

At Harvard, the curricular reality and the rhetorical justification were more consistent with one another, with the result that art history was privileged above the studio arts—which many would argue is still the case today.4 Charles Eliot Norton is the primary figure responsible for making a place for art at Harvard. His philosophy of art education seems to have combined elements of Princeton’s concern with cultured behavior and a belief in the morally formative power of the arts. According to historian Sybil Kantor, Norton’s strategy involved “using the imagination as the path to moral truth and beauty” in order to inaugurate and perpetuate a “Genteel Tradition” in Harvard students – a phrase which neatly collapses morally and socially good behavior into one category (164). Norton believed his lofty understanding of art to be fundamentally different from that pursued at schools of art like Yale’s. He even went on record saying that Yale’s kind of “technical education in the Fine Arts...does not belong to general education” (Ackerman 231) even though, as we have seen, the theoretical reasons for practicing art given by Hoppin and Comfort were every bit as lofty as Norton’s own. Norton’s biases against studio practice in the general curriculum have had a long life at Harvard. There was no undergraduate department in the fine arts until 1968, and even then, students could not earn a degree in fine arts. To this day, administrators at Harvard seem ambivalent about whether the visual arts should be an area of study or an extracurricular enrichment (Tomkins 47-48).

The situation at the land-grant schools founded in the wake of the Morrill Act of 1862 was quite different. Since the task of these institutions was expressly to “promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life” it was less necessary to argue for the legitimacy of training in drawing, stone-carving, woodworking and other seemingly ‘practical’ pursuits. Thus, many state schools incorporated departments of art that were unabashedly oriented toward practice and felt no pressing need to rationalize their place in the curriculum (Ackerman 230).

This tension between “practical” studies and art history is much less evident at the women’s colleges that were also founded in the 1860s and 1870s: Vassar, Smith, Wellesley and Bryn Mawr. In most of these institutions art played a central role, because drawing and the appreciation of beauty were seen as inherently related, and both were deemed essential for the “domestic enrichment” of students (Sherman 153). At Vassar, the art gallery was located across from the chapel on the top floor of the college. This placement was in keeping with the romantic view that art has “a powerful tendency to elevate the standard of intellect and consequently morals; and form one of the mighty levers which raise nations as well as individuals to the highest point in the scale of civilization” (Askew 58-9). At Smith, the 1877 catalogue presents fine art as a “part of the regular intellectual work of the college,” which also performs an important “ministry of beauty” (Lehmann 65-67). At Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley, the teaching of art history and drawing and painting seem dependent on one another and were so successful that at Wellesley, at least, art and art history split into separate departments, and by 1900 Wellesley offered the only art history major in the country (Sherman 153). The situation at Bryn Mawr was somewhat different. Modeling itself on Johns Hopkins and aiming to educate for

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3 While Syracuse was always open to men and women, Yale University was not. Women could, however, enroll in Yale’s school of art. By the turn of the century, the majority of the students in Yale’s school of fine arts were women. (Stankiewicz, 189).

4 The situation at Harvard was recently the subject of a widely discussed essay by Calvin Tomkins, “Can Art be Taught,” in the April 15, 2002 New Yorker.
professional life rather than for ‘domestic enrichment,’ Bryn Mawr emphasized theoretical study over practical study, and accordingly separated the practice of art from its history, and housed its art historians in the classics department (Sherman 156).

I think at this point, we should pause to note some salient issues that emerge from this brief consideration of the place of art in American colleges and universities in the late 19th century. Perhaps most obviously, this story forces us to acknowledge the general lack of continuity between the rhetoric about art and education and the reality of where the arts end up in the college and in the curriculum. There seems to be no necessary connection between the ideals articulated by college leaders and the real scope the arts are given in the curriculum. Perhaps this is not surprising given the gap between institutional rhetoric and curricular reality that exists in every institution, yet it does mean that when we look to the past to justify current practice, we should be attentive to both what was said and what was done.

Second, this history helps illuminate the divergent paths by which the arts came into college curricula—emphasizing either art history’s place in the general curriculum, or emphasizing independent studio programs outside the general curriculum. Art history, it seems, fit more readily into the general college curriculum even if that was done differently at various institutions; studio arts have had a harder time finding a secure place into the traditional college curriculum. The historians Jon Roberts and James Turner have argued that art history was one of several “humanities” that moved into the heart of the college curriculum in the late 19th century to fill the vacuum left by the recently abandoned courses in moral philosophy. Like the moral philosophy courses, the humanities, including art history, served to unify a student’s studies and deepen their moral force (108). Roberts and Turner’s argument renders the case of Yale and Syracuse even more curious, given the high-minded, morally laden reasons articulated by Hoppin and Comfort, for the necessity of art schools at Yale and Syracuse. If, as Hoppin believed, the practice of art “is an intellectual pursuit” and can “elevate people above materialism,” that it “counteracts the narrow education promoted by a focus on science,” and “promotes kind feelings, drawing people together in common interests” (Stankiewicz 185) why shouldn’t all students be required to participate in such a beneficent and uplifting activity? Yet the school of art was founded as an independent institution with its own set of requirements and course of study.

Lastly, before moving on to twentieth century developments, we should note that the story of the arts in women’s colleges offers an alternative to the divergent aims and practices of the other schools. There, the rhetoric of moral elevation and technical expertise seem to come together in a way that allowed studio practice and historical study to remain in a more harmonious, organic relationship to one another. This may be due to the fact that women’s colleges easily saw themselves as at once liberal and vocational. Their task was to equip their students to be fit wives and mothers whose potential influence over their husbands and sons required both theoretical and practical education. Interestingly, what many would consider to be an exceedingly narrow vocational aim (improving society by educating future wives and mothers) resulted in an educational role for the arts with more breadth and coherence.

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5 A study undertaken in 1912 by Princeton’s E. Baldwin Smith shows that the history of art was included in the general curriculum in any number of ways. Of the 400 colleges surveyed, 95 taught the history of art. Of those 95 schools, 65 actually had a chair in the history of art. Additionally, courses in art history were often offered under the auspices of other departments: Archaeology, Classics, French, Semitic Languages, and History. The Study of the History of Art in the Colleges and Universities of the United States, Princeton NJ, Princeton University, 1912. Reprinted in Smythe, pp. 12-36.

6 Bryn Mawr, from the tenure of its second president onward, would be an exception to this statement.
The Twentieth Century: Disciplines and Professions

During the early twentieth century a new set of tensions arose in the discussion of art and its place in educational programs. These were provoked by the advent of people and ideas from Europe, and from Germany in particular. In the realm of art history, the notion of art as a civilizing, moralizing force in education ran head-long into the Germanic understanding of art history as a professional practice, its own distinct discipline. This growing disciplinary consciousness worked against the role of art history as a kind of moral and spiritual glue in the general curriculum, even as it somewhat paradoxically enhanced the discipline’s potential to unify a student’s experience of knowledge. In the studio arts, the powerful ideas of the Bauhaus quickly re-mapped how people thought of art education in America, ousting traditional methods for artistic training which had emphasized drawing above all, and introducing a new, systematic, and avowedly “modern” model that emphasized design.

Roger Fry’s 1933 lecture, delivered on the occasion of his appointment to the Slade professorship at Cambridge, speaks to changing understandings of art history. Though his audience was English, his arguments are relevant to the situation in the United States as well. Fry began with an appeal to patriotism, pointing to the secure and productive place art history enjoyed in German universities and contrasting it to the tenuous place he thought the arts occupied in English educational systems. After striking this competitive note, he moved on to his central argument for art’s importance in a college curriculum:

If ever there was a study which, needing as it does the co-operation of so many sciences, would benefit by sharing the life of the University, it is surely that of Art History, and I would make bold to claim that the benefits it would confer would be at least equal to those it would receive. If ever there was a liberal education, that of Art History with its immense range of interests, its vast accumulation of learning and the necessity it imposes for delicacy and refinement of perception might claim to be such. (Fry 3)

Fry’s argument is more modern than the 19th century appeals discussed above, in so far as it makes only modest claims for art’s ability to elevate or cultivate, but rather points to its potential role in a university organized by disciplines. In 1940, when a department of the history of art was finally organized within Yale University (rather than within the Yale School of Art), the French scholar Henri Focillon gave a similar argument for its importance:

This plan does not envisage a splendid isolation. On the contrary, it is founded on collaboration with other departments. It is defined as an organ of liaison. Its novelty is essentially a novelty of structure, in the division of subjects taught and in their arrangement. It is devised to fulfill the double need of a great university: culture in the formation of mankind; and training for research in the formation of scholars. (Kubler 70)

By trading cleverly on its growing disciplinary status and cross-disciplinary appeal, the history of art became even further entrenched in colleges and universities. That colleges could by this time hire specialists trained in art history, rather than re-tooled philosophers or classicists, served to enhance its status even further. 7

Significantly, neither Fry nor Focillon feel the slightest necessity to speak for the studio arts. Whereas in 19th century writings on the arts, it is sometimes hard to tell if the reference is to art

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7 Tellingly, the pedagogical ills of increased specialization soon followed. Two former Harvard students who contributed to Craig Hugh Smythe’s volume on the history of art history complain that during their tenure as Harvard undergraduates (early 1930s), students had little contact with the art history faculty, who occupied a heady and remote realm far from the concerns of the undergraduate student. (Warburg, 43-46; Coolidge, 51-53)
history or to studio art or to both, Fry and Focillon are clearly and exclusively speaking for art history and assume there is no necessary link between the study of art’s history, and the act of actually making art. One might be led to think, then, that studio programs gradually dropped out of college curricula, yet this is not the case. Studio programs proliferated, increasingly divorced from historical study, and driven by two powerful engines: the need to train teachers, and the advent of Bauhaus-trained art educators.

College-based studio programs are a uniquely American invention. As Andrew Ritchie has argued, they have no European precedent, nor are they sustained by any genuine faith in the role of the artist as a good and necessary kind of citizen. Rather, college-based studio programs survived and thrived in the twentieth century due to “our peculiar beliefs concerning teacher education” (Ritchie 61-62). Ever since the introduction of Froebel’s German Kindergarten model of elementary education into the United States in the mid-19th century, it has been accepted that making art is an important part of a child’s education (Smith 18-21). Though the rationale for this changed from era to era (art as physical activity, art as the training of vision, art as an aid to individuation, art as therapeutic, art as a domain of human culture) the need for teachers who could give art instruction remained constant.

Teacher education programs provided college-based art departments around the country with a steady stream of students that grew into a torrent after World War II. At the same time, state certification requirements, which began to appear in the 20s and 30s, essentially dictated departmental curricula thereby relieving the faculty from the task of building and justifying a program for themselves in the context of their own institutions. State requirements eventually had an impact on independent art institutes which, beginning in the 1930s, began to revamp their curricula along the lines suggested by state criteria, even requiring general humanities courses for a degree in art. Thus, in the words of historian Jack Morrison, “The humanities have embraced the arts as brothers – or at least as cousins; the arts have become naturalized even when they are not fully integrated” (29).

As college-based art departments were growing by leaps and bounds, their curricula were taking a dramatic turn away from traditional beaux arts methods toward Bauhaus-style teaching as they exchanged the traditional emphasis on drawing and mimesis for a new grounding in design and materials. This shift would have seismic consequences for the future of art in the academy, effectively re-defining art in the modern era. The Bauhaus, established in Weimar in 1919 by Walter Gropius, was meant to offer a modern alternative to what had come to be viewed as the arid, elitist and useless training of the old art academies. Its program was committed to the unity of art and craft, and to the relevance of art for daily life. The famous Vorkurs taught by Johannes Itten, which still forms the core of much basic art instruction in American colleges and universities, featured a series of exercises that were meant to train in succession, the hand and the eye, the emotions, and the mind, progressing from two, to three, to four dimensional stages. Only after completion of this foundation course, could students move into workshops organized by medium to begin apprenticeships supervised by master artisans and artists (Elkins, 32-34). When the Bauhaus was closed by the National Socialist government in 1933, dozens of Bauhaus-trained artists fled to the United States, including Walter Gropius who came to Harvard in 1935 to help establish a Graduate School of Design, Josef Albers who became one of the most influential teachers at Yale’s School of Fine Arts, and Lazlo Moholy-Nagy and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe who went to Chicago.

By the 1950s, Bauhaus methods were flourishing across the country. The reasons for their success are clear. In an American art scene that was still struggling to articulate its place in the
world of art, the prestige of the Bauhaus’ European progenitors was in itself impressive to American audiences, but far more significant were features of the program itself. First, the new curriculum proved highly compatible with training teachers, the main work of many a college art department. Many scholars have noted the similarity between the kind of play with shapes and textures advocated by the 19th century proponent of Kindergarten, Friedrich Froebel, and the content of the Bauhaus’ first year. Gropius, Itten, and the other Bauhaus teachers reasserted the importance of kinetic activity and interaction with the material world in the learning process, affirmed that vision can be trained, and insisted that young adults, not just four and five-year old children, learn in this manner. It is no surprise that many Bauhaus artists (Paul Klee in particular) took the art of children very seriously.

In addition to its compatibility with teacher training, the systematic organization of the first-year program with its emphasis on principles of design and analysis of objects fit more readily with the kinds of learning that take place in other academic departments. It is of great significance, though, that the second and third year of the Bauhaus program – which were integral to its philosophy of art – found only token acceptance in American art departments. The typical American emphasis on exposure to many media is the merest shadow of the Bauhaus practice of assigning students to work with master artisans in creative workshops. This loss significantly changed the resonance of Bauhaus methods in the United States.

Gutting the Bauhaus program of its socially oriented hands-on component allowed the analytical, intellectual elements of the system to dominate the training of artists. It became possible to claim that art was like a science, that it focuses on the setting and solving of visual problems through repeated experiments in medium, technique, color and form. At mid-century, aligning oneself with the sciences was a powerful claim to legitimacy in the academy, but this move has had serious consequences for artists, whose activities have traditionally involves much more than the setting and solving of visual problems. By 1970 the art critic Harold Rosenberg asked, “Can there be any doubt that training in the university has contributed to the cool, impersonal wave in the art of the sixties?” (Goldstein 199)

The story of higher education and the visual arts in the early- to mid-twentieth century highlights two notable developments: first, the gradual untwining of the few threads that had tenuously held art history and studio art together; second, a revised notion of art that arose from the introduction of the Bauhaus first-year program into college-based art programs, and aligned the practice of art with that of science. Over the course of the twentieth century, the two questions posed at the beginning of this essay found answers. On what basis do we argue that studio practice belongs in the academy? As an activity analogous to science, it involves the setting and solving of visual problems. What is the relationship between art history and the studio practice? None; art-as-science does not require any historical consciousness.

This is the landscape most of us in art and art history inhabit today. And most of us intuitively rebel against the austerity of these positions. Every studio teacher will tell you that art involves learning beyond the setting and solving of visual problems even though we still tend to justify our place in the academy in those terms. Artists and art historians alike insist that art history and studio art are mutually informative, yet we are all hard pressed to actually articulate why this is the case. I would like to suggest that the history of the visual arts in American colleges and Universities does more than illuminate the past. It also provides alternative ways of approaching these questions. Some of its lessons are negative, but some are positive. Our own past offers alternative ways of imagining the role of art in our curricula, and more visceral
connections between the practice of art and its history. Taken together, they result in a more liberating vision for the artists we are training for work in the world.

**Engagingly Liberal: The Visual, Liberal Arts**

In order to make a richer, more liberating argument for why the arts belong in a college curriculum we need to address two deeply entrenched habits of thought. The first has to do with our conventional notions of what constitutes learning. The second concerns our conventional notions of what artists are for, of what they do in our society. As I see it, if we are willing to embrace more nuanced and better articulated understandings of learning and are willing to complicate our notions of art’s role in the world, then studio practice will come to fit more comfortably into the curriculum, studio art and art history can begin to overcome the barriers of disciplinary specialization and professionalization that have pulled them apart. I’ll begin with the question of what art brings to the learning process, move on to artists in the world, and end with a consideration of the ways art history and studio practice can work together to provide an engagingly liberal education.

Liberal learning is generally understood to be learning that is free, that is unencumbered with narrow occupational constraints. Yet in imagining that liberal learning should be disinterested, we’ve often tacitly assumed that it should be disembodied as well: we educate our minds, not our bodies; we learn by thinking, not by doing. Historically, our culture’s willingness to assert the importance of art in the education of children (Froebel) and women (Vassar, Smith, Wellesley and Bryn Mawr), but insist that adult men should not rely on such methods (Harvard, Princeton) demonstrates our implicit ranking of visual and physical learning below verbal and analytical. For all the talk in recent years about visual and kinesthetic learning, we still tend to view these approaches to education as accommodations to students deficient in verbal and analytical reasoning, rather than as ways in which we all know and can be taught.

Not only are visual and kinesthetic learning often viewed as inferior to verbal and analytical learning, they are also associated with occupational training, which is incompatible with traditional interpretations of liberal learning. Thus, at Syracuse and Yale, art schools were established, but not as part of the general educational program. They were, and are to this day, essentially vocational programs intended to train professional artists even though they may require some coursework in cognate areas as well.

Sustaining the illusion that liberal learning is exclusively verbal and analytical in character comes at a cost. Vast tracts of the world and human experience – movement, sound, representation, creativity – become hard to access and difficult to address. Liberal learning becomes constrained to the topics best suited to verbal and analytical engagement. Any area that requires visual and physical engagement remains marginal at best. Such an attitude about what counts as learning also encourages us to overlook areas of the curriculum where visual learning and physical engagement may already be part of the learning process. Here, I am thinking in particular of science labs, where learning to understand the instruments, handle them properly, observe carefully and draw conclusions from those observations are all highly physical, visual processes. Finally, there is a reverse-version of the loss to our curricula that occurs when we restrict learning to verbal, analytical processes: we miss the opportunity to bring verbal and analytical tools to bear on our visual and physical learning, and we do not spend enough time helping our students see and own what it is they are actually learning in a lab, in a studio, in practice or on the field. All of these repercussions curiously limit so-called “free learning.” Any
college that claims to liberally educate the whole person would do well to examine the ways in which the curriculum and co-curriculum live up to this desire.

In addition to liberal learning being “free” we also commonly assume that it is the best sort of educational foundation for democratic citizens. The kinds of literacy and range of skills one acquires in college should equip a young person to participate helpfully in their community, make informed decisions at the ballot box, and assume leadership where appropriate. We also assume that in addition to their general education, their academic major will give them a particular expertise with which to engage the world around them. As Andrew Ritchie has pointed out, however, in the United States, “artist” and “citizen” do not fit comfortably together. Unlike teachers, social workers, or biologists, for example, whose specialized knowledge compliments their status as citizens, artists are seldom encouraged to see themselves as a valued member of society. On the contrary, artists and public alike often see the role of the artist as that of antagonist – one who holds a critical and disdainful distance from the world around them. Never mind the fact that a good teacher, social worker or biologist will need to play the antagonist as well!

In our haste to disengage our college-trained artists from the taint of professional education and make them look more like scientists, we have also, it seems, disengaged them from a deep and thoughtful engagement with the world around them. This is what Harold Rosenberg was pointing to when he commented on the “cool impersonal art” coming out of the universities. By adopting the verbal and analytical aspects of the Bauhaus program while largely ignoring the sociological vision of Walter Gropius’ whole program, American art departments produced generations of inwardly directed, autonomously minded artists, whose best hope for social engagement would be economic in nature, that is through galleries and musea. Contrast this to Gropius’ own views on the separation of the artist from society, which resulted, in his opinion, in an “art proletariat lulled into a dream of genius and enmeshed in artistic conceit – destined to social misery – condemned to a life of fruitless artistic activity – social drones, useless, by virtue of their schooling, in the productive life of the nation.” (MacDonald 317).

Reframing our deeply entrenched views of art’s purpose in society and encouraging the vision of the artist-as-citizen, is I think our largest, most challenging task. But it is essential to helping colleges envision their art as part of the larger task of educating liberally. At Christian liberal arts colleges, where we aim to produce not only good citizens for a democratic nation, but even more importantly, good citizens of God’s kingdom, it is imperative that we expand our understanding of the artist’s place in society. Though Godly artists are certainly free to choose to engage the world as autonomous, quasi-scientific investigators of the world, engaging their audience via galleries and musea, we seriously limit artists’ contributions to the world if this is all we allow or expect. In fact, faith communities are well placed to demonstrate what these alternatives might look like. William Dyrness has recently argued that Christian communities and artists who take one another seriously could become the engines of a great renewal in the arts outside of the church. Many artists, believers or not, are longing for a more fulfilling role in the world.

Giving proper weight to the arts in a liberal arts curriculum will necessarily involve revising our notions of what counts as learning and revising our notions of what artists do in society. These points also provide avenues for a better integration of studio practice and the history of art, as both of these concerns can be addressed by artists and art historians alike. The history of art provides ample opportunity to consider the physical, visual and affective power of the arts. Learning the repertoire of stylistic vocabularies at work in art over time and in different cultures
helps students see the ways in which art represents complex themes and states of mind. Learning about how the arts have been used to mark rites of passage, anchor memory, encourage emulation, and represent virtue helps students recognize the fairly narrow uses for art in our own culture against a historical backdrop of amazing diversity. A sustained investigation into questions of material culture (what counts as art?), or into the role of life-drawing in the history of art (what kind of training is essential to being an artist?), are also powerful ways of engaging young artists and art historians in investigations of physicality, function, meaning, and morality in art. Similarly, design and drawing provide the student of art history exposure to the materials and techniques of artists, some understanding of the creative process, and appreciation for the diligence, creativity, and skill that artists bring to their work, all of which aids their work with the art of the past and enhances their appreciation for art past and present.

Recalling the historical narrative recounted above, art and art history seemed to enjoy the most complimentary relationship at nineteenth-century women’s colleges, where drawing and sketching and the history of art were all deemed legitimate parts of the curriculum and were seen as important aspects in the formation of female citizens. Understanding art, appreciating art, and generating art were part and parcel of the educational process. Doing one without the others would not have contributed to the ultimate “domestic enrichment” of the country. While we balk at the explicit assumption that a woman’s education should be aimed at producing good wives and mothers, and perhaps agree, out of habit, with the implicit assumption that such an education was ‘vocational’ and thus inferior, we shouldn’t let these objections blind us to the powerfully cogent view of art and education held out by early American women’s colleges: understanding, appreciation and skill stimulated one another, and all were valued parts of a curriculum designed to form female citizens.

In a way, these women were given a more liberal education in the arts then their male counterparts. They were invited to learn visually and physically as well as verbally and analytically. They were invited to see immediate connections between what they were learning and the tasks they would perform later in life as educated female citizens in the home and community. Is this not what we would wish for all our students, male and female alike? To learn as liberally as possible, not merely for the sake of individual fulfillment but for the sake of our common life?
Works Cited


