Presidential and Scholarly Leadership in the Humanities
Nicola Courtright
Professor of Fine Arts, Amherst College;
President and Delegate, College Art Association

The College Art Association is a hybrid organization, part learned society and part professional guild formed for artists, art historians, and all other visual arts professionals. It furthers the exchange of knowledge through journals and conferences at hopefully the highest levels, as well as finding jobs and advocating for the place of art in our society. With 11,000 members, it is the largest such organization in the world. As its new president, I feel I must approach this panel with an uncomfortable question. This is one that underlies, if unconsciously, most encounters with art in our society these days, if not among the chosen gathered here: that is, is art actually one of the liberal arts? How close is it to the other disciplines in the humanities; does it even belong in this august group? Does it not exist largely for amusement, for sensual pleasure, for aesthetic appreciation – to delight, as Horace would say – rather than to instruct?

Once upon a time, things did not look so bleak for art. Horace’s simile, “ut pictura poesis” – just as painting is, so is poetry – placed art in the catbird seat. This dictum meant that other arts were to be compared with painting, and led critics to practice the same kind of analysis on poetry as on painting. However, the pre-eminence of poetry and other text-based forms of expression in general seems to have caused an inversion of this analogy by the 15th century, and this is why many Renaissance artists campaigned for visual art to be regarded as one of the liberal arts like rhetoric, which all had philosophy as their basis (although this too was a contested idea throughout the centuries, artists still wanted to be members of that club). Consequently, from that vantage point, a study of art, too, could be regarded as a path to acquiring wisdom and knowledge.

But in our culture art is generally not wedded to the idea of epistemological discovery. Rudolf Arnheim, author of Art and Visual Perception, has written some decades ago that

Our entire educational system continues to be based on the study of words and numbers. In kindergarten, to be sure, our youngsters learn by seeing and handling handsome shapes, and invent their own shapes on paper or in clay by thinking through perceiving. But with the first grade of elementary school the senses begin to lose educational status. More and more the arts are considered as a training in agreeable skills, as entertainment and mental release. As the ruling disciplines stress more rigorously the study of words and numbers, their kinship with the arts is increasingly obscured, and the arts are reduced to a desirable supplement; fewer and fewer hours of the week can be spared from the study of the subjects that, in everybody’s opinion, truly matter.

The arts are neglected because they are based on perception, and perception is disdained because it is not assumed to involve thought. In fact, educators and administrators cannot justify giving the arts an important position in the curriculum
unless they understand that the arts are the most powerful means of strengthening
the perceptual component without which productive thinking is impossible in any
field of endeavor.¹

Is the view that art is a pleasant but trivial pursuit, nice if you’ve got the time and money but
otherwise not necessary to encounter, a reason for it being slashed and cut from the curricula in many
public elementary and secondary schools, via budget constraints necessitated by the “No Child Left
Behind” act that is institutionalizing a hierarchy of knowledge with the arts and other less-testable
disciplines at the bottom? Even at Amherst College and other elite institutions priding themselves on
their humanities curricula, art history and studio art professors find themselves teaching students who
are initially completely at a loss in front of art. Although high school students have all studied
literature by the time they get to college, when you teach them art you need to start with the equivalent
of articles, nouns, verbs. This is “a,” this is “the,” this “cat,” this “dog.” We rejoice at the first
conceptual linkage: “See Spot run.” It sometimes makes one despair about the future for art as a
conveyor of meaning, for many students in our elite institutions take studio art and art history, but not
in the majority of institutions of higher learning. Thus, although visual imagery floods our world, it is
a good bet that only a very few know how to understand it. Despite this, images – even those we don’t
regard as art – have a great deal of impact in communicating ideas. It is important for us to understand
the power of images and their potential for good or ill – to our peril if we do not, one might argue on
the basis of seeing how compelling imagery has been misused by totalitarian regimes in all too recent
memory.

In order to answer the question about what might be done to make our fellow citizens
understand that art can be a vehicle to profound understanding of societies and self, let me turn now to
address more broadly the subject of this panel, that is, what can learned societies do to lead and help to
change attitudes towards our disciplines in particular and the humanities in general? My three
suggestions, which echo some of the points in the AAU report, are based partly on aspirations and
partly on practices of the College Art Association, and may find resonance in other areas of the
humanities represented by the learned societies and universities here.

1) Continually offer a clear vision of the purposes that our disciplines serve to
create a better society. Too often in learned societies we are tempted mainly to react
against abrogations of freedom such as censorship, instead of stating persuasively what
the obvious value our work and study has. For example, how art, which gives free rein
to the human imagination, which delineates and examines fundamental human beliefs,
which discomfits us and makes us question what we believe, is not threatening to our
society, but is precisely the opposite – it nourishes it. Does art not break down barriers
between disciplines, seeking consonance and dissonance with other ways of thinking
and means of expression, so that it urges us out of our protected intellectual pods, just
as all of the humanities do at their best? We should say so at every opportunity.

2) Spend some of our precious resources to gather data on the life-and-death
issues in our fields and analyze it, and then disseminate the results in every way
possible – yes, even with paid publicists – so that the issues become part of a public
conversation and not a sermon to the converted. Partner with other learned societies
and groups whenever possible to act on these issues, so that we speak in one loud voice,
and not in many small ones.

This is how we can advocate to full advantage in areas in which we have the most knowledge. For example, intellectual property constraints are one of the things that are throttling the free exchange of ideas among art historians and inhibiting creative practice among artists. A number of academic publishers are no longer publishing art history books because of the prohibitive costs of copyright permissions, and artists are being sued if they make creative use of an earlier work still believed to be under copyright. This situation is critical for us, and important for other disciplines as well. The College Art Association’s pro bono lawyer, Jeffrey Cunard, the managing partner of Debevoise and Plimpton in Washington, is an intellectual property specialist who also teaches the subject at Harvard. At Cunard’s suggestion, the CAA recently gathered information on the problem of extending copyright longer than 75 years and then joined the case against Disney in an *amicus curiae* brief. Although we lost, our examples were cited in the minority opinion, so will have a long life (or half-life).

Also at his request, our organization later gathered information electronically from our members about the extent of another, related problem – copyright restrictions on works where no author could be found, called “orphan works” – and on our behalf, because the Copyright Office was preparing a position paper which contemplated change in the current legal restrictions, he joined with other advocates and submitted our information in an appeal to the Copyright Office for a change in legislation. It is being considered on the Hill at this moment. Further, with his legal scrutiny, our publications are now aggressively pushing the envelope of copyright. The captions of the images we publish, wherever possible, state that the works of art are in the public domain; the captions then cite the sources from which the photographs of these art works were obtained. We are setting a public example, so that scholars in all disciplines will be encouraged to assert that they will not adhere to a false claim of copyright by a museum or other image-holder for works of art that are not still under copyright, and that the fees we pay are for the photograph alone. Our staff also frequently meets with influential museums to urge them to allow free publication of their works in the public domain for scholarship with limited print runs; laudably, the Metropolitan Museum has just done so, in order to lead by example. We hope that the cost of publishing works of art will ultimately go down, so that scholars consequently will not be inhibited in a crucial aspect of their research.

3) Finally, combat the label of elitism by reaching out and inviting public figures into our doors. Let us, the leaders of learned societies, talk with them about the concrete and powerful advantages of the free and imaginative exchange of ideas and the way our fields exemplify this best. Let us invite our campus colleagues who speak so eloquently to larger ideas that are the foundations of what we do to join public and private fora or brainstorming sessions that we organize, funded by philanthropists with whom we have relationships. We need to help influential members of society, as well as the public, reflect upon what makes intellectual life meaningful in the profoundest sense.