1963

The Irretrievable Opportunity of Serving the Young

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the irretrievable opportunity of serving the young
Dedication of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery
Remarks by Frank Stanton, President
Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc.
University of Nebraska, May 16, 1963
The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, dedicated on May 16, 1963, is more than another beautiful building given to a university by beneficent donors. It is a contribution to a total cultural development which is taking place in America and one especially discernible in the midland of our nation.

One of the outstanding architectural masterpieces of the Midwest, the Sheldon Gallery is a part of the University of Nebraska's newer emphasis on cultural opportunities for its students and staff and an influence on the cultural appreciation of our region. It gives strong evidence that artistic contributions come from an irrepressible spirit in the hearts and minds of people who have the courage to marvel at the wonder of life and the conscience to interest themselves in its messages, emotions, and in its mission.

The Gallery, built on a plot reserved in 1869 by a prairie legislature for use in teaching and cultural pursuits, validates an American concept that people will respond to the stimulation of an intellectual center. Neither A. Bromley Sheldon, an astute businessman, nor his sister, Miss Frances Sheldon, was ever a student at the University of Nebraska. Yet, somehow, the influence of the University reached them, and they responded. Both of the donors are now deceased but their gift will endure to add to the artistic stimulation of other people.

In his thoughtful message, delivered on the occasion of the Sheldon Gallery dedication, Dr. Frank Stanton gives emphasis to the function of an art museum, a function well understood by Philip Johnson, noted American architect and designer of the building. The function is one which promotes response amid the excitement and confusion of technical and scientific advancements.

Clifford M. Hardin
Chancellor
University of Nebraska
It is most generous of you to invite me to share with you this significant event today. Such a forward step as the opening of a new museum by an imaginative and venturesome university is highly satisfying to everyone concerned with the enrichment of American life. And the launching of a new structure designed by an imaginative and gifted architect is always an occasion of importance. When the two are brought together – the imaginative institution and the imaginative architect – there is ample justification for holding the highest hopes of a noteworthy achievement. It comes as no surprise to me that, in the case of this museum, those hopes have been fully realized.

GENIUS AND EMINENT GOOD SENSE

Already, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery has been pronounced, on respectable authority, the “best designed, most beautiful small museum in America today,” and Philip Johnson is well on his way to becoming the master of the twentieth century museum as Christopher Wren was of the seventeenth century church. The fact that this gallery is completely wired for television leads me to add the hope that other architects will see fit to emulate the way in which Mr. Johnson quietly blends genius with eminent good sense.

There are also both at least a touch of genius and eminent good sense in the building up of the Hall Collection and the subsequent acquisitions over the years. I say “a touch of genius,” but I am not sure that the great collector does not rate, in some cases, even higher tribute. Collectors, whether individual or institutional, are in a sense the entrepreneurs of art, bringing talent and audience together. The insight, the taste, the qualities of recognition and judgment that your collection here represents seem to me of a very high and an uncommon order. And it is in far more than a ceremonial, perfunctory sense that I want to salute the memory of Mr. and Mrs. Hall and those who have been guiding the collection since the University began to add to it thirty-five years ago. It is an achievement in which any university – any institution – should take exceptional pride.

Both the inherent architectural distinction of this building and the impressive and important collection that it houses give this day a very special interest and excitement that go far beyond the University of Nebraska in the worlds of architecture and the
other fine arts. But it is an occasion, I think, of even greater and wider significance.

In the first place, all of us, all over the United States, have been disturbingly aware, for two decades now, of the enormously disparate pace at which facilities for the advancement of the physical sciences and those for the advancement of the humanities have grown. There have, of course, been pressing reasons for this. We had, as a nation and as the leader of the free world, material chores of a vast and most intricate nature thrust upon us by the events of the second World War and by the rise of the cold war conflict and the immense scientific achievements and aspirations of our adversary. We had also, in more peaceful areas, to take up the great slack that is always left by long preoccupation with war - including the adaptation and development, for peacetime uses, of the scientific advances achieved under the impetus of war. No one can deny that a great flow of good from all this has filtered through to benefit the daily lives of all of us.

But it has been easy for us to be lured into putting too great a proportion of our resources into the sciences and too little into the humanities. We have tended to add new facilities for the purpose far more often of training students than of educating them. The opening of a new physics or chemistry or biology laboratory has been an everyday occurrence on hundreds of campuses, since the war. The opening of a university art museum is, by comparison, an extraordinary event. The supply of scientific equipment of the most sophisticated sort has been lavish in contrast to the trickle of provisions made for teaching the humanities.

AN ELOQUENT REMINDER

Even our wealthiest universities are beginning to take stock of themselves, with surprise and concern, on this score. The dimensions of the problem are only hinted at by the fact that federal commitments for basic research alone in American universities totaled, in 1963, 625 million dollars, of which 98 per cent went to the physical, biological, and agricultural sciences, 2 per cent to the social sciences, and nothing to the humanities.

Today this museum is an eloquent reminder that man does not live by science alone - that there is little advance if we better the physical conditions of our environment at the price of neglecting all those things that give life its richness and its point, its
depth and its meaning. And if we have a great deal of catching up to do in this respect in all the humanities, it seems to me that we have a special problem in the fine arts.

The reason for this is that up until very recently we have lived in almost a completely verbal society. We have had printing from movable type for five hundred years, but we have had photography and the photographic printing processes for little more than a century. Journalism up until a very few years ago dealt almost entirely in words, with some exceptions usually directed at sensationalism. Pictorial history is a whole new field, despite some respected antecedents in the military area. Pictorial archives are just beginning to be seriously undertaken as necessary repositories, for the future, of material casting light on the past. The wireless, and then radio – the first great communications inventions since the printing press – necessarily dealt only in words.

In man’s wordy total cultural history, museums themselves are latter day innovations. Universities date from the twelfth century, but they had antecedents in classical times. The great library at Alexandria was established in the third century B.C., and the Emperor Hadrian’s Rome of the second century A.D. had twenty-nine public libraries. But it was not until 1739 that the first collection of art was permanently opened to the public at the Vatican. There was no museum of fine arts in England until 1759, none in France until after the Revolution, none in the United States until 1791. And though we had our first college in America in the 1630s and our first library in the 1620’s, we did not have our first college museum of art until over a hundred and fifty years later.

Today there are some fourteen hundred senior colleges and universities in the United States. They all have libraries. Only one in fourteen has an art collection and a place to show it. One of Phi Beta Kappa’s criteria for accrediting colleges is the number of books in their libraries. No one that I know of accredits a college of liberal arts on the number of paintings that it has or on whether it has any at all. The educational process has for centuries been word oriented, with even the fine arts taught by book and lecture.

We lived in a verbal society, and most people went through life not only with little exposure to the visual arts but with little awareness of them. “In the beginning was the word,” and the word was the end, too.
The twentieth century is beginning to change all this. In mass communications, fine reproduction techniques and new printing processes have made pictorial communications fast and excellent. Color can now be reproduced with exceptional fidelity. Electronic communications, once wholly verbal except for transmission of wire photos to newspapers, are now visual. Reporting, interpreting, and documenting painting and painters, sculpture and sculptors, architecture and architects are now being done repeatedly on television. As a result of the broad awareness of the arts created by the mass media, there is today an unprecedented popular appetite to see and to appreciate. For the first time, on any scale, the fine arts exist for people who have never been in a museum. What is more important is that the mass media are leading them to museums in increasing numbers. At the Metropolitan Museum in New York, for example, attendance has increased 200 per cent since 1950, now reaching some four million visits a year.

THE IRRETRIEVABLE OPPORTUNITY

Museums are also proliferating—although not fast enough in the places that most need them. Nevertheless, the trend is here, and although the number of college and university museums is still pitifully few, nearly two thirds of them have been started since 1948—in the past fifteen years. This trend, if it continues, should be greatly satisfying to all of us in the education and communications fields.

We in the mass media can introduce people to works of art. We can present profiles of great artists. We can report events and trends. We can stimulate interest and generate curiosity. On looking at the record, I find that during the past year the CBS Television Network has presented programs on Thomas Hart Benton; Edgar Tafel; the head of Christ as envisioned by great painters; Salvador Dali; the Director of the National Gallery, John Walker; Edward Steichen; the recreation of the Armory Show of 1913; paintings of the Corsican artist, Lucien Marett, publicly shown on CBS for the first time in the United States; a history of ecclesiastical architecture, suggested by the new Coventry cathedral; Leonardo da Vinci. Several other programs treated art subjects less extensively.

By their very nature, the mass media can do only part of the job. The museum has to take up where we leave off. The museum
has to go farther and go deeper, and its essential role is quite different. You cannot really “report” art. You cannot really “reproduce” it. A work of art, primarily, has being rather than meaning, and you must be in its presence to know it, for that is the only way that you can know the artist. We recall from Picasso’s famous comments of 1935, “It is not what the artist does that counts, but what he is,” and Mark Rothko, “A painting is not a picture of an experience; it is an experience.”

Because this is so – and fundamentally so, without susceptibility of change in spite of scientific progress in communications – it seems to me that a university museum has a very special privilege as well as a very special responsibility.

The great advantage of the university museum is the irretrievable opportunity of serving the young, before the patterns of observation and experience are structured, while there is still a kind and a degree of openness that are crowded out in later life. The regional museum serving a general public does not have the luxury of this emphasis. Your distinguished sister institution in Omaha, with its remarkably broad collections, the Joslyn, must serve many purposes and many age levels. The Sheldon Gallery, on the other hand, can enter into the continuing educational experience of young people day after day and year after year. Here they can live in a world of new dimensions – color and form.

**THE BROAD FUNCTION OF THE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM**

No one here needs to be reminded that this has too often and too long been a failure of our educational environments in the past. We all know that the profoundest things of life are not to be formally learned and not to be formally taught. They must be experienced. And so it is with a great painting, a great drawing, a great piece of sculpture. It is to be experienced – and life will never be quite the same again.

The very presence of this gallery and of the superior collection in it is the first thing, the essential thing, the great thing, for the thousands of students who come to this university each year. They are going to have a matchless opportunity to come to know the first-rate paintings, drawings, and sculpture that make up your permanent collection.

The broad function of the university museum, however, and also its unique opportunity, go quite beyond this. You have the
function of enlightening the student on the whole, varied past and present of art and the opportunity to do it at a time when it can be related to his total development as an educated man. The very fact that a university gallery's resources are not endless can be a help rather than a hindrance in performing that function and realizing that opportunity. I think that the general excellence of your collection already proves this. In time, I suspect, you will be increasing not only the number of works in the collection but their range as well. Ideally, a university collection should include representative works from the whole spectrum of the arts. But I do not believe it either practicable or desirable that it do so in the same copious way that the all-purpose museums of major cities do.

All university museums' financial resources are always less than their needs. Prudence and ingenuity in stretching them will always be a necessary discipline - necessary and probably constructive, because, for economic reasons if no other, the university museum can avoid the temptation to become saturated with the works of one artist or one period or one school in the wake of the contagion of high-riding nation-wide enthusiasms. Equally important, it can seek the objective of a collection finely representative of the art spectrum by one or two distinguished examples in each category rather than amassing them by the roomful.

Much of the function of the university museum can also be achieved by a lively policy of circulating exhibits. It is most reassuring to note that the Sheldon Gallery has provided separate and pliable space for these. This seems to me of the highest importance to a university museum. It is important, primarily, for the purpose of enlarging the experience of the student in the fine arts. Many of them are in the university for four years, some for many more. In that time, they should be exposed to a variety of visual experiences. Most of them cannot go to distant museums to see other collections, and they ought not to have to postpone such experiences until they can go in later life. Having become possessed of their sense of sight here and now, they should be able to develop it over as broad a range of art as their time and your facilities will permit.

Traveling loan exhibits are important also for a fuller participation by students in the dialogue among truly educated men and women that exposure to the arts evokes. I am not willing to put too much store in critical talk, as compared to the experience
and discovery of looking at the art itself, but I think that there will always be something of provocative interest in what a Malraux or a Berenson has to say. It is in the nature of man to consider the evolution and the past of the arts as of everything else he has experienced, to bear witness to the excellence or the lack of it in what he has seen, and to construct theories and hypotheses about it. To do this intelligently requires exposure to more than a single segment of the world’s art – however important it might be.

This need, I am sure you will agree, is one with which no acquisition program is ever going to be able to keep pace – nor should it try. But an active, imaginative loan program and circulating exhibition policy can go a long way in meeting it.

**THE EXPERIENCE OF SEEING**

I have had some familiarity with the circulating exhibitions of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. A grant of $150,000 was made by the CBS Foundation in 1960 to the Museum in order to pack and ship selected works, over a period of four years, to an increasing number of institutions all over the United States and Canada. Fifty-six of these traveling exhibitions have had four hundred and thirteen showings in one hundred and fifty-six cities in forty-four states. A very high proportion of them have gone to university and college museums. You may recall one, “Orozco: Studies for the Murals at Dartmouth College,” here at the University of Nebraska last July. They have drawn heavy attendances and a great deal of attention by television, radio, and newspapers. Eighty-six radio stations and ninety-eight television stations have broadcast special programs based on the exhibits. Undoubtedly many visitors were drawn to the exhibits by these programs. In addition, the broadcasts deepened the interest of those who saw the exhibits and broadened their participation in the continuing dialogue.

And so we come back again to the great truth of the voices of silence – as Malraux has so memorably called the world of art – the experience of seeing. But you are members here of a great university as well as administrators or friends of one of the most rewarding and delightful of museums. You are therefore concerned with teaching and with knowledge.

I have not meant to separate these from exposure to the experience of art. They are inseparable, when we are speaking of the
fine arts. The purpose of knowledge is to make distinctions, not
only as to the good and bad, but as to scope, intensity, relevance
– and a score of other things that will occur as readily to you as to
me. But in art there are no absolutes, nothing that can be taught
as a geometrical proposition or a chemical formula or a chronology
of history or a rule of grammar can be. And so the gallery is as
necessary to the teacher of the arts as the laboratory is to the
teacher of the physical sciences or the library to the teacher of
literature.

But let none of us – whether from the physical sciences, the
social sciences, or the ancient disciplines – consider that we are
dealing, in the world of art, with something precious, something
far removed from a world of overwhelming realities that may
swamp us at any moment. I am concerned with both worlds – as
you are – and, like you, I am not so sure that they are separate
worlds. We could not do better, because this is a day for the re­
statement of purpose, than to recall a thoughtful and perceptive
passage from a venerable observer of the relationship of art to
life – Berenson in *Aesthetics and History*:

“Art is not actual life, it is true, but it is ideated life and per­
haps as important. What distinguishes us from the other higher
mammalia is precisely the capacity for this ideated life. This ca­
pacity leads higher and higher, and the longed-for goal is far
away. But the goal of totalitarianism is not distant, and if it wins
through it will shape man into a completely mechanized brute,
guaranteed to remain a brute till he becomes a domestic animal.

“Every individual who feels the need of a human society must
learn to understand his responsibility towards art almost as
towards life. He must avoid encouraging the undesirable, let alone
the bestializing forms, not only of life but of art as well. This he
can do only if he takes the trouble to educate himself for the
ideated as he does for the actual world.”

In closing, I congratulate the University of Nebraska’s Fac­
ulty of Art on acquiring this most accommodating of galleries. I
congratulate the administrators of the gallery on its high and
promising mission. And I congratulate the University and the
people of Nebraska on having had in their midst the men and
women of vision and action who made this happy occasion
possible.