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Why Universities Collect Art: The Business of Art, delivered at LaFontsee Galleries on January 26, 1999

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LaFontsee Galleries – Art Talk Series 1998/99

Why Universities Collect Art – The Business of Art

Arend D. Lubbers

Tuesday, January 26, 1999

I. . *Walmart Story*

II. . *Collections Throughout the Country*

- A. V Not an expert
- B. V Impressed by sculpture at Princeton
- C. V Public sculpture in Kansas City – NCAA visits

III. . *Central College*

- A. V Frank Brower Story – 1st attempt
- B. V Rubens, Fragonard, Cuyp, Van Dyk

IV. . *Grand Valley – Development of Present Policy*

- A. V Calder visit at dedication
- B. V Nancy Mulnix – La Grande Vitesse lithographs gift to the College
- C. V Naming of Performing & Visual Arts Building for Calder V
– No money – wanted a piece of art V
- D. V Bought a Rickey sculpture for the new Calder Building V
– Occasional purchases and receipts of paintings V
- E. V Gift of African art by Governor and Mrs. Williams – in Student Center
– After his visit to Grand Valley – talked about art he collected as
Assistant Secretary of State – didn't know what he was going to do with it
- F. V Small art budget for new buildings– Student Center
- G. V Design of mall in front of Library – 2 large sculptures
- H. My Damascus Road Experience – addition of Psychology Dept. to
AuSable Hall coincided with the sale by Bill and Sandy Nicholson of
their house – gave collection on, I hope, permanent loan – also had budget
for building
- I. V Padnos and Henry Halls – Student Services Bldg. – Shakespeare Garden

V. . *The Reasons for a University Collection*

- A. V Communication
 - 1. V Universities are expected to communicate ideas, concepts, feelings,
and perceived solutions.
 - 2. V Usually done through language and mathematics but also through
the arts.

3. R Unfortunate when communication through the visual arts is limited to classrooms and galleries – better than no communication.
4. R If you place visual art throughout the campus, it can be the most pervasive and even intrusive means of communication found.
5. R Usually it pervades without offense and intrudes in unconscious ways or barely conscious ways.
6. R Verbal communication is usually most pervasive but we can't tolerate too much verbal intrusiveness. We must go to specific places for communication on specific topics.
7. R Mathematical communication is more limited because only a few can carry it beyond rather simple communication – wish I could understand more concepts – talk about entering new dimensions through math.
8. R Musical ideas, concepts, feelings and solutions are some of the emotionally most satisfying, but unless we have a cassette recorder and player with earphones we can't have it with us whenever we go on campus.
9. R It is possible for visual art to be in all places – inside buildings, outside on buildings and anywhere outside on campus.
10. R Not all pay attention, but many do as they walk on campus and attend their classes. They see what artists are showing them just as they hear what professors are telling them.
11. R Students untrained in the knowledge of non-verbal communication may not know it, but they are being influenced. Even liking or not liking is an influence – a small step in learning.
12. R You begin to understand that art is communicating when a group comes unhinged because of art that is highly offensive to them – or art that makes no sense to them.
13. R The more art in your life the more likely you will learn from art, and have your life changed by it.
14. R So our University places art everywhere so we can't avoid it. Whenever we walk or sit or stand it talks to us in the language of art. We don't hear it with our ears, but it gets to us through our eyes.

B. R Learning

1. R We learn about perceptions
2. Nature is examined for us R
3. There can be meaning in abstraction
4. Meaning is conveyed through symbols
5. Color and light offer new wonders. We learn to look for them. R
6. R Memory is stirred and recorded in an art memory bank.
7. R Art is another means of sharing deep meaning and emotion with another person – art can encourage intimacy on which humans thrive.
8. Form evokes for us meaning and emotion not formerly experienced or understood.

- 9. J Art can make visual a concept of beauty or capture beauty forever that was momentary, or record something beautiful and share it with many.
- 10. J Art which is so visual often conveys unseen meanings.
- 11. J Art tells us about the kind of life that was and is lived. It is often better than a written record, and if not better, then essential for the whole story.
- 12. J Art gives legitimacy to liking it without knowing why.
- 13. J Art gives legitimacy to feelings it evokes without having to explain them.

C. J Teaching

- 1. J One of the best reasons – Faculty can use collections for teaching art history, technique, materials and anything else they teach.
- 2. J Our policy not necessary – every building a gallery, the whole campus a sculpture garden – you can put it all in a gallery.
- 3. My preference is to have both – a gallery gives protection for collections of significant value.
- 4. Beginning with some small galleries – Alten collection.
- 5. Galleries will allow us to receive valuable collections and keep them on permanent display.

D. J Encourage Artists

- 1. J We can't buy a Ruben or the work of the most expensive artists, yet we want art.
- 2. J Commission Faculty – frankly I like to find ways to get some money to the art faculty.
- 3. J The University should be represented in its collection by the faculty it appoints to teach art to the students. They produce an element of our ethos.
- 4. J Our students are also a part of our ethos, and representative purchases from them demonstrate who and what we are, and shows our support for them.
- 5. J Several of our alumni are making a living, or a partial living as artists. They too, we claim and embrace, and buy good art from them.
- 6. J Artists of West Michigan – we want our region to thrive artistically. We want to play our small role in helping good artists to make it here.
- 7. J Michigan artists – as a State University we feel loyal to Michigan artists, and have sought in the past to commission significant works from Michigan artists – Gary Kulak – Detroit architectural sculpture
- 8. J Though at times I am fiercely provincial in my loyalties I know we must seek and find good art wherever we can. Our students deserve that.

VI. *Where do we go from here? How do we get there?*

A. H Expand our Gallery

1. H More buildings – tempted to do that systematically
2. H Classrooms – a special challenge – requests are coming in
3. H More art – more interest – people want to become involved.
Math Dept.—for the most part chose their own – good choices –
put some in classrooms
School of Education – didn't take some of what I thought was their
good art
Does art inside find a permanent place or do we move it around?

B. H Formed a President's Art Committee

1. H Appointed Henry Matthews as Director of Galleries and
Collections.
2. Budget for acquisitions and shows – Art Dept. has its budget and
figures prominently on the Committee.
3. H Budget for art in all new buildings

C. H Actively seek gifts of art or dollars to purchase art and add to gallery space

VII. *Conclusion*

You have to know that I eye everyone's collection of good art with an acquisitive eye.

Stuart Padnos – Do you want to be the next Stuart Padnos?