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ARTICLES

The Future of (High) Culture in America

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The mission of the University of Arizona Center for American Culture and Ideas (CACI) is to study and promote the arts, in particular, the high arts and culture in America and academia. To this end, the CACI held its inaugural conference, "The Future of (High) Culture in America," on March 19 to 21, 2014. Conference papers were presented to an audience of academics and the community at large, with each address followed by comments from a panel of two or three respondents and an audience Q and A. Presenters and respondents included practicing artists, critics, educators and academics, curators, and art purveyors.

Depending on the emphasis, the conference title can be read and understood as a statement or a question: Is there high culture in America, and if so, is it in jeopardy? The title also proposes an opportunity to consider what "culture" or "high culture" means. Included in our purview: music, dance, and the visual arts (particularly photography), as well as more general presentations.

Speakers were asked to trace our cultural footprint and share their view of where we are and where we might be heading, with sufficient latitude for strongly individual and idiosyncratic approaches. The result was what we hoped for—a fascinating kaleidoscope of our conference topic. I provide here an overview of those presentations.

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By necessity, CACI extends its investigation to the relationship of high art to mass or popular culture, as they frequently coexist to their mutual benefit. One need only think of Steve Reich's musical influence on the Club scene, street dance and hip-hop on ballet choreographers, the ephemera of pop culture in Warhol's art, and the impact of technology on how art is imagined and realized. This is nothing new—Haydn incorporated the popular courtly dance, the minuet, into his symphonies. This historical legacy should be better understood—but rather than submit to the postmodern blurring of these distinctions or "boundaries," CACI wishes to refine our understanding of this relationship to make those difficult judgments of value, and to help determine what is worth spending time and treasure on in the Academy.

Terry Teachout, *Wall Street Journal* drama critic, *Commentary* critic-at-large, and our keynote speaker, presented an overview of the artistic and academic landscape, citing problems in academia and the general culture. He reviewed Heather Mac Donald's 2013 Wriston Lecture on the demise of the English major at UCLA, which outlined the now familiar sequence of events in academia: required courses in Chaucer and Shakespeare are replaced with courses in gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and sexuality studies, etc.—and that UCLA and all of academia is abandoning "the humanist reverence for past genius."

At one time, upward mobility meant that all who had the desire and interest could engage in high culture. This is no longer regarded as a desirable notion, since high culture is not really viewed as "better" than pop culture. Consider the example of classical music, for which audiences and sales are rapidly decreasing; it is rarely presented on PBS and barely taught in our schools. We all know the problem: The classical arts and their appreciation is in decline. As a biographer of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, Teachout recognizes the value of popular culture, but not at the expense of the legacy and future of high culture, which he defines simply as "large-scale works of art that aim higher than their popular counterparts."

Teachout suggested that "a culture that is dominated by popular art is by definition limited." He doesn't want a masterpiece to be dismissed or demeaned, but rather to be engaged, because "egalitarianism be damned: it really is better." So what can be done? "We must now make the case for the fine arts," Teachout argued, in all parts of society, through persuasion, education, and persistent leadership. All who believe in the fine arts must become their advocates. And dear to my heart and CACI, he said we must "also develop and foster *new* institutions that exist solely to support and promote high culture." Our job is to celebrate "convincingly the glories of high art"—not because it is good for us, but just because it is good.

In "The Submerged Center and the Poetic Imagination: Impact of Technology on Art and Culture," Paul Pines, poet, novelist, librettist, and practicing psychotherapist, examined some of the factors affecting the possibility, understanding, or even the definition of high culture.

If high culture exists, where might we find it? In the "historical consensus of universally valued products," perhaps, or, in Mathew Arnold's words, "the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere." At the same time, Pines is nervous about where the twentieth century took us—"High culture, subject to a rate of change equivalent to that of the G-force that pulls spacecraft loose from gravity, may be unrecognizable"—and, most important, where the symbology central to man's understanding of himself—religious, philosophical, or archetypal—has been drastically attenuated.

Pines traces the roots of high culture to the notions of the sacred in many cultures, from Aztec, Chinese, and Indian, to Jewish and Christian, reminding us that high culture has reference to the singular vision, understood as the shamanistic, individual, poetic imagination. Yet he thinks that

> prior to the twentieth century, the circle-squared archetype of wholeness passed easily from one civilization to the next until it hit a hard edge midway through modernism, and broke. Cracks had appeared at the dawn of the nineteenth century, but went largely unobserved….Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx declared that nothing is what it appears to be; all received wisdom and articles of faith must be regarded with suspicion….Fitzgerald wrote about the death of high culture when the novel, which he'd thought "the most powerful medium of conveying thought and feeling from one human being to another," had become "subordinate to a mechanical and communal art…capable of only the tritest thought, the most obvious emotion." Poetic imagination had given way to Hollywood, a collaborative medium which fed on the obvious.

Our postmodern time is one of numbness, a result of the onslaught of constant stimulation, which creates a state of emotional atrophy, "when the soul turns numb and poetic imagination goes underground." This may be a necessary response to the frantic rate of change, but with numbness comes stress, and this state precludes the self-understanding and self-reflection needed to take in what the great works of high culture have to tell us.

Next, Pines addressed "the problem of high culture," suggesting that many ways to understand the term exist, most obviously the "privileged procession of

products agreed upon by consensus." These products come from everywhere, throughout time. They are often found in the least expected places. They can also be found in time alone, in "numinous moments that pass and are gone," as in a great jazz performance, or captured by a photograph. This leads to a definition of high culture as "that which connects us to the submerged center, conduit for poetic imagination, moves people beyond numbness, dumbness, violence and blind belief, absorbs pain that is otherwise not addressable—and suggests something permanent in the midst of impermanence."

If high culture is to continue to exist, and this is a big "if," it will rely on another human capability that has become attenuated—memory. "Memory is the guardian of meaning. There is no high culture without it.…Memory has been a prime casualty of the pleasure culture and hive mentality." Pines concluded with the hopeful thought that genius, however, will always be present—somehow, somewhere—and lead us, if not to sacred ground, at least on the sacred path.

Carol Iannone, editor-at-large of *Academic Questions*, presented "Plato Was Right," arguing that Plato remains a fine prism through which to look at the spectrum of high, middle, and low culture. She discussed three important Platonic ideas.

First, the idea of democracy is a leveling force, since when applied to the aesthetic realm it inevitably leads to a lack of serious criteria to apply to the quality of artistic objects—to the willy-nilly equivalence, for example, of a velvet Elvis and a Vermeer. After all, who decides what is the good? Second, since for Plato all art is a poor copy of reality, "if the artist is to portray truth, and not a distorted image, he must be open to that order of reality above the merely sensual and physical." And third, intellect and reason must rein in the unruly appetites and desires, as well as the desires to strive and achieve, which can result in works that sensationalize sex and violence.

While Iannone recognizes that this can sound like fascism to the modern sensibility, she cautions that the uses and abuses of art are important, because "art can mislead, defraud, corrupt, as well as undermine social, cultural, and even political coherence." She finds this particularly true in the modern and postmodern periods, when artists have engaged in what twentieth-century critic Lionel Trilling suggested was the virtual "canonization" of the "primal" and "nonethical," or, as Adam Kirsch glosses in writing of Trilling's work, "the idea that what we call evil is actually good: that the primal is superior to the civilized, passion superior to reason."

Iannone noted that "the repudiation of traditional morality was accompanied by an elevation of art as a kind of substitute religion. The work of art became an

autonomous entity….This led to a kind of sacralization of the aesthetic that permitted the arts to go further and further into shock, violation, transgression." While her references are primarily literary, Iannone finds that nihilism, love of the degenerate, depictions of graphic sex and violence (often united), dehumanization, and the description of man as anything but a sacred creature, has infected all the arts.

As antidote, Iannone discussed the controversy surrounding Jonathan Franzen's 2001 novel, *The Corrections*, which won the National Book award and was an Oprah Winfrey Book Club selection. Considering this somewhat of a watershed in postmodern, or post-postmodern literature, Iannone sees Franzen as a real writer who has come out the other side, has something to say, and says it without his colleagues' ironic veneer. As she noted, Franzen has given up on the kind of postmodern literature that demands a Talmudic compendium to help the reader forge through, but is rather seeking his way back to the tradition of high literature that is both deep and accessible.

Iannone also took on the trend toward regarding television dramas as a new addition to high art. Like Teachout, she finds these to be trivial, repetitive, formulaic, and morally empty. "Far from being great works of dramatic vision and artistry, they are really just glorified soap operas, far more brutal and lurid, to be sure, and with slicker production values than those of the past, and, without any sense of the moral center of the older versions." Yet she sees a glimmer of hope overall, as "fortunately, some artists are poking their heads outside the cave to get more in touch with the whole toward which Plato points us."

In "Women and Long-Haired Libidinous Foreigners: Classical Music and American Democracy," Jan Swafford, independent composer and writer, provided a witty, intimate history of classical music from the founding of the American colonies to today. Describing the somewhat ambivalent situation of this music in America, Swafford used Boston, his hometown, as his point of reference.

What we term high art spread erratically across America in the eighteenth century—as to be expected in a land in the act of self-creation, whose first goal was survival and the formation of a democratic society. In the early 1800s Europe was at the height of musical creativity, with Haydn and Beethoven churning out masterpieces. In the New World, people sang and played music, but almost no works of sophistication were being created, and no performing institutions yet existed, since performance typically occurred in the church with the singing of hymns—hardly a high art.

This changed in the nineteenth century, with a "messy democracy in action that included amateur passion, outsized personalities, enthusiasm outrunning

experience, and rampant can-doism. Boston, like other major American cities, had a world-class professional orchestra, an opera house, a new generation of native composers, and an important conservatory. At the same time, African American spirituals and ragtime conquered the globe." The Handel and Mozart Society, typical of those created elsewhere, had the primary goal of improving church singing, but had the further effect of introducing to America the best music from the Old World.

Whereas in Europe classical music had been supported by the aristocracy and then a burgeoning middle class, in America it had to find support within a democratic environment, and from bottom-middle-up as well as top-down. Classical music was always struggling for its existence, always in danger of being irrelevant. Yet it gained strength through increased sophistication, serious musical pretentions, and the outsized personalities of various conductors, entrepreneurs, and writers, who combined serious musical aspirations with the organizational skills of pastors and churchmen of the huge tent gatherings of the Great Awakening. And "with the debut of a new musical force in Boston…the top-down model of spreading musical culture entered the town in a big way: the advent in 1881 of the Boston Symphony Orchestra." But typical of America, the institutional doors were made open to all, a situation similar to recently founded artistic institutions around the country.

Swafford is intrigued by the proliferation of classical culture during the twentieth century, dismayed by its downward decline the last quarter of the century, and worried about the ensuing mass culture tsunami and the demise of music as a participatory activity:

> A healthy artistic culture is both bottom-up and top-down, commercial and non-commercial, and encompasses private patrons and entrepreneurs and investment from government. I think the situation in all the arts these days is a gigantic financial and aesthetic mess, but that doesn't mean good work can't be done….Popular culture is an irresistible juggernaut, but why should it be the only culture available?….Classical music is not about snobbery, not about class, but rather about life and emotion—for me, the most emotional music there is. I've also argued that the spectrum of Western classical music over the last thousand years is so broad that anyone can find a place in it."

In "The Sleeping Beauty: New Clothes for an Awakened Princess," dance critic and writer Elizabeth Kendall gave a brief history and summary of the state of ballet and dance in our post-Balanchine age, defining dance, for the purposes

of her presentation, as “any kind of dance intended for a proscenium, or a performing space, and for an audience.” She focused on ballet.

Kendall began with ballet’s origins in the court of Louis XIV, the subsequent move to a new site of importance, Russia, in the nineteenth century, its centrality to the Romantic ethos, and the momentous impact of Diaghilev’s stateless Ballet Russe in Paris and Europe in the early twentieth century.

Next, Kendall focused on ballet in America, which began with the arrival of former Ballet Russe star Balanchine and the creation of his School of American Ballet, the great attention given to Russian dance defectors such as Rudolf Nureyev, and subsequent support for dance from the Ford Foundation, all of which brought dance to the center of the American cultural conversation. These factors helped create the American dance boom of the 1970s, “in which dance was simultaneously reaffirmed and venerated in high-art venues, and vilified and deconstructed in counter-culture venues. What was important, though…was that dance mattered; dance was *talked about* in the culture as a whole—not just modern and contemporary forms of dance, but the highest level in the art, classical ballet.”

While Kendall acknowledged that dance isn’t quite what it was in its 1970s heyday, she is cautiously optimistic. The system of technical training in America is extensive and solid, and a dance audience exists that is committed and excited. And while we may not have a Balanchine, there are numerous skilled choreographers who speak to us and for our time. Kendall finds the work of Alexei Ratmansky at the American Ballet Theatre and Robert Garland of the Dance Theater of Harlem particularly exemplary. She added that virtuoso dancers who can provide what all audiences hope for—a transcendent experience—are performing around the country. Dance, therefore, is a thriving member of the high art scene in America.

In “Photography, Perception, Congnition: Past, Present, Future,” Brit Salveson, curator of photography at the Los Angeles County Museum (LACM) and former director of the University of Arizona’s unique Center for Creative Photography, examined the curious, ambiguous, and polymorphous nature of photography in the postmodern museum environment and its interaction with the larger, omnipresent, visual culture.

Photography is a new art form or medium that has grown up with modernity. Pictures themselves are ubiquitous; in fact we fairly drown in them. A picture can be documentary, expressive, or both. The state of photography can be seen in various polarities: “education versus entertainment, specialization versus cross-disciplinarity, expertise versus crowd sourcing, contemplation versus

sociality, intellectual property versus open sourcing." In the museum, either regular or encyclopedic (as is LACM), the positioning of photography has changed. Whereas photographs used to be placed in a side room or basement, they now appear front and center. Photography is also popular with current audiences, as we are now all photographers and curators.

So where does this leave the professional curator? The task is to create encounters between objects and viewers. While expertise involves "deep knowledge" the curator of photography must seek a breadth of knowledge along with encounters with the new. Once discoveries have been made, the best way to present them to an audience must be found.

Since most photography is contemporary, it bridges past and future. It is a more fluid visual form than others, and photography may be just one tool of the artist, used more for its communicative nature rather than for the permanence associated with painting or sculpture. The medium is postmodern in that it suggests the immanence of the moment, rather than the individual grappling with process and medium over time.

The curator must be open to false starts, even to failure; by its omnipresence there will be more questionable results. Even though there are many questions regarding photography as a mass art and its associations with sensory overload and narcissism, we must remember that these issues are not new. While the situation is chaotic, it is also alive and exciting. We are in the midst of a new "spectatorial engagement with imagery, with each other, and with the world." It is imperative that the dialogue about the effects and nature of photography continues.

Finally, in "Human Achievement and Innovation in the Arts: A New Educational Paradigm and Future for the Arts," I offered reasons contemporary culture, and more specifically, the current academy, need the CACI. I also spoke about our first curricular offering, the pan-arts course "Human Achievement and Innovation in the Arts."

Culture is as or more important than any other sphere of activity in America. We placed "high" in the conference title in parenthesis because we must differentiate high, middle, and low, or high and popular. There are strong reasons to make these distinctions, and to argue for the teaching and promulgation of high culture in the larger culture and specifically in academia. The first is the simple *good* of high art. Two other reasons are time and money. College students have four years to learn something that matters to them for the rest of their lives. Money, while fungible, is not infinite. Time and money should be spent on what has known and lasting value, and provides a rock-solid foundation for appreciating life and for creating something fresh.

CACI engages in this conversation within a university environment that is mostly hostile to high culture and where discussion of the topic is often problematic. So be it.

Another goal of the center is to provide students with an "ennobling vision" through an encounter with the best that mankind has produced in the arts specifically, and other areas of human inquiry and achievement more generally. We use that adjective knowing that it is somewhat old-fashioned, just as we do the words "elitist" and "connoisseurship."

The ignorance of our students and the general population of the great intellectual legacy of humanity is astonishing. One can no longer assume that everyone has heard a Beethoven symphony, read or seen a Shakespeare play, or is familiar with the institutions we refer to as "The Met." The ongoing and increasingly aggressive politicization of the university has contributed to this ignorance by gutting the traditional curriculum in favor of "theory." Thus, CACI's primary goal is to educate. In this regard, CACI is setting out to produce a new core curricula for our time. The first course it created is the aforementioned "Human Achievement and Innovation in the Arts" (HAIA).

Most arts students know little outside their own domain and most non-arts students know almost nothing of the arts. And taking an art or music appreciation course only covers a piece of the whole. The solution is to present in one course the best in *all* of the arts—visual, music, and the dance.

HAIA begins with a philosophical component: How does one determine what is beautiful and of merit, and what is Art? Today, it's not enough to say, "This is good for you because it has been determined by others to be so." Students must be drawn into the conversation. Appropriate terminology for each discipline is introduced, as students must be able to speak and write about these disciplines. They also learn how to use their eyes and ears as precision tools.

The course proceeds chronologically from 8000 BCE until the 1970s, where the journey stops due to time limits and that thereafter less consensus exists of what has lasting value. This historical progression demonstrates the developmental nature of the arts, the ebb and flow of their various fortunes, and how they are affected by historical, political, technological, and economic changes. It begins with visual art, adds music, then dance.

HAIA brashly presents masterworks as living presences and engages in conversation with them and their creators. This aliveness to the genius of individual personality is critical to this teaching enterprise.