

Houston Philosophical Society

641st Annual Meeting

Cohen House

January 21, 2011

Under the leadership of President Herb Ward, the Society gathered for a reception and dinner meeting. Following dinner, President Ward and Past President Evelyn Keyes made a few remarks in remembrance of members Lewis Spaw and Sidney McClendon, respectively, who passed away during the past year.

Don Byrnes then facilitated the introduction of guests at each table.

Former President Bob Patten introduced the speaker of the evening, native Houstonian and daughter of Society member Bill Ballew, Emily Ballew Neff. Dr. Neff is the curator of American painting and sculpture at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Dr. Neff received her B.A. at Yale University, with a stint at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, London; an M.A. at Rice University; and a PhD. at the University of Texas at Austin—all in the history of art. She has served as the Jameson Fellow at Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens, as a Whitney Fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as a Fellow at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, MA, as a scholar at the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum Research Center in Santa Fe, NM, where she conducted research on the role of the American West in American modernism, and as a Visiting Senior Scholar at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (CASVA) at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC., where her research formed the basis of a forthcoming exhibition on the subject of eighteenth-century American artists Benjamin West, John Singleton Copley, and John Trumbull, presented in the context of a transatlantic world. She has organized sixteen exhibitions and coordinated fourteen others whose subject range from John James Audubon to John Singer Sargent, although the two major areas in which she has published are in Anglo-American eighteenth-century art and landscape painting and photography of the American West. She is also a panelist for the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Luce Foundation of American Art. She has also been a distinguished lecturer at Rice.

Dr. Neff’s topic was “Art Matters.” Using the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, as a framework and a case study—the museum’s history, its early association with Rice University, its broad collection, the diversity and range of its architecture, its present mission and plans for the future—Dr. Neff’s presentation focused on major issues facing the art museum today.

Dr. Neff examined the historical development of the fundamental and currently largely accepted principle that an art museum plays a powerful role in the intellectual and cultural life of a

community. Her presentation covered some complex issues that the art museum faces—many seemingly “ripped from the headlines,” starting with the culture wars in which activists protested in front of the Smithsonian over an exhibit of a crucifix covered with ants.

She briefly sketched the history of Rice and the Museum of Fine Arts. Rice, chartered in 1891, opened for classes in 1912. The MFA began in 1900 as the Houston Public Art League with its project being to put art in Houston’s public schools as a means of uplift. In 1913, it became the Houston Art League. Will Hogg willed the MFA into being. Governor James Hogg became very wealthy through oil wells in Columbia, Texas and used his wealth on public projects. Will Hogg used Rice as an institutional model for the MFA, not only as a model of graceful urban planning but also as a model of philanthropy, William Marsh Rice having bequeathed his entire fortune to Rice. Captain James Baker was the attorney for the Rice estate. He turned down Will Hogg’s plea for funds for the MFA, but Hogg was not deterred. He thought of the MFA as a powerful adjunct to Rice and pointed out that many subscribed because of their love for Houston and saw the MFA as an inspiration. Baker pledged \$5000 for the museum. Hogg himself raised \$350,000 and would continue to donate until his untimely death in 1930.

Will Hogg saw the MFA as a “living and popular and useful” symbol of Houston’s culture. Since his time, and in accordance with that plan, the museum has grown to include (1) the Law Building, (2) Cullinan Hall, (3) the Beck Building, (4) the Cullen Culture Garden, (5) the Glassell School, (6) Rienzi, and (7) Bayou Bend.

Treasures from all ages and from all over the world are collected at the MFA, including crafts as well as painting—from an 18th century crewel chair to African art, to a gold myrtle crown, to a Greek torso, to Mme. Cezanne in Blue, to Rembrandt, to a translation of the Korna, to a Peruvian headdress, to contemporary works such as “Juanito Goes to the City” and work using found materials.

Discussing the importance of art, Dr. Neff drew attention to motto on the Woolworth Building, “For the Use of the People,” and to the modern origin of public museums in “wunderkammer,” or museums of curiosities, or “rooms of wonder,” paralleling the Leverian Museum in London’s Leicester Square and its organized specimens of natural and ‘artificial,’ or man-made, artifacts.

The first museum was a room of wonders, but other modes of organization were used also that could provide pleasure, educate, and provide sociable spaces—that could inspire wonder and provide an enjoyable journey through the world. An updated room of wonders in the Menil Museum in Houston shows what pleased the Menils but does not have another mode of organization. No other such museum is essentially private. Compare, for example, Peale’s Museum in Philadelphia, pictured in Peale’s own painting. This was the first museum designed to attract the broad spectrum of democratic society. As shown in Peale’s painting, it contained taxidermied animals, portraits of worthies, a bald eagle, a wild turkey waiting to be taxidermied.

Visitors shown in the painting include a young lady awed by mastodon bones, a father and son, and a tutor.

The model of the truly public museum came from France. Louis XIV's Apollo Gallery enhanced the prestige of the king. In 1792, the Louvre was declared to belong to the public and became the prototype of the public museum. With the representation of the French Republic painted on the ceiling and its rooms organized to put the central focus and emphasis on France, it became a physical resource for asserting a national identity. A half century later, the Victoria and Albert Museum opened in Kensington in London, as did the natural history and science museums clustered nearby. These museums were created out of the energy released by the Industrial Revolution with its utilitarian conception of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Note the Exhibition Hall, manifesting Prince Albert's great advocacy of innovation with its glass and steel hall. Inside are displayed the history of art from ancient civilizations to the Renaissance. Profits from the Exhibition Hall were used to fund the permanent collections. The applied arts were included on a massive scale, from ironworks to a copy of Michelangelo's David—with a detachable fig leaf—and artificial specimens from all over the world. There are nearly six million objects in the Victoria and Albert today.

Successors to this concept have included India rooms and British arts and design rooms designed to train artisans as well as artists, in part due to fear among leaders that uneducated masses would revolt. In Kensington, the museum emphasized civic responsibility, reaching the broadest possible audience through popular and commercial works of art. The museums are open free several days a week and emphasize practical and moral values, as well as furthering British national pride. In France, the Louvre linked the citizenry to its past, now claimed by the people, emphasizing art's service unto itself while also serving the people.

In the United States, the Metropolitan Museum is built on the Kensington model. It promotes knowledge and is oriented to art, history, the aesthetic importance of objects, and the reifying of ideas of civic responsibility.

Today, the museum world is changing. Current issues include (1) the recognition that we live in a golden age of museums, e.g., Denver, the National Museum, the MFA in Boston, and that attendance continues to soar, but (2) the challenge of attracting new audiences remains, (3) museums remain on the last contemplative environments, and (4) there are problems with how to fund acquisitions, programs, and facilities. Some museums are de-accessioning art works to pay for operations, i.e., monetizing collections and thereby jeopardizing future museums.

Art and politics may and do clash. For example, the Old Patent Building, the Smithsonian-MFA, opened an exhibition on the impact of gay and lesbian artists on changes in American portraiture that included #47, an early Hartley that is an abstract portrait of a soldier with whom Hartley had fallen in love who fell in battle and that showed the subject as a naked Christ covered in ants. The exhibition prompts discussion on sexuality in art. Incoming Republican Speaker of the

House Boehner and Senate Republican Whip Cantor attacked the show as anti-Christian and threatened the funding of operations (acquisitions being privately funded). Seeing the offending video that showed the painting was optional, but the art works were taken out of context. In response to the political pressure, the exhibit was taken out of the museum and put in a garage across the street.

Dr. Ballew-Neff argued that the key issue was lost in the trees, namely that we are looking at censorship and homophobia. In the culture wars, art is a straw man used to further political battles, here the replacement of Democratic House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, by Republicans following the November 2010 elections. She recalled, for comparison, the Maplethorpe controversy, which took place when Republican Jesse Helms was running for office. The photographic works of Maplethorpe, a homosexual whose works included highly abstracted representations of sexuality. These works, fueled by rage, perhaps at AIDS, which would shortly kill him, and his own mortality, were attacked as obscene. Art itself was used a political tool for political gain. Dr. Neff suggested that a better explanation of what museums do might avert the violence that follows art.

In response to questions, Dr. Neff observed that the numbers of visitors at the MFA are skyrocketing due to large exhibitions and also to the MFA's permanent collections, as they are at other institutions throughout the country. She also responded 'no' to the question whether museums devoted to a single artist will replace general museums, commenting that seeing works of art in the context of other artists adds to the experience of art.

Evelyn V. Keyes