

REPORT TO THE TRUSTEES OF BENNINGTON COLLEGE

Art Policy Committee - Lydia Winston, Chairman

October 12, 1963

Since Bennington College has received numerous gifts of art works (some have been given outright and are installed at the College, and others have been given to the College but retained by the owners during their lifetime) a number of questions arise concerning an art acquisition policy for the College. Last fall, Oscar Ruebhausen asked me to "investigate independently" this question for the Trustees.

The preliminary work I have done has involved viewing the holdings now at the College, discussions with Paul Feeley, and with Lawrence Alloway and Eugene Goossen (both former members of the art faculty). As a result, I feel we can now ask the following question and make certain observations.

Should Bennington continue with its rather aimless acquiring of some excellent, some indifferent, and some possibly questionable works with no direction in mind, or should the College aim for a significant art collection with a program and a purpose, based on Bennington's educational philosophy? If we follow the latter course, time and organization are necessary because the acquiring of works of art should involve more than a search for and an acceptance of pieces. There are practical and aesthetic questions brought to mind such as quality, value, and insurance. There is the responsibility of authentication and the protection of the College arising out of the tax situation.

If we plan to have an acceptable collection of works, it could relate to an educational program, an exhibition program, and the resulting appropriate housing. Such a space complex at Bennington cannot fall into the prescribed formula of tradition and static monumentality, but must be flexible and workable for the educational needs of the College. As Eugene Goossen expressed it, "We cannot have a timeless depository of works with eternal commitments at Bennington."

An interesting plan has been suggested by Mr. Goossen. He proposed that any gallery space be divided into three parts: Current, Reference, and Classical. Works, current and historical, would be accepted from donors on a five-year basis with an agreement from the donors in advance that after five years the piece would be reviewed. If the College no longer wished to retain it, it could be returned to the donor, or sold or traded for the benefit of the College Collection. Works in the Current section, if retained by the College after five years, would go into the Reference section. The Classical section would be small and might contain one perfect piece at a time.

This plan is interesting but in no sense is it final. It has been suggested and generally agreed upon that the present should be stressed, as it always has been at Bennington, that loan exhibitions are extremely important and should continue, and that we aim to build an organic collection based on change, including both present and historical works. Pieces

from the collection could tie in with loan exhibitions from time to time, serving as "idea exhibitions" in themselves - encouraging creative ideas in the use of the material at hand.

The whole educational experience coming out of this could be a unique one for Bennington students, who could participate fully in curatorial responsibility, security, information, gallery talks, aesthetic evaluation in critical writings for bulletins and the press, documentation, library work, conservation, installation, shipping and storage, and last but not least, integrating the other arts with their programs. In other words, this plan would allow for the possibility of running a small "idea" museum based on a growing permanent collection, and loans.

Today there is a great need throughout the United States for competent curators. There are many new museums and proportionately few curators. Perhaps in time Bennington could perform such a service by training, or beginning the training of such people. This can be a very creative field. With its own small experimental gallery and with its proximity to galleries, to great museums in New York and Boston, a project of this nature would seem logical, and a fascinating one for Bennington. It could perhaps be especially effective because of Bennington's reputation in the arts.

Bennington College has built an important place for itself in the contemporary art world, for it stands as a pioneer in the field. The College is known in the European art world, where older U.S. private colleges and universities are unknown. Through Bennington's distinguished and foresighted art faculty, the College has done more for current directions than any other college or university. Bennington held one of the first exhibitions of Jackson Pollock, the painter now deceased, and David Smith, the sculptor, and other now influential world figures in the arts. And the College has consistently maintained this high level exhibition program while continuing to pioneer.

It was said recently that since Bennington has built this significant reputation in the arts, it should keep its identity in a concrete form - through a representative collection of art. Paul Feeley expressed it when he stated that the College should have appropriate evidence of Bennington's contribution to the arts, evidence which would show what art has meant and now means at Bennington.

A collecting program of this nature would eventually require a full time art historian (curator) to take charge. It has been suggested that endowment to support a teaching fellowship of this nature might be found.

Prior to this meeting a Special Trustee Committee on Art Policy had been appointed by Oscar Ruebhausen. I have not had the opportunity to confer with them, but hope to do so in the near future. The members are:

John McCullough, Ernestine Meyer, Jane McCullough.* I shall welcome their aid and ideas in helping to work out, as soon as possible, a concrete plan for an acquisition policy, its program and implementation, its space needs - all based on its educational needs.

Such a program should be worthy of Bennington's standing in the arts. It can be of infinite value to the College's educational program, its prestige, and to the community at large.

Respectfully submitted,

Lydia K. Winston, Chairman
Art Policy Committee
Bennington College

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* I am happy to announce that since this report was given, Mrs. Roy Friedman of Chicago, and Mrs. Nathaniel Usdan of New York City, have both accepted membership on the Arts Policy Committee.