

ART EDUCATION AT BENNINGTON COLLEGE

This report from the Art Policy Committees describes the need for a Visual Arts Building and its proposed form and function. The report proposes (A) that such a building will make possible the extension of the present curriculum and the assimilation of increases in the student body. The report proposes (B) that exhibition galleries are essential to this building, as well as a new facility for the College, a museum.

---Lydia K. Winston
September 24, 1964

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INTRODUCTION

Since its founding, Bennington College has given to the visual arts a central place in its educational program. It is a core subject in a liberal arts curriculum, and one that is vital to the growth of both perceptual and conceptual abilities that prepare the student for making and enjoying art throughout life. The Art Division offers a general training in art to all interested students, irrespective of previous training. In 1964, out of a total student population of 350, there were 310 registrations in visual arts courses; about 17% graduate as art majors.

In keeping with the aims of the College itself, the visual arts faculty has pioneered methods of instruction that stress participation in art rather than learning about art. The aim is to prevent a premature hardening of opinion into fixed styles or beliefs that a student must accept or imitate. A continual effort is made to keep an evolving environment for the performing of art in all its forms, and open to the most challenging ideas and personalities from either inside or outside the college environment.* The visual arts faculty is composed of recognized practicing artists who with their own work and exhibitions serve for students as a constant presence of the standards, attitudes and methods of the professional world.

The implications of this approach are felt throughout the College. Art is an integral part of the life and atmosphere, and the experience of art is regarded as an important part of a complete education.

*This "open door" approach may be further illustrated by the fact that art students are encouraged to use the Non-Resident Term to go elsewhere for the best instruction available. With a comparative view of approaches and attitudes toward art, the student is better able to make up her own mind and find her own direction.

PROGRAM: ART AS CONTINUUM

The student's program in the visual arts begins with a required diversity of study that precedes individual concentration on chosen areas. By giving close attention to elements common to all arts, the student is discouraged from identifying art exclusively with one craft. Art is approached as a continuum with many forms or aspects to be discovered and explored.

A. Method and Discipline

Drawing is the discipline made central to all other pursuits. Every student's program is based on the study of drawing each year, taught by all instructors as an integral part of all workshops, both two- and three-dimensional. Thus drawing does not become a limited academic study, rather it is a discipline learned from various personal viewpoints and a relation to every kind of expressive task. Drawing from models, from still life, from geometric and sculptural forms--all are part of the continuing experience in communication through space and line. Rational solutions to problems of art based upon free enquiry -- through discursive exchanges between instructor and student, student and student, instructor and instructor, division and division -- are the final objectives of the student's search in a program that seeks depth as well as proficiency. The student develops (1) the ability to communicate ideas and experiences in visual form and in various visual media, (2) the ability to undertake research on visual problems rather than apply pre-digested sets of rules or techniques, and (3) to translate ideas from one medium to another, discovering the strengths of each and the range of expressive possibilities in all.* Each kind of art is not a static body of knowledge or a method with-

*Specifically, a teacher of painting may encourage a student to reconceive a problem in terms of graphic art media; he may encourage another student to translate a sculptural idea into painting. The aim is to find a way to express an idea or concept not limited by one technique or one medium. Or, to put it the other way around, the student is taught to see each medium as a means of expressing ideas or concepts for which techniques must be discovered or developed.

out conceptual content, but one solution to guided search for the best means of making a statement or expressing a visual idea.

Through this "organic" working method the student is expected to take responsibility for the growth of her own work so that personal experience keeps pace with instruction. Each completed problem represents the student's ability to communicate at that moment, one step in a continuous development. The emphasis is always on process,* not on success. There is no expectation of a final "masterpiece," fixed and untouchable, though a good end product will always be recognized as such. A less "successful" work can be even more important to learning and artistic growth.

B. Art History

As the student becomes increasingly aware, from personal experience, of the problems faced by the creative person, she is asked to find meaning in the creative statements of the past. Concurrent with her own investigative studio efforts, she studies the history and heritage of art.

Art history as taught in the Bennington framework stresses the present as the point of departure that has most meaning to the student. It emphasizes broad esthetic problems within an historical framework that begins with today, and extends both backward in time and toward the future for an understanding of the

*This is to say, problems arise out of pursuit of study, not out of a fixed text or methodology. The manner of study used by Leonardo in exploring anatomy, for example, would have been impossible to conceive outside of his actual quest for understanding; similarly, any preconceived method patterned on what he did would not lead to his results. Any teaching method that is highly structured tends to be "vocational" in that it leads to known techniques or results. Bennington's art teaching, particularly in the latter years, is not highly structured, but is highly disciplined.

visual arts and the time and nature of man.

C. Maturity of the Student

The privilege of working independently is decided by the student's readiness. As soon as she demonstrates the grasp and maturity, she is encouraged to proceed on her own problems and ideas, on her own schedules, with an instructor assigned to discuss and criticize work in progress as required. This usually occurs after two years of supervised group studio work, but there is no obstacle if a student is ready earlier.

Presently all juniors and seniors work on this seminar basis, and all seniors are given private studio space which simulates a virtually professional situation. In the new art building, we hope that space can be provided to allow all eligible students -- juniors, seniors and others -- to work privately. Experience has proved that possession of personal studio space often leads to a remarkable increase in the student's sense of responsibility and level of performance. (These individual studios should be planned so that they will be available during NRT.)

The student completes her senior year with a body of work that is equivalent to a one-man show: 15 to 20 major works in one medium, and sometimes an equal amount in one or two other media as well. The Annual Senior Show is a selective representation of each student's collected work presented to the College community.

Prognosis

Future development of instruction in the fine arts at Bennington will, as now, reflect and anticipate new ideas and modes of expression in the art of the time.

Keeping the individual frame of instruction that is so much its present strength, the department should also have the opportunity to incorporate any new instructional and learning techniques that may broaden a student's experience of art. While retaining emphasis on the continuity of the visual arts, the department should be free to change the specific emphasis on media employed. Architecture, for example, with its multiple connections to other disciplines (mathematical, sociological, esthetic) warrants future expansion in Bennington's liberal arts curriculum. Photography (motion and still) is recommended for inclusion both as a supporting technique and as a medium in its own right. Both documentary and experimental photography can be expected to be of the highest importance.

Future developments in visual communication will affect art teaching at Bennington -- electronics, computing equipment, new methods of light or motion (and sound) projection. The inclusion of a Communications Workshop in the curriculum seems very desirable, probably imperative. New materials and industrial techniques will have implications for the plastic arts affecting the use of shop space, and the need for technical assistance and maintenance. Considering the immense changes in communications in the last twenty years, and considering the possibilities of experimental collaborations among different arts, it is essential to maintain conceptual flexibility.

* * *

THE VISUAL ARTS BUILDING

The unity of the Art Division has survived the present geographical fragmentation and heavy usage of the various studios. Nevertheless, a time comes when the perpetual repetition of improvisatory methods endangers efficiency and progress. A new art building would remove the oppressive sense of a ceiling whose existence can only one day curb the activity and frustrate the invention of the art faculty. The planned enlargement of the student body must be expected to exacerbate seriously the present conditions, even to the point of threatening the full realization of Bennington's ideals of education in the visual arts. A new building is needed to permit the continued growth of these ideals and to harbor the increase in the student body. It follows that space at present occupied by studios would become available for other purposes for which they might, in many ways, be better suited, as in Commons, for example.

The new building for the Art Division needs to combine the twin services, different but mutually supporting, of studios and museum. Their functions will lead to a natural division in the layout of the Visual Arts Building. The proposed site facilitates such a dual usage; one side permits easy public access, while the other side can be fully identified with college activities.

A. Character of the Building

The Art Division has discussed in detail the character of the building that will serve the functions and provide the atmosphere in which art can best be taught. It is unanimous in feeling that the quality of the space and the working relationships between various parts of the building are of foremost importance, as is the relationship to the out-of-doors that will allow it to become part of the work-

ing area of the studios and the display areas of the museum-gallery.

Several images come to mind to express the spatial character that is desired: we have talked about "hangars," "factories," "lofts," and "barns." All describe a neutral, open, unfettered, well-lighted space that has free access from the out-of-doors, a flexible working space that will allow large-scale painting and sculpture to be done in comfort, a rugged heavy-duty space with usable walls ceiling and floors that will accommodate the mess and confusion of work in progress. All imply a horizontal structure with fluid circulation inside and outside, in which equipment or materials can easily move in or out, which permits work to be done in an outdoor room that is an extension of the studio itself. One faculty member has described it as "a permissive, participation-oriented space in which the student does not feel an intruder." Of all the images, the most precise seems to be that of a barn, possibly because the proportion of the space in the Carriage Barn itself has proved over the years to be such an exceptional environment for the display of art at Bennington. In terms of a complex of studios, offices and display areas, this suggests the prototype of the local "continuous farm," with the farmhouse, sheds, areaways and barns interconnected by covered links and enclosing a piece of the landscape into a yard or outdoor room. (This New England image is suggested not literally, but symbolically.) The variations in size of spaces, if well and successively related, could serve the important requirement of extreme flexibility. All of this implies a building in which the functional needs dominate the interior planning and take precedence over a "monumental" exterior, over formality, over architecture as a highly personal statement. It implies placement on the campus that will allow for casualness, free use of the landscape and easy

access. Because storage will be a vital consideration in both working areas and the museum itself, it suggests the possibility of a resourceful use of space, such as the basement in the science building at Andover, to provide the necessary footage without raising or spreading the building out too much.

In regard to the relation of the proposed museum to the studios and workshops, it is the art faculty's conclusion that the museum must be part of the art center complex because the two will be closely related in teaching and in staffing. The museum is seen not as a separate static domain, but as an area that will be constantly in use by students whose exhibition program will be tied in with the work in the studios, and whose curator will be an active teaching member of the art faculty. For all of these reasons, the museum should be connected but separable (for security reasons). Its character should be in keeping with that of the art studio building. The suggested "barn" image lends itself to a large, humanly-scaled exhibition space without any dominant stylistic commitment, which could have small subsidiary spaces and enough flexibility to meet the demands of any kind of display.

B. Outline of Functions

The new building will allow the continuation of Bennington's curricular program, but for a larger student body and with additional functions, as follows:

Photography as a supplementary tool for all the arts.

Communications workshop to supplement teaching in all divisions and for possible studio experimentation in fine arts.

Art library facilities, additional to but not replacing the services offered by the Edward Crossett Memorial Library. Exhibition catalogs and topical material would be emphasized.

Expansion of architectural study with reference to its ramifications in other divisions.

Pre-curatorial study in connection with a gallery and continuing exhibitions, and the growth of a college collection.

Storage for all studios (underground).

Studios for all doing advanced study.

Experimental room for the study of lighting and presentation (containing necessary hardware).

Offices and study areas.

Active social area (snack bar or restaurant, meeting place, etc.) for students and visitors, outdoor courts.

Open stacks and storage.

Other services -- lavatory, etc.

C. Additional Requirements

Acoustical privacy for all teaching spaces.

Accommodations that are separate enough for autonomy, related enough for good communication and coordination, common activity.

Adequate space for large-scale work; utilization of outdoor areas too.

Spaces adaptable to the unique personalities and idiosyncracies of students and instructors -- variable spaces where each occupant can put his individual stamp.

* * *

A MUSEUM AT BENNINGTON

It is the recommendation of the Art Policy Committee, in agreement with the Art Division, that a Museum be included in any future planning and building for Bennington College.

The Committee recommends that this space be utilized for the display of professional work, whether loan exhibits, exhibits drawn from permanent collections or one-man shows. (Student work-in-progress would be displayed elsewhere in the Visual Arts Center, except for the Annual Senior Show which would be a Museum event.)

We recommend that this Museum and its collection be under the direction of a curator who should be a teacher and a full-time member of the Art Division recommended by the Art Faculty. The curator should be qualified to offer pre-curatorial study with practical involvement in the acquisition, handling, cataloging, conservation, and display of works of art. Pre-curatorial study would not only contribute to museum staffs, but, also, take the lead in fostering in undergraduates a forward-looking attitude toward collecting and toward the use and enjoyment of art as an integral part of everyone's life and environment.

The Museum would house a permanent collection of art based on gifts and on purchases suited to the philosophy of the College and the teaching program in the arts. As a reference collection it should never cease to reflect the interests and viewpoints of the Art Division. As the collection grows and evolves, new acquisitions should always include the work of young, experimental artists as yet unproven in the market place. Provision should be made for disposal as well as acquisition.

Because the collection will be continuously used for study and reference, an essential feature of the Museum should be an archive-storage area where painting, sculpture, ceramics and prints can be easily seen and studied -- "a library of originals." In addition storage is necessary for incoming and outgoing exhibitions.

The Museum should contain one large area (4,000 sq. ft.) for instructional exhibits drawn from the permanent collection; another of about the same size (adjacent and joinable) for changing loan exhibitions; and two to four contiguous small exhibition rooms for special subjects (pottery, prints, etc.) that could be used with the main galleries for large shows. As has been pointed out, the permanent collection cannot be implemented until secure and attractive accommodation exists for it. In the first stage, therefore, while the nucleus of the collection is being expanded, the employment of the two spaces could not be conclusively programmed. What is described above is the ultimate assignment of the space.

The social and civic aspects of art openings and art viewing should be provided for in the layout of the Museum. A lobby (not corridor) could be developed not only for occasional receptions but as a focus for daily contacts and discussion. This would bring life and activity into the Museum at all hours and could also provide a spatial approach to the galleries proper, giving them a finality and restfulness that is an agreeable aspect of the present Carriage Barn gallery. This lobby would be open when the galleries were closed, so there would be no dead time in the building's use.

The museum space described above is not excessive but should be enough for Bennington's educational needs as presently outlined. However, important

bequests to the Museum could make it desirable to add special pavilions or rooms where a major collection could be retained intact and permanently displayed.

The Museum should therefore contain:

Gallery for permanent collection

Gallery for loan exhibitions

Small exhibition rooms

Lobby

Lecture theatre (to seat 150)

Photography room

Records and documentation room

Shop for carpentry and construction

Shipping room

Experimental lighting and display room

Reference library

Offices

Serving area for receptions

Open stacks and storage

Other services -- custodial, lavatory

Background to a Bennington Museum

Since 1950, Bennington has created a continuous series of exhibitions of art that have given the College Gallery a unique position in the art world. These exhibitions have ranged from the first retrospective of Jackson Pollock in 1951 to "A Second Look" at the work of Maxfield Parrish in 1964. A number of artists given one-man shows early in their careers, or their first retrospectives by the College, have since achieved world fame. Among those who have exhibited here have been: Joseph Albers, Joseph Cornell, Herbert Ferber, Helen Frankenthaler, Adolf Gottlieb, Hans Hofmann, Morris Louis, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Kenneth Noland, Raymond Parker, Jackson Pollock and David Smith. The Parrish exhibition went from Bennington to the Gallery of Modern Art in New York and is now booked for a world wide tour of museums which will keep the show before the public eye for the next two years.

In recent years, other colleges have followed Bennington's leadership in giving exhibitions of contemporary art, but Bennington has continued to exercise its leadership, retaining its distinction as the one college art gallery whose significance is recognized by the artists, critics and collectors of American art today.

The idea behind these exhibitions has been to bring to students the most advanced and vital art of the time, to the end that they may make up their minds about values not yet established. As a result of making hard decisions about new art in advance of the formation of public opinion, they may ultimately assume roles of leadership in their culture. (It will be seen from the above list that the faculty's choice of artists has been ratified subsequently in a high number of cases.) The design of the exhibition program has never been doctrinaire: figure

art, abstract art, popular art, have all been shown. The College has never looked elsewhere for confirmation of its judgment before making its decisions on exhibitions. It has, instead, depended upon its own views. In this manner it has encouraged its students toward self-reliance of judgment.

Bennington's exhibition program during the past fifteen years has been carried out under the most difficult circumstances. In the beginning, exhibitions were hung in two corridors. Later, half-time use of a room was obtained; the rest of the time being devoted to the showing of clothes, handbags and other commercial exhibits. Finally the Carriage Barn lounge was acquired, the use of which has been devoted not only to art but to music and drama as well. The divided use of space has made for extreme difficulties in the way of planning shows, putting them up and taking them down. Security risks are, also, implicit in the exposure of art in a multi-purpose environment. The transporting of art works for exhibition was frequently -- in the beginning almost invariably -- done by art faculty on its own time, often in its own cars or by using a truck loaned by the kindness of a local brush company. There has been no regular clerical staff assigned to carry on the correspondence and paper work necessary for the arrangement and insurance of loaned works. This too has been done by faculty members on their own time. During Mr. Fels' administration a regular budget was established for the expenses involved in carrying on the program. This, though small, has helped much to regularize and simplify the problem. There has been no room designated as a shipping room for art, or for packing it or mounting it. When necessary this has been done, as well as possible, through the regular shipping room of the College, which was certainly not designed for such a purpose, and has been most inconvenient

for those running it. These difficulties are mentioned not with the purpose of complaint but to show that the Art Division is thoroughly familiar with the practical aspects of running an exhibition program.

Over the years, students have become increasingly interested in Bennington's exhibition activity and have undertaken individual pre-curatorial studies with Alexander Dorner, Eugene Goossen, Lawrence Alloway and others who have taught art history at Bennington and been associated with different aspects of the exhibition program. However, owing to lack of facilities, such activity could only be occasional. A museum with proper facilities will make it possible to make pre-curatorial study systematic activity. Increasingly in America, an important way in which women can effect the "cultural life" in their communities is through museum work. The College should be alert to further this essential aspect of its influence.

The need for a museum to house art acquisitions has been discussed in various reports made by the Art Policy Committee. Already Bennington is the recipient of gifts of art work, but there is no question that an effective art acquisitions policy at Bennington is impossible without a permanent and dignified place in which art may be presented. Possible donors cannot be expected to be interested in either donating or loaning works to an institution capable neither of caring for it properly nor of putting it in a situation in which it is shown in high regard. A museum is essential in giving a community a proper sense of the importance and seriousness of art, and to this end it should be a building devoted exclusively to the presentation of art. In our time, under the guise of spreading culture in the workaday world, art works have been placed in offices and corridors and have

often become, in the process, no more significant than "decor."

A museum is a civic building and should be placed in a site that represents its civic and community significance, near the center of daily life. On a college campus, because of the character of its function in art teaching, it should be adjacent or near to the building designed for the study of art, but it should also be readily available to the larger public of the outside world. A museum is a "Mecca" if it contains works of interest and importance. During the Bennington Parrish show, for example, not only was the interest of the Vermont public very high, but people made special trips from Canada and distant parts of the South and West to see it. With both permanent and special exhibitions of significant work, an increased flow of visitors, scholars and students from outside the campus would take place, serving to enhance Bennington's position as a cultural and intellectual center. It is worth pointing out that the museum would be in an excellent position in originating its own exhibitions to circulate them to other institutions. This would be an additional source of income to the College (from hiring fees) and of experience to the participating students.

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DESCRIPTION OF SPACE REQUIREMENTS
for Visual Arts Building

The design of each studio should take into account the specific functions and processes special to it.

<u>A. Studio/Teaching Space</u>	<u>Sq. Ft.</u>
Architecture Studio	900
Designing, drafting, and construction of models. This space is primarily designed for table space, but also includes installation of small machines and tools, such as paper-cutter, jig saw, and small drill. Cabinet space for materials and instruments.	
Architectural Seminar Room	400
Ceramics Studio	
Kiln and storage room, drying room	450
Pug mill room	250
Plaster shop	250
Sample room	225
Outdoor Ceramic Space	---
Large concrete apron for work in warm weather.	
Drawing Studio	900
Will contain thirty drawing stools and easels for traditional life drawing. Should accommodate model stands, supply cabinets, racks, model dressing room. Sink.	
Drawing Studio	900
To accommodate tables, fifteen 3' x 4', for working flat. Collage, watercolor and wash drawings. Tempera, etc. Cabinets, racks, dressing room. Sink.	
Graphic Arts Studio	
Intaglio and Relief Printing Processes	1500
Space to accommodate tables for drawing and carving blocks, working on plates (current --	

Sq. Ft.

six 3' x 7' tables, future -- three additional tables), presses, sinks, work bench for sharpening tools, cabinets, hot plates, drying racks, storage.

Lithographic Printing Process

600

Space to accommodate presses, racks and movable tables for heavy stones, sinks for cleaning stones, cabinets.

Painting Studio -- Human figure

900

To contain stools, easels (30) for traditional figure and portrait painting, model stands, dressing room. Racks and cabinets.

Painting Studio -- Still life

900

To contain stools, easels (30). Tables for still life arrangements. Cabinets for still life props and casts.

Painting - Seminar Room

400

Viewing and group criticism room. Wall and seating space primarily important.

Painting - Seminar Room

400

Same as above

Sculpture Studio

3000

This room is subdivided into welding shop, terra cotta area, casting area and plastics area.

Outdoor Sculpture Space

Large concrete aprons for work in warm weather and for viewing works in an open setting.

Faculty Studios in connection with each area of study (excluding sculpture).

450 each

Faculty Sculpture Studio

600

Sq. Ft.

Three Studios for Introductory
Art Study Program

900 each

One of these studios designed for emphasis on
drawing study. Two for emphasis on work in
three dimensions.

Private or Semi-private Studios for approximately
thirty students

singles 12 x 12

144

singles 15 x 15

225

doubles 12 x 24 or 15 x 30

288 or 450

Children's Art Classes

400

Secretarial Office

250

9 Faculty Offices (including curator's)

250 each

Slide Storage and Viewing

150

Two Seminar Rooms

400

Gallery for Work in Progress

900

Communications Workshop

400

B. Museum Space

Permanent Collection Gallery

2625

Loan Exhibition Gallery

2625

4 Small Galleries (230 sq. ft. each)

2520

Lobby

630

Lecture Theatre (150 seats)

1500

Records and Documentation

150

Shipping Room

600

Experimental Display Room

400

C. <u>Common Facilities of Space -- Studio/Teaching/Museum</u>	<u>Sq. Ft.</u>
Carpenter Shop	1000
To contain heavy tools and machinery available to all studios.	
Art Study Room-Library Room	525
Photography Room	1000
Copy camera Developing enlarging Printing drying Storage	
Storage	
(A) Supplies and bulk materials for all studios. Some of this space may be outdoor space (steel storage, for example).	---
(B) Racks to accommodate examples of student work for five years.	500
(C) Open stacks for Museum collection (twenty 15' screen for total length of 30' to include extension of space and 1' between screens.)	900
(D) Storage for crates of temporary exhibitions.	200

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