

What Matters Most

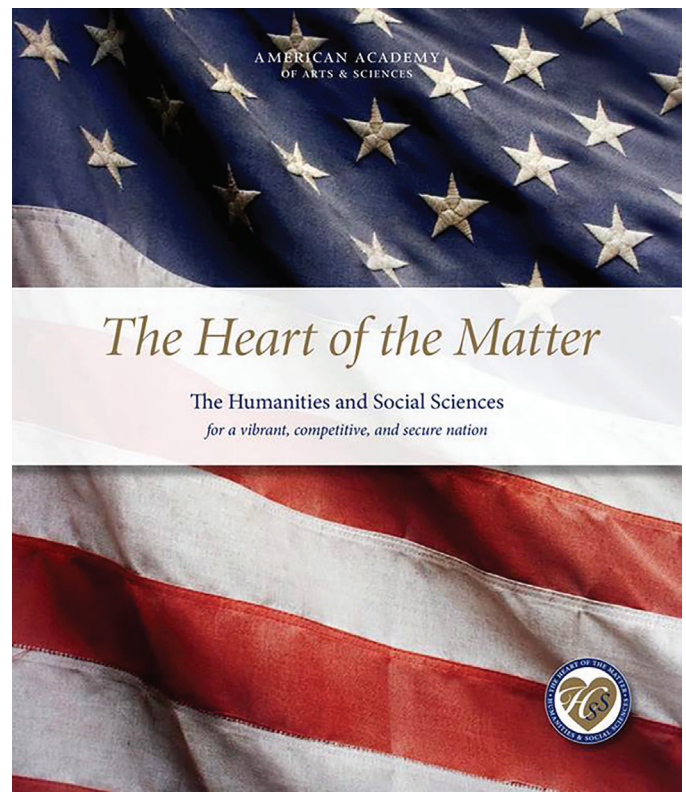
Museums play a crucial role as humanist institutions.

BY JAMES CUNO

In June the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAA&S) released a significant report stressing the essential role of the humanities and social sciences in American society and urging continued support of these endeavors at all levels of government. Commissioned by a bipartisan group of senators and representatives, The Heart of the Matter emphasized the critical need to refocus the country on maintaining national excellence in the humanities, and argued that failure to do so would have negative consequences here and abroad for the future of American education, security and competitiveness.

The report (amacad.org) was the product of intensive research and consultation, with contributions from notables in education, philanthropy, the arts, business and more. The academy's Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences represented an array of American thought leaders, including Duke University President Richard Brodhead, actor John Lithgow, filmmaker Ken Burns and James Cuno, a museum visionary and president and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust in Los Angeles. Here Cuno reflects on the report and the vital part museums must play in the future of the humanities in America.

At the official launch of *The Heart of the Matter*, Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN), one of the report's commissioners, reminded us that one can become a citizen of the United States through naturalization. In just the last year, more than 750,000 people achieved this goal. All it took was a period of residency (five years, or three for spouses of U.S. citizens), knowledge of the English language, and the ability to answer



correctly a few questions about our nation's history and the structure of our government. Language, history and civics, he noted, are humanities and social science subjects.

As we who served on the AAA&S commission discussed the purpose and current state of the humanities and social sciences, we returned again and again to the requirements and responsibilities of citizenship: we *make* our country and *become its citizens* by acting upon the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. And in so doing, we are fulfilling one of the greatest promises and responsibilities of an education in the humanities and social sciences.

Being educated in the humanities and social sciences, however, means more than having mastered bits of

» My TAKE

information. It also means being able to think critically and discern weaknesses in arguments and falsehood in statements. Given the speed with which arguments and statements are disseminated today—over the Web, on the air and through an ever-increasing range of social media—the ability to think critically is more important now than perhaps ever.

We live in an increasingly global world. Being educated about one's own country or culture is not enough today. One must be curious and knowledgeable about the world. This is where museums can make a special contribution. The works in our galleries and exhibitions betray the truth about art: it has never known political boundaries but has always been made out of contact with strange and wonderful foreign things. Museums bear witness to the truth that art is and has always been hybrid and mongrelized—a new truth from other truths—and evidence of the intertwined history of cultures and the connectedness that has always marked our global history.

The United Nations' World Commission on Culture and Development said as much in its *Our Creative Diversity* report: "All cultures are influenced by and in turn influence other cultures. Nor is any other culture changeless, invariant, or static." People are moving beyond borders today in numbers greater than ever. Through access to works of art from elsewhere in the world, people who have lived in one country for a long time are introduced to foreign countries and cultures—increasingly those of their new neighbors.

In the globalized, polyglot, multiethnic world in which we daily confront our many differences, understanding and tolerance of difference is of the greatest importance. Museums, as humanist institutions, can contribute mightily to this. They bear witness to what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur describes: "When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real,



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we are threatened with destruction by our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an ‘other’ among others.”

Art museums, to which I have devoted my career, provide people access not only to difference in the world, but to another basic fact of human—and *humanist*—life: we have always been drawn to the making and appreciation of beauty. In her powerful book, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry writes that the power of beauty leads to justice. She cites the French mystical philosopher, Simone Weil, who said that at the moment we come into contact with something beautiful, we “give up our imaginary position as the center... A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions.” To experience beauty is to experience an “unselfing,” a condition in which we give ourselves up to artifacts, specimens and works of art that preexisted our contact with them and which require us to understand them *in themselves they really are*, to paraphrase Matthew Arnold.

I have this experience every time I go to art museums and give myself up to the strange, wonderful, beautiful things in their collections. It happened the very first time I went to an art museum more than 40 years ago. I saw something of a kind I had never seen before, an artifact from a place and time of which I had never heard before. The museum was the Louvre; I was a young, traveling student. I encountered a small bust of a praying figure from the time of the Archaic Dynasties of the ancient Near East.

The sculpture was a fragment: a torso with a head with a long, flowing beard and one eye inlaid, made of a shell in bitumen putty (lapis lazuli may have been its pupil). Perhaps it was the rippling beard that attracted my attention (I had just grown my first, rather more scraggly beard a few months earlier). But looking at it now, I think it was that one eye, unblinking, staring straight at me as I stood before it. I look at it now in wonder as I must have the first time I saw it, and in ways I imagine its original beholders must have looked at it too. And then not just its original beholders, but everyone since who has seen it, admired it and protected it until it came into the museum where it has been preserved for centuries for all to see. I sense myself as but one person in a

long line of beholders, all of us joined by having experienced the beauty of that object. (By an engraved inscription dating from the Akkadian period, 2340–2200 B.C., we know the name of two of its beholders: Eshpum, the governor of Elam, and Manishtusu, the king of Kish to whom Eshpum gave the sculpture more than 4,000 years ago.)

The humanities teach us about things at once outside and deep within ourselves.

It is this kind of experience that art museums—and, for that matter, museums of all types—offer their visitors, and that the humanities offer all who engage with them. In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, writer Saul Bellow described author Joseph Conrad’s comparison of the quests of the scientist and the artist for what is fundamental, enduring and essential in the visible universe. The scientist knows the world by systematic examination, Conrad wrote. The artist, however, begins by descending “to that part of our being which is a gift, not an acquisition, to the capacity for delight and wonder...our sense of pity and pain, to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knots together the loneliness of innumerable hearts...which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.”

This is a powerful statement about the value of art and of the lasting contributions of the humanities. They teach us about things at once outside and deep within ourselves that develop our sensitivities to the rich and diverse universe of our humanity, that which is fundamental, enduring and essential. This is what we tried to say in our report: whether in providing the tools of citizenship or access to the depth of wonder and beauty, the humanities matter. In fact, they are the heart of the matter. «

James Cuno is president and CEO, J. Paul Getty Trust, Los Angeles.