



# PANORAMA

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“What are our own ambitions for our discipline?” Lauren Kroiz asks at the end of her insightful essay on art education and notions of citizenship in the United States in the early 1940s. What is art history good for? in other words. It’s an irksome question, made more so by general attitudes about the discipline’s fundamental irrelevance in these money-obsessed times: consider, for example, President Obama’s “off-the-cuff remarks” at a General Electric plant in Wisconsin in January 2014, when he stated that “folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree.” When art historian Ann Collins Johns (UT Austin) sent the President a letter of complaint, he quickly apologized—but his assumption that a liberal arts education is inferior to a “skill-based” education, or more correctly, that all forms of higher education should be directly keyed to lucrative employment, is widely shared among many Americans.

As Kroiz explains, today’s monetization of higher ed, and art history in particular, has a history. Her essay examines the College Art Association’s mostly forgotten journal *Parnassus* (1929-1941), which during its last year of publication, and under the editorial helm of Lester Longman, promoted “a better American art and a wiser pedagogy” that stemmed from art historians and artists alike engaged in “critical thinking and creativity.” In 1936, Longman, a Princeton trained art historian, was hired at the University of Iowa to chair a newly combined art/art history department that aimed to train “artist teachers” in historically informed and ethically engaged aesthetic attitudes. During his brief tenure at *Parnassus*, Longman argued for a similarly integrative kind of art pedagogy that could, further, “fire conviction in the minds of a hesitant, disturbed, and disillusioned society.”

Longman’s impulses were framed by deep anxieties about the state of the field at a moment of global crisis: as the nation prepared for war, Longman worried that its citizens were too easily swayed by “sentimental” visual drivel and dangerous “commu-nazi” propaganda, both of which threatened their capacity for critical judgment. His primary examples? The popular, and best-selling, regionalist paintings of his colleague Grant Wood (who taught at Iowa from 1934-1942), which Longman disparaged as “isolationist, tribalistic, chauvinistic illustration.” He wasn’t alone: in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), Clement Greenberg similarly identified popular culture as an insidious form of mass consumption and a primary tool of mass manipulation by totalitarian regimes.

Together, Longman and Greenberg seemed to argue that modern art and art history should be freed from commercial and ideological concerns and used, instead, as more efficacious tools of aesthetic discernment by the “cultivated spectator.” This idealistic (and elitist) stance challenged, of course, the norms of a well-established modern art market and an increasingly professionalized modern university, where the kinds of creative and critical thinking typical of the humanities would be steadily downplayed in favor of distinct silos of disciplinary knowledge, and their attached career trajectories. Set in 1940, Kroiz’s essay is a familiar story of challenge and defeat in late modern capitalism, one that reminds us that art history has always been good for something.