



# PANORAMA

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Lauren Kroiz's essay struck a chord with me. On July 1, 2014, the Department of Art and Art History at Pomona College went in the opposite direction of Lester Longman's State University of Iowa department in 1938, becoming two separate entities. The reasons had to do more with the expansion of the art history side of the department and the emergence of an academic agenda increasingly distinct from that of the studio art faculty, than with the type of pedagogical differences Longman experienced with his studio art colleagues.

Unfortunately, contraction rather than expansion marked the inauguration of our new art history department; we were informed the month before we changed the sign on the department office door that our request to replace one of our four art historians, who is retiring at the end of the 2014-15 academic year, had been denied. In arguing for the position, we had noted the College's celebration of "critical thinking" and "creativity" as hallmarks of a liberal arts education, and pointed to the centrality of art history in fostering both. Recognizing the increasing focus among students on the job prospects attached to any given major, we pointed to a thriving art market, the growing number of museums (at least in Los Angeles), and the medical schools that are encouraging students to major in fields like art history or studio art because of the expanding use of digital imaging, and thus doctors' increasing need for visual analysis skills. We also made a case for the essential role of medieval art history within the discipline as a whole. We linked our replacement position to a rethinking of the Mediterranean basin in the medieval era as a crossroads between the worlds of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and pointed out that the current political crises in the countries at the eastern end of the Mediterranean make an understanding of the history of this region even more important.

Yet these arguments could not compensate for the low numbers of art history majors. In a world where numbers matter, and where the President of the United States openly advertises his doubts about art history as a career choice, our application fell on deaf ears, or on ears attuned to the louder cries of the science and social science faculty whose departments are inundated by ever-increasing numbers of students.

The situation of art history at Pomona College is not unique. Across the country, the humanities are under pressure to prove their "usefulness," which means their profitability in a culture increasingly obsessed with profit margins. How can we best respond to this pressure? How do we justify the value of the study of art in terms other than job prospects or a vague notion of critical thinking? We need to broach these questions openly if we—students and faculty alike—are going to be able to negotiate in meaningful ways the political, economic, and academic crises of today.