

1945: The ASA acquires all rights to *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* from Dagobert D. Runes, the original owner, editor, and publisher of the journal. Thomas Munro is the first editor under ASA ownership.



1947: ASA applies to American Council of Learned Societies for membership. President Katharine E. Gilbert cites annual meetings, regional groups in seven cities, the *Journal*, and membership of 448 members.



1947: At the Annual Meeting at the Baltimore Museum of Art, "tea for wives of members of Society," is served on Friday afternoon, with hostesses Mrs. George Boas and Mrs. Lynn D. Poole

## Curtis Carter

It would be impossible to begin a reflection culminating with the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the American Society for Aesthetics without recalling the vision of its founding President Thomas Munro, a curator of education at the Cleveland Museum in the era of Post-World War I in the late 1930s-early 1940s. It is interesting to note that the support for this project came from a private corporation, instead of government funding as would have been more customary in Europe. The Carnegie Foundation funded three conference led by Munro: one in New York in 1941 and two in 1941 at the Huntington Library in Pasadena and at University of California Berkeley. <sup>1</sup> Out of these continuing discussions, and a growing need of scholars from a variety of fields (artists, philosophers, psychologists, and others) interested in such discussions and publication on issues clustered around questions in aesthetics, Munro led the efforts resulting in a two- fold plan: to create a permanent organization to enable meetings for discussion and a vehicle for publications in aesthetics. The result was establishment of the American Society for Aesthetics and the acquisition of the publishing entity that became the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.

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<sup>1</sup> Rolf Dieter Herrmann, "How a European Views the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*," Summer 1971, 450.

Using these two principal resources, Munro's aims were to enable closer correspondence among people working in aesthetics, to stimulate research, to foster interdisciplinary participation from scholars working in aesthetics in different areas of arts related research and practices. All of these aims centered on a concern for art and especially the theory of art. Although philosophy was included, it was never intended that philosophy be the sole or even the central focus of aesthetics. There was initially afloat the suggestion that aesthetics might become an empirical science, though it was not specified just how aesthetics might function as a science, perhaps apart from its connections to psychology. From the beginning, Munro actively sought the participation of international scholars, particularly Europeans with expertise and interest in aesthetics. This practice would follow from the fact that western theories of art and aesthetics originated in European cultures, including Greek, Renaissance, and Enlightenment theories and later on the Nineteenth century.

Precisely how these aims for a future American Society for Aesthetics, as envisioned by Munro were to be realized, has mainly resided in the ASA Program Committees charged with the selection of topics and presenters, and with the editors of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* who determine its contents. The Board of Trustees, committees, and officers including president, vice president and secretary-treasurer, who also serves as chief administrator for the Society, provide overall governance and management of the Society's activities. Given that the Society continues to thrive and serve the main tenets of its mission today, is a tribute to the vision of its founders and to those charged with carrying out its mission during its first 75 years.

## II. Personal Reflection

My first encounter with the American Society for Aesthetics took place when I attended the Annual Meeting held at the University of Virginia in 1969. Since then ASA has been an important part of my professional development, and a force of enrichment. Perhaps the greatest benefit has been

friendships and contacts with so many who shared their ideas and interests. I would like to pay special tribute especially to ASA members including Hilde Hein, Selma Jeanne Cohen, Rudolf Arnheim, Donald Crawford, Ted Cohen, Nelson Goodman, Arthur Danto, Noël Carroll, Peter Kivy, Stephen Davies, Garry Hagberg, Ivan Gaskell, Eva Kit Wah Man, and Mary Wiseman, to mention a few among the many ASA members, whose ideas and generous personal encouragement and support have enriched my understanding and practice in aesthetics. My ten years as Secretary Treasurer of ASA (1996-2006), and as the host of two Annual Meetings (1980, 2006) provided opportunities for developing leadership skills that extended to other aspects of my work as Haggerty Museum Director and Professor at Marquette University and the Les Aspin Center for Government, and as an international scholar especially in China.

### III. Current and Future Concerns

Throughout its 75 years, the American Society for Aesthetics has more or less held a steady course moving forward through a variety of intellectual challenges including: premature pronouncements on the so called "end of art," split alliances in philosophy among traditional, analytic, and continental strains, and the extension of the arts into technology, junk art, and many other variations that challenge existing aesthetics theories. As well, it is necessary to consider how major social changes with respect to race, cultural diversity, and gender equality will affect the future practices in the arts and aesthetics.

ASA is fortunate to benefit from financial resources from contributions, investments, and revenues that enable it to continue and extend its efforts. However, changes call for constant reassessment of mission and allocation of resources in relation to altered conditions of the world. There can be no room for complacency about the future of the American Society for Aesthetics, as the world continues to change exponentially. Hence, we do well to maintain a sharp eye in assessing how the needs for aesthetics are changing, and

how the American Society for Aesthetics might need to alter its strategies in light of new opportunities and needs in contemporary society.

One noteworthy contemporary shift affecting the practice of the arts and aesthetics is the move from nationalist based aesthetics, as a result of the globalization of art practices. Now, more than ever before, there are opportunities for extending involvement of western scholars in aesthetics to explore how aesthetics is understood and practiced in other cultures. What, for example, are the concerns of aesthetics in African, Eastern, and Middle Eastern and Latin American cultures? Currently, aesthetics has a huge following in China with support as its people come to terms with the transition from rural village to urban life, and the intervention of Western aesthetics into China.

While the movement of aesthetics from the West into China and other Eastern cultures is accelerating, mainly through the efforts of Eastern scholars who have been active since the beginning of the Twentieth century in their efforts to transmit Western aesthetic ideas into China and other Eastern cultures, there is it seems still relatively little reciprocity where Western aesthetics actively seeks to acquire greater understanding of Eastern aesthetics. My sense is that the American Society for Aesthetics participates in only limited engagements with non-western cultures. This is perhaps one area where ASA has not kept pace with the possibilities expressed in the mission of our founder.

There are other developing areas of research and inquiry where contemporary cultural and social practices might invite changes in the future plans of ASA. Today's experimental sciences are reaching into the brain to try to determine what in our brains manage activities relating to the arts and cognition. Indeed, some American and other aestheticians, are exploring such possibilities for developing new avenues for research in aesthetics. At the very least, such evolving developments invite examining the possibilities for greater inclusion in the projects of the American Society for

Aesthetics as it charts its future toward a century of explorations.

A more general concern centers on the social relevance assigned to aesthetics in contemporary society. There is still much confusion in the public sphere about the meaning of the concept of aesthetics and its relevance to everyday life. Some efforts to address the connections have resulted in positing theories of aesthetics and everyday life. But even such efforts have not reached beyond the scope of discourse among academic aestheticians. While the pages of the *Journal* and the Presentations at Annual Meetings are not aimed at the general public, there is need for greater attention to just how the practices of aesthetics among scholars and artists can contribute to understanding the role of aesthetics and the arts to the larger world. Perhaps it is time for ASA to assume a more aggressive role of advocacy and planning for the place that aesthetics might have into the future, both in education and in the lives of people in the world at large, for example in the future of city life which will dominate the coming centuries.

There are positive signs as ASA gives greater attention to issues relating to how aesthetics might contribute to understanding, and changing behavior in reference to societal concerns pertaining to diversity, race, gender, peace, social justice and arts education. Still, the pages in our *Journal* and conference papers are mainly concerned with issues that are of interest to a self-selected part of the academic community, which do not obviously serve the needs of the greater community. We are of course entitled to engage in reflecting on issues particular to aesthetics as an academic discipline, but perhaps there is more that aesthetics can contribute to the greater community while also satisfying its own intellectual curiosity and needs for expression. Such concerns may indeed require greater attention as we move forward to celebrate a century of life for the American Society of Aesthetics.

Perhaps a most pressing practical concern for the future of members of the American Society for Aesthetics is this:

where will be its home base in the academic worlds of the future? For the most part, aesthetics has resided in the philosophy departments of universities and colleges. Philosophers, while lending tacit support, do not always see aesthetics as a priority, or even a necessity. And as the academic world places lesser value on the humanities, we may anticipate problems with support for philosophy itself, let alone aesthetics. It will be no surprise as philosophy departments under pressure of declining resources, may not retain the positions currently occupied by aestheticians. Where then might aesthetics seek support? Will it be in the sciences? Individual arts? Or will the future of aesthetics be left adrift, or to independent scholars? In short, the problem of sustaining a home for aesthetics in academic institutions or elsewhere is of concern. Perhaps the role of ASA will be increasingly important in addressing this issue.