



**Earl A. Powell III: *The Humanities and the Role of the Art Museum***

Thank you **Dr. Jeff Hecker, John Veroneau**, and the entire **Executive Committee of the University of Maine Humanities Center** for inviting me to be here tonight.

I was privileged to serve on the **American Academy of Arts & Science's Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences** and proud to be a part of developing the report, *The Heart of the Matter*. I congratulate the University of Maine on their Humanities initiative, and their early and successful application of the work of the Commission.

It's an honor to share a little of my perspective on the importance of a humanities education for an enriched life and for active citizenship.

As the director of the National Gallery of Art, I can speak with experience about the power of the arts—particularly the visual arts—in the education of the whole person. Great works of art engage the mind and senses, and they educate the whole person and teach us about judgment, values, interpretation, and critical thinking. While technology changes, a “curriculum” based on beauty and excellence is universal and timeless.

Museums and cultural institutions can offer an opportunity for teaching and learning. They can be, as Michael Kimmelman noted in *The New York Times*, “a kind of ‘sacred space’ having everything to do with curiosity, which is what makes us human. It is curiosity that serves the pleasures of the spirit, the deepest curiosity. We go to museums to remind ourselves who we are.”

The founder of the National Gallery, Andrew W. Mellon, accomplished a great deal in his life in his roles in government, business, and finance. But he was still motivated to achieve something even greater through the founding of the National Gallery. It was only through his work on the National Gallery that he stated that he was able to “connect his life with something eternal.”

Over the past 73 years, the National Gallery has provided hundreds of millions with tangible reminders of the power of the human

spirit and the beauty of artistic expression. At the opening in 1941, Paul Mellon expressed aspirations for the new National Gallery by saying, “It was my father’s hope, and it is ours that the National Gallery would become not a static but a living institution, growing in usefulness and importance to artists, scholars and the general public.”

Andrew and Paul Mellon knew that nothing could replicate the experience of quiet discovery and exploration when faced with an original work or art. They recognized that a national, public museum would be important on both an individual level for citizens and on a national level for our democracy.

From its very beginning the National Gallery played a role as a center not just of visual art, but of education and general culture. Then and now, educational staff give tours, a music department presents Sunday concerts, and a library welcomes students and scholars. Much has changed over the years, but it was all set in motion by the original gift and mission defined by Andrew Mellon.

The National Gallery in particular, but all museums in general, are community centers and gathering places. They contribute to a national culture and enhance our quality of life. And museums are popular: according to the American Association of Museums there

are roughly 850 million visits each year to American museums – that’s more than the attendance for all major league sporting events and theme parks combined. Museums are also economic engines: museums directly contribute \$21 billion to the U.S. economy each year and they generate billions more through indirect spending by their visitors.

As the American educational landscape changes, museums play an ever more important role in the education of our citizens. With the spread of online learning, in particular, museums are filling the gaps by providing students with community, resources, and objects.

America’s museums, including the National Gallery, play an important role in expanding humanistic education. Even now, during an economic downturn, new museums are being built and old museums are being renovated and expanded, the National Gallery included. And they must, because institutions based on the humanities remind us of the human spirit at its finest. We collect, conserve, study, and display the very best in artistic expression. We innovate in the ways we educate and serve the community, but always in deference to the art itself. The world may change rapidly, the means and methods that we use to display and disseminate this great art changes and will continue to change, but the excellence and the power of the collection will not.

All of us gathered tonight can agree that growing an appreciation for cultural institutions and a liberal arts education requires advocacy, and increased support for partnerships and initiatives—like the initiative we are celebrating tonight. We all play an important role in forming an inclusive, educated, and creative national culture.