

News Release for February 25, 2001

## TANG MUSEUM AT SKIDMORE COLLEGE HOLDS CONFERENCE TO PROBE MULTI-FACETED ROLE OF MUSEUMS

The Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College will host a conference April 6-7 on the role and changing nature of the museum in contemporary society. The event will feature as speakers and panelists a number of prominent critics, writers, artists, and museum directors.

With its title framed as a question, "An Age of the Museum?," the conference will explore such topics as how the concept of the museum has changed during the 20th century; how museums reflect, interact with, and sometimes distort the cultural values they express; and how museums help us define terms and ideas like truth, beauty, originality, and authenticity.

The event is co-sponsored by the Tang Museum and *Salmagundi* magazine, an international journal of the humanities and social sciences, published at Skidmore.

"The intention of the conference is to promote debate on issues that extend far beyond the policies of particular museums, issues that bear heavily on the shape and mood of the entire culture," said Robert Boyers, editor of *Salmagundi* and Tisch Professor of Arts and Letters at Skidmore. "Obviously it matters to all of us that many museums today seem more interested in reflecting or keeping up with very recent developments in art and culture than with exhibiting and preserving what an elite takes to be the most valuable and important works the culture has produced. And it matters too that in a whole variety of ways the museum has become a popular institution, where not long ago it seemed peripheral to the interests of most people."

Among the participants will be philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto; essayist and novelist Susan Sontag; former Whitney Museum director David Ross, who is now the director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Jean Clair, director of the Picasso Museum in Paris; Steve Dietz, director of new media at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; and Philip Fisher, Harvard University professor in American literature and culture; among others.

The event will begin on Friday, April 6, with a session from 7:30 to 10 p.m. featuring a keynote address by Danto, who is art critic for the *Nation* magazine and author of *The Disenfranchisement of Art*. Respondents to Danto's talk will include David Ross; Michael Fried, director of the Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins University; and Barbara Black, Skidmore English professor and author of *On Exhibit*.

On Saturday, April 7, the conference will offer a number of panels, including a conversation with Sontag -- whose many works include *On Photography* (winner of the National Book Critics Circle award in criticism) -- and with Fisher, author of *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums*. No papers will be read at these sessions, each of which will begin with a very brief set of remarks and permit speakers to engage one another at length. The final session of the day will be a wrap-up panel discussion in which audience questions will also be invited.

The Saturday agenda also includes a morning gallery tour of one of the Tang Museum's exhibits, *The World According to the Newest and Most Exact Observations: Mapping Art and Science*, which brings together examples from five centuries of mapping. Combining more than 50 geographic maps and atlases with scientific objects, drawings of the human body, genetic-sequencing equipment, and map-oriented artworks by 19 artists, the exhibit springs directly from the Tang's interdisciplinary mission. Leading the gallery tour will be Tang Curator Ian Berry and two artists featured in the show, Denis Wood and Mel Ziegler.

Said Charles Stainback, Dayton Director of the Tang Museum, "The interdisciplinary mission of the Tang, in all of its programming, places it at an interesting juncture. Museums throughout the U.S. are rethinking their missions, attempting to attract more diverse audiences. The Tang is approaching this dilemma by rethinking the business of the museum. In short, we are a museum that is driven by ideas and not by our collections or the traditional constraints of connoisseurship. This conference seems only natural for us to do at this time, right after opening and before we have established a history or tradition to look back on."

The proceedings of the conference will serve as the basis for a special issue of *Salmagundi*, to be published in the winter of 2002.

NOTE TO WRITERS AND EDITORS: YOU ARE INVITED TO ATTEND ALL OR PART OF THE CONFERENCE. IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO ATTEND, PLEASE CONTACT ROBERT KIMMERLE, SKIDMORE'S DIRECTOR OF COLLEGE RELATIONS, AT 518-580-5733; [bkimmerl@skidmore.edu](mailto:bkimmerl@skidmore.edu).