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Lauren Lessing, Mirken Director of Academic and Public Programs

I direct the academic and public programs of a college art museum primarily devoted to historical and contemporary art of the United States. Over the past decade, as our building, staff, endowments, and collections have grown dramatically, I have often asked myself what exactly is the meaning of the term “American art” and why museums of American art are important. My interest has focused less on the exhausted question of “What is American about American art?” and more on how our collections and programs can keep pace with an expanding notion of national identity while resisting the bitter political fragmentation that increasingly divides us. In this particular historical moment, can an art museum help to build a sense of common commitment to a place, a set of ideals, and one another?

I think it can, and there is some research that suggests I am right. For instance, in 2012, a large-scale, random-assignment study of school tours of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, conducted by scholars at the University of Arkansas and Rice University, found that even modest exposure to the notable collection of that museum—which showcases the great cultural and regional diversity of American art—dramatically increased children’s tolerance and ability to feel empathy across social divides. My own experience has shown me that college students can gain a similarly expanded and connected notion of what it means to be American from encounters with art in the collection of the Colby College Museum of Art. As was the case with the schoolchildren in the Crystal Bridges study, such encounters also increase the ability of Colby students to think critically, not only about art, but also about historical and contemporary social problems.

Many Americans (perhaps in particular liberal academics like myself) shy away from the word patriotism, associating it with xenophobia and blind devotion. But, by working to create a more expansive and inclusive definition of American art, museums have an opportunity to define patriotism differently, as a shared commitment to solving the problems we face—including political polarization, racism, environmental threats—and cultivating empathy for one another.