

A Tribute to Bruce Cole
Ethics and Public Policy Center Dinner
Cosmos Club, Washington, D.C.
January 14, 2019

One year ago this month, the family and friends of Bruce Cole mourned his untimely death, and it would be completely disingenuous to pretend that the grief of losing this family man, friend, patriot, and leader is no longer with us. When someone matters as much as Bruce did to all of us, the sense of loss will remain.

But now, a year later, the loss is also founded on an appreciation for all that he left for us. And it is a rich and wonderful legacy. What makes a person immortal is what the person leaves in the hearts and minds of those who come after, and this evening I want to celebrate Bruce Cole the scholar, the mentor, and the civic leader. In the words of Robert Pogue Harrison—like Bruce Cole, a distinguished scholar of comparative literature—“We help the dead live on so that they may help us go forward.”

Any fraction of the recognition and awards that Bruce Cole received during his career would be the envy of the American professoriate. Those who knew him also knew how lightly and modestly he wore these distinctions. He was Distinguished Professor of Fine Arts and Professor of Comparative Literature at Indiana University in Bloomington. In 2006, Governor Mitch Daniels awarded Dr. Cole the Sagamore of the Wabash, which recognizes individuals who have brought distinction to the state of Indiana. In 2008, he received the President’s Medal from the University of Indiana for “excellence in service, achievement and teaching.” His work was supported by the [Guggenheim Foundation](#), the [American Council of Learned Societies](#), the [Kress Foundation](#), the [American Philosophical Society](#), and the [UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies](#). He was a corresponding member of the [Accademia Senese degli Intronati](#), the oldest learned society in Europe, and he was a founder and former co-president of the Association for Art History.

There is more, and I am only touching on the highlights.

In 2008, Bruce Cole was decorated as a Knight of the Grand Cross, the highest honor in the Republic of [Italy](#). Later that same year, President George W. Bush awarded him the [Presidential Citizens Medal](#), the second highest honor that the President of the United States can confer on a citizen. President Bush's award honored Bruce Cole "for his work to strengthen our national memory and ensure that our country's heritage is passed on to future generations."

Bruce left us fifteen books and scores of articles. They are a joy to read, and his personality, character, and values consistently shine through them all, whether academic in focus or contributions to higher education or public policy. A signature of Bruce's work is access and clarity. He stated his credo in the introduction to *The Informed Eye*: "I have tried to avoid, whenever possible, art historical jargon, obtuse theory, and fashionable interpretation. I want to explain these works as plainly and directly as I can for those just starting to look at and think about art."

I confess with some embarrassment in front of this audience that includes distinguished art historians and art critics that it took me a rather long time to gain an appreciation for the Trecento. But Bruce's 1976 book on *Giotto and Florentine Painting* was a revelation, a sure guide to the drama and genius of Giotto. Bruce escorts us into the Uffizi Gallery, where we find a Madonna that reveals how "its author's humanity is expressed through a wonderful combination of the grandiose and the detailed, the abstracted and the particular—a combination that rather accurately reflects the human condition." Only one with a heart of stone would not want the adventure of that journey into the details of the artist's work and—a signature of all of Bruce's work—a window into civilization itself. As Bruce concluded, "all great art has something for each age." The warm tribute paid to him by the distinguished John Pope-Hennessy was well deserved: "generations of students of Italian painting will have reason to be grateful to him."

Bruce Cole the scholar was always ready to rise to the challenges before him, the battle lines where he found himself stationed. At a time when both the search for truth and the standards of excellence are too often dismissed as either inherently impossible or even tools of repression, Bruce took his stand. Consider just the full title of his 1999 book, *The Informed Eye*, that I mentioned a moment ago: *Understanding Masterpieces of Western Art*. That title must be at very least a micro-aggression, maybe an even graver infraction, even though Bruce's encyclopedic

grasp of greatness extended from ancient Egypt through modern metal sculptures. Great scholarship comes from both the mind and the heart, and Bruce gave us both. In his introduction, he explains the choice of the artworks he describes, all of them “of the highest formal and interpretive order,” adding, “many of them are old friends whom I have long loved and admired.”

I want to let Bruce speak about his vision of art:

Great art, while always linked closely to the society that produced it, transcends the narrow societal boundaries from which it springs. As long as it exists, such art embodies universal, transcendent meanings which can illuminate, instruct, and ennoble. The informed contemplation of a single work of art can be life enhancing, a source of lasting joy, comfort, and spiritual invigoration.

Douglas Lewis, curator of sculpture at the National Gallery, knew at once the significance of this book: “The confident identification of superior quality, as well as other unfashionable principles, are here triumphantly re-vindicated.” Amen and amen.

I also take note of what he and his co-author had previously written in the preface to the volume that accompanied the PBS series, *Art of the Western World*: “Our art is part of us; in it flows the spiritual and intellectual lifeblood which still nourishes and sustains our ancient civilization... Art can embody and transcend both its creators and its times to reveal enduring truths about the human condition. The more we understand art, the more we understand ourselves and the complexities of our world.”

His protégés and disciples include some of the most eminent scholars and teachers. He was dissertation advisor and career-long mentor to the late Eleonora Luciano, who was associate curator of sculpture at the National Gallery of Art at the time of her death. Bruce was also advisor to Michelle Erhardt, who recently chaired the Department of Fine Art and Art History at Christopher Newport University: it was a sign of Bruce’s ongoing friendship and engagement with the students he advised that he gifted 2,000 volumes of his scholarly library to Christopher Newport University, now housed in a special gallery of the university library.

Bruce was the longest serving chairman in the history of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and his years of service to the nation were marked by contributions of the highest importance. It was exciting to work for Bruce, because everything had a guiding light and

purpose. At a time of darkness when the nation reeled from the shock and horror of September 11, Bruce called us back to the light of our own history and values as a nation. He created the *We the People* initiative, launched on Constitution Day in September 2002 at a Rose Garden ceremony with President Bush and historian David McCullough to help us all understand our heritage, further America's principles, and rise to the nation's defense. "Defending our homeland," he said, "requires not only successful military campaigns; it also depends on citizens understanding their history, their institutions, and their ideals." And "a nation that does not know why it exists, or what it stands for, cannot be expected to long endure. We must recover from the amnesia that shrouds our history in darkness, our principles in confusion, and our future in uncertainty."

Bruce the erstwhile academic, at a time of tight and contentious budgeting, made a persuasive and successful case for an increase in the NEH budget to address these crucial needs of the American people.

The U.S. Newspaper Program wasn't just about the important task of preserving fragile records. It was "the first draft of our nation's history." The first time I reported as a Division Director to Bruce, I did not feel like I was in a bureaucratic government meeting, but I felt like I was once again in conversation with a favorite graduate professor, whose scholarly, probing questions were animated by a deep passion to discover truth, to find meaning and purpose. And to serve the best interests of the nation. It was exhilarating.

Those of us who worked with Bruce knew that his high expectations for excellence and dedication to duty were graciously matched by gentleness, patience, and humor. I can recall many lovely moments. Once, when I was reporting in committee on a particularly thorny issue, I noted that our summary would need to be "ruthlessly nuanced." Not surprisingly, his face lit up with delight at what I confess was juxtaposition that was not part of the parlance of government-speak. On a more serious note, when I came to him, somewhat diffidently, with a proposal to create a new grant program, Landmarks of American History, it took him only moments excitedly to grasp onto and amplify its potential to bring large groups of school teachers for intense one-week seminars at the places where history happened, and he made it a cornerstone of the *We the People* initiative.

In all of my time working at NEH and in contact with NEH, I never saw the staff, the civil service, show such esprit de corps as I did with Bruce as chairman. Bruce called on every member of the staff to add intellect and value to the Endowment.

And, as an encore, and another important contribution to America's knowledge of its own history, he conducted the delicate and fraught negotiations that relocated the Museum of the American Revolution to downtown Philadelphia.

In his last book, *Art from the Swamp*, and the numerous essays and columns that Bruce wrote at EPPC, the personae of civic leader, scholar, and art critic merge.

The *New Criterion* was a perfect venue. Here we find our gentle friend using his pen like a sabre to cut through the arrogant, self-serving posturing of elites who deemed themselves the hierophants of high culture that the unwashed (you and I included) should fund, but never question. The Eisenhower Memorial Commission might coo over its "starchitect": Bruce cut to the chase of misused federal funds and a plan of towering ugliness. When WP columnist Philip Kennicott wrote of the "re-gendering" of the vocabulary of memorialization in the Eisenhower planning, Bruce helped the absurdity of the boondoggle scream out for itself. The scholar whose subtle analysis of the Trecento won him the highest acclaim in this nation and in Europe, also understood keenly what America's down-to-earth Norman Rockwell achieved. In the pages of the *New Criterion*, he skewered the latest biography of Rockwell for its attempt to deduce the artist's sexual fantasies from his art. Commenting on Rockwell's alleged bouts of depression and his unsuccessful marriages, Bruce writes: "All of this may or may not be true, but so what? Countless artists across time have had similar problems, as have millions of their contemporaries. It's tricky to see an artist's psyche expressed in his work." Would that every department of art history across the nation had that chiseled onto its walls. He dismisses the book with the lapidary observation, "it neglects the most important thing about Rockwell: his art." Time draws on apace, but let me point to one more favorite from *New Criterion*, Bruce's dissection of the grandiose schemes at the Hirshhorn to spend millions on an inflatable balloon: "Bursting the Hirshhorn's Bubble." He had no patience for a museum director who was fixated on the "controversial and highly experimental." Lest anyone think for a moment that Bruce's essays were simply polemics, however deserving their knavish targets were, do turn to the

limpid, edifying tribute he wrote after visiting the National Gallery of Art's exhibition, "Power and Pathos: Bronze Sculpture of the Hellenistic World."

As readers of Bruce's scholarly works know well, his taste in art was broad and unprejudiced, except for the criterion of quality.

I close this tribute to a dear friend, inspired scholar and teacher, patriot and civic leader with an allusion to the ancient world that Bruce knew so well.

In Virgil's *Aeneid*, a work that Bruce knew deeply, the poet describes a place in the Elysian Fields, the Roman abode of the blessed dead, where, alongside the great Roman generals and statesmen, those who enhanced human life with the crafts and arts they developed have their eternal place of honor. Bruce Cole earned his spot in the Elysian Fields as both a visionary national leader and as a scholar-teacher who brought light to the world of the humanities and the arts. Thank you, Bruce, for your life of meaningful service. May you rest in peace, dear friend: I know you are forever in that place of honor. But as you rest in peace, please know that you will continue to inspire us to be the informed, engaged citizens on which our nation's future depends. You remain alive with us. Thank you for the light you have given us.