

THE ARTS AND CULTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

WHEN CHANCELLOR CLARK KERR, ENCOUNTERING a friend from Harvard, asked why he was visiting Berkeley, his friend responded, to see, from the perspective of an Athenian, how they did things at Sparta. In his memoir Kerr says he was both stung and inspired by the observation. Was Berkeley, with its growing academic might in the sciences and social sciences, as culturally barren as Sparta? What could he do to make things different? Over the next several years, as chancellor and then as president of the university, he promoted initiatives to expand cultural facilities and programs, academic and otherwise, throughout the university system.

Since its earliest days Berkeley liked to style itself the “Athens of the West.” After building the first major modern Greek Theatre with donor largesse, the university was still ambivalent about institutional support for the arts. While it strove to make its students cultured only the study of literature was a part of the curriculum.

But a university with poets, sculptors, actors, and dancers as professors, and students majoring in such fields, was probably a little more than even the most visionary had in mind.

Today, as earlier of course, community members flock to each campus to see some of their region’s and the nation’s best performers. Performances and traveling exhibitions are common throughout the enormous university system.

A complete chronicle of the arts and the University of California would be the size of a telephone directory and encompass thousands of individuals, hundreds of academic programs, and scores of facilities. In this issue we have had to content ourselves with only a selection, past and present. In the past there have been many underlying issues that still roil academic and administrative waters: what, for instance, is the proper relationship between artistic practice and scholarship? Some disciplines have divorced into separate departments, such as art history and art practice. In others, they continue to co-habit, sometimes uneasily. What are the boundaries or are there even boundaries between “fine art,” “popular culture,” and “folk art”? In a multicultural society, what sorts of “culture” should the university enshrine and support? In an era of financial stringency what is the future for academic programs and facilities in the arts?

A common thread running throughout this issue is that programs in the arts have emerged and thrived with the inspiration and commitment of individuals, sometimes with benefits unseen in the original conception.

We hope that you, whatever your cultural allegiances and attitudes, will discover both broad and familiar aspects of your own university history here.