

Professor Craig Clunas' speech at the Art History Link-Up Colnaghi Foundation event on 9th July 2019:

Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Craig Clunas and mine is the shiny bald head you can see in a couple of the photographs of the most recent Art History Link-Up report, bending over some images from China in a particularly dungeon-like part of the British Museum.

I had the privilege of spending a day with the students there at the end of last year, and I wanted to share just a few of my thoughts from that experience, one I personally found extremely enriching, and which I very much look forward to repeating, if they will have me back.

Having just retired from a career of teaching students about the art of China in three separate British universities, and before that trying to make it meaningful for a broad public in the Victoria and Albert Museum, I think I have fairly well-developed antennae for when my audience is engaged, when they really, really want to know more, and so I can be pretty confident when I say that this was one of the most engaged, lively, and intellectually curious group of students it has been my privilege to work with, anywhere, ever. The desire for informed looking, closer looking, deeper looking, which lies at the heart of art history shone off them all like an aura, and as always happens with the best teaching experiences the teacher learned as much as the students; I found myself seeing some new things in some very familiar artworks, precisely because these students were fearless enough to home in on the most meaningful and also the most difficult questions; those are the killer questions that specialists in every field have, but that we have all agreed not to ask each other, because we don't really know the answers.

We need that fearlessness, and that intellectual curiosity. The field of art history needs it, because if the pool of talent from which art historians are drawn becomes too shallow or too narrow, then what we will end up will inevitably be a shallow and narrow art history.

Just as a wider and richer range of art becomes part of the way art history thinks about itself, with not just geographical expansion but also expansion into new media and new forms of visual experience, so we have to continually think of ways to make the experience of art meaningful to wider audiences.

We all have responsibilities here, we can all play a part in different ways, and I'd just like to add my thanks to all who have played a part in making this splendid evening possible.

This is a marvellous initiative and one I am very proud to be even marginally associated with; it deserves every support and I wish it goes from strength to strength. Thank you.



Craig Clunas is Professor Emeritus of the History of Art, University of Oxford, a founding AHLU donor and a volunteer visiting lecturer.

