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Remarks (as prepared for delivery)
for the Opening of the “Picturing the Nation” Conference
with the U.K. Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)

Washington, D.C.
October 23, 2008

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the Old Post Office Building, home of the National Endowment for the Humanities. I'm delighted all of you could join us for today's conference on the topic of "Picturing the Nation."

I'd like to begin by acknowledging some important people:

- Professor Shearer West and the staff of the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the United Kingdom, co-sponsor of today's conference; and
- NEH staff, for all your work in making this event possible. Thank you.
- Marcello Pera, former President of the Italian Senate
- Helen Thorne, from the U.S. office of the Research Councils of the United Kingdom.

Now I want to share a little background on how today's conference came about.

The NEH has long recognized that the humanities are a global endeavor. In fact, about one-quarter of our total program spending each year supports projects on the history and culture of other nations.

But we're striving to do even more in this area. One goal I've stressed during my time as Chairman is for the NEH to work with our peer agencies in other nations, so we can pursue common aims and foster cultural and scholarly exchanges.

NEH is now co-operating with organizations in Italy, China, Mexico, and Germany as well as the United Kingdom.

The Endowment has forged an excellent relationship with our counterpart in Italy, the Consiglio Nazionale di Ricerca, or CNR. We have signed two Memoranda of Understanding with the CNR to explore how we could promote scholarly research in the humanities.

NEH and CNR have co-sponsored two conferences, and have issued requests for proposals for individual research projects on the relationship between U.S. and Italian cultural heritage. We are planning a third conference on conservation issues.

We have also been working with our colleagues in Mexico to promote cross-border cultural understanding. Last year in New York we held a Bi-national Meeting of Border States and Regions — the first-ever gathering of cultural leaders from the border regions of Mexico and the United States. And we have signed Memoranda of Understanding with CONACULTA, the Mexican Cultural Ministry, and the UNAM, the Autonomous National University of Mexico.

Earlier this year, NEH signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the German Research Foundation, or DFG, to support digital humanities projects. We are currently offering two Bilateral Digital Humanities Grant Programs --- one for Bilateral Symposia and Workshops, and another for Joint Digitization Projects.

Our cooperation with DFG is similar to the partnership we struck last year with the United Kingdom's Joint Information Systems Committee, or JISC. In March, we announced the first recipients of the JISC/NEH Transatlantic Digitization Collaboration Grant awards. These grants encourage British-American collaboration on humanities projects that use digital technology to unify collections of artifacts, documents, manuscripts, and other cultural materials.

In January, I was in London for the first joint NEH-JISC panel and symposium, and I had dinner one evening with Philip Esler, Chief Executive of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and Professor Evelyn Welch. During our conversation, I mentioned Picturing America, and we discovered that both the U.S. and the U.K. have current initiatives involving their nation's art.

At that point, our discussion turned to a larger question: What role does art play in the life and history of a nation? What does art tell us about a civilization or a people?

Artists do not work in isolation, and their art does not originate in a void; it grows out of a culture, a civilization. Art speaks dynamically and forcefully about where a people have come from; what they have endured; and where they are headed. By studying and understanding a nation's art, we can learn much about how that nation views itself and its place in the broader story of humanity.

To cite just two examples: It is impossible to imagine the history of ancient Egypt without thinking of the great pyramids, or the history of Renaissance Italy without recalling the works of Michelangelo and Leonardo. What these civilizations accomplished through their art greatly affects how we understand them. Art helps us dig below the essential facts of history and discover insights into the character, ideals, and aspirations of a nation.

My conversation with Professors Esler and Welch led to further discussions about how the NEH and AHRC could cooperate to explore this topic more deeply. The result is today's conference, which will be followed by a second conference next year in Great Britain.

In fact, NEH's Picturing America project has been attracting interest from outside America's borders. Last month at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, Picturing America was the highlight of "American History and Culture Week," sponsored by the U.S. Permanent Mission to UNESCO. The week began with a Symposium and the opening of an exhibition of the 40 Picturing America images.

This past June, I was also invited by the Mexican Ministry of Culture to give a presentation on Picturing America at the National Arts Center in Mexico City. This led to preliminary discussions of exhibiting Picturing America more widely in Mexico, and also of Mexico possibly developing a similar project, using Mexican art.

The NEH has offered to share our experiences with our Mexican colleagues --- and our counterparts in other nations --- if they choose to pursue similar projects in their own countries. We are also exploring more possibilities for exhibiting Picturing America in other nations.

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The purpose of Picturing America is to provide our citizens, particularly our young people, an engaging and innovative way to connect with the people, places, events, and ideas that have shaped our nation. By using works of art to help them *see* better, we hope to help them *understand* better the continuing drama of the American experiment in self-government.

In a few minutes, we'll hear a presentation from NEH Senior Program Officer Barbara Bays, who has been the real catalyst in the development of Picturing America. Barbara will discuss the specifics of the program, including how the concept originated ... the substance of the program ... how and why we chose the particular images ... and how they can be used in classrooms and libraries.

Barbara is just one of the outstanding group of scholars and experts from the United Kingdom and the United States who will shed light today on the topic of "Picturing the Nation." In their presentations, they will address questions such as:

- How can art illuminate a nation's history?
- How can the humanities enrich the understanding of history by engaging the public in the study of art?
- How can art and history best be integrated in scholarship and education?

We are honored to have gathered such a distinguished group, and I look forward to the stimulating ideas and discussions they will present for us today.

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