The first class I took in graduate school (and as it turns out, my favorite) was a class in historiography—the practice which acknowledges the role of the historian or the person who is telling a history in determining how it’s told, from which perspective, what and who is included, and what and who is omitted.

From an institutional perspective, legacy is another form of self-perpetuating historiography, which, by way of a narrativized kind of inclusion, can create its own seemingly immutable and entrenched systems of exclusion. At the close of 2020, the historiographer’s role in constructing our present and our understanding of our past is being played out into daylight. As a culture, we are finally beginning to articulate the ways in which historiography and legacy (among other shared conditions) have intertwined with the engraving of a democracy, which was never really that democratic to begin with.

By this time this journal reaches your mailbox, it will be 2021 and Skowhegan will be celebrating its 75th anniversary. As we reflect on our own historical narrative, the story we tell ourselves, the legacy we have inherited and the legacy we author, I have been consistently struck by the openness of the school’s founding documents. In its original articles of incorporation, the founders of the institution list its purpose in the following:

To organize and conduct schools of painting, sculpture, and art of design in Maine or elsewhere, as may be necessary for the accomplishment of its purpose—to leave space for generations of directors, boards, artists to be able to adjust, expand, and innovate according to the urgencies of any given moment. The “Maine or elsewhere” leads me to believe they just wanted to have a school, wherever it might have to happen.

The mutability of “business incidental thereto” leaves us the ability to conduct pedagogy as effectively as we can. Over time, we have followed the same loose frame—nowhere is it dictated in this mission that we have 65 participants, five faculty and two directors or any of the other characteristics that have been consistent almost since the first summer. We’ve often changed and expanded the program, but there is space in the “art of design” that allows for expansion beyond the forms of art that existed at the time. We have also followed and expanded the extraordinary historic precedent set in 1946 to accept and include a true diversity of artists. Most importantly, that allows for expansion beyond the forms of art that existed at the time. We have also followed and expanded the extraordinary historic precedent set in 1946 to accept and include a true diversity of artists. Most importantly, that allows for expansion beyond the forms of art that existed at the time. We have also followed and expanded the extraordinary historic precedent set in 1946 to accept and include a true diversity of artists. Most importantly, that allows for expansion beyond the forms of art that existed at the time.

Over the years, I have come to think of its vagueness as license—our own historicization that William Cummings, Harry Varnum Pozo, Sidney Simon, and Charles Cutler wrote it this way on purpose—to leave space for generations of directors, boards, artists to be able to adjust, expand, and innovate according to the urgencies of any given moment. The “Maine or elsewhere” leads me to believe they just wanted to have a school, wherever it might have to happen.

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The privilege of this institution from its earliest days—the privilege to imagine and even to dare to enact something that can subvert the boundaries around it, so that others might dream democracy, freedom, wildness as well. Hopefully for as long as is necessary in the future, is what one chooses to do with one’s privilege to manifest. But the question for all of us at Skowhegan, perhaps in the past, certainly in the present, and moving forward, is what dream do we make for some and not for others. Skowhegan, like everywhere else, has to tread lightly around becoming too enamored by its own story—where the narrative can become concretized rather than giving into ever evolving, ever innovating, and ever expanding.

For some, this privilege has allowed us to offer more comprehensive buildings and grounds so that facilities are accessible to a wider array of artists with differing abilities and practices. It allowed us to expand food offerings to contribute economically to our local community. It allowed us to increase program staff salaries to acknowledge the labor of our team whose work is challenging and real while recognizing that not all staff arrive on campus from the same economic circumstances and flexibility, and cannot invest in this work based on the sheer perceived privilege of working at Skowhegan. It will allow us to provide more equitable housing to all of its participants. None of these things are explicitly outlined in the mission statement, but they are vital nonetheless by its decree in the current world. In 2020, it allowed us the freedom to keep the campus closed (in light of a global pandemic), so we could instead triage within and outside of our community to help where we could and reinforce the institution internally so we would be better equipped to, again, continue the teaching of art in Maine and elsewhere.

Unrestricted funds—an unrestricted vision and the ability to act as a counterbalance to constructed and entrenched historiographies and legacies that exist external to this organization. The capacious vision and financial planning of the founders and all of the subsequent boards and directors has allowed this organization to serve as a counterpoint to space—physical, artistic, historical, educational—that has existed for some and not for others. Skowhegan, like everywhere else, has to tread lightly around becoming too enamored by its own story—where the narrative can become concretized rather than giving into ever evolving, ever innovating, and ever expanding.

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