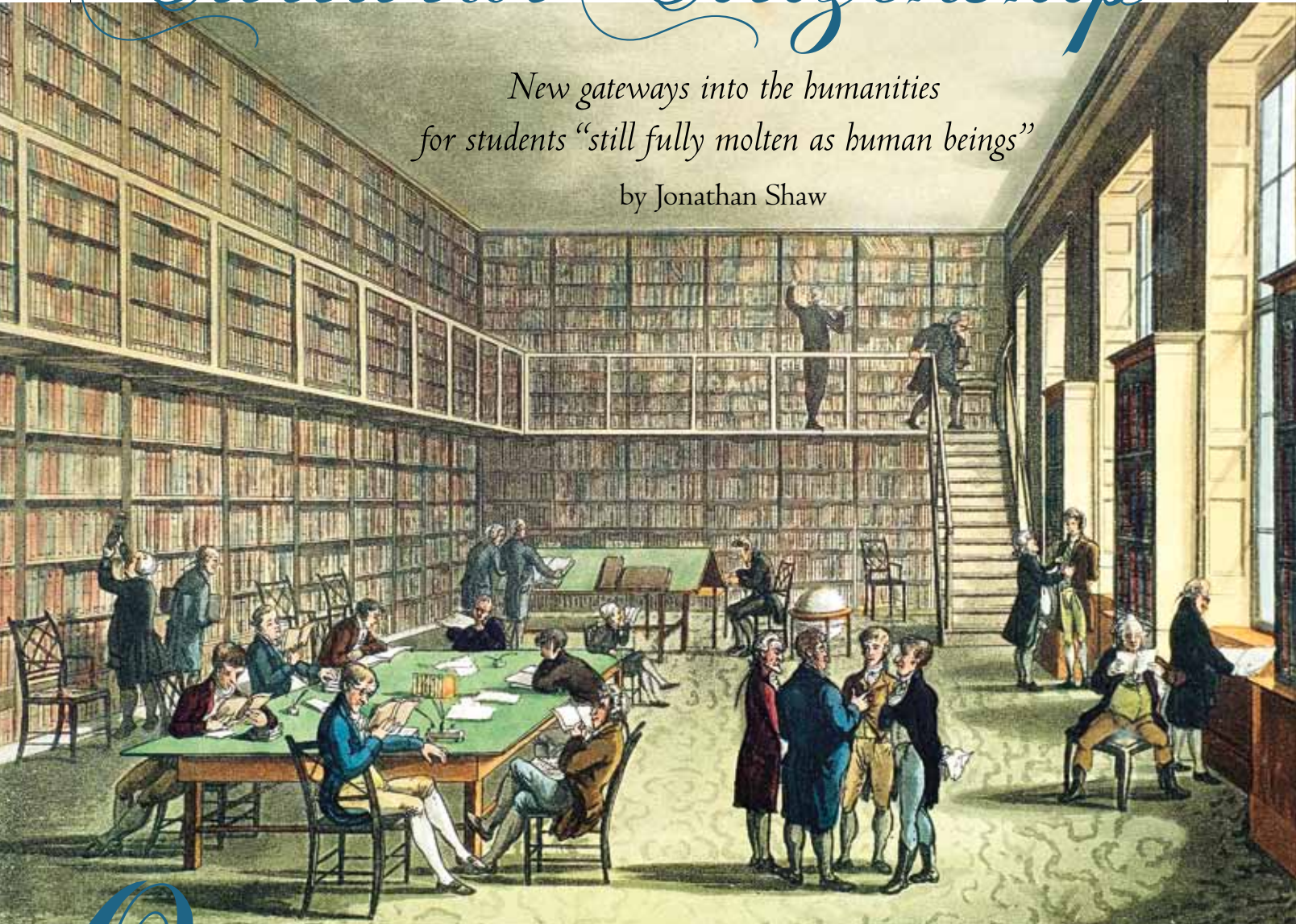


Toward Cultural Citizenship

*New gateways into the humanities
for students “still fully molten as human beings”*

by Jonathan Shaw



ONE DAY in the early spring of 2013, Alexander Rehding asked the students in his graduate seminar to join him in experiencing the sound of silence. As he led them through an exercise in deep listening, the students sat quietly for 15 minutes, becoming calm, and bending their attention to the sounds around them. “Over time, your listening experience fundamentally changes,” the Peabody professor of music said later. “You become much more attuned to the very quiet background noises that we normally just ignore. Many of the students report that, after a while, they stop trying to identify what the sounds are and where they are coming from. The

sounds surround us, and everything becomes musical in a way.”

Rehding hoped to learn whether this exercise in sonic awareness (inspired by American composer Pauline Oliveros, a visiting artist at Harvard in 2012) might prove useful in teaching undergraduates as part of a new course, “The Art of Listening,” to be offered for the first time that fall. There is always a risk, says Rehding, that pedagogical experimentation “[can] fall flat on its face. But it didn’t.” The students found it meaningful, and for Rehding himself—who aims to make his students more active and critical listeners—it was a novel listening experience, too.

The course is one of a trio—in the arts of listening, looking,

and reading—designed to attract freshmen and sophomores to the humanities concentrations, which are losing students rapidly. Together with two small, hands-on studio courses that focus on museum and library collections—those laboratories of the humanities—and an expanded, year-long general-education course that introduces students to select works of Western literature and philosophy, they are the outcome of the Humanities Project, a general rethinking of the division's curriculum carried out by more than 40 faculty members (see “Invigorating the Humanities,” September-October 2013, page 54).

The decline in student interest is recent, and particularly affects elite institutions like Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, says Bass professor of English Louis Menand. (His 2008 lectures at the University of Virginia, collected in *The Marketplace of Ideas*, trace the long-term national decline in the humanities since the early 1970s.) The current crisis is “continuous with that [national] story” of polarizing and contentious philosophical debates about the legitimacy of various subjects and approaches, but those conflicts, he says, “were never accompanied by a huge flight of students.” Now, “the numbers are a little alarming. From 2006 to 2012 we had a 35 percent drop in concentrators in English. I think history has also had a fairly dramatic drop. And when sophomores signed up for concentrations last fall, almost every department in the arts and humanities was down—some by a lot.” In five departments, there were fewer than half as many concentrators as among the previous class.

The reasons for waning student interest are not entirely clear. *The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future*, a report of the Humanities Project published in the spring of 2013 that included a quantitative study of the problem, revealed a 50 percent attrition rate among Harvard students who as pre-freshmen had expressed an intention to concentrate in the humanities. Most of those students defect to social sciences such as economics, government, and psychology. Menand believes that this trend is partly attributable to “what has become a kind of general conventional wisdom: that the humanities don't offer peo-

ple much that is practical in way of a career. And that is a little scary.” But because this has all happened since the recession, he says, “The hope is that these choices are tied to the economy,” and that with rising prosperity, interest will rebound.

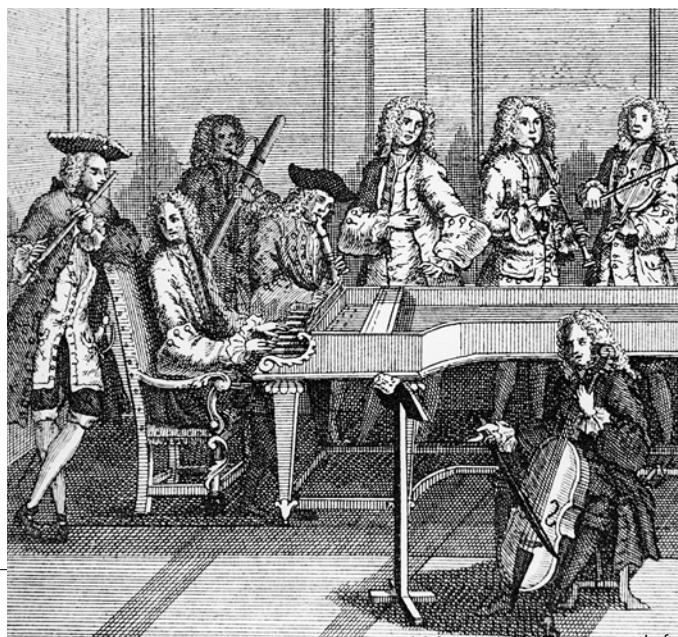
But clearly other forces are at work, too, such as rising student interest in entrepreneurship, and in coursework that directly relates to, or even engages with, important social problems. Cogan University Professor Stephen Greenblatt says that among undergraduates (and their parents and advisers), “There is a perception that the humanities are not as trustworthy a launching pad as in the past. There is considerable real-world evidence that this is not true, but—as with recessions and the economy—the perception is as important a fact on the ground as the reality.” Greenblatt was recently talking with Tiampo professor of business administration Ranjay Gulati about the ways in which Harvard Business

“Professors in the humanities are struggling with how to integrate the study the *we* really value with the world that our undergraduates inhabit”—a world of smartphones, texting, Twitter, and Facebook.

School uses stories—their famous case studies—to train managers. “Figuring out the threads in these stories and why people behave the way they do has been the subject of literature for the last several thousand years, so it's entirely relevant,” he points out. “The public perception that there is a huge gap between what it is to be gung-ho for business and what it is to study literature is just absurd. They are deeply integrated, speaking to this particular moment we are in and the anxieties it triggers.”

AGAINST THIS BACKDROP, arts and humanities dean Diana Sorensen and Mahindra Humanities Center director Homi Bhabha conceived of the three foundational “frameworks” courses in the arts of listening, looking, and reading as “a positive bulwark,” says Bhabha, “a platform to try and address the problem.” The two new studio courses are under way this spring, and the relaunched, expanded general-education course, taught by Menand and Greenblatt, will debut this fall. Sorensen, who is Rothenberg professor of Romance languages and literatures and of comparative literature, says the new framework and studio courses aim to introduce students to the interpretive skills that are the hallmark of the humanities by developing habits of mind: the sense of how to reason rigorously, the means to express ideas in a compelling way, and the ability to write well. All of them depart in interesting ways from the traditional lecture course.

Bhabha, the Rothenberg professor of the humanities, who is teaching “The Art of Reading” this spring with Marquand professor of English Peter Sacks, asserts that the humanities are “the pre-eminent sciences of interpretation.” Whether assessing linguistic, aural, or visual evidence, “the humanities through literature, the classics, modern languages, [or]...philosophy” use interpretation to create a “whole world of associations, contexts, significations, and values.” Interpretation, he stresses, is therefore an activity that through the exercise of judgment about important works (of art, literature, music, sculpture, architecture, etc.) “creates social and cultural values. And therefore, the humanities help us to become...



Anonymous print of a chamber music ensemble at the time of Johann Sebastian Bach

not just political citizens, not social citizens, not citizens in a legal sense, but *cultural* citizens. *That is the real force of the humanities.*”

Humanistic interpretation also plays an important role in coping with the outpouring of information from the digital world, Bhabha says. “As we teach our students how to interpret, that allows the flood of facts and information to be turned into knowledge. *Interpretation* is the mediating force that winnows through all the information” to produce and categorize knowledge.

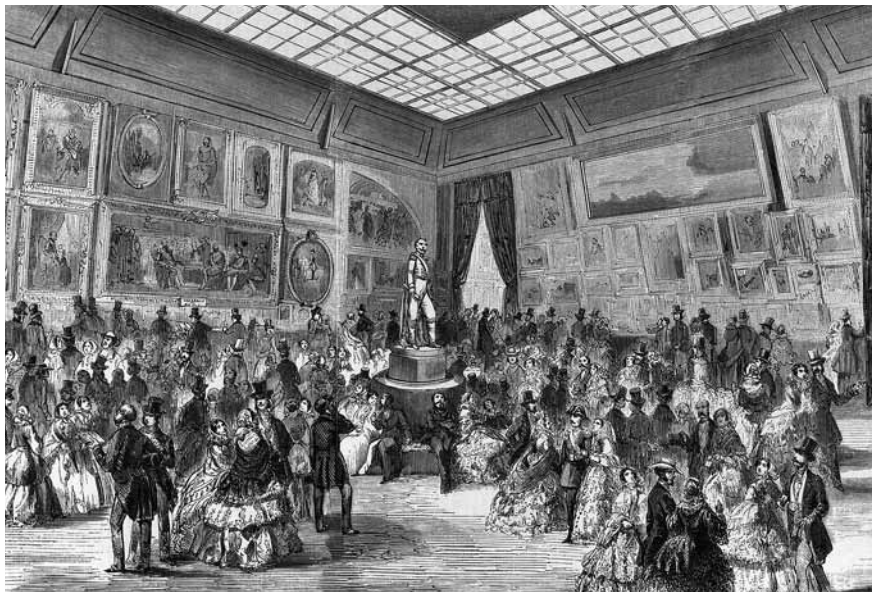
In their frameworks course, first taught as a graduate seminar last year, Bhabha and Sacks introduce students to four modes of reading: literary, historical, social, and digital. In literature, Bhabha explains, the texts may be fiction, but they relate to historical, ethical, moral, and psychological issues, often developing great symbolic presence. The students who read Joseph Conrad, for example, are learning to interpret by engaging with works in which “the central characters, like Marlow in *Lord Jim*, are themselves involved in the practice of learning to read a situation.”

Similarly, in reading history, the students are asked to consider how historians interpret or judge an event. This leads in turn to considerations of how the humanities engage with the past, present, and future, says Bhabha—whether by assigning values to memory and traditions that help us interpret or judge in the present, or by projecting our values into the future as aspirations for the planet, the race, the nation, or the community.

“Reading the social” focuses on the literature of 9/11, including the W. H. Auden poem “September 1, 1939” (“much requested” in the bombing’s aftermath, says Bhabha). And in the fourth mode—reading technologies—students consider the blog of an Iraqi girl, assuming the point of view of both author and audience, as well as other new forms of digital expression, such as Twitter, with its imposed limit of 140 characters.

What the “Art of Reading” further teaches, beyond the subject matter and broadly applicable skills of interpretation, is *self-awareness* on the part of the students, Bhabha says: that ability to think about their own role and responsibilities as readers. “Self-reflection...is now structurally part of the course. And that is a different approach. Our hope is that...will help students to have that kind of self-awareness in their other choices, and in their other courses.”

SELF-AWARENESS is an important element of all the frameworks courses. Rehding’s “Art of Listening” course, which he co-teaches with professor of comparative literature John Hamilton, pairs important canonical works relating to sound, such as Wagner’s essay “The Virtuoso and the Artist,” with hands-on assignments that train the students to become more active and critical listeners. They learn about the components of sound and how to manipulate them with editing tools, create a soundtrack for a silent film, and map the sounds of Harvard and its environs. (In parallel with the development of the course, Rehding applied for a Harvard Initiative for Learning and Teaching grant that allowed him to install a sound lab in the music library.) Students also explore the ethical, psychological, and emotional dimensions of sound: Plato, in an extreme example, banned certain types of music from



his ideal state because they were thought “inappropriate to creating good citizens.” The students make a mix tape (and learn about the ancient analog technologies that their parents used for recording sound) and study the mechanics of the ear, and how it mediates what humans hear. And they explore the relationship between sound and memory, in part, by memorizing a poem and learning about the use of epithets and melody as mnemonic devices during a visit to Harvard’s Milman Parry archive of oral literature, which preserves (in its recordings of South Slavic heroic songs that resemble ancient Greek epics) examples of some of the greatest human feats of memorization known.

“The purpose is to draw attention to the sonic dimension of many activities that people engage in,” Rehding says. “I find this mixture of fairly challenging and historically important texts—a beauty parade of Western intellectual history from Plato via Rousseau and Nietzsche to contemporary thinkers—paired with practical exercises, assignments, and engagement with sound in immediate ways, very attractive.” The hope is that students will, too. Many undergraduates already choose music as a secondary field, Rehding notes, but the course may persuade them to “concentrate in one of the existing disciplines within the humanities” by providing “a taste of what we do and providing them with useful tools that are applicable in a number of different contexts.”

Burden professor of photography Robin Kelsey, who chairs the department of history of art and architecture, says that one aim of the frameworks courses is to give undergraduates a clear gateway into the humanities. Survey courses once did that, but “in a moment of questioning authority and ‘meta-narrative,’ [they] tended to fall by the wayside,” he says. As a consequence, “There has been a concern among some of us that the humanities curriculum for undergraduates at Harvard has too often these days seemed like a smorgasbord,...without any clear sign as to where one might start if one was unfamiliar with humanistic inquiry.” Now, faculty members “are trying to find a way to give a kind of cohesive introduction that avoids the perhaps excessive ethnocentrism of the old survey” while providing “a kind of transparent and reasonable progression in terms of developing expertise in humanistic inquiry.”

Kelsey taught “The Art of Looking” this past fall with Jennifer L. Roberts, professor of history of art and architecture (and chair of American Studies). Their course uses historic and contemporary examples of visual technologies such as the map, the telescope, the



daguerreotype, and the television not only to teach students about the ways these tools have “framed our understanding of the world, often in ways that we aren’t conscious of,” but also to “hone skills of visual, material, and spatial analysis through encounters with aesthetic objects from Harvard collections.”

Kelsey says that “professors in the humanities are struggling with how to integrate the study that we really value with the world that our undergraduates inhabit”—a world of smartphones, texting, Twitter, and Facebook. The key, he thinks, is to find a way to give assignments “that feel relevant and at the same time develop those thinking skills, those looking skills, that critical acumen that we have always wanted to provide to students in the humanities and that remain exceedingly important to being a citizen and an educated person.”

Roberts, who teaches students to engage in deep-looking (see “The Power of Patience,” November-December 2013, page 40), begins the course with a lecture on the world map. Kelsey suggests it is “eye-opening for students to learn” that the maps they find on Google Earth are “based on the Mercator projection, which was created for navigational purposes” in the sixteenth century and distorts the world (as all maps do) in specific ways. For example, it specifies North as up—with wide-ranging consequences—and grossly distorts land area so that high-latitude countries like Greenland appear nearly as large as the African continent. “One can’t imagine an equatorial nation coming up with a system like that,” Kelsey notes wryly.

One subject he covered was the daguerreotype, those silvery little nineteenth-century portraits under glass, often in velvet-lined, engraved leather cases (see “From Daguerreotype to Photoshop,” January-February 2009, page 42). “The origin of the idea behind the course, actually, was in the correspondence between the experience of looking at a smartphone and looking at a daguerreotype,” he reports. (Of course, he adds, “you only get the one image” with a daguerreotype, but he found it fun to introduce the subject in that fashion.)

Taking this conceit one step further, a course assignment challenges students to “conceptually design” a filter or app that will produce an image that *looks* like a daguerreotype. That requires them “to think analytically about how the daguerreotype processes visual information: its reflective qualities, its conversion of the world to a monochromatic visual field,” Kelsey says. He was “very

impressed by the ingenuity with which the students approached that and other assignments.” Listening to their discussions, he thought, “Someone from Silicon Valley could be overhearing this and thinking that here is their next \$100-million company. It’s impressive to see what the students can do when they are given a creative assignment that appeals to their entrepreneurial impulses.”

THE FRAMEWORKS COURSES are just one way that Diana Sorensen hopes to draw students into the humanities. The new, yearlong, introductory course for would-be humanities concentrators to be offered this fall by Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Menand is another. Disciplines such as computer science, the life sciences, and economics stage large courses that “draw freshmen who hear their peers talking about them,” says

Menand, whereas “we haven’t had such a thing in the humanities” since the demise of survey courses (see “Yearning for Big Humanities,” January-February 2005, page 72).

This revamped humanities offering expands the existing and very popular English 110, “An Introductory Humanities Colloquium,” which covers important works of Western literature and philosophy. It will start in the ancient world, with Homer’s *Odyssey*, and follow an arc focused on themes of love and self through Dante and Montaigne to Shakespeare, to Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, and on to James Joyce’s twentieth-century *Ulysses*. The second half of the course will address themes of war and politics, working backward from Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* to the *Iliad*.

“As [the undergraduates] read more and more,” says Sorensen, “they understand allusions, references, and echoes, and start to think of culture as a dense conversation through time.” Students “derive a lot of pleasure from being able to be part of that conversation.” Menand and fellow Pulitzer Prize-winner Greenblatt (the authors, respectively, of *The Metaphysical Club* and *Swerve*, both organized around such “conversations” and written for general audiences) head the course, but half a dozen or more faculty colleagues will join them to lead sections.

“Students coming to Harvard rightly feel that they should grapple with those books and other cultural objects—paintings, sculpture, music—that will be important to them for their whole lives,” says Greenblatt. He calls liberal-arts education “one of the great things that we at Harvard and in the United States collectively have created,” because it arrives at a moment in late adolescence when students can “explore lots of things while they are still fully molten as human beings”—subjects that will help them build a meaningful life. “When you open a book that was written centuries ago by someone who couldn’t possibly have known you, or anything about your life, and discover that it seems to have been written for you, that’s an amazing experience.” The realization that humans have been grappling with issues like love for a long time creates a sense of community, he says, “as when you learn a foreign language and, instead of a babble of voices you don’t understand, you suddenly hear what the conversation is around you.”

“The best thing we can do,” says Menand, “is to have students encounter these famous works in fresh ways. We teach Dante, Homer, Proust, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Sophocles. To cover all that [within

individual disciplines], you would have to take six courses. From a scholarly point of view, that's a little bit of a scandal, but really, what are we talking about? We're getting 18-year-olds to read Dante."

"Can that compete with student perceptions of exciting and successful lives in the financial industry, or the allure of launching a startup? We don't have a huge amount of career-specific knowledge to offer that student," Menand admits. But there is abundant innovation in the humanities, including experimentation with entrepreneurial work.

THIS SPRING, the initiative's two new studio classes are offering students the opportunity for hands-on engagement in creative scholarship under the direction of professor of Romance languages and literatures Jeffrey Schnapp, faculty director of Harvard's metaLAB, a center for research and teaching that focuses on networked culture in the arts and humanities (see "The Humanities, Digitized," May-June 2012, page 40). "The challenge," Schnapp says, "is to couple the humanities content to questions that engage students and that shape skills that make sense to them in the environment they operate in. Using video, for example, to make a compelling argument—that's an arrow you might want to have in your quiver alongside expository prose and critical thinking skills."

Schnapp points to seismic shifts within the humanities, such as the erosion of the traditional system of knowledge distribution that included scholarly monographs and books published by university presses, as harbingers of deep change. The idea of what it is to be "a scholar, an author, an intellectual, a teacher, is changing," he says, "and this is chipping away at comfortable boundary lines, including those of the university itself," which increasingly can "reflect only a small part of the world of possible knowledge." Even within universities, formerly distinct areas—the library, the museum, the classroom, the laboratory—are becoming "increasingly interconnected and porous," he points out. Schnapp is optimistic about the future of the humanities; he thinks the changes happening now are part of a revolution, a "participatory turn in culture," that is, in part, about entrepreneurship and invention.

His studio courses therefore frame a pedagogical experience focused on a research question that presupposes disciplinary and technological skill-based expertise (on the part of the professor and others); they are small master classes in which the students learn by doing. The undergraduates immediately discover "how difficult real scholarship is, but in a supportive environment," he says. "At the end, they deliver something, whether it is a book, an exhibition in a museum, or a website." With the assistance of experienced sound and video producers, students in "Cold Storage" are documenting the workings of the Harvard Depository, the suburban storage facility for a vast and growing proportion of Harvard's library books (see "Gutenberg 2.0," May-June 2010, page 36). The work will include "short interviews with the personnel, who will tell us how they work in a complex ballet with machines and movable shelving structures." Students will thus

create an ethnography, says Schnapp: "a complex, multilayered portrait of the place," for publication of a web documentary that will be organized around a floor plan of the facility. Students will also participate in the development and production of a more conventional 25-minute film that reworks and remixes the classic 1956 documentary by Alain Resnais about the national library of France, *Toute la mémoire du monde*.

The other studio course focuses on the late Bernard Berenson's collection of 17,000 photographs of missing works of Italian Renaissance art. A project called Curarium (www.curarium.com) is hosting these images along with their metadata (see "Why 'Big Data' Is a Big Deal," March-April, page 30) in a format that allows scholars like Schnapp to teach, interpret, tell stories, and ask questions about them. The course is essentially a studio in digital curatorial practice. Schnapp aims to get students engaged in thinking about what it means to make choices about a series of objects: how to show relationships and to reason and make arguments in multiple media. He hopes that such courses will "develop a generation of humanists who have a rich sense of possibility in terms of how traditional forms of scholarship could connect to more public-facing forms of cultural work, such as exhibitions or websites."

Rehding calls the decision to develop these new humanities courses "an enormously courageous thing": "Harvard is doing the right thing and hopefully setting a new model for what the humanities can be." What remains to be seen is whether *students* can be convinced that culture is much more than "a sweet rhetorical effusion, an art of using words to bear witness to a transient moistening of the soul" (to quote essayist Roland Barthes in a text from "The Art of Reading"), but is in fact the embodiment of fundamental human values—and thus worthy of focused study.

Liberal-arts education is "one of the great things that we at Harvard and in the United States collectively have created," because it arrives at a moment in late adolescence when students can "explore lots of things while they are still fully molten as human beings...."

During a symposium on the humanities convened at the University last year, Harvard Corporation member and former Tufts president Lawrence Bacow said "We have done our students a disservice when we have failed to help them understand that their careers are not defined by what they major in in college." When executives are hiring, he pointed out, they "look for critical thinkers, candidates with a basic understanding of culture, and people who can work in diverse environments, and who appreciate the larger world." Citing debates over the federal deficit and the global climate crisis, Bacow said that they are, at their core, not about science or engineering but rather "the responsibilities of one generation towards future generations," a subject about which "philosophers have a lot to say." "The most fundamental issues that we are facing as a society in some ways can never be answered by scientists, or by social scientists," he emphasized. "But, in fact, the conversation *can* certainly be elevated by humanists." ▽

Jonathan Shaw '89 is managing editor of this magazine.