What I’m not talking about: why Fine Arts matter to universities: I assume that the people who are here already assume that this is the case, and that people who don’t make this assumption wouldn’t come to a talk like this.

What I am going to talk about—or try, because as you will see, I have no definitive answers or even arguments: is why we have Fine Arts in universities at all.

There are a couple of sides to this topic:

• Why do universities and colleges (US style) have Fine Arts departments?
• Why include what we now call fine arts in a liberal arts curriculum?

But we also need to ask:

• Why do students who want to become professional artists go to a U when alternative specialized training exists in conservatories and art schools?

And when we think about the existence of conservatories and art schools, we can take our first questions a step further: Why did universities develop fine arts programs, especially in applied areas—studio and performance—when there were and are well established and effective alternatives?

Before I go on, I want to assure people that I am not raising these questions to put this Faculty or the concept of Fine Arts in university curricula into question. Nor am I trying to justify one aspect of Fine Arts curricula while finding fault with the other.

It’s important to recognize that all aspects of university programs and curricula are historically determined and contingent:

• Sociology in Canadian universities
• Geography departments in the US
• The changing nature of English departments, from philology to lit crit and beyond
• Classics as grammar/classics as grand ideas

In other words, disciplines are socially constructed, and even those that seem to have a long history and to be deeply rooted are not always as eternal as they might seem.

In this context, then, the questions I’m raising can be raised with respect to pretty much any other elements of university programs and curricula, and we can be sure they are being raised in this era of financial constraints and utilitarian approaches to education. You could be pretty sure that if there were any guarantee that applied fine arts graduates would one day earn lots of money, there would be no questioning of the worth of these programs.
My first idea was to look at the histories of different fine arts programs and try to figure out some themes that would help me answer my first question: how did such programs become part of university curricula in the first place? But despite extensive googling and readings of university web sites, I couldn’t find out much about this. So I have no real answer to this question. Instead, I found myself looking at a whole variety of social and cultural forces that contributed to the phenomenon of the university fine arts department, or at least that I think did. I’ll have to go back into the 19th century and earlier to trace these tangled roots, and at the end of it all I will have some speculations but nothing definitive.

There are five basic threads I want to follow:
- First is the changing nature of the university In western society, and particularly in North America—I’ll start with this and come back to it.

But we also need to consider
- Changing class configurations of western society
- Changing configurations of gender in western society
- Changing concepts of art in western society, and in particular the development of a distinction between Fine and lesser arts or crafts
- Changing concepts of artists—or of The Artist—in western society

These don’t proceed in neat chronological order, nor do they involve clear and simple causes and effects. Thus I while I’ll try to go through these one at a time in some kind of order, I will have to jump around a bit.

1. Changing nature of the university
There are a couple of traditions in universities that can be seen as leading logically to areas such as music theory and history, art history, film studies—the areas loosely called “studies.” But it’s important to remember that even these disciplines are not any more or less intrinsically logical to universities, any more than Sociology.

It’s harder to explain how and why applied arts—studio art, music performance, film making—came into university curricula. There are specialized schools—conservatories, art schools—that train in applied arts: so why duplicate this in universities? Again, I am going to make some guesses about this, but I’m on much shakier ground with this.

To repeat, I’m not saying this to justify some disciplines or to challenge others, to justify studies and slam applied areas. Rather, I am trying to figure out the different logics that brought these into universities in the first place, and that might play some role in future decisions. I am also trying to figure whether and how these different logics play a role in the communications divide that exists at least in this Faculty, if not everywhere.

The early European universities when groups students banded together to hire teachers to give them more systematic training. In Bologna, widely regarded as the first university in Europe, it was law students who did this. So right from the beginning, universities were in part designed
to train men—and it was only men—for certain professions, primarily law and the church, sometimes medicine. But it needs to be noted that the great majority of men who trained in law or for the church did not go to universities, and that indeed up until well into the 19th century and even beyond, much of this training was done in the form of practical apprenticeships. Universities didn’t get monopolies on this kind of training until the 20th century.

There seems to have been another, less explicit purpose for universities, and this takes us into the areas of social class and gender—I told you that I can’t make this into a neat argument. To make a very broad assertion, early modern Europe saw more wealth and less war and thus created a problem of what to do with young men from wealthy families and young gentlemen—sons of the aristocracy and the landed gentry—once knighthood was no longer a major career option. Wealth and social status created leisure for privileged males; it took a long time for women to catch up, which becomes part of our story later on. Without the profession of knight or warrior, it wasn’t clear what young men of status would do with their lives during the increasingly long period between the end of childhood dependency and the age of marriage. It seems to me that universities were one place to stick these guys, sometimes for prolonged periods. While universities did give the sons of the emerging middle classes professional training that they needed for certain occupations, it also gave them status, which was probably one reason they went to university rather than other more common forms of training. And many of the young men who went to universities did not need professional training, because they lived on inherited wealth, and earning a living would have been beneath them.

In a sense, what was going on here was a form of what Thorstein Veblen, a sociologist who worked at the turn of the 19th and start of the 20th century, called “conspicuous consumption.” In many cultures, not just our own, one of the important aspects of possessing wealth is the ability to be useless and to consume useless things. Hence the rise of leisure among wealthy males, and educational curricula that were organized around the study of things that had no utilitarian purposes: the classical trivium: grammar, logic, and rhetoric and the classical quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Working people needed to learn practical skills; you had to be free from the exigencies of making a living every day in order to devote yourself to Greek grammar. We can see some roots for the study of the arts in the classical curricula: rhetoric could include poetry, and of course we now see music, or at least some kinds of music, as a fine art. But rhetoric was studied for its rigor and order, and music for its mathematical qualities and its insights into the cosmos. In no way did university educations prepare young men to be professional musicians, or any other kind of artist.

In the class system of pre-18th or 19th century Europe, people of the highest classes did not earn their livings at all, and gentlemen who needed to earn livings certainly did not do so in ways that involved physical skill or effort. The work of artists—musicians, painters, goldsmiths, and others—involved both physical skill and effort and working for money. Artists, male and female, were not gentlemen or ladies. No matter how cultured and witty a musician or painter was, no matter how much he was allowed to hang around in the Duke’s court, there was no way that
the Duke was ever going to let him marry his daughter, or let his son become an artist. People in the gentle classes did learn to make music, they might even paint—but they did so as amateurs, never as artists. Artists were trained within guilds or other forms of organization until into the 19th century, and their class status was relatively low.

2. Changing class configurations of western society
Yet things change, and as society changed, so did universities and their curricula. Thus to get at my questions about Fine Arts in universities, it’s important to know a bit about the changing nature of social class, the second of my themes. I want to leap ahead into the late 18th century and beyond, to the society arose with the industrial revolution. The IR brought an enormous increase in the production of wealth and in the number of wealthy people, even if they were still a tiny proportion of the population. It greatly expanded the professional urban middle class that had to earn its own money, but did so in genteel ways, as lawyers and clerks and clergy. Perhaps most importantly, it gave rise to a new kind of middle class that earned its wealth not through the genteel professions, but through trade—through owning factories and selling their products. Historically, people who earned their livings in this way had low status. But these new tradesmen were enormously wealthy, often far more wealthy than the aristocracy or landed gentry. They had the same problem of what to do with their sons as had the older middle and upper classes, but the goals they had for their sons were often—though not always—different. While some of the nouveaux riches wanted their children to be able to live on inherited wealth, many also or instead wanted their sons to have educations which would give them social refinement but also some practical skills.

With new social class configurations, there were just a lot more rich people who didn’t need to work hard or at all, and thus had leisure, and who could afford to consume a lot of useless things, and could thus afford to engage in orgies of conspicuous consumption. At the same time, the 19th century saw a lot conspicuous consumption and leisure move out of the private domains of wealthy households and into the public sphere. It’s not that these things had been completely private—royal processions were about as public and conspicuous as you could get—but for the most part, the people that people of status and wealth had to display themselves to were other people of status and wealth. The new middle classes, whether truly wealthy or merely prosperous, did not have a secure social status; their prosperity was tainted by their origins in real work and trade. It was important for them to let the world know they had arrived, and to do this they needed to enter into the public sphere. In addition, that part of the new middle class that was prosperous but not really wealthy wanted to consume useless things and express their capacity for leisure, but could not afford to commission expensive paintings or hire musicians to play every night while they ate dinner. Thus there was an increase in the demand—and the supply—for public access to leisure spaces and public forms of useless consumption such as museums. Those who were wealthy enough bought important art for their homes or, sometimes, to donate to museums or other places—think Norman MacKenzie; the less wealthy consumed art in public concerts, museums, and other cultural institutions.
3. Changing configurations of gender in western society
The 19th century saw another important social transformation that works into this story: changing configurations of gender in western society. Before the 18th century, women in even the wealthiest families had little leisure. They were expected to manage their servants, educate the young ladies of their households, do needlework, perhaps keep household accounts, and many other things. In the 18th century leisure came to be extended to the women as well as the men of the wealthy classes. Gentlewomen in distressed circumstances replace aristocratic wives as housekeepers and aristocratic mothers as teachers. In essence, the lady of leisure became an item of conspicuous consumption: a man who has the means to keep his wife and daughters entirely idle shows to the world that he has high status.

As the new middle classes emerged with the IR, the ideal was for the ladies of these households to be as useless as possible in their everyday lives (while, it should be noted, bevies of female servants did the hard physical labour that emerging scientific research demonstrated the female body could not manage—but this is another story). (By the way, “useless” was not how people thought of this at the time!)

The problem was that the ladies needed something to do. Their brothers could cool their heels in universities, travel, or even do certain kinds of work—buy commissions in the army, take over livings and run churches, play at practicing law. Ladies, however, were increasingly supposed to be separated from the larger world of commerce and competition, had no places in universities, and certainly could not enter the army or the clergy. For a while, some of them continued to try to do useful things in a non-useful kind of way, by concentrating on their spiritual growth, keeping spiritual journals, writing inspirational poetry, and the like, but this did not fill their days. By the 19th century, with the great increase of wealth and with the increasing affirmation of the idea that women had no part to play in public affairs—this was a shift from the 18th century—there were a lot of these ladies, or at least aspiring ladies, and what to do with them was a real issue.

What did they do? Well, one of the new genre of ladies’ magazines in the 1820s confronted this question head on: they could publish only so much on fashion; they could not publish anything on news items, because ladies did not read the news; they could not publish fiction, because this might inflame the passions (perhaps one reason that ladies were avid readers of fictions); so they resorted to publishing calculus problems, which were seen as entirely appropriate to the mental faculties and sensitive natures of ladies. But there is only so much calculus a lady can do, so there had to arise some other activities that were consonant with leisure, and indeed there did: ladies did art.

This art is with a small a, and note that I did not say ladies became artists. Remember that the social status of the artist was still relatively low, and in any case professional artists did art for money, and ladies did not handle money. They didn’t even handle money when they made purchases, and they certainly didn’t earn it. So while art came to be seen as a worthwhile way for ladies to fill their time without doing anything useful, in no way did ladies come to be seen as artists. Which jumps us ahead to the next threads in my tangled skein—changing concepts
of art itself and the changing concept of the Artist, capital A, who in the 19th century becomes masculinized in ways that had not existed previously. Ladies could do art (small a) as long as it was refined in content and process, but ladies could not be artists because they—like all women—lacked the innate capacity to create or even think great ideas. Ladies had the sensitivity to respond to Art—capital A—but not to make it. Also artists were not respectable, and ladies were.

But back to our ladies: The education of girls did not include Latin and Greek, necessary elements in the educations of their brothers, or law or theology, which gentlemen might also study. But ladies were expected to be literate and refined, and to demonstrate this in public though discreet ways. Thus the education of ladies included training in the genteel arts—in the early 19th century, the concept of Fine Arts had not really arisen, though it was on the way. They learned to perform music, not of course as professional musicians, but to symbolize their refinement and to provide entertainment in homes that could not afford to hire musicians and did not yet have recorded or broadcast music. Of course, what music training was proper for ladies was an issue. Wind instruments were out because they involved puckering the lips and making funny expressions. The violin and viola were out because they were not consistent with the graceful postures that were expected of all ladies. Cellos—no way, they go between the legs. That left keyboards, ultimately the piano, and voice. Ladies also trained in cleaner visual arts, drawing and watercolor but not usually oils and very rarely sculpture. The painted on glass and china, made images using the hair of dead relatives, and continued in the long feminine tradition embroidery. All of these kept ladies busy and maintained them as objects of conspicuous consumption for their male relatives. This also brought around an association of femininity and artistic sensibilities, even as the role of artist was becoming increasingly masculinized.

4. Changing definitions of art/distinction between Fine and lesser arts
But first I want to look at changing concepts of art itself, because this is intrinsically tied to the changes in class and gender configurations I’ve been talking about. And yes, I will bring this back to universities, eventually. The concept of some forms of art practice and production as “fine” while the rest is craft, or vulgar, or something otherwise not fine, had its roots in pre-modern Europe but really came into play in the 19th century. There were a variety of social forces at work, and there is debate on what these were, just as there were debates at the time over what constituted “fine” as opposed to other arts. “Fineness,” those, related to the two themes of uselessness and conspicuous consumption that I have already mentioned. The idea arose that true art—Fine Art—involved experiencing a sublime aesthetic. The experience of Fine Art was completely removed from any utilitarian purpose. Art could be Fine only if it was fine in its own terms—art for art’s sake, not to buy a patron’s way into heaven, or to provide a beautiful setting for table salt. It was relatively easy to designate some forms of art, such as painting and poetry, as Fine Arts, because it was hard to argue that either of these things could ever be particularly useful. Ceramics and printmaking were other cases altogether—ceramics could result in dishes, print in posters—and as for theatre, while the creation of plays might be fine, acting in them was not. In any case, we begin our creep back to universities, because one
way that nouveaux riches in particular could demonstrate that they were not just wealthy, but Fine and refined, was by acquiring Fine Art and having it in their houses. One way the less wealth middle classes could demonstrate that they too were refined was by experiencing the sublime in museums or through buying copies to hang on their walls. Audiences for public concerts and the opera began to change, from the earlier practices of talking and fornicating and seeing and being seen generally to one in which they kept reverentially quiet while the musicians played so that everyone knew they were experiencing the sublime.

This is not to say that no one really liked fine art. Many people developed a genuine taste for and appreciation of fine arts; people like my grandfather, a farmer, owned and read volumes of poetry (I have a volume of Alexander Pope’s work that my grandfather owned). The ability to experience the sublime in a genuine way came to be an important value among the middle classes, and this—I have not forgotten my topic—is one reason that studies of fine arts start to creep into university curricula in the middle of the 19th century.

5. Changing concept of Art and Artists
But before we get back to universities I want to talk about my final theme, the changing concept of the artist, because even if the study of fine art was creeping into university curricula, the artists themselves, by and large, were not. When Charles William Eliot, president of Harvard from 1869 to 1909, hired someone to teach Art at Harvard in 1973, he did not ask an artist. He hired his cousin, Charles Eliot Norton, who didn’t need to work to earn a living, but who was depressed after the death of his wife in childbirth and needed something to occupy his time, and who on years of even date, delivered a weekly lecture on Dante and on years of odd date, on the Italian medieval church, and apparently is considered to be the father of modern art history. Norton’s credentials were that we has an aesthete who had travelled extensively in Europe to experience the sublime and who possessed the standard Harvard classical education of the era. He did not Do Art, nor did Harvard students of that era study to be artists.

By the 19th century, the social position of the artist had changed radically from earlier times. The old guilds had broken down; the old system of private patronage was dead or dying; and in any case there were new social classes for artists to relate to. It was this century that saw the rise of specialized schools for training artists—the atelier system of France, the formal art schools of England and North America, music conservatories in many places. The artist was still not a gentleman, and gentlemen still did not become artists. But neither was the artist essentially a member of the working class. The Artist began to fill a new social position, that of the Man Apart, the man not bound by convention but driven by a highly personal artistic vision and talent. Fine Art came to be seen in terms of highly personal statements, and people conveniently forgot that such sublime artists as Michelangelo and Leonardo had to be astute businessmen who signed contracts in which they agreed to such things as painting the Virgin’s robe a particular shade of blue that the patron liked and to put craggy rocks in the background because apparently the patron liked that too. One reason for the rise of the Shakespeare—couldn’t—have-written-Shakespeare industry that persists to this day is that what little we know about the historical Shakespeare does not conform to the romantic 19th century image of
the Artist as a man driven by his creative vision, undergoing schooling only to the extent that it enables him to express that vision, but not dependent on formal training to be a true Artist. The true artist might study in an art school or conservatory, or, on the grounds that regular pay is nice, teach in one, but he would not sell himself to universities, which were definitely not artistic sorts of places... Until

Back to the U
U’s of the 19th century NA were undergoing rapid change. While some of the older schools, such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, clung to a long time to the classical curriculum and gentlemanly student bodies, things were moving elsewhere. As new private liberal arts colleges and publicly funded and land grant universities opened up, a broader range of people begin to attend them and the reason for universities began to shift. Not only was there an increasing number of sons of the middle class who sought higher education, they did so in order to get training that would prepare them for a range of occupations. While emerging liberal arts curricula still placed great emphasis on the transmission of high culture and on general skills, the students who entered these colleges and universities were young men who accepted without shame that they were going to have to earn their own livings. And, just as radically, these new institutions were increasingly open to women, many of whom also anticipated the possibility that they might have to earn their own livings, but who also believed that they would be better able to perform their duties as wives and mothers if they were highly educated and cultured people.

One of the issues I would have liked to track down, and didn’t, was the extent to which the entry of female students brought the teaching of fine arts into universities and colleges. Harvard, obviously, was all male, and class issues were probably paramount there. But remember the association of femininity with art and artistic sensibility, add that to the idea of educating women not just to be better mothers but possibly to be teachers, and we see, perhaps, some impetus for adding fine arts to the curricula. And because refined women did art as well as consumed it, perhaps this gave some impetus for adding studio and performative music to curricula. The late 19th century saw the feminization of elementary teaching, and also the development of progressive pedagogies in which doing art was seen as essential to child development; teachers and mothers thus needed to know how to do art. And because society saw females as fundamentally different from men, coeducation meant the need to create curricula that would suit the different needs of the two sexes, and fine arts were appropriate to female students, as long as no nude models were involved (even the plaster casts of Roman copies of Greek statues had fig leafs). The Northwestern Music School, now the Henry Bienen School of Music, which is a fairly important university music program, had its origins in the separate North Western College for Women that was established in 1841; when the women’s and men’s colleges were merged, the Music School came along.

Another issue: Wealthy people collected Art, lots of it, and had to do something with it, so that many of the older colleges and universities of the northeastern US have quite significant art museums based on collections that were bequeathed in the 19th century. Or wealthy men like Felix Slade bequeathed or endowed chairs in Fine Arts or conservatories to universities and
colleges. Thus many schools began to acquire fine arts collections and spaces for fine arts performance, and needed to do something with them.

It was still true that the men and courageous women who wanted to be artists tended to go to art schools or conservatories. While men could function well and even very respectably within the category of Artist, however, taking on this role or even attending an art school could put a young woman’s reputation at risk. For young women of the middle classes, a university class or program in fine arts might allow her to study art while keeping her status, even if the training she got was not as complete or rigorous as what she would have got in an art school or conservatory. The young ladies who went to the North Western College for Women were, after all, mostly Methodists.