

Whence Come We, What Are We, Whither Are We Going?: SECAC's Seventieth Meeting, Parts 1 and 2

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The two sessions together titled “Whence Come We, What Are We, Whither Are We Going?: SECAC’s Seventieth Meeting” at the 2014 SECAC annual meeting, convened by the Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida, were conceived as a sequel to a single session featuring three papers by longtime members of the organization titled “Reflections on Sixty Years of SECAC” held at the 2001 annual meeting at the University of South Carolina, Columbia. Those papers from 2001 signaled an approaching benchmark anniversary of the founding of SECAC, with reminiscences on its history and their authors’ experiences within it. Posted on the same SECAC website as the 2014 narratives that follow this introduction, the purpose of the 2001 accounts was and is to remind members and inform other visitors to the site of the long road traveled from 1942 through the turn of the twenty-first century, when early on the conference’s meetings were not yet even annual affairs. As records of the organization’s past, they enlarged the parameters established by the lead article in the 1992 issue of SECAC’s annual scholarly journal, the Southeastern College Art Conference Review (vol. 12, no. 2, now Art Inquiries), orchestrated by then-current editor Floyd W. Martin and with contributions by him and five others, titled “Editors’ Recollections: 25 Years of the SECAC Review.” Later that article and the 2001 papers were joined by a third cluster of written statements comprised of fourteen wide-ranging essays varying greatly in length, again coordinated by editor Martin and including in slightly revised form the three papers from 2001, that appeared in the 2007 issue of the SECAC Review (vol. 15, no. 2, now Art Inquiries) to celebrate the sixty-fifth anniversary of the organization.

While 2014 marked seventy-two years since the founding of SECAC, and thus was not to be considered a particularly significant birthday, it was the occasion of our seventieth gathering. It therefore seemed right that—to paraphrase the title of Paul Gauguin’s most famous painting, a staple of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston—once more we should take stock of what we are, where we have been since 2001 and even prior to that, and—recognizing that the history of SECAC is ongoing by turning as well to a topic hardly addressed in those earlier compendia—where we are headed from 2014 forward. Each of the six speakers at the two sessions organized around this theme was invited to prepare a narrative that presented general observations on the history and future of SECAC and/or that focused on specific aspects of it. Following the template of the 2001 session, both serious and humorous musings were encouraged, to be followed by informal discussion among readers and listeners before each session adjourned. To restate the matter, the six papers of 2014 that resulted complement the three from 2001 also available on the SECAC website, and grouping these alongside the essays by a host of other SECAC stalwarts published in the 2007 issue of the Southeastern College Art Conference Review and the jointly authored article appearing in the 1992 issue, together they constitute an invaluable running history of SECAC—and an autobiographical one at that, given that it has been written by the members themselves. Taking the longer view, my hope is that these accounts—twenty-six in all—will be further augmented in the future by loyal members,

likely younger than are most of today's presenters, whose experiences in turn will afford them the gift of perspective as our organization continues to develop and evolve.

Briefly, then, what were the personal experiences with and thoughts about SECAC that each of the presenters at the 2014 sessions considered especially relevant, as reproduced here?

Thomas Brewer—better known to all as Tom—began the first session by giving the audience a primer on the growing presence of art education within SECAC. Tom was particularly well suited to offer comments on this phenomenon thanks to his leading role in the development of an organizational policy statement, successively updated over the years, that explains how art education can and should fit into college curricula, and that also establishes standards and best practices for art educators to follow as they build their professional careers. Longtime SECAC officer Beth Mulvaney delighted listeners with her humorous recollections of the memorable 1998 gathering in Miami—not her first SECAC meeting but evidently the one that really sealed her commitment to the organization and inspired her to direct not one but two later conferences, in Raleigh in 2003 and Durham in 2012. Like the 2006 meeting in Nashville about which Beth also reminisced, she revealed how the one in 2012 produced more than its fair share of unexpected surprises that only in retrospect had her—and us—laughing. The first session concluded with Barbara Watts, an extraordinarily dedicated member of SECAC over many years and the director of that 1998 meeting in Miami. She underscored the fact that, other than for people like Beth on her second go-around, everyone who chairs a conference is a raw recruit not only at the outset of that several-year-long commitment but really right through to its end. Barbara began with a summary of the results of a questionnaire that she had circulated to past conference directors, who joined her in responding to questions as to the reasons, goals, and expectations that each had in volunteering for the position; the amount and type of help that was forthcoming from colleagues at their institutions, respectively, in carrying out conference-related tasks; the significance of the particular field of specialization of each director in putting together the conference program; and the sorts of unexpected events that occurred before, during, and after the meeting and how each director handled them. Barbara's thinking here was that future conference directors might profit from the results of her questionnaire, which she intends to put on file with SECAC. She then moved on to describe in a most amusing manner the many obstacles that presented themselves as she went about the business of organizing the Miami meeting—which incidentally included the inaugural SECAC Annual Juried Exhibition—with issues over the many widespread venues that were booked, transportation arrangements that were made, institutional egos that required appeasing, and money that was committed, all intermingling to ensure a madcap ride for Barbara that in the end paid handsome dividends for her and everyone who was there.

That is certainly true for Debra Murphy, another long-serving officer who initiated the second session and whose first SECAC conclave was Miami in 1998. She recounted some of her personal experiences at that meeting and at the one that she directed in Jacksonville in 2004. Debra paid particular homage to SECAC scholar and philanthropist Gulnar Bosch, whom she knew from her student days, and also singled out the achievements of various members in the areas of art history, studio art, exhibition catalogues, and in SECAC's administration. Debra ended her presentation by predicting a bright future for the organization and with a promise to

be part of it. Floyd Martin, another respected officer, two-time conference director—Little Rock in 1989 and 2005—and the person with the longest institutional memory of our organization among the six speakers, drew from his diary a few highlights of the many meetings that he attended prior to the turn of the new century, mentioning along the way a number of SECAC members whom he came to regard as true friends, and also the various issues discussed at meetings of the Board of Directors in which he participated year after year. Floyd then turned to the future and the several interrelated issues that now confront SECAC resulting from its staggering recent growth: increasing administrative complexity, the inevitable decline in the level of interpersonal familiarity within an expanded membership, the equally inevitable rise in competition for spots on the dockets of panels and sessions at meetings and the consequent disappointment and decrease in loyalty on the part of those who feel excluded, how best to take advantage of SECAC's increasingly national character, and how to address the growing impact of technology. Floyd also touched on a pair of financial issues, namely, the deleterious influence that the trend in higher education toward reliance on part-time faculty will have on membership in SECAC and on conference attendance, and the question of attracting donations and bequests to enhance organizational solvency and programming. Some of these topics were addressed by Sandra Reed as well. A rising star within SECAC and yet another past conference director—Savannah in 2011—Sandra's remarks concluding the second session built on her view of SECAC as an organization well served by the equilibrium achieved through an internal system of checks and balances: intellectually and creatively among the membership with its artists, art historians, art educators, graphic designers, visual resources curators, and museum personnel; and administratively with its several centers of authority—president and Board of Directors, conference director, host institution, and the SECAC administrator—all jointly responsible for planning and bringing to fruition our annual meetings. Sandra pointed out several instances of how SECAC has evolved over the years by guarding its well-established traditions while remaining open to changes when circumstances called for them. Then, not unrelated to this but looking to the future, Sandra's remarks concerning individual elements within SECAC's overall financial picture were particularly astute, touching on such matters as grants awarded by the organization, the rise of technology, maintaining affordability for all members, fundraising, and the need to upgrade the administrator's salary and benefits. Sandra also advocated for SECAC's enhanced national profile and recent initiatives in which she has been instrumental, the mentoring program above all.

A varied group of presentations, to be sure, but two things that all six presenters emphasized were the fellowship and welcoming atmosphere that sets SECAC apart from other large professional organizations composed of persons involved in the visual arts, and the high level of competence demonstrated over and over by members in their exhibitions, presentations, and publications. "Companionship and mutual support" was the common denominator among the three presentations given in the "Reflections" session held in 2001, which stated otherwise might be termed the willingness to share and inspire, and those same virtues emerged again and again from the observations of the six speakers in 2014. All of them, and all of those in attendance at the two sessions, expressed confidence that SECAC's future, grounded in a continuation of responsible and responsive participation by its members, will be as bright as its past.