Dear Alumni and Friends,

In the humanities there is a productive tension between the emergence of new fields and new technologies and the presentation of the integrity and boundaries of established disciplines. At the University of Chicago, scholars embrace this tension and thrive on identifying and addressing new problems.

The digital age offers us ready access to massive amounts of information and to modern tools that can enrich the scholarship of students and faculty members. To make the most of these opportunities and to build on the recommendations of a faculty committee that has surveyed our resources and needs, I announced the formation of a Digital Humanities Oversight Committee in March. This team of faculty and staff will assess the challenges that the digital humanities present and chart a course for how we can use digital technology to remain at the forefront of humanities research.

Digital humanities projects allow us to pursue new sets of questions in novel and fascinating ways and to study the impact of digital technology itself on culture and society. Digital-only publications, for example, forges the traditional monograph or printed edition and puts all sources, data, and conclusions online. One such project is Placentia illustrated by Niall Atkinson (Art History), which combines quantitative, qualitative, and cartographic information about Renaissance Florence. Other projects are “born” digital, incorporating data sets of demographic or geographic information and combining them with hyperlinked text, images, and sound. Wu Hung (Art History) and Jason Salavon (Visual Art) have used 3-D models to document and “restore” the pillaged Xiangtanshan Buddhist caves. Yet other projects work within the realm of new media: Patrick Jagoda (English) has collaborated with a colleague in the biological sciences, Melissa Lillian, to develop video games that encourage responsible health decisions by teenagers. I think back to my own research and how digital technology might have changed it. As editor of the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, which was completed in 2011, I worked with a team to assemble our data using the process established by the project’s founders in the 1920s. We carefully compiled and categorized information using index cards, a system little modified from the one established by Carl Linnaeus in the eighteenth century. Starting a similar project today, we would make use of sophisticated databases to cross-reference data and quickly retrieve information. Instead of housing millions of index cards in wooden files, we would store data in computer servers or in the cloud. Moreover, the end products might be different—we might publish hard copies of edited volumes, make all our raw data available to scholars digitally, or create separate and simultaneous print and interactive online versions, as the Chicago Hittite Dictionary is doing today.

This is a new world for humanistic scholarship, but it does not change who we are—researchers and teachers—or what we aim to accomplish: the production and transmission of new knowledge. This issue of Tableau highlights several faculty members, students, and staff who use technologically sophisticated tools for research as we probe old questions in new ways. You will find that these tools and methods provide opportunities to enrich our mission of pursuing free inquiry and rigorous scholarship grounded in the disciplines of the humanities. We move forward with these principles firmly in place, turning the challenges of our time into opportunities for the future.

Sincerely yours,

Martha T. Roth
Dean of the Division of the Humanities
IT’S HARD TO GET A SIMPLE ANSWER out of Maureen McLane. Mostly it seems like there aren’t any—and that’s the way she likes it. A poet and professor at New York University since 2008, McLane, PhD’97, inhabits the in-between: the hybrid spaces that mix poetry and prose, past and present, lyric and narrative, the cosmic and the terrestrial. McLane’s poetry is infused with her literary scholarship (much, but not all of it, on the romantics), and her essays are infused with poetry. There is an echo of formalism in her free verse. And her formal poems sometimes seem ready to break free from their harnasses. Perhaps the book most emblematic of McLane’s work as a whole is a 2012 collection of autobio- graphical essays called My Poets (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). A finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award, My Poets is disarming, luminous, and piercing; it feels at once experimental and old-fashioned. Interspersing her own prose with lines from poets canonical and contemporary—Shelley, Wordsworth, Dickinson, Bishop, Louise Glück, Fanny Howe, Frederick Seidel, Anne Carson—my Poets stitches together memoir and po- etic criticism, charting McLane’s reading life from young adulthood onward as it coincided with her private life: friends made and lost, a marriage, school, adulthood.

Tucked between chapters are two centos, poems; the centos offer their own summations of the intermingled life and literary. An abecedary mid-way through the book presents a songlike alphabetic catalog of what she calls “My Translated,” works in translation that have been meaningful and important to her: Sappho’s, Homer’s, the Iliad, the Odyssey… “My Poets” is a long poem about a polymorphous that remains ancient even as it’s made new, for- ever changing. It is a poetic response to the poetry of their own period as well as their source, new poems perpetually in conversation, quotes from her reading, lists of books read or to be read, and the beginnings of conversations, poetic ideas about ancient poetry. Interspersing her own prose with lines from poets canonical and contemporary—Shelley, Wordsworth, Dickinson, Bishop, Louise Glück, Fanny Howe, Frederick Seidel, Anne Carson—my Poets stitches together memoir and poetic criticism, charting McLane’s reading life from young adulthood onward as it coincided with her private life: friends made and lost, a marriage, school, adulthood. McLane grew up in a middle-class suburb of Syracuse, New York, the oldest of three children in a family full of books and music. “It was a very church school kind of life,” she says. “Which had its pleasures and security and also its limi- tations.” McLane took piano lessons and played the organ (“very badly,” she claims) at two churches; she sang in community and school chooral groups and still sings. She went to Harvard for college, where she studied poetry with the famous critic Helen Vendler, and earned a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford. In the early 1990s she came to the Uni- versity of Chicago to study English and American literature and wrote a dissertation that became her first scholarly book: Romanticism and the Human Sciences: Poetry, Population, and the Disourse of the Species (Cambridge University Press, 2000). In graduate school and afterward, she wrote book reviews for the Chicago Tribune and later the Bos- ton Review and the New York Times. After nearly ten years as a teaching fellow and lecturer at Harvard, McLane joined the English department at NYU, where she teaches poetry and romantic literature to undergraduates and graduate students. She published Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry (Cambridge). She spent early 2014 on a London sabbatical with NYU classicist Laura Slatkin, with whom she is working on a new book. Tentatively titled “Brit- ish Romantic Homer,” it will examine how Hom- er’s poetry was received in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England and Scotland. “Was he a national poet?” McLane asks. “Was he an illiterate bard?” romantic poets’ conceptions of Homer, she says, illuminate their thinking about the poetry of their own period as well as their ideas about ancient poetry.

Somewhere along the way, McLane herself became a poet. If you ask her when and how, the answer is complicated. “Keats says a poet is the most unpoetical thing in existence, and I think that’s a useful thing to sit with,” McLane says. “I could say I always felt that I reverberated in a certain way to language and rhythm, and that was for me and probably for a lot of people the unconsciousness,” she jokes. McLane keeps a series of notebooks, in which she records stray thoughts and images, snatches of overheard conversations, quotes from her reading, lists of books read or to be read, and the beginnings of poems. After a notebook has gestated for a few months, she returns to it, to mine out the shards of what will become a poem. All three of her poetry collections were written this way. The most recent, This Blue, meditates on the idea of time and finitude and on a world that remains ancient even as it’s made new, for- ever broken and also full of new possibilities. Po- etry itself is a bit like that: proliferating in unex- pected directions but always rooted to the same source, new poems perpetually in conversation with the past, like those that marked the birth of the blues. Take it up Old Adam— every day the world exists to be named.

Keats says a poet is the most unpoetical thing in existence, and I think that’s a useful thing to sit with.

—Maureen McLane

Poet and literary scholar Maureen McLane explores the hybrid spaces in writing.

By Lydialylye Gibson

Photo by Jason Smith

Poetry surrounds Maureen McLane in her NYU office. She published her third collection of poems in April, a process that often begins with “unconscious” jotting in notebooks.

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Digital tools transform the study of ancient civilizations.

BY ELIZABETH STATION

In 1906, when Oriental Institute (OI) founder James Henry Breasted led an expedition to survey the temples of ancient Nubia, he employed state-of-the-art techniques. Perched on wooden scaffolding, a photographer took pictures of inscriptions and developed them on the spot. Breasted compared the black and white photos with the temple walls, noting by hand any details that the camera had missed. The group carried the images by camel and by ship along the Nile, organizing their findings Arch in Chicago after the Egyptian season ended.

Today students and faculty in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (NELC) investigate the ancient world using tools that would have startled scholars even a generation ago. In fields from cuneiform studies to Egyptology, a digital revolution has begun.

In a darkened lab in Wieboldt Hall, a dozen grad students and faculty members sit quietly at computers as PhD student Tytus Mikolaj-czak explains the basics of Adobe Illustrator, a software program used for drawing.

Mikolajczak emphasizes the versatility of Adobe Illustrator—once you have the drawing on the computer, you can do anything with it. You can shrink it, enlarge it, and correct it endlessly, and it always stays nice and sharp,” says van den Hout. “I don’t think anyone will go back to the old-fashioned method.”

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—Theo van den Hout

At archaeological dig sites, technology is transforming every phase of research. Oriental Institute scholars pioneered the aerial survey of sites in Egypt, Iran, and Turkey, taking photos from airplanes and hot-air balloons in the 1920s and ’30s and later from helium blimps.

Scholars around the world now use remote sensing, portable X-rays, 3-D scanners, and other sophisticated tools to map and analyze findings.

One of the OI’s Persepolis Fortification Archival Database specialists and researchers on OI projects, other students have learned a technique called polynomial texture synthesis (PTS), which allows the virtual study of artifacts from every angle.

Young scholars at UChicago also gain valuable training in the “old ways,” says doctoral student Oya Topcuoglu: “in the past you would have to do hand sketches and measurements of the site. It took much longer. Now you can load images into a software program that generates 3-D computer models of the site—which contains the ruins of a 3,000-year-old walled city—instantly creating digital records tagged with GPS data.”

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Publishers increasingly require scholars to submit articles with digital photos and drawings of objects they’ve studied, but academic programs don’t teach those skills. Mikolajczak conceived the workshop to share his knowledge, hoping to “level the ground” so that even students without art training can produce high-quality images.

Last fall he also tutored Theo van den Hout, NELC’s department chair and a professor who studies Hitito-Anatolian languages in the Institute. For a 2010 book featuring cuneiform fragment studies from Boghazkoy, Turkey, van den Hout made 254 drawings by hand, using pencil and ink.

That artisanal approach has long been standard practice, and van den Hout says he “loved the work,” but he plans to produce the next volume digitally. Using a tablet computer and stylus, scholars can trace digital photographs of ancient objects held in museum collections anywhere, making the document-
When isolated individuals come together and use their hands as their primary communication, that’s where you see language spontaneously combust.
—Diane Brentari
A new generation investigates art across centuries and continents.

BY TOM POPELKA

“I DON’T LOOK like a regular art historian,” admits Niall Atkinson. His shoulder-length blond hair says “surfer” more than “professor,” but Atkinson, a Neubauer Family Assistant Professor in Art History, isn’t referring to his physical looks. His area of study—the soundscape of late-twentieth-century architecture and urbanism—falls outside the usual boundaries of art history. The five other recent hires in the department, notes Professor Christine Mehring, chair of the department, share his adventurous approach. “We all have that offbeat quality,” says Cécile Fromont. “It’s exciting to be a part of that cohort.”

Recruiting scholars is not a task the department takes lightly. Professor Claudia Brittenham, who studies Mesoamerica in the Middle Ages and the newest member of the department, notes that faculty searches can take several tries before a committee finds the right candidate. Instead of hiring to fill a gap in the curriculum, Mehring says, they search for the best scholarship. “We seek quality, we seek a great mind—we seek great work that isn’t attached to ‘this’ kind of art history or ‘that’ kind of art history.” This open approach is something the new faculty members recognize as a strength. “We’re all a little quirky, and that’s something the department prides itself on,” says Claudia Brittenham, a specialist in nineteenth-century Japanese art, who believes that art historians in general are making a return to the “old art history” era. “I seek their advice all the time,” Foxwell says. “This open approach is some-thing the new faculty members recognize as a strength.”

The group’s research interests point to another shift. Art history today is “a more even field” than it used to be, observes Mehring, with thriving sub-fields that span the globe and cross centuries of civilizations. Incorporating artistic traditions from outside Europe or North America “is something our department is doing very well,” adds Fromont. She studies visual manifestations of cross-cultural connections in the early modern Atlantic world, from images in political and scientific texts to seventeenth-century curosities from the Kingdom of Kongo.

“My work is in between many fields,” says Fromont, adding that cross-pollination between subfields can only improve scholarship. Even within more traditional fields such as European or American modern art, she believes that research is “made more interesting by collaboration with those working on modern art elsewhere.” Many of the assistant professors are not so much focused on one particular area of art but on the interplay between regions and peoples. Chelsea Foxwell, a specialist in nineteenth-century Japanese art, examines how cross-cultural exchanges after Japan’s so-called opening to the West affected the country’s art. Both Foxwell and Ping Foong, a scholar of early Chinese art, take advantage of what Foxwell says is “a special sense of energy and collaboration on campus,” working with colleagues in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations and the Center for East Asian Studies. “I seek their advice all the time,” Foxwell says. Brittenham, who studies Mesoamerica in the 3,000 years before the Spanish invasion, also finds it easy to connect with her colleagues. She and the newest member of the department, Patrick Crowley, both work with the department’s Center for Global Ancient Art. Crowley’s research in ancient Roman visual culture looks at images of ghosts and how they play into ideas about the reliability of vision and notions of truth.

On the surface, Brittenham’s work on pre-Columbian mural paintings has little to do with Crowley’s investigations of ghost images on ancient Roman sarcophagi. But Brittenham finds that comparing methodologies, findings, and evidence—or even what counts as evidence—between areas of study “shakes things loose” that she can take back to her own research.

For younger faculty members, it can be diffi-cult to balance teaching with research, but they enjoy working with students who often surprise them with original insights. In art history, says Brittenham, “the barriers to access are so low. All you need is a pair of eyes to do original research.” The students are “so engaged, so fearless.” Discussing his recent introduction to Roman art and Archaeology course for undergraduates, Crowley notes, “even though no one in my class is an art history major, it doesn’t matter—they all have things to say.”

Despite their divergent research, the group shares “points of intersection and points of conver-sation,” says Brittenham. “We all like each other too.” Atkinson notes that their extended conversations also occur through students, with assistant professors regularly sending students to each other to “reproduce that ethos” of open exchange. “Students come in with conventional ideas about art history that I’m trying to undo,” says Atkinson. “I’m trying to get students to see that they can cross corridors.”

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WHEN JACKIE REBER WAS JOB HUNTING, she was struck by the job listing for Codify, a Chicago tech company. The firm expressed interest in humanities graduates, linguists in particular. “Nobody asks for linguists,” says Reber, AM’07, PhD’11, who earned her degrees in that field. “Nobody knows what linguists do.”

As it turned out, the head of Reber’s division, Gina Bulatovic, AB’98, AM’03, PhD’08, is also a linguist who knew exactly what linguists could do for Codify. The consulting firm helps companies improve their websites and e-commerce presence by reorganizing and reclassifying the data they gather online.

“The process reminds me a lot of work I did during my dissertation,” says Reber, an analyst. “You’re given a mass of data, and your job is to sort through all this information and organize it in a way that makes sense. It’s about organizing data to tell stories.”

Here, Reber and four other Humanities alumni offer thoughts and advice about finding fulfilling careers in the tech sector.

The tech sector doesn’t just need programmers and entrepreneurs. Reber advises humanities to cast their nets widely when applying for jobs. “There’s a shortage of really talented people,” agrees Matt Percy, AM’96, a graduate of the Master of Arts Program in the Humanities (MAfH). Percy is director of strategy and business development for Microsoft in Redmond, Washington. “We’re super agnostic about where these people come from.”

“The tech community in general loves people who can think differently and who are really, really smart,” says Mary Carello Senic, AM’18, another MAfH graduate and a recruiter at Google’s headquarters in Mountain View, California.

The skills that students develop—researching and writing about cinema or philosophy or eighteenth-century poetry—do translate to the tech world. “The secret of the tech industry is that it only works if there are lots of people who aren’t techies,” says Jon Aronoff, AM’96, vice president and distinguished analyst at the Research Board, a New York City think tank that is part of Gartner, the world’s largest information technology research and advisory company. “There are brilliant engineers out there, but they tend not to deal with human complexity that well,” he says. “The world that we live in requires the skills you get in humanistic education.”

By that he means research, writing, persuasive, and analytical skills. For example, Aronoff might make recommendations to companies about how and whether to use an online file-storing service such as Dropbox. Where a financial analyst might evaluate the service’s cost-effectiveness, Aronoff—who studied English in graduate school—would research and analyze the cultural context in which it exists: how and why people use it and whether those reasons are likely to exist in the future.

“When people are trained to analyze companies from a business school background, they tend to do it from a financial standpoint,” he says. “The way we’re looking at it isn’t actually that different from the skills you use learning to analyze poetry or breaking a film down shot by shot.”

The UChicago network is powerful: use it. Codify is just one example of a UChicago grad hiring more alumni. Aronoff was the first UChicago graduate to join the Research Board, but thanks to his recruiting there are now seven on a research staff of 13. An alum interviewed Carello Senic for a position at Google several years ago; she wasn’t hired, but staying in touch ultimately paid off when she interviewed again last year and got the job.

First, of course, it’s important to reach out. “I think there are a lot of people who don’t put themselves out there enough,” Percy says. “I get a call from maybe one UChicago person a year.” If this story spurs more calls, he says, “That’s great.”

Keep ties to the humanities. Carello Senic, who wrote her master’s thesis on the green building movement, still does architectural research in her free time and has volunteered with the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Humanities training can help even when you don’t have a job. Before landing his current position as a product marketing manager for Facebook in Menlo Park, California—“a job I love”—Jeremy Galen, AM’07, had a few different tech jobs. Some were with start-ups, some not; some were full-time, some not; and he felt frustrated. “I felt like I’d abandoned my vocation,” he says. What sustained him was creative writing—essays and fiction, including several book-length works—using the skills he’d honed in the MAfH program. He also started a blog of philosophical musings that he still maintains, which includes a defense of the idea of “overthinking” that would make any UChicago alumus proud.

Percy, now at Microsoft, believes the intellec- tual approach he learned in graduate school forms everything he does, including his work on the company’s Xbox video games. “I like to think the humanities is a huge part of who I am,” he says. “It’s really shaped the way I approach the world.”

There are brilliant engineers out there, but they tend not to deal with human complexity that well.
—Jon Aronoff

Humanities alumni offer tips for thriving in tech careers.

by Jeanie Chung

FROM GREAT BOOKS TO GIGABYTES

IN MEMORIAM

Ted Cohen, AM’62, a philosopher whose agile intellect and wry humor made him a campus legend, died March 15 after a brief hospitalization. He was 74.

A memorial service was held April 12 at the Quadrangle Club.

Over a 50-year career, Cohen, a professor in Philosophy, turned his eye to a vast range of subjects that included jokes, baseball, television, photography, art, and the philosophy of language and formal logic.

Cohen’s Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters (University of Chicago Press, 1999) offered a lively, accessible take on how and why jokes work. In Thinking of Others: On the Talent for Metaphor (Princeton University Press, 2006), he argued that the ability to think of one thing as another is an essential human capacity that makes sound moral judgment possible.

Widely praised for his engaging writing style, he won the 1951 Proust Prize for his essay “There Are No Ties at First Base.” Among other honors, he served as president of the American Philosophical Association and the American Society for Aesthetics. He chaired the Department of Philosophy from 1974 to 1979 and won the Quanrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching in 1983.

Cohen also made his mark as the longtime moderator of the University’s famed Latke-Hamantash Debate—though not an impartial one. “The hamantash is a very, very good thing of its kind,” he argued in the 1976 debate. “The latke, however, is a perfect thing. Now that I’ve laid the correctness is already evident to you.”

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In 2013, he collaborated with the Quadrangle Club’s annual Latke-Hamantash Debate, a series of humorous, non-technical monologues on a wide range of philosophical topics.

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—S.A.

ADD YOUR OWN ADVICE by commenting on this article at tableu.uchicago.edu/tech.
An alumna who found her calling in the commercial art world helps future students find theirs.

BY CARRIE GOLUS, AB’91, AM’93

WHEN AMY GOLD, AM’90, AB’91, AM’93

By Carrie Golus, Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

I wouldn’t ask somebody to give money for something unless I would do so myself. —Amy Gold

The University of Chicago,

The couple will also help to fund student internships at the Art Institute of Chicago, where their support will be dedicated to the new exhibitions and conservation projects. Gold has offered to facilitate access to private collections of contemporary art, which she and Gorvy have been building over the past few years.

Among the highlights of the past year, Gossett cites the work at the New England Conservatory of Music, where he was awarded an honor of "Outstanding Alumni". He has also been recognized for his work on critical editions of the pieces, a quintet, and the manuscript items related to the five major works of Rossini. His research interests include the role of the interpreter in performance, and the influence of Rossini’s music on contemporary composers such as Donizetti and Verdi.

Music professor Philip Gossett (above) at his retirement celebration in 2020.

By Claudio Vellutini

PHILIP GOSSETT’S CAREER is captured in the title of his 2006 book, the award-winning "Italian Opera: Performing Baroque Opera." Since his graduate studies at Princeton in the 1960s, Gossett has focused on the recovery and performance of Rossini’s music. His work has been recognized with several prestigious awards, including the New York Times Award for Outstanding Contribution to Music in 2006.

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Music professor Philip Gossett (above) at his retirement celebration in 2020.

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CELEBRATE THE HUMANITIES

alumni weekend
June 5–8, 2014

THURSDAY, JUNE 5
2:00–3:00 p.m.
Understanding Gilgamesh
UnCommon Core session in the Oriental Institute with Christopher Woods

FRIDAY, JUNE 6
10:00–11:00 a.m.
A Conversation with Peter Selz
UnCommon Core session with art historians Peter Selz, AM’49, PhD’54, Christine Mehring, and Reinhold Heller

SATURDAY, JUNE 7
1:30–3:30 p.m.
Alumni Beer Garden
Drinks on the quad with Humanities faculty members and alumni

PLUS: Special programming for MAPH alumni, an organ concert in Bond Chapel, Smart Museum and Mansueto Library tours, an animal safari of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia for families, and other events

TO REGISTER AND LEARN MORE, VISIT ALUMNIWEEKEND.UCHICAGO.EDU OR CALL 800.955.0065.

SAVE THE DATE
HUMANITIES DAY
SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18
2014

Mark your calendar and plan to explore new topics in literature, visual arts, linguistics, music, and more at the University of Chicago’s 36th annual Humanities Day. All events—presentations, tours, and exhibits—are free and open to the public. Visit humanitiesday.uchicago.edu.