

# From the Archives

The first president of the American Academy, James Bowdoin, was a businessman and a scientist who went on to become governor of Massachusetts. He and the other founders of the Academy were deeply concerned with the role of the arts and sciences in building a new nation. In his inaugural address, Bowdoin voiced the expectations of the fledging society and imagined what a historian living a hundred years after 1780 might say about its founders:

“Rapt into future times,” and anticipating the history of our country, methinks I read in the admired pages of some *American Livy*, or *Thucydides*, to the following effect...

It was not to be expected, that our ancestors, involved as they were in a civil war, could give any attention to literature and the sciences: but superior to their distresses, and animated by their general principles, which liberty and independency inspire, they instituted the excellent society, called *The American Academy of Arts and Sciences*...

... [T]hey proceeded on fact and observation, and did not admit of any reasonings or deductions, but such as clearly resulted from them. This has been the uniform practice of the society: whose members, from time to time, having been chosen from men of every country, from every class and profession, without any other distinction than was dictated by the dignity of their characters, by their morality, good sense, and professional abilities, we find in the printed transactions of this society, the best compositions on every subject, within the line of their department. We find in those transactions new facts, new observations and discoveries; or old ones placed in a new light, and new deductions made from them.

They have particularly attended to such subjects as respect the growth, population, and improvement of their country: in which they have so happily succeeded, that we now see agriculture, manufactures, navigation and commerce, in a high degree of cultivation; and all of them making swift advances in improvement, as population increases. In short, they have, agreeably to the declared end of the institution, “cultivated every art and science, which might tend to advance the interest and honour of their country, the dignity and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people.”

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