from some of the most disturbing modern works—“[s]trange videos, distorted and grotesque paintings, graffito, and perverse photography”—but came to accept that “Perhaps...this latest generation of ‘modern’ artists had more to offer than I was giving them credit for. I know that would have been my mother’s reaction.”

Fittingly, the second element of his gift is a major boost to the Fogg renovation and the reconfiguration of the University’s three art museums—one of the nation’s largest collections, and pre-eminent teaching institutions as well. The new study centers and seminar rooms will be the centerpiece of the museums’ efforts to bring students and their teachers into direct contact with important works of art. Rockefeller’s support is the first announced for what promises to be an expensive, intricate effort expected to take as long as five years.

David Rockefeller with the Brazil staff of his eponymous Latin American Studies center, during a visit to the São Paulo office in 2006

A smaller fund will support implementation of future recommendations by the president’s arts task force, possibly involving fellowships for student artists, expanding visits by performers to campus, and longer artistic residencies at Harvard.

Rockefeller’s pledge to Harvard equals two other pledges he has announced in recent years; $100 million each to Rockefeller University, the scientific research institute in Manhattan, and to the Museum of Modern Art. All are testamentary gifts, to be funded in full upon his death; unusually, he is also providing each institution with annual cash payments now, so they can begin implementing the programs he wants to support before the endowment and current-use elements of his philanthropies are actually transferred.

The Rockefeller family has long been associated with the first two institutions. In a way, David Rockefeller’s landmark $100 million gift to Harvard puts his signature on another institution—where the tradition of family engagement began squarely with him.

In his memoir, he described himself as a B student at Harvard, the result of diligent application in spite of what he deemed lackluster academic preparation. Socially, the transition was harder. Had he gone to boarding school, as did many classmates who were the sons of wealthy parents, “my life at Harvard would have been more immediately pleasurable and certainly very different from what it was,” he wrote. “Upon reflection almost 70 years later, however, I do not believe the rest of my life would have been as interesting or constructive as it has been. Having to deal with my early insecurities at Harvard and to struggle for academic achievement and social acceptance made me a more open-minded and tolerant person.”

For that contribution toward what he called “a wonderful life,” Rockefeller has now made a remarkable repayment.