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Art for Sale

Michael J. Lewis

If the health of an institution can be gauged by its building activity, then no institution is healthier today than the American museum. In every direction, and no matter which vital statistics one consults, the picture is rosy: billions expended on architecture, millions of cubic feet of new space created, tens of millions of annual visitors to fill up all that space. And then there is the tangible evidence itself, in the travertine acropolis of the new Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the titanium flutter of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, both of which opened in 1997 and thereby launched the current building boom.

The signal having been given, flashy leviathans soon followed in Milwaukee, Fort Worth, San Francisco, and of course New York, where the Museum of Modern Art (2004) has set a new standard for self-deprecating opulence. And still they come. Blustering additions will soon transform (among others) the Whitney Museum in New York, the Seattle Art Museum, and the pastoral Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Even the cloistered Barnes Foundation in Pennsylvania has been granted permission by a court to walk away from its suburban site to a new building in central Philadelphia. Today it is a poor museum director indeed whose valise does not contain at least one set of blueprints or schematics.

But frantic building activity is not always healthy, or even rational, as the adventures of Mad King Ludwig or Nicolae Ceausescu may remind us. Even as the latest behemoths have collectively fashioned a new public image for the museum, other factors have been sullying that same image. A succession of prominent scandals has come to touch nearly every aspect of museum operations— funding, the acquisition and sale of objects, corporate philosophy. The effects cannot be assessed with the same numerical precision as the building statistics, at least not yet, but it is safe to say that they are anything but signs of well-being.

First was the 1999 Sensation exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, which showcased the Charles Saatchi collection of contemporary art. The show was heralded by a heavy-handed and rather incendiary ad campaign featuring the slogan, “Health Warning: The Contents of This Exhibition May Cause Shock and Vomiting.” Indeed they did, particularly Chris Ofili’s Holy Virgin Mary, a painting famously bedaubed with elephant droppings and pornographic decoupage.*

* See “The Monotony of Sensation” by Steven C. Munson in the January 2000 Commentary. [32]

In the ensuing clamor, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani sought to strike the museum's half-million-dollar monthly subsidy, insisting angrily that no citizen ought to be compelled to help pay for art that blasphemed his religion. New York's influential arts community promptly closed ranks to support the Brooklyn Museum and its director, Arnold Lehman, arguing that Ofili had a right to be as insulting as he wanted and also (without any attendant sense of contradiction) that elephant dung was no insult but rather an African form of homage.

By the time a federal court ruled against Giuliani, some surprising facts about Sensation had come to light, to the acute distress of the Brooklyn Museum. Saatchi, it was learned, had exercised an unprecedented degree of control over the display and presentation of his objects—overriding the museum's curatorial staff and in effect serving as his own curator. Moreover, he had been selling works from his collection, their value evidently augmented by the Brooklyn show and its overheated publicity. In effect, the Brooklyn Museum had collaborated in allowing itself to be exploited as a commercial gallery, only without sharing in the profit—making the contest between censorship and artistic freedom look in hindsight like a carefully engineered public-relations stunt.

If unethical, Lehman's activities were not technically illegal. The case was otherwise with Marion True, the curator of antiquities at the Getty Museum who is currently on trial in Italy for participating in the smuggling of antiquities. There is no question that True was involved, only about how deeply and actively she was involved.

In retrospect, it is easy to see why the Getty was a peculiarly susceptible buyer. A cash-rich but object-poor institution, it did not wade into the art market in a big way until the 1980's, by which point importing major art from Europe (with the exception of England) had become practically impossible; Italian law, for instance, strictly regulates the export of the country's cultural patrimony, and smuggled art invariably bears a spurious provenance, often in the form of a trail of feigned private collections. For a curator like True, faced with the offer of a stupendous Greek sculpture, the temptation must have been irresistible to give its documentation only the most cursory inspection.

Following the tracks of True's dealer (and co-defendant) Robert Hecht, investigators have identified other looted antiquities in prominent collections, including the Euphronios Krater, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's most celebrated vase, long known to have been smuggled out of Italy. (The museum has now agreed to repatriate the vase.) Indeed, it is becoming clear that the trafficking in illegally acquired ancient artifacts out of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds is closer to a torrent than a trickle.

As much as the woes in Brooklyn and Los Angeles have titillated the public, still other ominous developments have gone overlooked. One of these is the silent scandal of "deaccessioning," the process by which a museum sells works from its collection to raise ready cash. Longstanding museum practice has mandated that such funds are to be used only to acquire other works of art, and never for general operating expenses. But this is a rule increasingly honored in the breach.

A few recent sales have particularly raised eyebrows. The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago auctioned the bulk of its works by George Catlin, a self-taught painter who lived among the Indians of the Great Plains in the 1830's and documented their lives and customs. The museum's staff of anthropologists claimed that the work was politically offensive and of "negligible ethnographic content," providing a fig leaf for a decision that the trustees more honestly referred to as "monetizing a non-performing asset."

Worse was the sale last year by the New York Public Library of Asher B. Durand's Kindred Spirits, an 1848 portrait of the painter Thomas Cole and the poet/newspaper editor William Cullen Bryant. Cole founded the Hudson River School, whose ideas about the meaning of the American landscape were drawn upon by Bryant to push through his campaign to create New York City's Central Park. The painting is itself an exultant précis of local history, both financial and cultural: in 1825 the Erie Canal had opened upstate, making New York City the nation's financial capital even as it made Cole the great witness to the destruction of the Hudson River landscape, which in turn produced the cultural energy that led to the building of Central Park. Nowhere else in America could the painting mean as much as in Bryant Park, the site of the library. But here as in Chicago, another allegedly non-performing asset was "monetized."

Both the Field Museum and the library have argued that they are not art museums and that they serve different public goals. But the same voracious willingness to make a yard sale of donations has become increasingly normal in museums whose business is to preserve and document works of art.* Of course, this is not a new problem. Thirty years ago, the Guggenheim Museum dramatically sold off about half of its collection of Wassily Kandinsky abstractions in what was billed as a judicious "pruning." But the temptation to loot the assets can only grow worse as operating budgets become far greater and as inherited scruples diminish, leaving curators and boards more susceptible to rationalization of the sort practiced in Chicago.

One might contend that the current woes of the museum world are merely the stresses and strains of any large, complex organism, no different from those afflicting other institutions today, especially in a period of expansion, and that scandals or incidents of malfeasance can be marked down to the usual human failings of ambition, sloth, and cupidity. But if so, is there a point at which a multitude of individual failures can be said to amount to a collective crisis? Or to put it another way: is the wave of museum-building truly a sign of inner vigor, or something more akin to the sprouting of mushrooms on a long-decaying log?

A good place to begin looking for an answer is in the testimony of those most responsible for the institution. In 2001, James Cuno, director of the Harvard art museums, organized a year-long symposium featuring some of the most prominent figures in the American art establishment, including the directors of the Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the Getty, the Chicago Art Institute, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

* See Hilton Kramer, "Deaccession Roulette," New Criterion (December 2005).

The results of their deliberations were subsequently published in Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust.* Although the book appeared two years ago, it is well worth revisiting in light of more recent events.

Whose Muse? is fascinating both for what it says and for what it does not say. Deaccessioning, for example, is not viewed with any great alarm. Although Glenn D. Lowry of the Museum of Modern Art refers to it disdainfully as “taking the lid off the cookie jar,” neither he nor any of his fellows musters much fervor in attacking a practice that, in extremis, can offer a lifeboat to a sinking institution.

Nor do they express any urgent concern about illegally acquired art. This seems more surprising. Although Marion True’s shopping spree had not yet come to light a this time, much attention had been focused in previous years on the amount of Nazi-looted art that was still unaccounted for. Since the appearance of Lynn Nicholas’s The Rape of Europa in 1994, it was known that prominent museums, including the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Seattle Art Museum, held works that had been confiscated from Jewish owners who had subsequently been murdered (although, to be fair, none of the implicated museums seems to have been aware of the fact).

By the time Cuno’s panel convened, however, much of the wind had gone out of that story. A presidential advisory commission had been formed to study the question, and a congressional committee had conducted hearings. Like the controversy over deaccessioning, the whole issue of improperly acquired art must have struck Cuno’s contributors as regrettable but best passed over. Both practices, after all, are as old as museums themselves, and criticisms of them by directors can have something of the quality of loan sharks speaking out against the breaking of legs—an unfortunate practice, to be sure, but part of the cost of doing business.

Of greater interest to the panel were not the perennial vices of museology but the novel ones. In particular, the directors express genuine alarm over the willingness of an august institution like the Brooklyn Museum to lend its reputation and authority to a marketing gimmick. What they clearly fear is that the protracted public spectacle— the sensation over Sensation—will come to taint them as well. Public faith in the authority and integrity of museums is their greatest intangible asset, and what has been patiently stored up over the ages stands in danger of being fecklessly squandered in a single generation. To Lowry, strongly seconded by Philippe de Montebello of the Metropolitan, the Brooklyn scandal is not simply a shabby act of collusion between a museum and a collector but a far- reaching “breach of public trust.”

* Edited by James Cuno, Princeton University Press and Harvard Art Museums, 208 pp., $29.95.

Under normal circumstances, museum directors are loath to say a word against a fellow director or sister museum, and certainly not in public. In this instance, the impulse to dissociate themselves from Lehman seems to have proved stronger than the constraints of collegial solidarity. Even more remarkably, the directors also choose to dissociate themselves from another figure whose career had been widely regarded not as a scandal at all but as the success story of his generation. This is Thomas Krens, the flamboyant director of the Guggenheim.

An art historian who later acquired an MBA, Krens became director in the late 1980's and quickly won fame for applying the principles of modern corporate management to the world of the museum. But it was not so much efficiency and rational cost-accounting that he brought to the Guggenheim—far from it—as the bold risk-taking and aggressive expansionism that was a hallmark of the corporate culture of the mid-1980's, when it began to seem to many that the path to success lay less in innovative products or processes than in clever financial arrangements.

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Kren's first major initiative was the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. There he drew on the modern concept of the franchise, in which corporate identity is licensed in the fashion of a restaurant chain. As an example of the imaginative financial arts, the Bilbao project was without peer: Krens identified an underutilized asset—the enormous amount of Guggenheim art in permanent storage and unseen by the public—and matched it with a potential market—the untapped tourist resources of the Basque country, a picturesque but economically distressed region conveniently perched for easy travel from London and Paris. All that he needed was the frisson of publicity, and this he achieved with Frank Gehry's expressionist tempest of a shimmering metal-sheathed building.*

By every measure, Bilbao was a thundering success, both for the Guggenheim and for the Basque province. Flush with that success, the trustees authorized Krens to launch a flotilla of satellite Guggenheims, including one in Switzerland, one in Brazil, and one on the East River in New York. Weirdest of all was one in Las Vegas, an unlikely partnership among the Guggenheim, the Hermitage in Russia, and the Venetian Resort Hotel-Casino.

Even as he expanded his network, Krens was also radically changing the tone of the Guggenheim's exhibitions. Viewers who remembered when the Guggenheim debuted as the Museum of Non-Objective Art could be forgiven their perplexity when confronted in 1998 by an exhibition of the motorcycle, an objective object showcased by the Guggenheim in a massive, crowd-pleasing jubilee. The motorcycle show, moreover, was underwritten by BMW, signaling yet another change: where Lehman had made a pitiable effort to conceal the commercial nature of Sensation, Krens brazenly celebrated his commercial connections. In 2000, the Guggenheim hosted an exhibition devoted to

* I discussed this project in "From Bauhaus to Bilbao," Commentary, September 2001.

Giorgio Armani, for which it happily accepted a donation of $15 million (or so the figure has been reported) from the clothing designer.

It was in part for acts like these that the New York Times suggested in early 2002 that Krens had overreached himself. At around the same time, a Village Voice piece entitled “Downward Spiral” called for Krens’s resignation on grounds of malfeasance. The author, Jerry Saltz, pointed out that with each successive exhibition, “the Guggenheim looks a lot less ‘visionary’ and a lot more dubious, with each branch set up to support another branch. The business world calls this leveraging. The street calls it a shell game.”

Indeed, the strutting style was proving to be the perfect embodiment of a feckless and ultimately foolhardy policy, as, in the post-Bilbao years, the balance sheets of the Guggenheim fell increasingly short of expectations. The shipping of art treasures from St. Petersburg for display in a Venice-themed museum in the Nevada desert—which must have seemed like visionary globalism at the time— proved something of a boondoggle; the museum, opening a month after the attacks of 9/11, was quickly mired in financial troubles. The East River museum, slated to be another cyclone of whirling titanium, was heralded in a massive Gehry exhibition—a naked use of the museum’s facilities to generate its own publicity—but the publicity did not help, and the project was quietly shelved. And so forth.

In brief, the same corporate chain that had lifted the Guggenheim operations in the 1990’s now worked to pull them down. As early as 2000, as Whose Muse? points out, the museum was digging deep into its reserves to cover expenses. In that year alone, over $10 million was pried from the endowment, leaving a shockingly small reserve of $37 million for an institution of global aspirations with, at the time, debts in the amount of $28 million.

Throughout his tenure, Krens, perhaps modeling himself on the developer Donald Trump, has cultivated a brash and confident persona as a marketable asset in its own right. But in the business world, failure is normal and expected, and bankruptcy, which Trump has already seen once, is no disgrace. Things are otherwise for a museum, at least in the eyes of the museum establishment. True, a museum—particularly in a capitalist country with no tradition of royal or aristocratic patronage—resembles a business in many ways. But it also resembles a church, in that, whether the audience is two million people or two, it purports to teach truths and to conserve things that are both eternal and of intrinsic value. True, too, a museum collection is an asset—but not in the sense of a stock portfolio to be traded (through deaccession), mortgaged (through partnerships with commercial parties), or gambled (through a Ponzi-like pyramid of interlocking and costly building initiatives). Rather, the assets of a museum more closely resemble the passengers of an ocean liner, whose safety the captain is duty-bound to preserve.

And herein lies the real concern of the respectable wing of the art establishment as represented in Whose Muse?—namely, that the wheeling and dealing of figures like

Krens and Lehman betoken an ominous and potentially catastrophic shift in the core ethos of museums, a sign of worse things to come.

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To account for this development, the participants repeatedly invoke three interrelated factors: modern corporate culture; an increasingly jaded and entertainment-satiated public; and the radical expansion of the goods and services provided by museums, which has transformed them from places of intense and personal aesthetic encounters to something more like multifaceted amusement centers.

All three factors are clearly at play, and act reciprocally on one another to maximize the mischief. But unacknowledged by Cuno's panel is that all three have their roots well over a generation ago, and in the heart of the establishment itself. It was in 1978, after all, that Thomas Hoving organized the Metropolitan's celebrated King Tut exhibition, perhaps the single most spectacular museum success in American history.

What that success told trustees, including at the Metropolitan, was that there was a large and mostly untapped potential audience that might be lured into museums with the right kind of material and the right kind of publicity. Such an audience was likely to be motivated less by aesthetic hunger than by an itch for novelty and spectacle, and it could bring in a great deal of cash.

Ever since then, museum trustees have judged the relative success or failure of exhibitions by the box office. So, necessarily, have curators, even though they have had to witness their own status fall as a byproduct of this same process. Where once curators comprised the principal staff of museums (in some small museums, the only staff), they have now become merely one division in a far-flung operation comprising education and public relations, special events and security, preparations and gifts shops—a terrifically expensive business in which the centrality of their own role could not help being eroded.

Something of this sort has even happened at the Museum of Modern Art, until recently America's greatest curatorial success story. Since the Modern was founded in 1929, its historical exhibitions have been of intense interest to contemporary artists. Indeed, the careers of figures as diverse as Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, and John Flannagan are unthinkable without their formative encounters with the great roster of pre-war shows at the Modern: African Negro Art (1935), Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa (1937), Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art (1940), and Indian Art of the United States (1941).

But the museum's string of distinguished curators—including Alfred H. Barr and William Rubin—came to an end with the resignation of Kirk Varnedoe in 2001; since then, it, too, has shifted to a corporate rather than a curatorial model. Such is the burden of Jed Perl's withering essay, "Arrividerci MoMA," in the New Republic (February 6), tracing the "transformation of what was once a chaotically creative institution into a well-oiled business-model museum." It can only be mortifying for Glenn Lowry, who in

Cuno's volume tries so scrupulously and diplomatically to point out where the Guggenheim went wrong, to be exposed here as "a suaver version of Thomas Krens."

The fact is, however, that curatorial authority is everywhere on the wane, if seldom so dramatically as in the so-called Boston Massacre of 1999. In this incident, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts fired eighteen curators and longtime staff members in a single day. It was in the wake of that trauma that the Association of Art Museum Curators was belatedly formed in 2002. Yet even with this professional organization in place, it is difficult to know what possible response a curator could make, for instance, to an admonition I recently overheard issuing from the mouth of a museum's events planner: "You must not forget, we are the profit center."

But reliance on tickets and gift sales is not the only factor warping the institution. In fact, box-office receipts cover but a fraction of museum expenses, with the rest being made up through the support of philanthropic foundations. This brings its own distortions and compromises. Increasingly unwilling to give for reasons of prestige or pure philanthropy, charitable foundations require results-oriented accounting, which by definition measures only that which is measurable: not only visitors and sales but also size of staff and value of endowment, number of exhibitions and new acquisitions, physical plant and cubic capacity. From this angle of vision, it is no easy task to explain why an impeccable exhibition of Byzantine art seen by 10,000 at the Metropolitan is intrinsically "better" than a motorcycle exhibition seen by 100,000 at the Guggenheim.

Finally there is perhaps the most pernicious consequence of the franchise model, which is the implied suggestion that, like big-box stores, art museums can be instruments of urban renewal. Each of Krens's first two building projects—the Bilbao Guggenheim and

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Mass/MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts—was sold to local authorities as a means of revitalizing an economically shipwrecked town. The lesson has not been lost on foundations. Where a generation ago they routinely judged the educational value of an exhibition, today they are more likely to ask a museum—as James N. Wood, the former director of the Chicago Art Institute, puts it—to "justify yourself in terms of your economic impact on the community."

To all this it can be retorted, truthfully, that no museum was ever built strictly for the purpose of providing solitary aesthetic pleasure, and that museums have always served an agenda. This was certainly the case for the great museums of Germany, the first to be built expressly for the public display of art. The Altes Museum in Berlin and the Glypothek in Munich, both completed in 1830, established the canonical type: a classical marble temple with a grand public hall, around which the objects of the past were arranged in sequence. This was not a connoisseur's cabinet of curios, as with earlier museums, but a comprehensive totality, organized so as to show the unfolding pattern of development and style.

Thus, from the beginning, the museum was an instrument of civic education. Even the classicism of the façade, linking it to other neoclassical public buildings, served an instrumental function, enjoining the visitor to apply the lessons he learned within to his civic life without. Compared with Karl Friedrich Schinkel's great Altes Museum in Berlin—whose purpose was to inculcate Prussian virtue—Krens's vision of the museum as an engine of economic renewal may not seem so far out.

Nor is it intrinsically wrong to use art as an instrument of policy. The great art of the past, from the Parthenon to Chartres to the Sistine Chapel, has never been thought less of for having been created to teach a moral or civic lesson. Problems begin only when the instrumental considerations become so predominant as radically to subvert the viewer's experience of the art itself.

This, alas, is soon to be the case with the Barnes Foundation, the private collection established by Albert Barnes outside Philadelphia in 1925 and now to be uprooted and moved to the city. Although, unmentioned in Whose Muse?, and indeed still ignored by the art establishment as a whole, what is happening here is an act of cultural vandalism far more serious—because irreversible— than the gambols of the Brooklyn Museum.

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Barnes's fortune was made by a great humanitarian invention: eye drops that prevented a baby from being infected by any disease (especially syphilis) carried by its mother as it passed through the birth canal. With his wealth he amassed a priceless collection of early modern art, including a stunning array of Cézannes and early Picassos. But after his debut exhibition was snubbed in a local newspaper, Barnes defiantly turned his back on Philadelphia and the art establishment alike, reserving access to students. Even in death, Barnes continued to bait Philadelphia: his will placed the foundation under the control of Lincoln University, a historically black college that, to patrician Philadelphia, stood on the wrong side of every possible set of tracks.

Within months of Barnes's death, Walter Annenberg, another Philadelphia collector of distinction, brought suit to open the Barnes Foundation to the public. As a Jew, Annenberg was as much an outsider as Barnes, but he was also a conspicuous foe of Philadelphia's system of trusts by which patrician privilege was maintained. His suit was unsuccessful, which may have contributed to his decision to bequeath his own collection to the Metropolitan in New York. Nonetheless, over time, the strictures of Barnes's will were gradually loosened, first to permit casual visitors and then the lending of objects.

And so things would have remained, along with Barnes's wildly eccentric hanging scheme. At the Foundation, paintings are grouped not by artist or style but by compositional structure, with no wall titles, labels, or other didactic materials

permitted to sully one's formal encounter with the paintings. Thus devoid of curatorial cues, the Barnes may be a poor place to teach art history, but it is the country's finest place to look at art.

This experience will now vanish. In late 2004, court approval was granted to the trustees to relocate, ostensibly in order to allow greater public access to the collection. In bringing their suit, however, the trustees had showed no interest in exploring alternative means of getting visitors to the crowded suburban site, such as a shuttle system of the kind successfully used by the Getty in Los Angeles. From the beginning, the intention was far more ambitious: to transform an eccentric and secluded private institution into the one thing that Barnes did not wish it to be: a world-class public museum.

Enter now the philanthropies. Like the project to build a new home for the collection on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia, the trustees' suit was underwritten by a consortium of philanthropic institutions led by the Pew Charitable Trust. Given that Barnes's collection has been estimated to be worth about $25 billion, the $150 million amassed for the move can be regarded as one of the great garage sales of all time. Barnes's little reliquary of a museum—designed by Paul Cret, sculpted by Jacques Lipschitz, and painted by Henri Matisse—was designed for the objects it contains. It was, one might say, an installation piece, on a grand scale. Dismantled into its constituent parts and removed from its context, it will offer something far diminished—an instance of more people getting to see less.

No one would think the world better off if the paintings of Lascaux were taken from their lonely caves and installed in the Louvre, or if the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel were dropped and brought closer to the eye. Or perhaps the Pew Trust would. So, at least, runs the Benthamite calculus that increasingly governs the museum world—and if not its directors, then the funders and trustees to whom they are accountable.

One must not exaggerate the ill effects of making art museums more popular. In an age distracted by video games, the charms of the Internet, and a welter of electronic diversions, it is startling and heartening to see young crowds pour into a museum, as I did at the recent Salvador Dali show in Philadelphia. While the overall spectacle awaiting them inside might represent a certain dumbing-down from Byzantine gold, compared with almost any other modern amusement option it can only represent a smartening-up.

In other respects, too, the crisis of museums is not as dire as some accounts suggest. Despite the blaze of bad publicity that Marion True has brought upon the Getty, she does not exemplify any fundamental failure of the museum itself. She has done what every great museum-builder has always done, from Pope Julius II to Napoleon to Lord Elgin, and her crime, if any, is one of bad timing: the strict export laws she is accused of violating are of recent vintage.*

* The laws are also wreaking havoc on archaeological finds. By punishing trafficking in antiquities, they have created an irresistible motive to conceal the site of a discovery—often the only key to an object's history and meaning.

But there is a good reason for lamenting the state of the museum today, albeit one not cited by Cuno's refreshingly honest panel. This is that those who are charged with the stewardship of art no longer seem able or willing to defend it on the one ground on which it matters. It is true enough that a work of art can serve to entertain, to educate, to catalyze a social interaction, perhaps even to resuscitate a moribund town. So can other things. At their best, works of painting, sculpture, and architecture are something else entirely: the highest physical manifestations of a civilization—its aspirations, its ideals, its accumulated experience, its conversation with itself over the ages.

Works of art are not only products of civilization, but carriers as well, both fruit and seed. The Renaissance, after all, was made possible by nothing more than a meaningful confrontation with the fragmentary remains of the art and literature of classical antiquity. But while the belief in the existence and value of a civilization, particularly Western civilization, was once universally accepted, the term civilization itself has virtually been laughed out of the academy, which is precisely where museums must look for champions.

The result has been the formation of a professional museum corps with the highest standards of training and work ethic, but whose relationship to the objects with which it has been entrusted is on the whole managerial and procedural. If called upon to defend these objects as precious relics of civilization, many would find themselves incapable of doing so without embarrassment, or simply incapable altogether. From this perspective, it is no wonder that museum directors should have entered so enthusiastically into the culture of box office and sensationalism precisely when they did— at the moment when, throughout the academic and intellectual world, it was becoming unfashionable, if not illegitimate, to speak of art as art, let alone to draw meaningful distinctions between a motorcycle and a Michelangelo.

Montebello, Wood, and their peers at the heart of the establishment are, still, exceptions to the trend. But what of their successors? So long as museums can still justify their role by reference to the civilized and civilizing nature of high art, they can arguably survive commercialism, personal immorality, and arrogant megalomania. They can even survive the swanky hangar-sized halls into which they are now moving. When that is no longer the case, all the stop-gap insistence on ethics, curatorial responsibility, and public programs will be as nothing—a veneer of borrowed respectability on a show long since given over to the heirs of P.T. Barnum.

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