



Association of Art Museum Curators

2010 Annual Meeting

Keynote Address

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"The Curator and The Trustee"

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The Art Institute of Chicago

Welcome to Chicago

My three topics today are the trustee's responsibilities: (1) To the museum; (2) To the curators; and (3) In a bad economy.

There is an East Coast maxim that "Harvard Yard is where the rubber hits the air!" How does one avoid airy speeches? The answer is Gossip! The poet Robert Frost said that gossip is "One of the three great things in the world!" Some of you will be wondering about the other two....so I will have more on this later.

Let me also say a word about methodology. In the world of lawyers there is a doctrine called "precedent." Supreme Court opinions are influenced by precedent because what has happened before provides predictability.

Precedent is not the same as infallibility (the British House of Lords believes in infallibility) but instead is a bellweather of what one can expect in the future. So my method today is to tell a few stories, be they gossip or precedent, that may help in times to come.

First, what is the Trustees' obligation to the Museum?

Three Young Men

One of the most important trustee responsibilities is the selection of a new Director - - that puff of white smoke watched by worried curators everywhere! Judith Barter has noted the long ago selection

of Chick Austin at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Alfred Barr at the Museum of Modern Art, and Daniel Catton Rich at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Why did the Trustees pick such young directors?

1. In the October 1927 Bulletin of the Wadsworth Atheneum, there was a short notice entitled "Changes in Staff:"

"Professor Edward W. Forbes, Director of Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, has accepted appointment of Honorary Director for one year. Arthur Everett Austin, son of Prof. Austin of Cambridge, Mass. will take up duties of Acting Director on October 15. After graduating from Harvard University, Mr. Austin continued his study of art with Professor Forbes and Professor Sachs at the Fogg Art Museum, where he has been for the past 8 years. Besides being a student of art, he is himself an artist and has traveled extensively abroad. He is thus well equipped to fill the position for which he has been highly recommended to the trustees."

CHICK AUSTIN was just 26 years of age! One third of the trustees were Goodwins who were among the founders of Hartford and their relatives and fellow trustees J.P. Morgan and Junius S. Morgan. They heeded Professors Forbes and Sachs! Professor Forbes withdrew as Honorary Director a few months later. Indeed, in 1929, Austin married Helen Goodwin in Paris!

Over the next 17 years, Chick Austin famously made the Atheneum a destination for the arts. He built the collections of Italian Baroque and Modern Art, and premiered the opera "Four Saints in Three Acts" by Gertude Stein and Virgil Thomson. In 1930, Florine Stettheimer painted a portrait of Virgil Thomson at his piano playing songs from this opera. Thomson gave that painting to the Art Institute and it is on view in the American Galleries.

Chick Austin also founded a society called "The Friends and Enemies of Modern Music" a truly inclusive group!

2. In 1929, ALFRED BARR, at the age of 30, was appointed Director of the Museum of Modern Art. He also had studied at Harvard under Edward W. Forbes and Paul Sachs. He had taught at Vassar and was then teaching a course on "Tradition and Revolt in Modern Painting" at Wellesley.

Most endearingly, he referred to all nine students in his class as "faculty," made them each responsible for teaching some of the course, and assigned no required reading other than *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker* and *The New Masses*!

Barr's appointment came at the recommendation of Paul Sachs with the support, after full interviews, of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and A. Conger Goodyear. For the next 13 years as Director (and thereafter as Advisory Director and Director of Collections), Barr led a dialogue with trustees and the public that built one of the world's greatest collections of modern art.

3. DANIEL CATTON RICH came to the Art Institute in 1927 as Editor of the *Art Institute Bulletin*. In 1928, he too, studied under Edward Forbes at Harvard. In 1929 his scholarly writing led to his appointment as Assistant Curator of Painting and Sculpture, and a year later as Associate Curator under the Director, Robert Harshe. In 1938, at the age of 34, he became the Art Institute's Director of Fine Arts.

Like Chick Austin, Rich built the collections of Italian Baroque and Modern Art, and was instrumental in building and then being gifted major private collections.

A poet and President of Poetry Magazine, we honor him today for inspiring a new appreciation for Modern Art in Chicago. As a result, he and his curator of modern painting and sculpture, Katherine Kuh (a former student of Alfred Barr at Vassar) were able to acquire iconic works by Cezanne, Picasso, Matisse, Gris, Picabia, O'Keefe, de Kooning and Pollock.

In 1953, Rich and Kuh also acquired Matisse's "Bathers By A River" the inspiration for our current exhibition, "Matisse: Radical Invention, 1913-1917."

What lessons can be learned from this?

The spirit of experimentation and openness of those days continues today in our museums and especially within the curatorial ranks. The risks were outweighed for Austin and Barr by strong recommendations from Harvard. Rich had proven himself as an experienced curator. All were art professionals.

Professionalization is key. The audience today is younger, more diverse and decidedly electronic. Art Museums need to be continually refreshed by new thinking and new ideas to reach this audience. This is true of our best directors and curators, be they young or seasoned. The vision of these three young men are valuable precedents.

New Buildings

The Modern Wing of the Art Institute was one year old last week! In just one year attendance grew to two million visitors, an increase of 33%. To quote Jim Cuno, the doors opened and the citizens

of Chicago came to "claim the new building as their own." The new Ryan Education Center has already been enthusiastically embraced by Chicago's school children.

Funding new buildings is a major trustee responsibility, and was led here by Board Chairmen John Nichols, John Bryan and Tom Pritzker, as well as by Lou Susman, Campaign Chair. But there were precedents:

In 1882 Charles Hutchinson, age 28, became President of the Art Institute's Board of Trustees. He held that office for 42 years. By 1885, Hutchinson saw that the Museum was running out of space. He hired a prominent architect, John Welborn Root, and by the Fall of 1887 a new five story Romanesque "permanent" home was heralded on Michigan Avenue with thirteen spacious exhibition rooms.

But, as Hutchinson once observed, echoing Daniel Burnham's famous adage to "make no little plans," public institutions make the same mistake time and again: plans are laid on too small a scale and "hamper. . . the growth that is sure to come." By 1890, the handsome Burnham and Root building, paid for through bonds sold to the museum's most loyal supporters, was only three years old, but the museum had already outgrown it.

Yet to build again, to reach so soon for a vastly larger place on the national stage, was felt to be an audacious move.

Just at this moment, however, an opportunity appeared that seemed unlikely to return. That extraordinary chance came in the guise of the World's Columbian Exposition.

Hutchinson immediately moved to secure one of the lakefront structures for the Art Institute, hired Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge as architects and raised over a million dollars (the equivalent of \$124,000,000 today) to build the Renaissance Palazzo that remains the Art Institute's main building.

As my wife Celia has written in the current issue of the *Art Institute's Museum Studies*, "To Hutchinson, the shiny prize was the splendid site on the lakefront."

Hutchinson's success provides two lessons:

It is important to create a "destination" museum, one that the public can claim as its own, that allows the curators to rethink the collection and raises the bar for its display, its conservation and the libraries that support it.

A second lesson is that there will always be another building in the future!

Long Range Plans

In 1981, Art Wood, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, embarked on a long range plan. The task took a year and involved trustees, curators, conservators, librarians and the tireless coordination of Suzanne McCullagh. The plan listed strengths and weaknesses in the collections, and curatorial space and staffing needs. It also helped lay the foundations of our very strong curatorial department of architecture and design. It provided a road map, since updated and redefined in 1991 during Marshall Field's chairmanship, that remains valid today.

It is amazing how prescient these plans were: even today new acquisitions fill lacuna identified by curators 30 years ago. The libraries have had two major expansions as planned, and conservation has a vast new scientific home within the Art Institute.

Here, again, there are lessons for today:

A thorough plan provides institutional focus. It also builds morale and nurtures a dialogue between trustees and experienced curators in ways that helps the whole institution.

Second, What is the Trustee's responsibility to the Curators?

At one of these AAMC meetings, I am told, three individuals were deep in discussion in a room. One was a senior curator with strong opinions on many subjects. Another was a young curator who said she really hadn't developed any opinions. The third individual was the Easter Bunny! As they talked, they looked down and saw a \$500 bill on the floor. The lights went out and when they came back on, the \$500 bill was gone.

The question is who got it? The answer is, the curator with strong opinions. The reason is, that the Easter Bunny and the curator with no opinions are figments of your imagination!

The Christmas Party

Moving on.... In the 1970's and 80's, the Committee on Year End Gifts would meet in the Director's office each year just before Christmas. Usually 5 or 6 trustees and the same number of curators would attend and bond together.

Of course, most acquisitions were accepted during the year by the departmental committees and approved by the Board. But some donors prefer to make their gifts and fractional gifts at year's end either on the advice of tax counsel or because it is more private. What magnificent gifts there were:

Fragonard's "Portrait of a Man";

Gauguin's "Ancestors of Tehamana";

Goya's paintings of "General Romero" and "Boy on a Ram"; and

Matisse's "Interior at Nice" (given in 1956 but not received until the early 1980's).

Some years the public would bestow a hundred works of art destined for every curatorial department.

These Christmas parties filled us with joy! Word would spread throughout the museum and among the trustees of the latest prizes! It may even have encouraged donations. In my own giving, for example, I have preferred the privacy of year-end gifts because of the warmth of those early days!

100 Years

In 1979 the Art Institute celebrated its 100th birthday. In those days I was President of the Auxiliary Board, a group of 50 or so young men and women, many of whom were sons and daughters of Art Institute benefactors. The Auxiliary Board took the lead in celebrating our Centennial with four programs:

1. We hosted the Centennial Ball called "The Party of the Century";
2. We produced a series of six different musical programs performed throughout the Centennial year at the Art Institute by members of the Chicago Symphony and Jazz musicians;
3. We sponsored and published a year long series of 22 lectures by eminent scholars from Europe and America. Each curatorial department was asked to invite two lecturers to come to Chicago during the anniversary year. Each lecture was followed by a small dinner party at the Casino Club for the speaker, the departmental Curators and various Auxiliary Board members.

Speakers included Ellis Waterhouse, John Shearman, John Szarkowski, to name a few. It was a scholarly feast!

4. Finally, we published a book: "100 Masterpieces in the Art Institute of Chicago," initiated as a labor of love by my predecessors, Tom Keim and Michael Goodkin. For the Centennial, we also produced a special limited edition of 100 copies in which the living artists included in the book each signed the page illustrating his or her work. The signers included Miró, Chagall, O'Keefe and de Kooning.

Those of you here from the Birmingham Museum of Art will be interested that my co-conspirator in all this was Julie Isham Ward. Julie succeeded me as President of the Auxiliary Board,

was its first woman president, and then moved to Birmingham. She quickly became a trustee of your museum and reported back to us what a wonderful destination museum you have!

The lesson here is that we all need young supporters. Our Symphony Orchestras have seen this, especially. So, if you don't have such a group, create one.

Major Donors

What would any one of us do without major donors? Yet they require care and feeding! Helen Regenstein donated spectacular drawings and Asian art to the Art Institute from 1958 until her death in 1982, and her children continued making such donations after her death.

In 1978, Helen Regenstein was the largest contributor to the purchase of a great 1924 Miró drawing. Ed and Lindy Bergman gave a dinner party for all the donors in their home which was filled to overflowing with their important collection of surrealist art (much of it now at the Art Institute).

All of the great early collectors of the 50's and 60's were there. I recall Vivian Newbury, in her 80's, asking Lindy Bergman for a glass of Stolichnaya vodka. Lindy said she didn't have Stolichnaya vodka. Vivian said, "In that case, I would like a glass of water!"

A few minutes later, Helen Regenstein and I were talking together when someone walked up and said "So, Helen, is this your son (pointing at me!)" Helen looked at me and . . . hesitated! She then denied being my mother, but from then on I felt like part of the family.

We all depend on our major donors. In Chicago, the McCormick and Palmer families, Eloise Martin, Marilyn Alsdorf, Ron and Anstiss Krueck, John Bryan, and many others have been indispensable.

Harold Joachim, our Curator of Prints and Drawings in the 60's and 70's, loved major donors! We would get a glimpse of his technique at committee meetings:

He would say "We have the opportunity to purchase a great drawing by Claude Lorrain, 'Panorama From the Sasso'" and then he would pick it up in its frame and hold it so we could all see it, and then he would say . . . nothing! He would just let the drawing speak for itself. He relied on us to have the taste and knowledge to understand . . . or, as we quickly learned, to ask questions! In the end, Helen Regenstein bought it. Today, written justifications precede every purchase, as they should!

There are lessons from this.

First, make your major donors feel a part of the family. Curators should not seem like cloistered seminarians talking to each other; this is the moment when curatorial dialogue should intentionally reach out to the Museum's family of supporters and trustees as well as to a more diverse public-at-large.

And the lessons for the trustee?

- 1st Adopt a department or two,
- 2nd Be guided by curatorial expertise and be generous in your giving,
- 3rd Help fund new acquisitions, and
- 4th Explore new fields together with the curators.

And Finally, what is the Trustee's responsibility in a bad economy?

Here is where the rubber hits the road. Again, there is precedent. Today's economy does not look any worse than the economic downturns in 1979-81 and 1990-93.

1. In 1979-81, inflation rates were in the stratosphere and the economy was bad. Yet we celebrated our Centennial with great fanfare, and gifts kept coming:

Picasso's 1906 "Girl With a Pitcher"

A Seurat oil sketch for "la grande jatte"

Vuillard's large "Landscape Window Overlooking The Forest."

2. In 1990-93 there was another substantial economic downturn. So Board Chairman Wes Dixon launched a capital campaign! "The Second Century Fund: Securing Chicago's Masterpiece" raised over 60 million dollars. And, again, the gifts kept coming:

Francesco Guardi's "the Garden of the Palazzo Contarini"

Jacob Lawrence's "The Wedding."

Raphaelle Peale's "Still Life - Strawberries, Nuts &c"

Museum Metrics

Let's look at Art Museum Metrics: The sources of income we love to turn to in time of need:

First, Major Exhibitions. I chaired the Exhibitions Committee here at the Art Institute from 1992 until 2006. Once a year, Dorothy Schroeder, our young Vice President for Exhibitions, would send me

the statistics on the Exhibitions for the prior year along with the schedule of exhibits for the next 5-7 years. Then, Jim Wood, Dorothy and I would discuss attendance projections, which exhibitions should be ticketed, and how to fulfill our obligation to the public.

Dorothy would conjure up amazingly accurate attendance projections! On average, every two years, a major exhibition would provide a surplus of over a million dollars through ticket and catalog sales, food services and new memberships.

But times changed. Ten years ago attendance at special exhibitions fell (I'm not a sociologist so I cannot explain this phenomenon). As a result the Museum could no longer rely on a biannual surplus.

So, a year ago, the Art Institute raised its admission fee from \$12.00 to \$18.00 for adults (free for members), and made all exhibitions free with the price of admission to the Museum. To date, the Matisse exhibition has attracted 200,000 visitors in two months, with a month still to go. As hoped, membership in the Museum in the past year increased by 20% to 100,000.

But there are other options:

First, eliminate admission fees and set higher price points in the shop and for other services. (This has been successful for a small museum in Michigan where unemployment has exceeded 20% in its area). Or, consider some combination of the two, such as reduced admission fees, bundled fees for evening events, etc.

Second, reach out to other local museums, arts organizations, and college and university museums and galleries to reduce costs for loans, build membership and help each other.

The Art Institute displays works on loan from the Field Museum of Natural History, the Adler Planetarium and, most bountifully, the Terra Foundation for American Art. It also has relationships with the Chicago Symphony, the Poetry Foundation, the Joffrey Ballet and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago.

The Millennium Generation

How, in a bad economy, should Museums respond to the Millennium Generation's fascination with on-line social media?

I am an intellectual property lawyer in real life so I have seen the effects of cyberspace on young minds. Four years ago I introduced an on-line gaming expert to an auditorium full of law students at Northwestern University School of Law. The first question from the students to the expert was "Who are You!?"

Many young people do not read newspapers, are not museum goers, and are probably unaware of museum events and exhibitions. New social media marketing techniques are needed to reach these elusive on-line audiences who are focused on music, sports or other social values. 30 million people played Fantasy Sports on-line in 2007!

The Art Institute uses Groupon, is in Face book, on Twitter, and has an interactive web site. "Matisse" appears as a key word on its blog with a link to behind the scenes stories of our current Exhibition.

Museums must do all this and evolve to be competitive. As the first Marshall Field said, "Don't blame the public if no one comes into the store."

The Role of Government

What is the likely role of government in a bad economy?

1. Art museums should ordinarily expect more federal grant money (after all, President Obama took Michelle Obama to the Art Institute on their first date!). However, uncertainty over the federal deficit could reduce these funds. I doubt we will know the answer for another year or two.

2. The outlook for state and local government funding is bleak, especially in states like New York, Illinois and California where government indebtedness is excessive. State and local government leaders are strong advocates of museums, however, and may well continue their present support or reduce it modestly (as has happened here).

3. The 5% distribution requirement for foundations under federal tax law and the rise in portfolio values over the last 14 months should restore the prior level of foundation gifts. (Corporate support, however, will likely remain thin).

4. The tax laws need changes to encourage gifts of works of art. Senator Schumer (D. N.Y.) introduced Senate Bill 394 in August, 2009 to enable deductions for fractional gifts of art over a 10 year period and to allow tax benefits for any appreciation in the value of each fractional gift. However, Washington has been busy, and the Bill has not been called up. Museums and Trustees should strongly advocate its early passage.

Equally important, a proposal has been floated in Washington to reduce the tax deduction for gifts of art to 28% of the assessed value. Currently, the tax deduction floats at the same level as the tax

rate, about 35% for upper income tax payers. But Washington has indicated that upper income tax rates will soon increase (but the details will be forthcoming after the Fall elections!).

Art museums are in competition with the market for art works and until now, have enjoyed parity. Any inequality in rates will eliminate this "level playing field". Collectors and their heirs will sell art to achieve a higher return than will be allowed for gifts. Museums and Trustees should also strongly oppose this change.

5. As an aside, let me say a word about staff reductions: the Mellon Foundation and others advised not-for-profit institutions in Fall, 2008, to respond quickly to the economic downturn. Most institutions did so and for most museums, I believe, the worst is over for staff reductions.

6. I am also aware of the concern in the field about whether Museums should become more entrepreneurial in order to survive, or whether this is possible without sacrificing core values.

During the economic downturn of 1990-93, the Art Institute closed all its satellite stores in response to a sharp fall off in consumer spending. More recently, Boston and the Metropolitan have made similar reductions.

My own view is that such entrepreneurial ventures are often expensive to wind-down in difficult times, and that the answer lies in emphasizing core values. A great Museum is not measured by its annual revenue, but by the quality of its collections, exhibitions and scholarship measured over decades.

How do Trustees view these issues?

Most are sympathetic with the long term core values of Museums. In addition, precedent cautions against new business directions as does the pattern of relatively short cyclical downturns.

What lessons are there for the current economic downturn?

First, as the cartoonist Robert Crumb has declared: "Keep on truckin." This is what was done in 1979-81 and 1990-93 with considerable success.

Second, Art Museums should be proactive: this year, the Art Institute of Chicago established a President's Circle seeking gifts of \$100,000 and \$250,000 a year in support of the annual fund. Philadelphia's Leadership Circle already seeks \$100,000 gifts for this purpose.

Third, don't forget Matthew verse 21 which teaches "Ask and you shall receive." Too often help would have come if only someone had asked.

Finally, there is the vision of our museum leaders. Jim Cuno has encouraged the citizens of Chicago to view the Art Institute as a great "Civic Museum," linked to the teeming art and architecture exhibitions of Chicago's new Millennium Park and the Pritzker Music Pavilion via the lofty vistas of the Nichols bridge.

Conclusion

I began my discussion with Robert Frost. Why did Robert Frost judge gossip so highly? As so often with our great poets, Frost was speaking metaphorically of humanity. His metaphor speaks to our great museums, large or small, and to all of you as members of this young and vibrant Association of Art Museum Curators! Here is what he said:

"Of the three great things in the world:

first there's religion; and then there's science;

but biggest of all, is friendly gossip –

our interest in each other."

Thank You.



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