College Art Museums — the Good, the Bad, the Glorious

Detail of *The Large Cat*, ca. 1657, engraving by Cornelis Visscher, in the collection at Vassar College (Purchase, Timothy Cole Fund and Pratt Fund)

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Despite financial battles and occasionally vapid political

In my last articles, I wrote about the Yale Center for British Art and the art museums at Bowdoin College in Maine and Princeton. They're among the best of about 200 or so art museums in America owned by a college or a university. This week I'll consider the characteristics these museums share as well as their challenges and pitfalls.

First, they offer students the glorious, life-changing opportunity to study art using the real thing. Few museums do this better than Vassar's. It was established along with the college, so the school's record of teaching art and art history via looking closely at objects is a venerable one. Its *Master Class* show combined pedagogy — how the museum's wonderful Dutch art collection is used in teaching the field — with a salute to Susan Kuretsky, the revered scholar who retired after 43 years of teaching there. It united one scholar's passion — I would say it's a calling much like a priest's — with the art that fuels it. This is the gold standard for what these museums do.

I often write about museum governance. Governance might sound opaque, but it's a transcendent feature of life in the not-for-profit world. It means the trustees, the people who have the power and make the rules, yet governance for school museums is weird. They're departments. In the table of organization, headed by the trustees and then the president and the deans, they're usually among the middle boxes.

This is good and bad. Museums get more independence. The trustees aren't meddling. They aren't there every day looking for dust bunnies. Their interests are school-wide and, since they're usually alumni, they're scattered. An enterprising director can cultivate them from a gauzy, happy distance.

Now, the bad. The museum is rarely a trustee's top priority. Trustees know it exists, profess warmly to love it, but then usually dedicate their giving to financial aid or sports. Most museums are free, so they're not profit centers. Trustees don't follow museum attendence, by students or the general public, and focus on the museum only when it gets bad publicity, has financial trouble, or receives a big gift. If the museum is comatose, trustees might not

School presidents and especially fundraisers tend not to want trustees to adore the museum so much that it becomes a giving priority. For years at Mount Holyoke, for instance, which has a lovely museum, a phalanx of bureaucrats separated the museum from the trustees. The director couldn't communicate with a trustee without the development office's permission, rarely granted. The museum almost never featured in a trustee meeting. As a result, the museum lived a poor, despairing life. For the Mount Holyoke museum, this has changed, as it often does, as leadership changes. Trustees need to pay more attention to their museums, and they need to do it proactively because the administration will rarely suggest it. The art is usually the school's biggest financial asset. It's often its most glamorous one.

One of the biggest car wrecks I've seen between a museum and its masters occurred at the Rhode Island School of Design. A new president arrived on the eve of the financial crisis in 2008 from MIT, where his specialties were graphic design and computer science. He was an MIT lifer, and aside from the obvious mismatch in cultures between MIT and a school for artists, he was particularly inclined to see RISD's museum, traditional in the best ways, as a wolf sees a full moon: bright, inscrutable, and a menace. He feuded with the director over money, power, and the museum's purpose.

It was disruptive in the extreme, but, for a newcomer, he acted in coincidental accordance with a longtime RISD tick. The faculty, historically, resented the museum as both a money pit and as competition. This might seem a strange response from artists to an art museum, but it's not.

There's often tension among the museum and other departments, usually outside the humanities, whose members see the museum as another hungry diner at the table. "What fills their plate comes from mine" is the blinkered, zero-sum mentality. It's hard to get some people to understand that some donors will give money only to the museum, or that they will never give the school money but will give it art. Interdisciplinary learning is changing minds. More departments are using art to teach. They now see the museum as an ally, not as competition.

College Art Museums

A selection of artwork housed at college museums across the country.

Pictured: *The Large Cat*, ca. 1657, engraving by Cornelis Visscher, in the collection at Vassar College.

Purchase, Timothy Cole Fund and Pratt Fund

Art and art-history departments often generate angst for school museums, too. At Williams, where I went to school, the museum was once a function of the art department and used exclusively for teaching. Its collection

more and more, the general public. Some art departments are notably hostile to the museum's need to address these audiences. They won't understand that the museum is not just for them anymore.

The Meadows Museum at Southern Methodist University in Dallas seems to have achieved a perfect equipoise of harmonious school relations, good scholarship, superb fundraising, and outsized acclaim. SMU is a big school, and its museum focuses only on art of the Spanish-speaking world. Still, all the school's constituencies — its board, alumni, administration, and departments — love and support it. How many museums get an official visit from the king and queen of Spain, or of anywhere?

Then there's money, which rears its ugly head and tosses its curls in its own, special way. As a school department, a museum has salaries and building expenses that are part of the overall operating budget. A museum's special programming, and this includes exhibitions, catalogues, and lectures, becomes the rub when it's covered through fundraising.

Many toxins spew forth here. The school's fundraisers, covetous of donors, often strictly, even brutally, limit a museum's access to discretionary money. They desperately fear that every dollar a museum attracts is a dollar denied their annual fund goals or their targets for, say, that existentially crucial boathouse for the rowing team. When a museum director gets fired, it's often for poaching donors.

I was fortunate. When I was the director of the museum at Phillips Academy, I had broad fundraising power and unfettered access to trustees, but only because, like the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard, my museum was financially independent from the school. To use Harvard's odd lingo, our "tub floated on its own bottom," which meant we could spend whatever we raised and not a penny more, but most alumni were fair game for fundraising appeals.

Selling museum art to fund other school programs is a profound worry. While there's nothing illegal about selling art from a museum collection to build a new dorm, fund scholarships, or give the president a bonus, it's a grave violation of professional museum standards, which hold that once museum art is sold, the money can be spent only on the purchase of art. Enforcement is through shaming intense enough to mortify alumni and humiliate the board. When a school tries to sell art originally given with strings attached, courts usually get involved.

The liquidation of museum art for non-museum purposes began a few years ago at Fisk University, a historically black college desperate for money. Georgia O'Keeffe had given art to the school in memory of Alfred Stieglitz, her husband. The fuss was enormous and settled only when Crystal Bridges Museum bought 50 percent of the collection, giving Fisk a lifesaving cash infusion. The art alternates between the two institutions.

Soon, schools from bigger leagues entered the marketplace. In 2014, Randolph College sold a painting by George Bellows from its quite decent museum to the National Gallery in London for $22.5 million. It was the first American picture the National Gallery bought. It's a very good Bellows, but if I were buying an American picture for the museum, it would not have been my choice. In any event, the college's sale followed years of painful litigation. The trustees got their money for a near empty endowment but not before they were pelted with garbage.

stock-market crash and the Madoff Ponzi scheme. The president had wanted to liquidate the museum for years. Every time he went to Palm Beach to grovel before a cranky, old alumnus, he'd think, *Why am I doing this when Brandeis is sitting on all of this art I don't understand . . . and no one's ever there!* Trustees secretly agreed to close the museum and sell. Otherwise, the president told them, they'd need to cover the university's deficits, and Madoff wasn't kind to them, either. The alumni rebelled with unexpected fury. The Rose family, Brandeis to the core, was still very much present. The sale collapsed. The president is gone. Now he has lots of time to visit Palm Beach, and no one to see!

This year, La Salle University's board raided its fine museum of some of its best pictures. La Salle isn't flush. It's not insolvent, either. It also has a good art-history department. The president had plans for faculty-enhancement programs and capital improvements. Rather than raise the money the old-fashioned way — cultivation and getting rich people to write checks — she and the board tried to gut the museum. It was brazen, yes, but the school was able to do it. The subsequent auction sales were weak, embarrassingly so. The school's president might have pushed the auction house to boost estimates, brightening the dollar signs in trustee eyes.

These raids have stealth in common. The school's leaders know it's the wrong thing to do. Armed guards appeared one day to remove the Bellows from Randolph's museum walls, an armored Brink's van at the curb with the motor running. Pearl Harbor–style attacks like this, and the indignation that followed, show that there's still a big stigma to monetizing art collections. I don't know how often this will happen again. There will always be presidents and trustees with enough hubris and chutzpah to think they alone can navigate the labyrinth of public relations and legal problems arising. Every time they try it, though, there's a scandal.

I think it's much more common, though unreported and hard to detect, for administrations to raid restricted museum endowments in times of financial stress. Siphoning this income from museum coffers to the school is easy, though illegal, and the museum director knows he'll lose his job if he snitches.

Do these school museums lead the way in left-wing activism? Sometimes. Wellesley's Davis Museum leads the way. After President Trump issued his 2017 executive order temporarily barring admission of foreign nationals from seven countries, the museum draped in black or removed every painting in the galleries either done by an immigrant or donated by one. "We needed to do something quickly," the director said, "to respond to the anxieties and concerns that everyone is feeling." The museum wanted to show what it would look like without art by immigrants or given by immigrants.

This put me in a questioning frame of mind. Wasn't this an overreaction? Wasn't the Trump ban temporary? Does someone at the museum have special expertise in immigration law? It's a bit complicated, I hear. Aren't thousands of people from abroad rejected each year for visas, work permits, or citizenship? Hasn't that been happening for decades, nary a peep from Wellesley? The ban affected people from North Korea and Venezuela, among other countries. Why does the museum think they're so important? How about the Arab Christians, the Copts, or the Yazidis? They can't get in, and they're facing violent suppression. How about the poor slobs who came to the museum, unaware of the museum's newly found scruples, indifferent to whether or not Yemenis come to America, to find the walls emptied of a big chunk of art? Does anyone care about them?

school museums are great credits to their institutions. Happily, few provoke questions like that. In the world of American museums, their work — and that includes their collecting — are singular strengths.

Something to Consider