

MERRIBELL PARSONS

Exchange and Scholarship in American Museums

The contributions of museums to scholarship has been considerable, and that made in the last ten years can only be described as enormous. One need only cite the impressive catalogues of collections and of special exhibitions that have appeared in Italy during the last decade to gauge the impact of museum research on art history. Noteworthy catalogues of collections have appeared in the United States as well, inspired, to be sure, by European precedent, but demonstrating nonetheless that scholarship is indeed alive and well in most American museums. No one would question the extraordinary impact of American exhibitions on our knowledge of artists, schools and artistic movements. And, yet, despite these glowing accomplishments, if I were to declare that scholarship was a fundamental concern of American museums, I would be met, by and large, with disbelief. The attitude prevails that scholarship in museums is a contradiction in terms.

That this attitude still exists, despite evidence to the contrary, is somewhat baffling. American art historians have seen the development of superb research facilities in museums, such as the extensive libraries, photograph and slide collections, and the rich deposits of archival material that Mr. Edelstein has discussed. Mr. Millon will soon describe the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art, as a model museum research center. And, one has observed the emergence of strong, academically-oriented museum publications, such as journals, bulletins, and catalogues. What hinders a correct estimate of the contribution made by American museums to scholarship is the definition of what scholarship is, or should be, in museums, and the recognition of the position that it holds within the general fabric of the institution.

Museums are, after all, deposits of works of art, and scholarship in museums deals with these separate, discrete and unique entities. Scholarship in museums, therefore, involves, by and large, the precise identification of the work of art, and, when feasible, its place in the definition of a particular artist, style, or region. The history of ideas that the work of art reflects, though no less important, is, nevertheless, secondary to the primary exercise of delineating the finite characteristics of that work of art. The question of attribution, the question of definition is often belittled by scholars. And yet, without the process of objective, dispassionate analysis of individual works of art one cannot begin to establish order out of chaos. Without the methodical recreation or reconstruction of works of art, or of artists, or of styles, one cannot begin to build a larger synthesis of concept. This kind of classification or grouping of works of art has been associated with connoisseurship, and the larger synthesis of concept has been defined as scholarship. That both methods, both viewpoints, both attitudes should exist in museums is imperative, because museums believe one simply cannot exist without the other.

But, there is a difference in scholarship conducted in museums and that practiced in universities, as it has been pointed out by two distinguished colleagues who have written brilliantly on the subject of scholarship in museums. I direct you to two papers which are key to a full understanding of this subject: the one written by Sir John Pope-Hennessy entitled *The Contribution of Museums to Scholarship*, and the other written by Ann Sutherland-Harris, entitled *The Future of Connoisseurship*.¹⁾ Both offer explanations for the differences in approach and attitude to research held by scholars within and without the museum. "The difference can be summed up in the word 'practicality'", asserts John Pope-Hennessy, who also notes that "in museums it is hardly ever possible to study problems to the point of no return when useful work becomes a complicated academic exercise". Ann Sutherland-Harris examines attitudes towards connoisseurship as the primary cause in the rift between academics and curators. She quotes Lorenz Eitner, a well-known art historian, who stated in a recent lecture, "the distinction between connoisseur and historian is not so sharply drawn in Europe, where much art historical writing is still being done in museums by scholars with a stake in connoisseurship. American art history, by contrast is almost entirely an academic discipline, carried out by the faculties of some six hundred art history departments. Almost all American art historians are teachers and, unless they are favorably disposed, come only sporadically into direct contact with works of art",²⁾

The schism between art historian/connoisseur and the art historian/academic is certainly not new. It does seem to have been surprisingly deep in the United States, however, and it can certainly be considered as one of the reasons why scholarship in American museums has not received serious consideration until recently. Another explanation, and one which is more pervasive, is the general perception that scholarship holds a low priority in museums. To be sure, the transformation of American museums after the war to broader-based, more publicly-involved institutions often precluded the time and effort necessary to conduct sustained research. The tasks of acquisition, preservation, and installation of works of art, by necessity came before research and interpretation. One cannot overlook, however, the great accomplishment of American museums which managed to acquire in a relatively short period of time very fine, very strong collections, and, moreover, managed to consolidate support for them among the American public. Support which was as much financial as it was moral. With this accomplishment behind them, museums have been able to turn their attention more and more to other important issues, such as conservation and scholarship, which will become, I believe, the overriding concerns of the eighties. Some critics observe that this more conservative, 'back-to-basics' approach is a reaction to the popularization of

art that took place in our country during the '60's and the '70's. I would argue to the contrary, that the growth of interest in serious research and scholarship is a direct result of this 'popularization of art' which drew attention to museums and to art in general. The public today has a heightened expectation of knowledge and information about works of art in museums because of the promulgation of 'popular' art history.

What is the obligation of museums to scholarship in the 1980's? As I have mentioned, the recognition that museums have an obligation to scholarship has never been more highly perceived. The belief that "basic scholarly obligations of museums are determined by public rights", and that "the public has the right to know what it is looking at",³⁾ is generally upheld by museum professionals and visitors alike. Accuracy of information about works of art is expected, including authorship, date, subject, background, and, increasingly, of conditions as well. The state of preservation is often critical to our aesthetic understanding of a work of art, and, therefore, should be discussed in catalogues and labels, as Mr. de Montebello urged in his remarks this morning. The next decade will witness great care exercised in meeting this obligation to record collections accurately and to make this information known.

Few museums can establish research centers similar to the one at the National Gallery of Art. However, all museums bear the obligation to foster and facilitate research. First and foremost, museums must guarantee access to the collection. The availability of works of art is fundamental to any study of them. Museums must ensure that the collection can be seen, if not in the galleries, in study rooms or in storage areas. Access also implies access to information on the collection, either from publications, from centralized catalogue information, or from curatorial staff. Good records and documentation are essential to this enterprise.

Availability of visual documentation is also very important. Decent photographs of the collection should be obtainable, at modest rates for study purposes. Likewise, access to archival material and conservation records should be accorded to students and scholars. Increasingly, museums have acquired significant archival material, such as archaeological reports, original architectural drawings and plans, documentary photographs and films, etc., which have become considered valuable research tools.

In addition to facilitating research and to guaranteeing access to works of art in the collection (and information on them), museums are obliged to encourage and to stimulate an exchange of scholarly information on collections among the scholarly community.

Visiting scholars are invited to catalogue museum's collections. It is, in fact, the work of our foreign colleagues that has stimulated American curators to pursue more serious scholarship. The catalogue of paintings in the Walters Art Gallery by Federico Zeri, the catalogues of the Kress and Frick collections by a host of English scholars, and the work of Sir Hohn Pope-Hennessy gave set exemplary models for us to follow.

The second important vehicle for exchange comes through fellowship and research stipends awarded by museums. Mr. Millon will discuss the research opportunities of his important Center. I wish only to point out the many fellowship and research possibilities that exist in other American museums, not only for American colleagues, but for foreigners as well. I am extremely pleased to say that the Metropolitan Museum led the way in awarding fellowships and research stipends to both graduate students and post-doctoral scholars. We administer ten different fellowships with funds provided by private patrons. Over thirty art historians receive research stipends each year to pursue independent research.

Great emphasis is given in the United States to staff development, as a means of promoting the scholarly potential of staff, the second great resource to be found in museums, after the collections. Museums in the United States generally allocate funds for the purpose of travel and research by staff to facilitate their research on the collections. Some museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum, award tuition reimbursement to staff completing degrees. A few enlightened museums are beginning to offer sabbaticals for senior curatorial staff. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, and the Cleveland Museum of Art allow their senior staff, after several years of service, to take six to twelve months to pursue independent research.

An exchange of staff is also vital to a better understanding of museum operations. American museums have always welcomed colleagues from abroad to study and observe various aspects of museum administration, education programming, or collections management. Each year the Metropolitan Museum receives over one hundred guests from other museums who have come to discuss and/or participate in apprenticeships, workshops, or other programs aimed at the museum professional. Exhibition design, conservation, security, registration procedures have been a few of the topical issues discussed this year.

I'd like to bring to your attention one exchange program that may have great bearing on what we resolve to do as a result of this conference. In discussing potential collaboration between museums in Italy and in the United States, we may find interesting parallels in a study program established by the United States and Germany. The Metropolitan Museum, in cooperation with the American Council on Germany, Inc., awards two fellowships a year to provide travel and living expenses in West Germany for a period of six weeks. The fellowships, named for John D. McCloy, are intended to encourage American curators to study, travel, conduct research and to further cultural exchange with colleagues in German museums. The fellowship program is supported by the Council's John D. McCloy Fund which was set up in 1976 with a gift from the West German government in honor of the former U.S. High Commissioner for Germany who as instrumental in establishing the Federal Republic of West Germany. McCloy Fellowships provide for American professionals to travel and

study in Germany, and for comparable numbers of German curators to travel and study in the United States. Administration of the fellowships is the responsibility of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz.

Since the purpose of this conference is to suggest ways in which our museums can collaborate in the future, I would suggest that a similar exchange program be instituted between Italian museum professionals and those in the United States.

Before I close I would like to discuss briefly another contribution of museums to scholarship, and that is the development of expertise and methodology through teaching. Curators are frequently called upon to teach in their specialized fields. At the Metropolitan Museum, many of our curatorial and education staff hold faculty appointments in nearby universities. This is not only appropriate, but it is absolutely necessary, since most of our graduate courses in art history deal exclusively with architecture, painting and sculpture. Therefore, to encourage the study of the decorative arts, of prints, of drawings, of photographs, of the arts of Africa, Oceania, and New World cultures, curators in these fields must teach.

That curators should teach is no surprise. What is new in American museums, however, are the courses that are being organised by museums in conjunction with universities, courses which utilise the collections as a basis of study, and for which credit and degrees are given. You may already know about the museum-studies programs that American museums conduct with universities. The Metropolitan Museum has enjoyed a particularly close association with the Institute of Fine Arts, which is the graduate school of New York University for art history, archaeology and conservation. One of the courses of study that has evolved from this association is that of museum training, a course that runs over a period of one and a half years, and is taught exclusively by museum curators. This program has been going on for some fifteen years, and together with the one offered at Harvard University, it has been the inspiration for over thirty similar museum-training programs in the United States. You would think that the programs at Harvard and at New York University would no longer be unique. This is not true, however, because these two programs remain the only ones that deal exclusively with curatorial responsibilities and connoisseurship. The value of our museum training program is immense, we feel, in promoting and inculcating vital curatorial attitudes into the art history curriculum.

But our museums do not limit their teaching to museum studies. We have recognised needs for instruction in other areas, and have proceeded to establish courses of study that deal with the history and development of

costume and design, as well as other subjects. Once again we call upon our good relations with New York University to develop a program in costumes, that is a rival, though not a duplicate of the program in textile history that exists at the Courtauld Museum in London. The course is administered by the university, but it is taught exclusively by the museum. The collections of the Metropolitan Museum are indeed comprehensive, and are among the largest in the Western world. The curatorial staff is equally impressive, with over 150 specialists attached to 19 different curatorial departments. It is no surprise that the scope of the collections and the talent of the staff can be channelled into other, similar, courses of instruction. We have what is claimed to be the most important collections of American art. However, in our opinion, no substantial course on American studies exists in New York City, therefore we are in the process of negotiating with New York University, especially the Institute of Fine Arts, to institute such a program, using our collection and our staff. Similar efforts are being made for the decorative arts.

Our participation in study programs is not restricted to art history, but has begun to concern art education as well. We realise that our obligation to scholarship includes the field of education. Our effect on generations to come depends not only on scholars, but teachers also. Because of this, the museum has sought out collaborative programs with colleges of education, and we are at this moment exploring the development of courses with New York University's College of Art and Education, to instruct future teachers and administrators on the resources of museums.

In conclusion, I wish to underscore the fact that American museums are dedicated to the promotion of scholarship, and that they carry out this commitment in a variety of ways. Information on scholarly programs is available through the education department in most museums or, in the case of the Metropolitan, through the Office of Academic Affairs, which was established especially to develop and promote scholastic activities. A great deal of time and a great deal of money is allocated to this effort but, considering the contribution that scholarship makes to our present and especially to our future, it is a small investment indeed.

1) JOHN W. POPE-HENNESSY, *The Contribution of Museums to Scholarship*, in *Papers from the Seventh General Conference of the International Council of Museums*, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art September 22-October 3, 1965, 1967, pp. 31-43. ANN SUTHERLAND-HARRIS, *The Future of Connoisseurship*, delivered at the symposium on *Art and Scholarship: A Critical Assessment of Current Methodology in the History of Art*, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, September 1980, papers in press.

2) LORENZ EITNER, *Art History and the sense of Quality*, in *Art International*, May 1975, pp. 75-80.

3) POPE-HENNESSY, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

SERGIO ROMANO: *Grazie, signorina Parsons, per la sua esposizione così interessante sulle attività scientifiche del Metropolitan.*

In un certo senso, come già stamane il soprintendente De Marchis, lei ci ha detto che il museo deve al tempo stesso conservare e conoscere. Naturalmente la parola conoscere assume qui un significato particolare, perché lei ci ha ricordato l'esistenza di una dicotomia nella vita artistica americana che non esiste, se non occasionalmente, nella vita italiana: la distinzione coè tra il connoisseur e lo storico dell'arte di estrazione accademica.

Non esiste al punto che ho cercato a lungo, mentre l'ascoltavo, la traduzione della parola connoisseur senza riuscire a trovarla, a meno che il connoisseur non sia l'erede del 'dilettante' del 1700. Forse abbiamo motivo di essere lieti che non vi sia in Italia una tal distinzione e che vi sia invece notevole mobilità fra il mondo della direzione dei musei e quello universitario della storia dell'arte.

Le siamo anche grati per averci dato un quadro molto interessante dell'attività didattica e scientifica del Metropolitan. Coloro che non ne erano al corrente non potranno non essere sorpresi dalla vastità dei programmi educativi e scientifici e soprattutto dalla liberalità con cui il Metropolitan mette a disposizione degli studiosi, sotto forma di ospitalità e di borse di studio, le proprie strutture.

Dò la parola all'architetto Gae Aulenti che ci parlerà di Il progetto per il Museo della Gare D'Orsay.