

# Whose Muse?

ART MUSEUMS AND THE PUBLIC TRUST



EDITED BY James Cuno

*With essays by*

James Cuno, Philippe de Montebello,  
Glenn D. Lowry, Neil MacGregor,  
John Walsh, and James N. Wood

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For Aggie Gund

## *Preface and Acknowledgments*

James Cuno

OVER THE COURSE of ten months, from October 2001 through June 2002, the Harvard Program for Art Museum Directors and the Harvard University Art Museums, of which at the time I was director, organized a series of lectures on the subject of the public's regard for and trust in art museums. The participants and I suspected that we would approach the topic from different points of view, and we did not discuss our papers with one another before hand. But we did read each paper along the way, and a month after Philippe de Montebello's lecture, we gathered together in his office at the Metropolitan Museum (except for Neil MacGregor, who was unable to join us) to revisit our topic and discuss it among ourselves with the benefit of hindsight. An edited (but not censored) version of this round table discussion closes out this book.<sup>1</sup>

In the round table discussion, James Wood remarked that he sensed an almost "suspicious consensus" and wondered if we might not have had more varied viewpoints if we had asked other people to contribute. No doubt we would have. But I was not looking for representative viewpoints from across the profession; I thought other views and voices had been heard often enough. One knows what the aggressive, risk-taking, expansionist directors think; they have expressed their opinions in print and in speeches many times. Equally one knows what the audience-building, community-activist directors think; they, too, have written and spoken widely on their beliefs. I wanted to offer an alternative to these viewpoints. I did not want



to present a debate, nor a sampling of current opinion. I wanted it to be focused on first principles, as it were, on the basis of the contract between art museums and their public. I wanted to know if we could articulate those first principles and if they could be the building blocks for a case for public support for art museums.<sup>2</sup>

Since the conclusion of the lecture series, I have moved to London, where I am director of the Courtauld Institute of Art, Britain's oldest and largest center for the study of the history and conservation of art. The Courtauld also has a renowned collection of paintings and drawings. My responsibility for those collections has brought me into conversation with the directors of London's museums. Not to my surprise, the issues explored in our Harvard lecture series are very much on the minds of British museum directors.

Numerous people helped make possible the lecture series published in this book. At the outset, Agnes Gund challenged us to found the Harvard Program for Art Museum Directors, which since 1995 has gathered in small groups art museum directors and Harvard faculty to discuss topics bearing on the leadership of today's art museums. Yve-Alain Bois, Philip Fisher, Peter Gomes, Ronald Heifetz, Mark Moore, Peter Sacks, Elaine Scarry, Helen Vendler, and others were generous with their time and challenging in their questions, as were the museum directors who participated in the program. It was in our luncheon and dinner discussions that the idea for this lecture series was proposed. We found ourselves returning again and again to the question of the purpose of an art museum and its contract with the public. None of us was comfortable with the image of the art museum in the press as either (or oddly, both) an immensely popular and varied educational and cultural center or an arrogant and greedy hoarder of ill-gotten goods gathered in league with dishonorable people. Nothing of this rang true with the art museum as we knew it. So we organized the lecture series "Art Museums and the Public Trust" to explore the topic further and present its contents in published form.

Richard Benefield, Stephanie Schilling, Sharon Wing, Ann Starnbach, and Evelyn Rosenthal of the Harvard University Art Museums were

central to the planning and execution of the lecture series and this publication. We thank them and all others who helped on this project.

## NOTES

1. Anne d'Harnoncourt participated in the round table discussion and lectured in our Harvard series although her essay is not included here.
2. Examples of the public airing of differing views on these subjects include discussions with Thomas Krens and Philippe de Montebello in "Hip vs. Stately: The Tao of Two Museums," *New York Times*, 20 Feb. 2000; Malcolm Rogers and James Cuno in "Cuno vs. Rogers," *Boston Herald*, 15 Dec. 2000; and T. J. Medrek, "Considering Form and Function of Museum of the Future; Museum Directors Pose Tough Questions about Future of Arts," *Boston Herald*, 18 Dec. 2000. The trajectory of the fate of the art museum (specifically the Guggenheim) as multinational corporation can be tracked by comparing Alex Prud'homme, "The CEO of Culture, Inc.," *Time*, 20 Jan. 1992, with Deborah Solomon, "Is The Go-Go Guggenheim Going Going . . .," *New York Times Magazine*, 30 June 2002.





## *Introduction*

James Cuno

OVER THE YEARS at meetings of the Association of Art Museum Directors, around the seminar table at the Harvard Program for Art Museum Directors, or in one or another of our offices, we, the authors of this book, found ourselves frequently discussing the nature and foundation of the public purpose of art museums and wondering why art museums, which are more popular than ever before, are also more at risk and are more vulnerable to public criticism than ever before.

In the early 1990s we discussed financial and political challenges to art museums as the U.S. economy was stalled and the federal government was debating whether or not to reduce or even eliminate funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEA and NEH).<sup>1</sup> William J. Bennett, then recent chairman of the NEH, complained that the endowments were less interested in creating art or fostering knowledge and more interested in “ridiculing, provoking, and antagonizing mainstream American values.”<sup>2</sup> Lynne V. Cheney, then chairman of the NEH, declared that “many academics and artists now see their purpose not as revealing truth or beauty, but as achieving social and political transformation.”<sup>3</sup> And Newt Gingrich, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, assailed the NEA as comprising “self-selected elites using tax money to pay off their friends.”<sup>4</sup> By implication, museums were accused of aiding and abetting radical academics by publishing their ideas, and peddling pornography by purchasing and

exhibiting the work of such artists as Andres Serrano and Karen Finley, the bêtes noires of anti-NEA conservative politicians.<sup>5</sup>

Then in the middle 1990s, with the declassification of previously secret government documents, there was the publication of Lynn Nicholas's *The Rape of Europa* and Hector Feliciano's *The Lost Museum*, which documented the looting of private and public art collections in Europe by German officials during the Nazi era and questioned the current ownership of works of art from that period. Museums were accused of hoarding such ill-gotten goods.<sup>6</sup> Articles appeared in national and international magazines, newspapers, and news Web sites with headlines like "Museum Art Buyers Rarely Check Work's Past" (*Boston Globe*, 18 May 1997), "Suspicious Pasts Cloud Some Local Artworks of the Fogg, MFA" (*Boston Globe*, 9 November 1997), "Family Sues for Return of Matisse Painting Looted by Nazis: Seattle Art Museum Holds 'Odalisque' Donated in 1990" (CNN Interactive, 4 August 1998).<sup>7</sup> And in June 1998, the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) held a press conference and released the report of its Task Force on the Spoliation of Art during the Nazi/World War II Era, four months after a few of its members testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Banking and Financial Services Committee.<sup>8</sup> Still, questions persist. In 2000 the Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets in the United States notified museums that it was beginning to compile a report that "will document the historical development of U.S. museums' policies and procedures . . . that deal with the investigation of provenance and legal title of artworks acquired by museums." And in February 2000 a representative of the AAMD was again called to testify before the Banking and Financial Services Committee about art museums' progress in identifying Nazi-era looted art in their collections.

At the same time, art museums were being accused of holding antiquities illegally exported from foreign countries. With headlines like those concerning Nazi-era looted art, museums were linked to the trafficking in stolen cultural artifacts from Latin America, Africa, Italy, Greece, and Turkey: "Turkey's War on the Illicit Antiquities Trade" (*Archaeology*, March/April 1995), "Objects of Desire: Contested Artifacts Are the Prized

in an International Culture Clash" (WashingtonPost.com, 14 December 1997), "Recently Acquired MFA Works Lack Documentation" (*Boston Globe*, 27 December 1998). And they were linked to museum donors who were charged in lawsuits with possession of improperly imported antiquities: "Collectors are the Real Looters," (*Archaeology*, May/June 1993), "Judge Rules Ancient Sicilian Golden Bowl Was Illegally Imported" (*New York Times*, 18 November 1997), and "'The World Cannot Afford Many More Collectors with a Passion for Antiquities'" (*Art Newspaper*, October 1994). Public conferences were held everywhere, it seemed—at art museums, on university campuses, in law school fora—with such titles as "Who Owns Culture?" and "Reports from the Front Lines of the Art and Cultural Property Wars." Art museums, collectors, and art dealers were regularly pilloried in editorials in *Archaeology*, the popular magazine of the Archaeological Institute of America.

And then, as the decade came to a close, art museums were being criticized in the press for improper associations with moneyed interests. In 1999 the mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, held a press conference to criticize the Brooklyn Museum of Art for mounting an exhibition that included works of art he believed offensive to his constituents. He specifically targeted a painting by Chris Ofili, *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), which depicted a dark-skinned woman of African features; on its surface were affixed globs of elephant dung and cutouts from pornographic magazines. The artist called the painting reverential. The mayor called it blasphemous and demanded its removal from the exhibition. The museum refused and a public debate ensued. The mayor sought to cut off city funds to the museum and revoke its license but was forbidden to do so by a federal judge. He then charged that since the exhibition comprised works from a single private collection, the museum was actually in cahoots with the collector to enhance the value of his collection (through its public exhibition) at the expense of taxpayers whose taxes went in part to subsidize the museum.<sup>9</sup>

The fight played out for months until the court ruled against the mayor. The museum appeared victorious in defense of free speech and the First Amendment to our Constitution, but it had been sullied in the

process. Over time it was revealed that the exhibition had in fact been underwritten in part by the collector, even though the museum director had at first denied this. Then it was revealed that the collector was making what some saw as excessive demands on the museum to show his work a certain way and the curator in charge went on record asking that the museum get “a bit closer to the driver’s seat—or at least [that] we can all have a hand on the steering wheel.” Commercial houses got involved with galleries representing artists in the exhibition donating money and with Christie’s auction house, through which the collector had recently sold more than one hundred works by artists represented in the exhibition, making its “most significant financial commitment to an external exhibition to date.” The museum even provided a link on its Web site to the pop star David Bowie’s Web site, where one could find mention of the exhibition; see an image of painting Bowie made with Damien Hirst, one of the celebrated artists in the exhibition; join Bowie’s fan club; buy fan club products; and even use his online banking service. The museum seemed desperately and intimately connected to a network of for-profit ventures seeking to capitalize on its exhibition. It didn’t help that one of them, Christie’s, was at the time involved in a high-profile federal anti-trust investigation for allegedly fixing the prices it charged to buyers and sellers.<sup>10</sup>

Charges of blasphemy, pornography, and financial corruption were made against the Brooklyn Museum and for months stuck to the public image of museums as such. Museums appeared elitist, both in the sense that they decided what was and what was not art, even at the expense of the feelings of the public, and because they partied and even perhaps partnered with the rich and famous. Former Congressman Newt Gingrich’s earlier charge against the NEA came to mind: “self-selected elites using tax money to pay off their friends.”

And then in 2001 the Guggenheim Museum announced its partnership with the State Hermitage Museum in opening two museums at and with the Venetian Resort Hotel-Casino in Las Vegas. In its press release, the Guggenheim’s director, Thomas Krens, explained: