The Ruth & Ted Braun Awards for Writing Excellence at Saginaw Valley State University

An American Hybrid

Katie Hughey

COLLEGE OF ARTS & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

Nominated by Dr. Erik K. Trump
Associate Professor of Political Science

Katie Hughey is majoring in political science, with a minor in philosophy. She lives with her son in West Branch, Mich. After graduation, Katie plans to attend law school.

The American art museum suffers from a multiple personality disorder. It is a strange hybrid, both public and private in nature, and beholden to a constituency so varied in its interests that the function of the museum has become increasingly difficult to discern. Much of the confusion surrounding the nature and proper function of the art museum in the United States has to do with the unique form that arts patronage has taken in the country. There is a primary difficulty facing funding of the arts in America, namely the fact that the benefits of art and art museums are not easily stated in the simple utilitarian terms which justify expenditures on things like roads and a police force. For this reason, cultural patronage has largely been a private venture. The first American museums were born of the private collections of the robber barons, organized as not-for-profit corporations, and placed under the control of private boards of trustees. Only subsequently were municipal governments asked to contribute by way of funding construction costs for new buildings and providing for maintenance expenses.

The involvement of government in the funding of art museums raises several questions which serve to highlight the confusing hybrid nature of this uniquely American cultural institution. First, why do governments fund museums at all? The short answer involves the educational benefits conferred on the public by art museums. But once a municipality has taken on the task of paying for a public service which happens to be provided by an autonomous private institution, the real question becomes one of control. Who exactly "owns" the museum? If the stated goal of the museum enterprise is public in nature, while the works hanging on the walls and the programs offered by the museum are supported primarily by private funds, to whom is the museum accountable? Is it appropriate, for example, for a museum to accept support from individuals or corporations who stand to gain financially from the museum's exhibitions? Further, if an art museum is perceived to be acting in a manner contrary to the public interest (whatever that may be), does a government, or an agent of that government, have the right to pull the plug on funding?

To begin to answer these questions and others, and thereby gain an understanding of the importance of the art museum as a quasi-public American institution, we must examine the enterprise from all angles. A good place to start is with the inception of the art museum itself. From there, we may turn to the funding of art museums, discussing their public role and the ways in which this very role is compromised by the business of paying for public programs. Finally, in order to put the issues in perspective, this essay will focus on a contemporary museum controversy involving the Brooklyn Museum of Art which addresses all of the messy questions raised thus far. This case study hopes to show that when it comes to the arts in America, private and public interests need not be mutually exclusive. In fact, the public benefits from private commercial involvement in the museum enterprise via diversified museum collections and an increase in public programs.

The Birth of a Hybrid

Karl Meyer gives perhaps the best discussion of the emergence of the art museum in late 19th century America. The notion of a public gallery accessible to all is, according to Meyer, a legacy of the French Revolution. On August 10, 1793, a year to the day after the overthrow of the French monarchy, the Louvre was proclaimed a *musée révolutionnaire,* open to all citizens of the Republic (Meyer 20). Wealthy, art-minded American travelers marveled at the treasures of the Louvre and dreamed of creating such a glorious monument to democracy in their own young country. To these men, "it seemed wholly proper that government should support art museums, in the same way that it assisted schools, libraries, and parks, all of which belonged to the fabric of civic-minded rule" (Meyer 21).

It was not, however, the government that would lead the way in the establishment of the great public galleries of America, but rather well-to-do private citizens. The lack of governmental initiative in funding of the arts is not surprising. Art museums have a far narrower appeal than public parks and are not as clearly utilitarian in function as public libraries, and the government has traditionally been loathe to spend taxpayers' money on ventures that are perceived as less than useful (Meyer 21-22).

The first public gallery was founded in 1773 in Charles Town, South Carolina, by the city's Library Society, whose membership was largely drawn from the professional and landowning ranks. Soon, historical societies and colleges had gotten in on the act, amassing their own collections of art and curiosities for public display. As Meyer describes it, "each of these institutions was the fruit of spontaneous citizen initiative" (Meyer 24). Nearly all of these early museums were organized as not-for-profit organizations controlled by private boards of trustees, setting "a pattern of local initiative and private control" which still prevails (Meyer 25). It is not, Meyer contends, the organization of the museum that has changed over the years but the ways in which they are funded.

Meyer offers the example of the founding of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York as an illustration of the emergence of the public-private hybrid museum form. The Metropolitan was the supreme undertaking of a Committee of Fifty distinguished gentleman, members of the prestigious Union League Club and the Century Association, which, led by the lawyer John Jay (grandson of the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court), took "upon itself the founding of a great museum in New York City" (Meyer 25). Corporation lawyer Joseph H. Choate set the terms for the generous municipal support the Metropolitan was to receive in the museum's 1870 charter. Under this charter, the museum was to be erected in Central Park at a cost to the city of $500,000. The city was also to pay for maintenance expenses. Control of the Metropolitan, however, was to remain firmly in private hands, meaning, in effect, that "the City of New York was being committed to support generously, if not munificently, a museum over which it would have no real power" (Meyer 26).

Given the fact of retention of private control over the day-to-day functioning of the Metropolitan, how did the city justify the public cost of museum sponsorship? Eugene Smolensky cites the "education externality" as the principal force driving municipal involvement in the museum movement of the late 19th century (Smolensky 758). He identifies two sorts of educational benefits associated with the museum enterprise which help to explain government support. The first involves the role of the art museum in the "broad elevation of the tastes among workers as a class" (Smolensky 761). This surely was the motivation behind the insistence on the part of the City of New York that the Metropolitan Museum of Art remain open and free of charge on Sundays to allow the working class to attend. In a small way, the city was able to exercise at least some control, as funding was contingent on Sunday openings, "even though various trustees saw in it blasphemy against either God or Art" (Smolensky 763).

Social reformers of the late 1800s viewed the establishment of the public art museum as just another means of spreading social benefits broadly across the population; in that manner, they were no different than settlement houses and public schools. The founding of these institutions represented what Germain Bazin, former chief curator of the Louvre, referred to as "constructive charity," designed on the part of progressive activists to improve the general welfare of the public (Smolensky 761).

Taken as a whole, however, public funding of art museums represented only a small portion of total museum expenditures. No matter how generous municipalities were in donating real estate and the cost of maintenance for the new museums, a building and land on which to erect it do not a museum make. The galleries must be filled with works of art, and to this end private sponsors have carried most of the cost of the museum enterprise. Joseph Choate, beyond convincing Tammany Hall to pitch in funds for the Metropolitan, was also able to sell the idea of art as investment to the *nouveau riche.* "Since often enough the new-rich found themselves burdened with the problem of how to spend their money," Meyer explains, "Choate's contention that art could yield dividends in pleasure, prestige, and public service fell on receptive ears" (Meyer 27). Among those whom Choate converted to the art cause was financier J.P. Morgan, who between 1890 and his death in 1913 spent half of his fortune on works of art. Elected president of the Metropolitan Museum's board of trustees in 1904, Morgan packed the board full of fellow millionaires, thus ensuring that the "Metropolitan's board of trustees was not only the most exclusive club in New York, but also, without a doubt, the richest" (Meyer 27-28).

By appealing to the particular pleasures of connoisseurship and collection building, the museum world was able to mobilize the support of the private sector with money to burn (Meyer 44). Ironically, however, it was government action that opened the floodgates to private donations to arts institutions. Meyer points to two fiscal measures that have been "indispensable to the rise of the art museum in the United States" (Meyer 31). The first of these was the 1909 Payne-Aldrich Tariff, which allowed for the duty-free importation of original works of art more than twenty years old. The second was the introduction of the charitable deduction provisions in federal and state tax laws. "Without these legislative inducements," Meyer argues, "it is safe to say the museum explosion in this [the 20th] century could never have occurred" (Meyer 32).

Private Dollars, Public Interests

No other country in the world has a system of cultural patronage like that in the United States. Far from being the planned creation of a national government, the American art museum is, as we have seen, a unique public-private hybrid, which indiscriminately "mingles private and public monies, direct and indirect subsidies, and funding by agencies at every level of government" (Meyer 64). One of the inevitable difficulties arising under any form of patronage is the fact that the patron, "wishing to be more than a passive conduit of money," seeks to influence the creative process (Meyer 75). Meyer refers to this urge as the "Medici Mentality," after the wealthy Florentine family who bankrolled many of the great works of Italian Renaissance art. As James Cuno, director of the Harvard University Art Museums, points out, the public, which subsidizes museums either directly through donations or indirectly via their status as tax-free nonprofit organizations, expects them to "carry out their duties professionally on its behalf" (Cuno 164). Private individual and corporate donors, likewise, wish their interests to be taken into account. These donors often exercise what theater director Robert Brustein termed "coercive philanthropy" by restricting their gifts to certain creative purposes (Cuno 163).

More often than not, funding controversies arise when the public perceives a museum as acting in a self-interested manner or for the financial benefit of its private sponsors. Cuno argues that museums are public institutions, even if they are privately funded and operated, because they stand for a public good, specifically "easy if not equal access to culture and learning" (Cuno 162). As museum scholar Stephen Weil sees it, the museum must learn to view itself as an instrument for public service. Since the "cost of maintaining that instrument" is to a considerable extent paid for by the community via direct and indirect subsidy, Weil argues that the community ought to have some choice in how the "instrument" is to be used (qtd. in Schuster 83).

American arts institutions are acutely aware of the public expectations placed upon them. One of the ways that museums have tried to fulfill their public purpose is by widening and diversifying their audiences. These diversification efforts primarily involve reaching out to previously under-served economic and racial minority segments of the population. Museum consultant Teri Edelstein notes a "genuine desire on the part of museums to reach out and include more people" (Edelstein 110). Diversification and outreach have undoubtedly contributed to the growing popularity of art museums, and in turn, higher attendance figures have helped to legitimize public expenditures on the arts. Gilbert Edelson, administrative vice president of the Art Dealers Association of America, implicates the expanding public role of the museum in the problem of funding. The art museum is no longer a "treasure house," Edelson contends, but a "cultural center, a people's palace of the arts, with educational programs, films, concerts, tours, lectures, classes," etc. (Edelson 178). In light of the expansionist nature of the modern American museum, one cannot, in Cuno's opinion, underestimate the need to raise additional revenue, especially with the decline in recent years of governmental support (Cuno 163). More and more, this much-needed support is commercial in nature.

Thus another perverse consequence arises from the quasi-public nature of the American art museum: in order to fulfill what it views as a necessarily expanding public role, the museum world has immersed itself in private commercial ventures. It is not uncommon, for example, for a museum to hold exhibitions of works from a private collection that are likely to be sold or put up for sale during or shortly after the exhibition (Edelson 175). Museums frequently enter into partnerships which may prove mutually beneficial. However, as Edelstein argues, "Exhibitions are not a zero-sum game." The interests of private museum sponsors are not necessarily at odds with the public interest (Edelstein 113).

This is not such an easy contention for the public at large to swallow. Drawing from Cuno, we must bear in mind that a museum's reputation is built on trust. No matter how popular museums may become as a result of their diversification programs, they risk losing the public's trust if they appear to be serving their own or their patrons' interests rather than the interests of the people (Cuno 168). The wariness of the public regarding the involvement of museums in commercial transactions is, according to Edelstein, largely a result of a lack of public understanding of the "mechanisms of exhibition organization" (Edelstein 112). In fact, this lack of understanding regarding the inner workings of museums (and arts funding organizations in general) is central to most contemporary public art controversies. Museums have, in a way, been *forced* to enter into partnerships with private individuals and corporations in order to better serve the public. "Museums have vigorously sought out acquisitions that mirror the cultural diversity of their communities," Edelstein explains, and have "actively created programs that attempt to attract larger and more diverse audiences" (Edelstein 111). These publicly beneficial exhibitions and programs require a lot of money, and in the absence of dependable government support, the private sector steps in to fill the void.

Besides merely accepting corporate sponsorship, art museums have now embarked on their own commercial enterprises. What self-respecting museum does not have a café, bookshop, gift shop, mail order catalogue, or online outlet? Edelson also mentions the fact that many museum gift shops sell original jewelry, pottery, and even original signed prints. The next step is obvious: the museum as art dealer (Edelson 179). In fact, in communities that are not major cultural centers, many museums have assumed this role, primarily to provide a much needed service. But for the museum, Edelson argues, artists in these communities would have no outlet for displaying and selling their work, and the public would not have the opportunity to enjoy original, contemporary art (Edelson 179).

In their drive to lure increased income and audiences, art museums have also increasingly felt the impact of the overstimulation of society by the media. Carol Becker argues that as a result of having to compete with television, film, the Internet, and so on, "museums now position art as entertainment" (Becker 17-18). Without some sort of dramatic hook, it is difficult for museums to draw in the crowds they need to pay for the ever-expanding services they offer. Thus, museum exhibitions themselves have become increasingly commercial in nature. Shows featuring motorcycles, automobiles, the treasures of King Tutankhamun, the works of Van Gogh, and other blockbuster favorites have not only proven immensely popular, but have offered the promise of corporate underwriting and ample commercial tie-ins (Meyer 116). To the extent that "access" is an adequate measure of museum performance, art as entertainment "has proven a resounding triumph" (Meyer 268).

Contemporary observers are not in agreement about the effects of commercialization on the American museum system. James Cuno, a believer in the principle of disinterested inquiry, frets over the potentially detrimental effects of commercialization on the educational aspect of the museum enterprise. Edelson, on the other hand, welcomes the diminishing of prejudice against the involvement of museums in commercial activities (Edelson 178). Teri Edelstein agrees. She contends that "as educational institutions, museums succeed when they bring thought-provoking art before the public," and this includes making available works owned by private collectors who may stand to benefit from the exposure offered by a museum exhibition (Edelstein 113). The issue turns, according to Edelson, on "reasonable perception." It is appropriate for museums to enter into mutually beneficial partnerships with private donors except on the occasion that a reasonable person would perceive market interests rather than art-historical importance as being the motivation behind a given exhibition (Edelson 174-175).

The question remains, however, of who ultimately decides when the interests of the public have been violated. Certainly with growing museum attendance there has been an increase in protests regarding the policies and collections of museums on the part of citizens and local interest groups. Edelstein notes that as a result of museums' diversification measures, works of art that once seemed to "transcend any kind of discord are increasingly read differently" by a new audience (Edelstein 111). Also, museums have come under heightened attack from minority groups for what is *not* present in their collections. But does the government, as distributor of public funds, have the right to intervene when it perceives that a museum has violated the terms of its charter by failing to serve the public interest? This question has been tackled primarily as a legal issue, and in this respect there prevail two opposing opinions—the majority and the minority view.

The majority view holds that art museums are engaged in a sort of speech protected by the First Amendment. To this end, once a municipality has endeavored to fund a museum, it may not then decide to pull funding simply because it objects to the content of the works exhibited (Strauss 44-45). According to David Ross, director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, museums serve the public good by serving "as broad a set of public interests as professionally possible" (Ross 97). This, of course, includes displaying works of art that many members of the public will appreciate but that others will find shocking or offensive. Excepting the off chance that questionable works may be proven to meet the strict constitutional standards for obscenity, the government may not mete out punishment by way of withholding public funds.

There is another view of course, the minority view on this issue, presented by law professor Stephen B. Presser. Rather than emphasizing the constitutional questions raised by government funding of the arts (Presser, in fact, does not believe the First Amendment extends to the state and local levels at all), he considers the problem from the perspective of partnership law. Municipalities come to be involved in arts funding, he contends, because it is in the best interest of both the city and the museum to join forces. "The museum gets some essential funding from the city, and the city is able to perform its traditional function of education" (Presser 58). While the arrangement does not provide for direct involvement by the city in the day-to-day business of running the museum, the city may choose to withhold funding or cancel a lease in the event that the museum "shall cease to be maintained according to the true intent" of the legislation forging the partnership between the two parties (Presser 60). Therefore, if a museum exhibits works which offend certain members of the community, or if it participates in questionable financial dealings, the municipality is completely within its rights to force compliance by withholding public money.

As we have seen, the American art museum represents a confusing melding of public and private interests. The primary function of the museum, however, is, without question, to serve the public. This is, after all, the justification for government sponsorship of museums, and largely explains the increasing expansion of public-oriented programs offered by art museums. In an ironic twist, museums have become increasingly commercialized in the effort to reach out to a broader audience, and in effect, have threatened their very legitimacy. The public's apprehension regarding the commercialization of the museum is, in the minds of many experts, simply a matter of ignorance regarding the reality of museum operations. In fact, as I will seek to show, the public actually benefits from private commercial involvement in the museum enterprise. These benefits are wholly in line with the educational purpose of the museum, and come in the form of more diversified museum collections and increased public programs.

The Brooklyn Museum Controversy

This public vs. private tension may also provoke controversy. In September of 1999, the not-yet-opened Sensation exhibit of young British artists at the Brooklyn Museum of Art came under fierce attack from then-New York Mayor and potential U.S. Senate candidate Rudolph Giuliani. Giuliani blasted the show, proclaiming it "sick stuff," and threatened to withhold the museum's nearly $7 million yearly appropriation from the city and to cancel the lease on its city-owned building unless offending works were removed from the exhibit (Szántó 189).

One painting in particular, Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary,* became the prime object of the Mayor's wrath. While variously described in the press as a "portrait with elephant dung tossed across the canvas," "the Virgin Mary covered in elephant dung," and "the Virgin Mary splattered with elephant dung," Ofili's Virgin Mary is, more accurately, a highly stylized woman with African features floating on a bright yellow background and decorated with a carefully placed lacquered clump of elephant dung (Szántó 189). It did not seem to matter that the Mayor had never seen Ofili's painting, however, as he was soon joined by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and other conservative religious and political groups in calling the work "sick stuff" that "desecrates religion" (Fraser 127). Oddly enough, most of the attacks on *The Holy Virgin Mary* focused on the elephant dung, while virtually ignoring the pornographic cutouts of female genitalia shown from behind and below which, shaped to look like angel wings, float around the portrait (Steinfels 24).

When the Brooklyn Museum's director Arnold Lehman refused to remove the Virgin Mary painting from the *Sensation* exhibit, Giuliani ordered the city to cancel a half-million dollar check that was due to the museum on October 1. In response, the museum filed suit against the City of New York, claiming violation of its First Amendment rights. Predictably, federal Judge Nina Gershon ruled in favor of the Brooklyn Museum on grounds that Mayor Giuliani's threatened actions were tantamount to the kind of viewpoint discrimination prohibited by the First Amendment. Having already agreed to subsidize the museum, the city could not later cancel the museum's lease and pull funding simply because the mayor and others found exhibited works offensive (Strauss 47).

While no one expected Giuliani's actions to stand up under judicial scrutiny, questions surrounding public funding still remained. David Strauss, for one, cautions that in spite of the ruling in the Brooklyn Museum case, the First Amendment cannot be relied upon to prevent public officials from cutting back or eliminating future funding for controversial or unpopular works of art. In fact, he argues, "the more effective First Amendment arguments are in court, the more government spending on the arts is likely to be cut, and cut in ways that the First Amendment cannot prevent" (Strauss 44). In the end, public support of the arts is contingent upon public opinion. As history shows, government entered the museum funding game in order to provide a public service to the citizenry. There is nothing, therefore, to prevent government from withdrawing support entirely if it perceives that museums are not acting in the public interest. This was Giuliani's main contention in the Virgin Mary case, that the (partially) publicly funded Brooklyn Museum was displaying art that was potentially offensive to members of the public it was obliged to serve.

In an era of decreasing governmental support for the arts, it is important to re-consider the nature of the relationship between art museums and the cities that help fund them. The Brooklyn Museum of Art (BMA), like most other cultural institutions in America, is a public-private hybrid, run as a private not-for-profit corporation by a private board of trustees but receiving nearly one-third of its operating budget from the City of New York (Fraser 127). The arrangement between the BMA and the city is actually described as "a joint partnership between the City and a group of private citizens" (Presser 58). So, if the Mayor (as representative of the City) and the BMA are partners in a joint venture, why shouldn't the Mayor be free to threaten to end the partnership if the museum has violated the terms of their agreement? Stephen Presser claims that the Mayor was within his rights to do just that based on partnership law. "If the museum was unwilling to take down *The Holy Virgin Mary*," he argues, "Mayor Giuliani should have been allowed to pull the plug on the exhibit" (Presser 59-60).

Presser's argument from partnership law is compelling, but flawed. It begs the question of why the Mayor should be the ultimate arbiter of public taste and opinion. Ofili's Virgin Mary may have been offensive to some Catholics, but it was certainly not offensive to all of them. As a survey conducted by the UCLA LeRoy Neiman Center for the Study of American Society and Culture reveals, 74% of the *Sensation* audience liked the show; and despite the claim that Ofili's painting was anti-Catholic, when polled, Catholics were no more disapproving of the show than any other group (Halle, et al. 138). Another nationwide telephone survey by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut shows that 67.7% of Americans oppose banning "possibly offensive works" from public museums (Halle, et al. 147).

With the data indicating that audiences overwhelmingly enjoyed the *Sensation* exhibit, and with public opinion clearly on the side of allowing potentially offensive works to be displayed, how then was Mayor Giuliani acting in the public interest by threatening to shut down the Brooklyn Museum? Why should the offended sensibilities of a handful of Catholics prevent the rest of the public from viewing an exhibition? The BMA mounted the *Sensation* exhibition as part of director Arnold Lehman's plan to "enlarge and diversify" its audience (Edelstein 110). Far from ignoring the public's interests, the museum sought to reach out to as many people in the community as possible. Seen in this light, Presser's argument that the BMA somehow violated its charter with the city by mounting the *Sensation* exhibition is "mere legalism." As David Ross argues, "the trustees and director of the museum serve the public good by running an art museum intended to serve as broad a set of public interests as professionally possible" (Ross 97).

The truly interesting questions regarding the BMA and its public service role emerge when its private financial dealings surrounding the *Sensation* exhibition are revealed. While Giuliani initially attacked the content of the show, he was quick to draw public attention to the Brooklyn Museum's questionable fundraising practices; namely, the heavy involvement of Charles Saatchi, the millionaire advertising mogul whose private collection comprised the *Sensation* exhibition. He alleged that the exhibit was a "scam," a conspiracy between Christie's auction house, the BMA, and Saatchi to raise the market value of the collection (Levine 1). The press, in turn, latched on to the story and lambasted the museum for accepting donations from parties with potential financial interests in the show.

Far from being unheard of, many of the financial practices implicated in the *Sensation* controversy are commonplace, yet little discussed, outside (or even inside) the museum world. Museums have been less-than-forthcoming when it comes to their private commercial dealings, from fear of losing the public trust. But as we have seen, an increased reliance on private donations and commercial ventures arises out of the desire of museums to reach larger audiences. Perhaps the Brooklyn Museum's largest mistake in financing *Sensation* was failing to maintain an image of disinterestedness and propriety. More than this, however, the Mayor and the media were able to capitalize on the public's general ignorance concerning the everyday functioning of the art museum. As András Szántó notes,

> Americans simply have no idea—because they're never told—what kind of lending practices are customary in arranging museum shows, what sort of individuals foot the bill, how curators work with private patrons in mounting exhibitions, and how museum shows influence the art market. This is a blank check for political interests (Szántó 183).

Charles Saatchi's involvement in the BMA's showing of the *Sensation* exhibition was the most troubling aspect for many observers. Saatchi has often been criticized as being more of an art dealer than a collector—he was known to have sold (through Christie's auction house) 130 works by artists featured in the *Sensation* exhibition after it was shown in London. For the Brooklyn showing, Saatchi was actively involved in the exhibition's installation and donated $160,000 of his own money. He was also instrumental in convincing Christie's to contribute to the show. No doubt the whole affair seemed to be an elaborate scheme designed to promote the future sales of works in the show, to the benefit of both Saatchi and Christie's. One must ask, however, what was the Brooklyn Museum's interest in mounting the show?

Despite the appearance of impropriety, Lehman's interests in bringing Sensation to the BMA were in line with his public vision for the museum. He had seen how popular the exhibition was at the Royal Academy in London, particularly in terms of the diversity of the audience (Cuno 184). Luring *Sensation* to the BMA would not only create an opportunity to increase the diversity of the museum's audience, but also make Brooklyn relevant as a center for contemporary art in the world's most competitive cultural community (Ross 98). The problem was finding a way to pay for it. Originally estimated at $625,000, the exhibition would end up costing $2 million (nearly one-third of the BMA's total municipal support). Many private donors were reluctant to contribute because they did not want to benefit Saatchi, who was, for all practical purposes, their competition (Cuno 165). As a result, parties with direct financial interests in the show were allowed to provide substantial support. So eager was Lehman to bring *Sensation* to the public that he risked threatening the very public trust and support that art museums depend on.

As Gilbert Edelson notes, appearance is everything in matters of art museum funding. It is perfectly appropriate, he argues, for a museum to exhibit works from a private collection as long as the primary motivation is perceived as being aesthetic or public-minded rather than financial. In fact, as he points out, at the time of the *Sensation* exhibition at the BMA, there were over a dozen exhibitions of works from private collections being shown across the country (Edelson 172). It is a matter of historical fact that most of the art museums in America were born of the collections of wealthy patrons, and that the works in these collections undoubtedly increased in value by virtue of being displayed publicly in well-respected institutions. Until fairly recently, those patrons not uncommonly served as curators. In fact, Lehman claims to have welcomed Saatchi's curatorial participation because of the collector's "expertise in British contemporary art" (Fraser 139).

The question of the commercialization of American art museums is problematic, to say the least. It seems, however, to be a trend that will only continue to increase as museums take on an expanded public role. The Brooklyn Museum's *Sensation* exhibition is just one illustration of the process unfolding. Part of the dilemma that museums now face is that as they have been forced to compete with other forms of entertainment, museums increasingly pitch their exhibitions as commercial entertainment, as a product. The Guggenheim's *Motorcycle* show, for example, was sponsored by BMW, and the Museum of Modern Art's *Autobodies* by Jaguar, Ferrari, and others. Going back to the 1970s we find the *Treasures of King Tutankhamun*, which toured the United States, accompanied, of course, by all sorts of commercial product tie-ins (Meyer 267).

Sensation was not so heavily marketed as "Tut-o-Mania," but the museum employed sophisticated marketing techniques to "sell" the show. The preshow publicity and signage included the infamous "Health Warning," cautioning that the exhibition "may cause shock, vomiting, confusion, panic, euphoria, and anxiety" (Levine). The show was presented as if it were an amusement park ride that one must enter at one's own risk. To further add to the hype surrounding the exhibit, the BMA convinced David Bowie to record the audio tour for the show. (It should be noted that Bowie also provided some funding for the show and promoted the exhibition online at his website davidbowie.com). By all accounts, the *Sensation* exhibition was a huge popular success. More than 175,000 people attended the exhibition—nearly half the museum's average annual attendance (Cuno 164).

Some may argue, however, that the popularization and commercialization of America's art museums comes at the expense of the educational mission they were designed to fulfill. But if access is an apt measurement of a museum's overall success, the trend towards greater commercial involvement is a positive development. Museums can hardly be expected to fulfill their broad public function if they continue to cater to the tastes of a highly cultivated elite. In order to remain relevant, and to justify public support in the form of direct subsidies and tax-free status, museums must continue to provide programs and exhibitions which appeal to a broad, diverse public. With government funds decreasing, it is private commercial funding that in large part makes these programs possible.

Art museums that have long suffered from their public-private hybrid nature may now take advantage of it. As the Brooklyn Museum controversy has shown, museums are best able to serve a broad audience if they are allowed to take risks and invite private sponsorship. While the risk for controversy increases as audiences expand, the very growth in attendance confers legitimacy upon the museum enterprise. Private dollars and public interests need not be at odds, as both parties reap the benefits of more programs and more diverse exhibitions. If museums are careful to choose their offerings based on aesthetic considerations rather than mere profit-making concerns, private commercial involvement may prove to be a public blessing.

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