Reverence for the Object

Art museums in a changed world

by JANET TASSEL

"...in every prosperous municipality in the land, in the next ten years the call is likely to come for thoroughly equipped curators and directors. Harvard must maintain its leadership in this new profession, the dignity of which is as yet imperfectly understood."

So predicted Paul J. Sachs, A.B. 1900, the Fogg Museum's associate director, in 1915, a few years before he created his own legendary graduate course, Fine Arts 15a, "Museum Work and Museum Problems," known simply as "the museum course." This year marks the eightieth anniversary of the formal opening of the course in 1922. In celebration, the Harvard Art Museums, under Cabot director James Cuno, Ph.D. '85, sponsored an academic-year-long series of lectures and discussions—"Art Museums and the Public Trust"—featuring seven of the world's most distinguished art-museum directors. Four of them, carrying on the Sachs legacy and clearly "thoroughly equipped," were Harvard-trained: Cuno; Philippe de Montebello '58, marking his twenty-fifth year as director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Glenn D. Lowry, Ph.D. '85, of New York's Museum of Modern Art; and Anne d'Harnoncourt '65, of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Their fellow speakers were James Wood of the Art Institute of Chicago; John Walsh, director emeritus of the J. Paul Getty Museum; and Neil MacGregor of the National Gallery of London, who was named director of the British Museum last November.

Much of the conversation this year about museum theory and practice uncannily resonates—and struggles—with the principles enunciated by Sachs long ago. But today's dilemmas, although foreseen by Sachs, are a world away from those he faced. The audience laughed when de Montebello, for example, quoted a "fanciful" flourish from a 1992 American Association of Museums report, *Excellence and Equity*: Museums, said the article, must foster "the ability to live productively in a pluralistic society and to contribute to the resolution of the challenges we face as global citizens; museums must help nurture a humane citizenry equipped to make informed

Painting by William II van Haecht (1593-1637), Art Collection of Cornelius vander Goest, *now in the Rubens House museum in Antwerp, Belgium.* ©Scala/Art Resource, New York

choices in a democracy and to address the challenges and opportunities of an increasingly global society." As Cuno has written elsewhere, "Whew! What a responsibility!" No museum is meant to take such rhetoric, with its "misplaced emphasis...on social activism," seriously, said de Montebello. But such pronouncements only emphasize how the terms have changed since Sachs's day, when the work of art *was* the responsibility.

Sachs designed the course, he said, "to implant scholarly standards in future museum workers; to educate their eyes so that they might be helped to see." Seeing and looking are stressed in all his lectures and in his unpublished memoirs (which he wrote in 1958, describing himself as "this short, fat, seventy-nine-year-old author—whose feet rest always on a footstool when at home—a happy, retired Harvard teacher, member of the museum guild and passionate collector of Master Drawings..."). Every university fine arts department, he wrote, should be

> closely associated with a museum of its own—its laboratory...so conceived that it offers a large number of men and women familiarity with the artistic heritage of our civilization through contact with original works of art, and also offers to a limited number specialized scholarly training, to enable them to serve as teachers, critics, curators, or directors of museums.... Traditional methods of study gave students little more than a literary approach to the masters, rather than an appreciation of their works, [while] the museum brings a student into actual contact with the objects of his study....

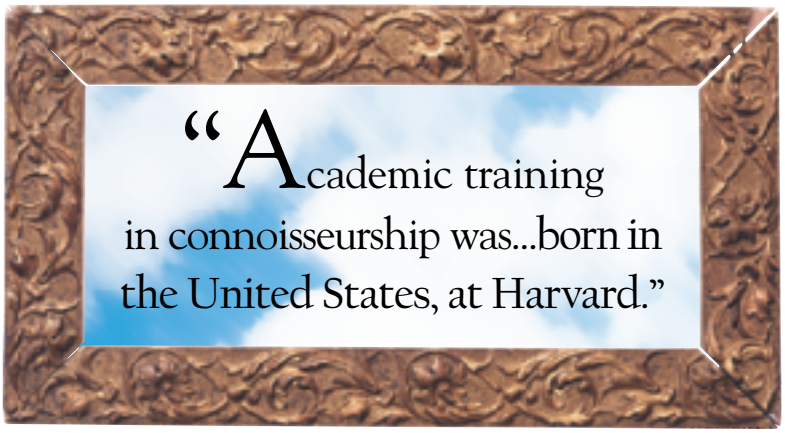
By thus "combining historical investigation with the study of individual works of art," the course would aim to produce "scholar-connoisseurs" who, after applying themselves to the

work, could "know by the senses" and by instinct that which is possible only through daily study of *originals.* (Sachs's words echoed often in this year's series. De Montebello stipulated, for example, that "there must never be any question of a reproduction, a simulacrum, taking the place of an original work of art.")

To Sachs's immense satisfaction, his dear friend, Fogg director Edward Waldo Forbes, grandson of Ralph Waldo Emerson, was determined

> to make of the Fogg not only a treasure house, but also a well-equipped setting adapted for teaching purposes; that he meant it to be a workshop as well as a place of inspiration for undergraduates and mature scholars. Free from the craze for size, uncompromising when it came to quality, Forbes...understood sooner than others the importance of confronting students with original works of art.

SACHS WAS A VISIONARY INDEED, but even he might not have predicted that his museum course would become the most important program of its kind in the country. "Academic training in connoisseurship, the identification of a work of art by its qualities," writes art dealer Richard Feigen, M.B.A '54, "was...born in the United States, at Harvard." The course produced 388 students, 341 of them taught by Sachs himself until his retirement in 1944, at least 160 of whom ended up holding the highest positions—as directors, assistant directors, and curators—in the most prestigious museums in the country. A short list includes James Rorimer '27, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Alfred H. Barr Jr., Ph.D. '46, first director of the Museum of Modern Art; Perry Rathbone '33, former director of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts; and John Walker '30, former director of the National Gallery; former Harvard professors Sydney Freedberg '36, Ph.D. '40, later the chairman of the department and acting director of the Fogg; archaeologist George M.A. Hanfmann, later the Fogg's curator of ancient art; and John Coolidge '35, later director of the Fogg and Sachs's successor in the museum course until its disbanding in 1968; and collector-entrepreneurs Lincoln Kirstein '30, Edward Warburg '30, and Joseph Pulitzer Jr. '36.



Today we might scarcely recognize Sachs's teaching methods. The museum course, taught Monday afternoons at his home, Shady Hill (formerly owned by Charles Eliot Norton), and Friday afternoons at the Fogg, was remembered fondly by students such as Agnes Mongan, curator of drawings and later director of the Fogg. Sachs would pass around priceless pieces from his own collection, asking questions like, "What does this say to you?" "There you would sit," recalled Mongan, "with some incredibly rare object in your own two hands, looking at it closely." She remembered, as examples, "a small bronze Assyrian animal, a Persian miniature; in another case, a Trecento ivory, occasionally a small Khmer bronze head."

During winter vacations, he took his students to New York and Philadelphia to visit dealers, collectors, and museum professionals. Selected students would be invited to black-tie dinners at Shady Hill, where the food rivaled the art collections: "Anyone who professes an interest in the fine arts and is indifferent to the joys of the palate is suspect with me," he quipped. And the conversation rivaled both: guests included everybody who was anybody in the arts and business. (Sachs—see facing page—had been a partner in the family firm of Goldman, Sachs.) He never ceased stressing the importance of contacts, sharing with his students his list of 2,000 European and American dealers and collectors, every one of whom he knew personally.

But the course itself "did not ignore the responsibility of the museum to the community...to improve the quality of life for all citizens." So notes art historian Sally Anne Duncan in "Paul J. Sachs and the Institutionalization of Museum Culture between the World Wars," her 2001 Tufts University doctoral dissertation. Sachs's emphasis, though always object-oriented, was practical. He insisted that students be conversant in several languages and travel extensively (often he paid the way), but also "that training in drawing and painting should be provided"—for instance, in the studio course, "Methods and Process of Italian Painting," a hands-on workshop in fresco, gesso, silverpoint, tempera, and other techniques. Thus education "would eventually overtake inherited wealth as the determining factor in who would lead the museums of America.... The model of the impresario was transformed into that of the expert."

If Mondays were reserved for the close scrutiny of objects at Shady Hill, Fridays at the Fogg were lecture days, with talks by museum staff, visiting professionals, and scholars—often of great renown—and the students themselves. Assigned coursework included making an architect's drawing of the floor plan of the Fogg; inspecting the building daily with the superintendent for one week; describing in writing (from memory) all the pictures on the second floor; delivering docent talks on Sunday afternoons; drafting a presentation on an unpublished object, with full bibliography and connoisseurial study; preparing a radio talk of 10 minutes on a Fogg exhibition; and assisting with the preparations for various exhibits. Thus did the Fogg become the "laboratory" Sachs had envisioned. But the students were also required, for example, to research and present the history of the important museums of Europe, and to be seriously *au courant* with all that was going on in the museums of New England. If Sachs succeeded, his students would fit his ideal of a museum practitioner: "one with the passion of a collector, the preparation of an art historian, and the public service values and management practices of a modern manager."

There is general agreement," recalled Sachs in his memoirs, "that at Harvard we blazed a trail." But, as James Cuno never tires of pointing out, the trail is still being blazed, not least by Cuno himself, who will soon be blazing new trails of his own: in January he becomes director of the Courtauld Institute of Art in Lon-

ALL FRAMES: PHOTO DISK/GETTY IMAGES

Portrait of the Artist as a Director

Collector, connoisseur, hands-on teacher, Paul J. Sachs blended appreciation for art objects with the practicalities of museumship.

The prototype of the silver-spoon baby, Paul Joseph Sachs was born in November 1878 in New York City, the eldest son of Samuel Sachs (a partner in the international banking firm of Goldman, Sachs & Company) and Louisa Goldman Sachs (the daughter of partner Marcus Goldman). His happy childhood included trips to Europe with his father that featured frequent visits to the great art museums. He attended his Uncle Julius Sachs's School for Boys and Collegiate Institution, whose graduates included the scions of New York's most prominent Jewish families.

There could be no possible choice of college for him but Harvard. But in 1895, in "a humiliation that rankled him for years" (according to art historian Sally Anne Duncan), he failed his entrance exams, passing German, French, and history, but flunking Latin, Greek, math, and science. After being tutored intensively for a year and studying diligently in front of a poster that read "I must, I will, I can," he was finally accepted. At Harvard, not surprisingly, he focused on French and other modern languages, philosophy, and particularly the fine arts. One of his principal influences was Charles Eliot Norton, whose course, "The History of the Fine Arts as Connected with Literature," was the first of its kind in United States. (Sachs later purchased Norton's home, Shady Hill, for his own family.)

During the summers, Sachs worked at the family firm. After graduating in 1900, he joined the business, becoming partner a year later. One of his Harvard professors, Charles Herbert Moore, had offered him an assistantship, but it paid only $750, and his father had refused to supplement the salary. "But...," he wrote in his memoirs, "I vowed never to give up the thought of an ultimate professional career in art."

In 1909, Edward Waldo Forbes became director of the Fogg Museum, and in 1911, he asked Sachs to join the Fogg's visiting committee. "This invitation is an opening wedge," Sachs excitedly told his wife. "My foot is in the door." In 1913, he was appointed chairman of the visiting committee, and within a year, Forbes offered him the assistant directorship of the Fogg. Sachs lost no time in accepting, and soon retired from business. "A great many people on 'the Street' thought I was a damn fool and couldn't understand it," he later recalled. One letter, from an English colleague, said, "I always knew you were fond of 'queer things,' but never guessed you would hide away in a musty museum and hobnob with Egyptian mummies."

At first he did not receive a salary, but even so, as Forbes observes in *his* memoirs, "these days," someone with Sachs's lack of academic credentials "wouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell" of getting such an appointment. As Duncan explains it, "Forbes saw money in Paul Sachs," a link to successful Jewish alumni and art patrons, to the banking community, and not least, to potential contributions from Sachs himself. To Sachs, writes Duncan, the move represented a kind of continuum: he called it "a short leap from the hallowed atmosphere of the banking house to the construction of a correspondingly rarified space in the museum, a space which established a well-ordered universe for the presentation of capital of a different sort...."

During World War I, the five-foot, two-inch Sachs, who was too short for the armed forces, served as an ambulance driver and administrator in Paris for the American Red Cross. When he returned to Harvard, he was appointed assistant professor of fine arts. He moved steadily up the academic ladder, eventually becoming department chairman; in 1932, he was appointed a visiting professor at the Sorbonne and lectured at other leading European universities—a major coup that introduced the Old World to American achievements in art research and museum management. In 1942 Harvard awarded him an honorary doctorate as a "lover of the fine arts, who deserted a business career to become an accomplished teacher."

As chairman of the committee on personnel of the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas during World War II, Sachs recruited many of his former students to hunt down looted artworks and oversee their return to their owners; more than 15 million items were located. He and Forbes retired from the Fogg in 1944, but Sachs continued to teach the museum course through the 1947-48 academic year as an emeritus professor and honorary curator of drawings. He died peacefully in his library, surrounded by his books, prints, and art, in February 1965.

Photograph courtesy of the Harvard University Archives

don (see page 73). As if speaking autobiographically, Cuno says, "Harvard continues to have a powerful impact on the shape of institutions here and abroad. Twenty-four of the world's current art museum directors are Harvard-trained."

In other words, the Sachs legacy to some extent lives on. For example, in its stipendiary internship program, Harvard trains some 12 to 14 interns a year in both curatorship and conservation. This program, says Ivan Gaskell, the Fogg's Winthrop curator of paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts, who ran the course for its initial three years, is a "true apprenticeship," our "modern equivalent of the Sachs museum course." As Gaskell describes it, "First-class pre- or post-doctoral students, or their equivalent in conservation, join a lab or a curatorial department for an academic year—or two, as in the case of the Busch-Reisinger internship. Some are Harvard students; the others are students from elsewhere in this country and abroad. They take part in the day-to-day life of their departments under the guidance of curators, and undertake a research project that might result in a publication or an exhibition." And, he adds, "an impressive number of these interns have gone on to prestigious curatorial work all over the world."

James Cuno in his milieu—the Fogg. To his left is Pablo Picasso's *Woman with a Chignon* (1901); Claude Monet's *The Gare Saint-Lazare: Arrival of a Train* (1877) is in the background.

The Sachs legacy also survives in those few courses that utilize the museum's choice collections. Weyerhaeuser curator of prints Marjorie Cohn, A.M. '61, whose course in the history of prints uses the original wherever possible, says, "There's no substitute for the original print. The qualities of the surface and the ink, the qualities of texture and reflection of light, just never come through in a reproduction." Given that "practically no schools, except those at the highest university level, have the resources to provide their students contact with original works of art on a regular basis, I feel that if students don't get it here at Harvard, it's a shame."

Called by some the last of the Sachsians, David Gordon Mitten, Ph.D. '62, Loeb professor of classical art and archaeology and Hanfmann curator of ancient art, embodies the old ideology-free, pure connoisseurial love for objects. Of his class on Greek coinage, he reports, "Twice a week we have trays of coins, and after I've explained them, we put on gloves and hand them around. Oh sure, they're often my own coins, well-worn examples which will eventually come to Harvard, but most of them are from the Sackler. In my class on the Aegean Bronze Age, I bring in Anatolian pottery and Cycladian statuettes and Neolithic pottery from the museum collection. We use copies, too, but I think handling the actual objects or fragments makes a tremendous impact on people; it gives them the immediacy, the authenticity, the actual physical contact with objects that have survived for, gosh, 3,500 years!"

The Museum According to Sachs

As to Sachs's vision for museums, his museum course, writes Sally Anne Duncan, "became the normative framework for museums in America...Kantian ideals of beauty and connoisseurial methods coexist[ing] side by side with bureaucratic notions of expertise and progressive ideals of enlightened leadership." His theology, for it was no less, included the precept that the work of a museum director was not an occupation but a calling, as custodian of the museum's unique, almost sacral, apartness. One of his students, Pennsylvania State professor Alfred Christ-Janer, G '40, learned at Sachs's feet that

> even as the educational institution should not become embroiled in the every-day conflicts of the world, but should serve in a higher capacity of examiner and of critic, of councilor and of judge, so the museum cannot afford to enter into the arena, to let the dust of battle cloud the eyes to ultimate values.

Sachs insisted that the museum must remain "firmly in the control of a trained elite, [which would] maintain standards of quality independent of the contingent values of daily life." A hierarchical canon of art must remain "an organizing principle" of America's art museums: "The canon [is] an agreed-upon compilation of works assigned the highest aesthetic power by the historians, critics, and curators who [are] its guardians." Accordingly, museums "must direct public taste...and not be dictated [to] by it."

Of course, practical man that he was, Sachs foresaw problems, among them,

Photograph by Jim Harrison

> ...ideological dilemmas presented by the public display of rare and costly objects...entitlement versus access, excellence versus equality, private revelation versus public instruction, object-based knowledge versus text-based interpretation, universality versus multivocality, and permanence versus change.

Which, as we shall see—and as reflected in the directors' deliberations this anniversary year—brings us right up to the present.

The Battle Joined

Whatever our wistful remembrance of things past, there can be no denying that art museums are different places from what they were several decades ago. Blame it on the sixties. Nothing was unaffected by the sixties' social and moral and intellectual upheavals. It was during this period, let us recall, that all hell broke loose at Harvard and other campuses. And this was also the era that saw many traditional courses, among them the venerable museum course, disbanded.

Of course, arguments against hierarchy and elitism in art predated the sixties; Sachs was well aware of the muted groundswell of opinion proclaiming "every man his own historian," as Carl Becker put it in 1932. In the years between the two world wars, rumblings against the old-boy network at such places as the Fogg were heightened by "a widening discourse that included Socialist criticism and Popular Front invective," as well as "New Deal arts initiatives, which embraced crafts and other grassroots" activities, observes Duncan.

Nevertheless, in spite of its shortcomings—clubbiness, preferments, and old duffers—the Fogg tradition, as art critic and editor of *The New Criterion* Hilton Kramer writes, "may be accurately described...as an example of cultural elitism that serves the public interest." And it did serve, says Kramer, until it expired with Harvard's "fateful" appointment of the self-proclaimed Marxist Timothy J. Clark as professor of fine arts in 1980. By that time, says Kramer, the "Fogg tradition was already on the wane...its days...clearly numbered. The cultural insurgency of the Sixties had done its work at Harvard, no less than elsewhere in the academic world...," eviscerating rigorous traditions and making room for "avowedly left-wing radicalism," the purpose of which, like the writings of Clark himself, was and "is to destroy—or, as we say nowadays, deconstruct—the very idea that art is in any sense an autonomous enterprise or that its highest achievements often add up to a good deal more than the sum of the social and material circumstances of its creation."

The appointment of the controversial Clark (who was then at UCLA, and who left Harvard for Berkeley in 1988) was vigorously championed by many in the department who considered him a brilliant young Turk. But the decision was bitterly opposed by Freedberg, among others, and probably led to Freedberg's early retirement from Harvard in 1983. One former graduate student told Lynne Munson, author of *Exhibitionism*, that Clark laid down the rule, "If you were T.J. Clark's student, you couldn't study with Sydney Freedberg"—and Clark was formally reprimanded at one point by the visiting committee for intolerance and for violating students' academic freedom.

Some of Sachs's protégés in the world of art, clockwise from upper left: the Fogg's John Coolidge; Perry Rathbone of the Museum of Fine Arts; MOMA's Alfred H. Barr Jr.; and collector Joseph Pulitzer Jr.

Other factors led to the vulnerability and alienation felt around the Fogg in the eighties, factors such as Aga Khan professor of Islamic art Oleg Grabar's term as department chairman from 1977 to 1982. According to Munson, Grabar, who had once "announced that he no longer wanted to be called an art historian...but a visual semiotician...., and a small but growing coterie of like-minded professors advocated disassociating the department from the Fogg and the connoisseurial image embodied by its collection." In 1990, Cambridge University-educated Norman Bryson, then head of the comparative arts program at the University of Rochester, was chosen to replace Clark. Bryson had never trained in art history, but rather in literature and linguistics. According to Munson, "Bryson has argued that the contemporary art historian may completely disconnect his interpretation from any responsible understanding of a work's original meaning...calling for an art history driven by 'pragmatics,' in which interpretations are preferred on the basis of the desirability of their social consequences." Bryson returned to London in 1999.

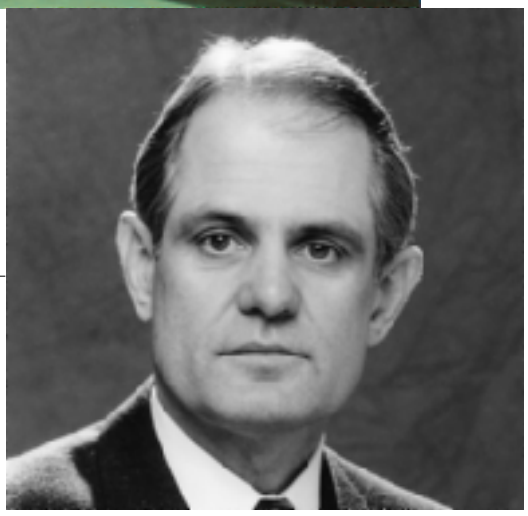
"Harvard got away from Paul Sachs's principles dramatically a generation or two ago," says the Met's Philippe de Montebello. In fact, he continues, "If you go to the College Art Association, connoisseurship is practically a dirty word." And J. Carter Brown '56, M.B.A. '58, former director of Washington's National Gallery, lamented shortly before his recent death, "One pines for Sachs's great emphasis on the object, connoisseurship, and the aesthetic experience." By the year 2000, according to Richard Feigen, in town for a dinner at the Fogg,

> back on hallowed ground and basking in the old academic atmosphere, I happened to use the word "connoisseurship"

Photographs courtesy of the Harvard University Archives

in a conversation with one of the faculty. After all, there I was in its very cradle. My friend said, wryly, I thought, "We don't use that word around here anymore."

Harvard, he sighs, "had come a long way since the days of Paul Sachs and Sydney Freedberg." He might have added the name of any prominent Sachs student, like MOMA's Alfred H. Barr Jr., who famously described the daily work of museum professionals as "the conscientious, continuous, resolute distinction of quality from mediocrity"—which is to say, connoisseurship. In any event, concludes Feigen, "Reverence for the object seemed to have lasted at Harvard barely a century."



James Wood of the Art Institute of Chicago, with Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* (1942), from its collection

As we have seen, reverence for the object in its museum setting is hardly moribund at Harvard. Indeed, Cuno's lecture in the directors' series was a magisterial evocation of the power of the original object—even the fragment of an object—to stir, stun, and exalt. However, at Harvard and elsewhere, concedes Marjorie Cohn, "there are people who are concerned with objects in art history, but who are somehow hostile to museums. For example, archaeologists who are hostile to museums because they are terribly concerned with provenance, architectural historians who don't have the same orientation for museums, and other people whose art specialty, whatever it is, does not happen to be in museological fashion these days. A number of faculty members don't quite know how to integrate the original object into their teaching."

Cohn and Cuno disagree, however, with the commentators who blame T.J. Clark for the disjunct. Cuno, who studied with Clark *and* Freedberg, remembers them both "as having rigorous intellects and as being equally committed to detailed examination of works of art." (Cuno completed his Ph.D. while teaching at Vassar, after which he directed the Gruenwald Center for the graphic arts at UCLA before accepting the directorship of the Hood Museum at Dartmouth. He returned to Harvard to assume his current chair in 1991.)

Of Sachs and connoisseurship, Cuno says, "The issues are different now than they were then. When Paul Sachs was running the program, museums were being developed, they were new or just getting started around the country; they needed to be staffed with curators and directors, and he was besieged with requests for people. Among the talents one needed in order to build a museum and its collection was, of course, connoisseurship. Today we are preparing people to perpetuate those museums."

Museums today, say curators Gaskell and Cohn, are also of necessity more professional than in the cozy old days. Says Cohn, "We don't sit and type our labels on our own typewriters and use white-out on colored paper labels the way we used to. We're much less casual about everything. Take loans. It used to be if you wanted to borrow something you called up Paul and said, 'I really need this piece for a week. Can you send it over?' And somebody drove it over in the back of the car."

At Harvard, this atmospheric change, says Cuno, "coincided with a big change in the makeup of the visiting committee, once a joint committee for both the department and the museum, and now split in two, one for the museum and the other academic. That 1970 separation signaled a major division."

And museums, at Harvard and elsewhere, have had to adapt to different civic conditions, as well. "Museums are now the concern of a broader spectrum of the community, imposing contradictory claims," says Cuno. "The museum gets caught in the middle of these contradictory claims." How so? "Because at the very least the community can claim it is subsidizing us; the museum, they can rightly say, occupies land that is not taxable. The community can't be ignored."

What then are some of these "contradictory claims?" They are exactly those "ideological dilemmas" prophesied by Sachs. Meanwhile, pity the directors and their "public trust." Whew! What a responsibility!

The Museum as Refuge?

In his own lecture this year, Cuno began by recalling the "terrible events" of September 11, 2001. In the wake of such catastrophe, he said, museums "have an especially important responsibility. We have all heard stories of people going to muse-

Photographs courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

ums in the days following the attacks on New York and Washington, just to be there, quietly, safely in the company of things that are beautiful, things that are impossibly fragile yet have lasted for centuries through wars and tumult to lay claim still on our imaginations.... It was a way of coming home, of being reminded that in a fundamental way home was still there."

Then he referred back to the lecture by the National Gallery's Neil MacGregor, recalling MacGregor's narrative "that as German fire bombs and rockets rained down upon the city, the London public asked to see old master pictures on view once again in the Gallery (they had been kept in safe storage deep in Wales ever since the start of the war). Moved to respond, the Gallery put on view each month one painting, changing the painting every month," to reassure the citizenry that "however violent life was, however threatened they were by the enemies of the civilized world, their artistic legacy was safe and available to them as it had been for a hundred years...."

A most trenchant example of this response to the threats of the outside world is that of James Snyder '73, director of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, who says, "Of *course* the museum continues to be open! We recently finished an absolutely great show of 100 magnificent objects sent from China, and 120,000 people saw it. And we just opened a show called '*Handled With Care': Glass in the Israel Museum.* We've got probably the richest collection of ancient glass of any museum in the world. So part of this is about showing the quality of the patrimonial heritage, and part of it is actually making a kind of philosophical point about the frailty and the endurance of glass. We have very few tourists now, but our obligation is to be strong and to keep these objects available to the people who live here. In a climate such as this, people come and use the museum even more as a place which lifts them up and which takes their minds off the complex issues outside."

In one of his books, *Vermeer's Wager*, Ivan Gaskell claims that art is indeed "therapeutic," but warns that we must

> distinguish between consideration of art as causing forgetfulness, or a superficial assuagement...and...what Aristotle famously defined...as catharsis: a wholly therapeutic concept, connected with contemporary medicine, encompassing the purging of pity and fear, thus righting the emotions of the soul.

On the other hand, *caveat emptor:* museum visitors in search of consolation and catharsis had better be careful which museum they choose. In an article last winter for *City Journal* magazine honoring the "triumphant democratic elitism" of the Metropolitan Museum of Art under Philippe de Montebello, author and critic Heather MacDonald, after praising the Met's "scholarly, beautifully mounted" exhibition of works by a seventeenth-century Italian still-life painter, recapped some alternative aspects of New York's museum scene at the same moment:

> Seven blocks up Fifth Avenue the Giorgio Armani show at the Guggenheim reminds us that the "art" in an "art museum" these days is optional. The Guggenheim has turned its entire spiral ramp into one endless advertisement...; by the fourth turn of the screw and the hundredth loose-fitting pantsuit, the nightmare sensation of being trapped in a...Bloomingdale's boutique grows overwhelming....
>
> Across the East River, the Brooklyn Museum of Art presents a heartbreaking spectacle of a once august institution beached by demographic change, now flailing desperately to find a new audience—whatever the cost. *Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhymes, and Rage* presents the billion-dollar hip-hop industry, complete with gangster rap, obscene misogynist lyrics, and city-killing graffiti, as art worthy of inclusion in a museum dedicated to man's greatest achievements.
>
> And back in...Manhattan, the Museum of Modern Art is displaying some of the grotesque products of contemporary Soho and Chelsea, created as props to the cultural elite's favorite "issues"—AIDS, sex, AIDS, feminism, AIDS, homosexuality, AIDS, the patriarchy, AIDS, the irrelevance of artistic skill, AIDS and capitalism. Kiki Smith's contribution to the AIDS "issue" is 12 silvered water bottles all in a row, marked with the labels "semen, mucus, vomit, oil, diarrhea, urine, sweat, pus"....

The Guggenheim, which has embarked on a joint venture with a Las Vegas casino, soon thereafter put together an exhibit devoted to motorcycles. In 1999, the Brooklyn Museum with great fanfare mounted *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection,* which, in author and critic Roger Kimball's words, included, in addition to the notorious depiction of the Virgin Mary "festooned with cutouts from pornographic magazines and...a clump or two of elephant dung," some of the following:

> pubescent female mannequins...studded with erect penises, vaginas, and anuses, fused together in various postures of sexual coupling, the portrait of a child molester and murderer made from what looks like a child's hand prints, [and] bisected animals (pigs, cows) in plexiglass tanks full of formaldehyde.

The marketing campaign for *Sensation* included a "warning" that

the exhibit would bring on "vomiting, confusion, panic, euphoria, and anxiety." So much for consolation and refuge. As de Montebello (quoting Hamlet) dolefully intoned in his Harvard lecture, the situation, "though it make the unskillful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve."

The list of museums' misalliances with "popular" culture is indeed grievous—from Kansas City's Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art's exhibition on Disney theme parks to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's show on the American sneaker, *Design Afoot: Athletic Shoes, 1995-2000.* It is what Chicago's James Wood in his lecture (quoting de Toqueville) called the "invisible despotism of entertainments." One may recall the pranks of Marcel Duchamp, who said, "I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge, and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty." Or, to quote George Orwell, "If you threw dead donkeys at people, they threw money back."

If we are now asking what in the world these museum/casino/fun parks can be thinking of, we have inevitably arrived at...

The Bottom Line

In 1997 Cuno and James Wood founded the Harvard University Program for Art Museum Directors, a yearlong endowed program that, according to Cuno, "introduces recently appointed art-museum directors, as well as more senior directors, to leadership and management issues, in addition to trends in university-based art-history teaching and leadership" (see "Captains of Artistry," March-April 1998, page 20). The group of 10 meets three times during the academic year at Harvard, and "in the summer the four more-or-less junior directors take part in a six-day program at the Business School called 'Strategic Perspectives in Not-for-Profit Management.'"

Stephen A. Greyser '56, D.B.A. '65, Chapman professor of business administration emeritus, cochairs this program. Says he, "I show one slide in the program that's entitled, 'What They Didn't Teach in My Ph.D. Program in Art History.' Most heads of museums have never had training in such things as financial management. For some, it is a stretch to read a balance sheet! They've had no formal training in strategic planning, in institutional relationships with stakeholders, in crisis management—the kinds of issues that *all* heads of organizations must face."

By and large, these were not issues Sachs and Forbes had to worry about, cocooned as they were in the cordial, gilded informality of early museum-building—though they were hardly slackers, either: President Lowell called them "those exuberant mendicants." But their extensive network of wealthy contacts insured relatively painfree fundraising and gifts of prize collections (Sachs himself donated huge sums and more than 2,690 pieces of art to Harvard; his father was one of the Fogg's great benefactors, and his mother gave a number of important paintings), and of properties such as Bernard Berenson's Villa I Tatti near Florence and the Bliss family's estate, Dumbarton Oaks, outside Washington, D.C.

By contrast, Cuno describes his own Sisyphian efforts at fundraising as periods of "pressure and strain," when "every day you wake up to fight some battle, to raise some money, to push the cause uphill."

He is not alone. According to Susan Young in the *Harvard Business School Bulletin,* "merchandising know-how and advertising savvy are but two of the myriad skills...required of today's museum manager....The fundraising and financial aspects of their jobs, say the HBS MBAs who were interviewed for this article, are often the most challenging." The word "discouraging" is not uncommon in such accounts.

Philippe de Montebello of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and a bust of Alexander Menshikov, (ca. 1703-04), from its collection

Is there a solution? Trustees with deep pockets and savvy, says Greyser, are invaluable, although he admits, "The hardest part for trustees is to unlearn the things they have gained from corporate board experience that they think apply automatically to nonprofit boards." Sachs, too, certainly knew how to attract and cater to trustees and potential donors, but once, in a discussion of modern art, he exploded:

> [Trustees] would come from State Street or their law offices, and one would say, "I like it" and another would say, "I don't like it." Well, what the hell difference does it make whether they like it or not?

Such a remark would elicit embarrassed blushes in museum circles today. Museums need happy trustees, just as they need astute marketing, for they must market themselves, and not only to

Photographs courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

one public, but to several. Which publics? Find out with marketing research, advises strategist Fiona McLean in her book, *Marketing the Museum*. A museum director needs, for example,

- to know who its visitors are; what is the profile of their age, their occupations, interests, and so on.
- to discover who are not visiting the museum; how they could be persuaded to visit.
- to help establish priorities: Should the museum invest in upgrading the labeling or is there a greater need for baby-changing facilities? (To be fair, Sachs himself underscored the importance to museum visitors of comfort, including bathrooms.)

Anne d'Harnoncourt of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, with a Mughal painting from the *Hamza-Nama* romance, *A Follower of Amir Hamza Attacks Tahmasp* (ca. 1562-77)

The upshot of all this financial anxiety and marketing, according to Cuno, is a scenario codified by Thomas Krens, the director of the Guggenheim Museum, as "great collections, great architecture, a great special exhibition, a great second exhibition, two shopping opportunities, two eating opportunities, a high-tech interface via the Internet, and economies of scale via a global network."

The upshot, according to Hilton Kramer, is that

> We now take it for granted that the art museum is an appropriate place in which to order lunch or dinner, buy something to wear, do our Christmas shopping, see a movie, listen to a concert, attend a lecture on anything under the sun, possibly even art....

Similarly, writes Lynne Munson, "most museums now front-load the visitor's experience with so many opportunities to sip cappuccino and to purchase water-lily patterned neckties that their foyers might be mistaken for premium shopping malls."

Finally, as art critic and teacher Carol Duncan writes of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, at one time, beyond "the classical monumental entry façade, the entire sequence of world civilizations followed one upon the other, Greece, Rome, and Egypt on one side balanced by Japan, China, and India on the other." But since the addition of the East Wing, the "narrative" has changed:

> The museum's opening statement now consists of a large gallery of modern art, three new restaurants, a space for special exhibitions, and a large gift and book store. It has become possible to visit the museum, see a show, go shopping, and eat, and never once be reminded of the heritage of civilization.

"Oh, now," chides Stephen Greyser, "just because a thing is commercially successful doesn't mean that it is antithetical to art. Does this mean that I would be happy to have a disco atmosphere at the MFA? Of course not. But there are a lot of things that may offend ultratraditionalists that make sense. For example, in recent years the MFA has upgraded its food service, and with that, they have made themselves a destination spot for young people—it's a 'place to go.' Now some people might say, well, they're going there for the wrong reasons. But in fact, if these new visitors inhale deeply of the real reasons and the real stuff and decide to become members and maybe start providing resources to enhance the art experience for other people, isn't that a good thing? I would say yes. Naturally, if the experience-enhancement activity overwhelms the underlying substance, it's not going to be a successful total experience, even from a business point of view."

Confirming the primacy of the "underlying substance," Philippe de Montebello in his talk recalled the Victoria and Albert Museum's "ill-conceived...infamous" advertising campaign touting the café "with art on the side." He has also written that "luring people in under false pretenses will generate only short-lived gains. Those who come for such marginal activities will necessarily turn out to be fickle. They'll eventually move on, and why not, since they hadn't come for the exhibits in the first place."

In a debate with de Montebello set up by the *New York Times* (headed "Hip versus Stately"), the Guggenheim's Krens reported that the motorcycle exhibition had indeed "generated a new audience for the museum." Yes, he was asked, but do these people come back? His retort: "We don't tag them like whales and find them."

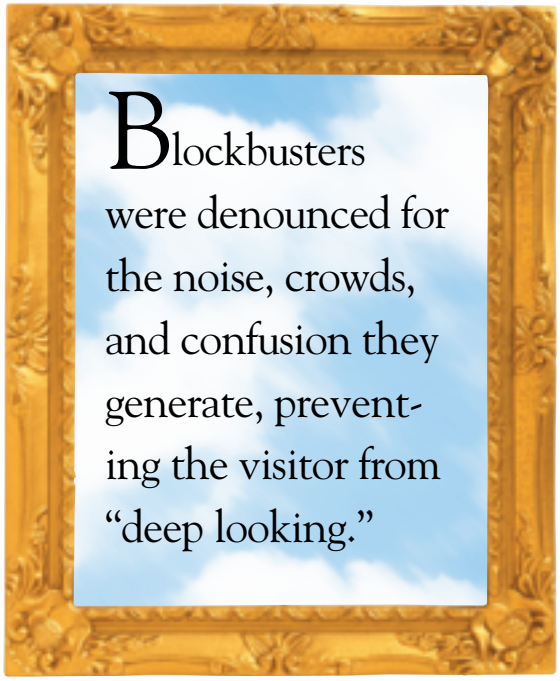
To which de Montebello replied, in his loftiest Sachsian mode, "To me, audiences are second.... Our primary responsibility is to the works of art.... Then comes the matter of bringing it to the public. The public is the ultimate beneficiary of our primary purpose." On the subject of commercialism in the museum, he echoed Sachs: "This is a question of aura. People who make the conscious decision to visit a museum do not want a promulgation of their daily existence." There must be, he said, "a kind of caesura."

How then does the museum make ends meet? Doesn't it need to enlarge its public? Shortly before his death, J. Carter Brown an-

Portrait courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
Painting © Philadelphia Museum of Art/CORBIS

swered in a personal e-mail, "On the contrary, [museums] are hugged so tight by the great bear of the public that they are gasping for breath." De Montebello agrees: art does not need to "cast wide the nets to gather in ever more paying guests." Blockbuster shows, he shrugs, mean "Egypt, Matisse, Picasso, Impressionists, Impressionists, Picasso, Matisse, Egypt, over and over." (Or as Greyser had quipped, "Monet, *c'est la monnaie.*") The Met, de Montebello told one interviewer, doesn't do blockbusters. "And we haven't done an Impressionist show in seven years....We do exhibitions, and if they turn out to be very popular, then that's wonderful....One of the ways in which I specifically resisted the blockbuster mania is by abolishing charging for exhibitions." One way out of the "blockbuster mania" is for museums "to emphasize building up their endowments. It is the budget that should be in support of the program, not the other way around."

Over and over in the Harvard lecture series, blockbusters were denounced for the noise, crowds, and confusion they generate, preventing the visitor from, as John Walsh said, "deep looking." Cuno summed up the "Harvard" approach to this complex issue in his lecture: "I would suggest that we could begin by clearing away some of the clutter in our museums, the many distractions we have introduced into them—the commercial, the alimentary, the promotional, the entertaining, even, to the extent that it comes between the viewer and the work of art, the educational—and by weaning ourselves of our reliance on temporary exhibitions and all of their attendant hype. We need to be more modest in our efforts, to get back to basics, to regard as our most important contributions once again the acquisition, preservation, and presentation of and research into our permanent collections."



But with the subject of permanent collections, we bump against yet another of Cuno's "contradictory claims."

Pillage or Preservation?

> About the only time we read about art museums' collections is when they are accused of harboring works of art looted from private individuals during the Nazi era or housing antiquities pillaged from archaeological sites and exported illegally from their countries of origin.
>
> —James Cuno, *Boston Globe*, October 26, 2000

As the current president of the Association of Art Museum Directors, Cuno finds this debate on cultural property one of the thorniest on the list of museum directors' concerns—and of course, like the others, it directly involves the public trust. Museums in democracies, Cuno has written,

> are increasingly being asked to reexamine their holdings in light of values most prized by democratic societies, the most obvious relevant one being the consent of the people whose patrimony was removed.

His own view, he continues, is that museum acquisitions are

> in the service of the public good. They are a means of transferring works of art from the private to the public realm, where scholars are more likely to learn of their whereabouts, and students and the general public will be given the chance to study and appreciate them. This is why I believe that museums should continue to acquire works of ancient art [following careful procedural guidelines that he outlines]. It is one way by which we can preserve the past for the benefit of generations to come.

He quotes David Stuart, Bartlett curator of Mayan hieroglyphic inscriptions and lecturer on anthropology at the Peabody Museum, a scholar "often described as the world's leading Mayan epigrapher, [who] has said, 'I work with looted objects routinely in my research. I have no qualms about using material if it's going to be scientifically useful,'" and others who emphasize "that refusing to consider a looted or unprovenienced object is absurd."

"Is this not the same for works of antiquity from the Mediterranean world?" Cuno asks. "Definitely," say colleagues like David Mitten. Maybe not, argue others, like Boardman professor of fine arts Irene J. Winter:

> The institutional justifications for acquiring these objects are familiar to all: how the museums and collectors of the past have been able to preserve works that would otherwise have been destroyed; and how, once the piece is extracted from its original context and place of origin, there is nothing that can be done to salvage the site, so the piece might as well be acquired by a museum, rather than buried in a private collection.
>
> Justifications such as these come very close to willful ignorance. Every purchase fuels the continuing search for yet more marketable works, which then contributes directly to the further disruption of sites and destruction of evidence in clandestine searches for the saleable unitary piece. In short, these searches are destroying the very base from which we can reconstruct any understanding of the original contexts of the works that then turn up in collections, often leaving questions of authenticity unanswerable.

But, argues Cuno, "Look at recent events in Afghanistan: the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan, completely destroyed by the Taliban. Obviously, they couldn't have been moved. But the objects in the Kabul Museum, including 59 smaller Buddhas, all those irreplaceable artifacts of the Silk Road, also completely destroyed by the Taliban, lost forever because the policy of the government had been to not allow the removal of objects from the country." (In March 2001, de Montebello had announced that the Metropolitan was seeking permission to remove some of the more portable sculptures and to transport them to the Met at its own expense. To no avail.)

The Fogg's recent exhibition, *(please turn to page 98)*

REVERENCE FOR THE OBJECT

(continued from page 58)

Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur, organized by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and organized for Harvard by Irene Winter, is an example of enlightened excavation and acquisition, says Cuno. "These objects," he says, "illustrate the ancient Sumerian culture of Ur, homeland of the biblical Abraham, in what is now southern Iraq. These glorious pieces, thousands of years old, are all the result of excavations responsibly done so that their context was documented and studied; the reason they can be shown is that they were moved from that part of the world to the safekeeping of the University of Pennsylvania. There was every possibility that these objects might have been destroyed in the Iran-Iraq war or Desert Storm. Right now the cultural politics of the world is emphasizing what we call 'retentionist' policies; what some of us are arguing for is an 'internationalist' policy, enabling those objects to be rescued and shared with the world."

The Museum as Enemy

"Cultural politics" brings us to by no means the final, but perhaps the biggest, headache of museum directors, and in some respects the mother of all their headaches: the demonization of the museum itself. As Fogg curator and professor of history of art and architecture Henri Zerner says, "Oh, sure. I have at least one colleague who obsesses over the idea that the museum is the enemy."

The gravamen of the charge, it seems, is the museum's "elitism." We have seen how pivotal the concept of a true elite was to Sachs's blueprint for his ideal museum. The scholar-elite, the connoisseurs, would arbitrate the issues central to a museum's reason for being: issues of quality. But in recent decades anti-elitists often question even "the notion that there is such a thing as art, that this art consists of certain classes of objects rather than others," as art historian Linda Nochlin says. Many of the rebels dare the keepers of the flame to go ahead and define quality, or even beauty, if they can. Asks Stephen E. Weil, author and former deputy director of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum, "Is 'quality' an inherent characteristic of a work of art, or, like beauty, does it lie not merely in the eye but ultimately in the mind—and possibly, even in the entire social experience—of the beholder?"

Glenn D. Lowry of the Museum of Modern Art, and a detail of MOMA's *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) by Andy Warhol

This loaded question, which strikes at the heart of traditional museum ideology, can be traced back, as it is by Lynne Munson, to "postmodernism…a spinoff from deconstruction…[which] posits that truth and objectivity are impossible and that our traditional understanding of knowledge is naïve. According to this way of thinking, what we believe to be true—about past events and historical figures long considered significant, or about the merit of treasured artistic and literary works—is actually a propagandistic illusion perpetuated by the powerful." The universities are to blame for the spread of postmodernism, says de Montebello: "Harvard in particular was a leader in disseminating deconstruction and relativism and contextualism and theory."

Hilton Kramer, too, laments that value judgments differentiating one work of art from another are "now deemed to be indefensibly elitist." Such judgments stand "opposed to the doctrine of 'diversity,' which requires us to believe that distinctions of value and achievement in art are nothing but a political racket designed to protect the interests of white male heterosexual artists in the West." As it happens, this accurately sums up the position of those critics, such as Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, for whom quality "is the central tool which bourgeois hegemonic culture (that is, white, male, Western culture) has traditionally used to exclude or marginalize all other cultural practices."

In the sixties, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu took this line of reasoning to its sociological endpoint, saying that the "true function" of the art museum "is to reinforce for some the feeling of belonging and for others the feeling of exclusion."

The list of "excludeds" extends beyond the horizon, it seems. An abbreviated list would include self-described multiculturalists. "Often, the claims made against us are of the moment, and personal, not the long or broad view," says Cuno. "'This is our museum,' visitors might say, 'but I don't see myself or my ethnic or national origin reflected on your walls.'" To the resolutely color-blind de Montebello, this is balderdash. "No sentient being will not find his heritage under this [the Met's]

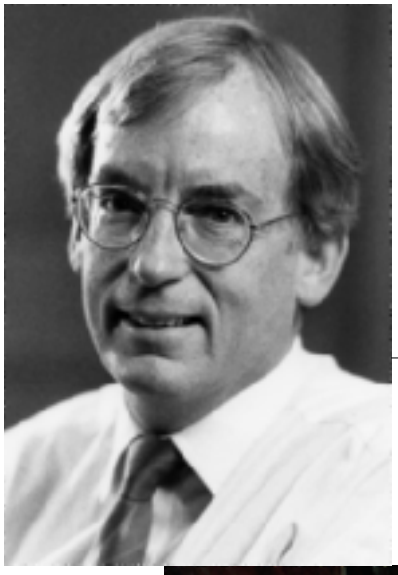
Photographs courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art

roof," he declares. "A black youngster on one of our weekend public-school tours confronted me with the Met's 'elitism,' and I answered him, 'But you're an elitist yourself! This is a Saturday, and yet here you are at the Met.' The rest of the kids clapped."

But the drumbeat is deafening. Ten years ago, the Association of Art Museum Directors published a book, *Different Voices*, that was completely devoted to multicultural—black, Hispanic, and Asian—and women's demands, one of the wave of such books that have flooded bookstores and libraries. One contributor, Carol Becker, managed in her article to summarize the entire book:

> Women, gays, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans have begun to engage in the tedious work of redefining their own position in society...in writing and in art. They are challenging the concept of a dominant culture, and those perceived as being on the margins have a great advantage in so doing, because, as Hegel said and Franz Fanon after him: The slave always understands the master better than the master understands the slave....
>
> Women artists have confronted the representation of the female body. How, they ask, can they paint themselves or other women without challenging all that has come before—the disempowering postures and devastation caused by the internalization of the male gaze.
>
> ...The struggle is not over any single piece of art. Rather art has become the focus of a much larger debate over who gets to write, to speak, to visualize, to tell their story; who gets to frame and interpret reality, to position their text, as part of the cultural mastertext.

In *Marketing the Museum*, Fiona McLean accomplishes a similar feat in a couple of pages, citing demands for "cultural empowerment" of local people and for more "political content" in displays, along with claims on behalf of blacks, the homeless, Ukrainians, all and other "dominated groups" who "believe that the museum should address the more positive aspects of their culture...." Cuno has written about the "storm of protest" from Irish-Americans concerning an exhibit at the Museum of the City of New York called *Gaelic Gotham: A History of the Irish in New York*, leading him to the conclusion that the museum is called upon to be "not only a site for commemoration but also for *self-commemoration*, by and for its 'stakeholders' themselves."



The list of excluded "stakeholders" has grown too long and various for consideration here. But just one more:

> Children...are in a particularly weak position because they are relegated to the state of childhood which, by definition, largely robs them of the ability to represent their own interests....True, many groups will be represented by someone else...but the situation is extreme for children as they cannot lobby easily for the ways in which they would like to be represented in the way, for example, possible for women....
>
> —Brian Shepherd, in *Museums and the Appropriation of Culture*

Add to these lamentations the ubiquitous claim that museums should be remedying all the ills of the world, from poverty to global warming. Whew! What a responsibility!

But as de Montebello says, "...change is a commodity I believe art museums should use with the utmost circumspection." Doesn't that make the art museum elitist? "That is exactly what we are," he replies. "That is what art is, and that is what every visitor to the Met is—by crossing the threshold they are joining the elite."

And Cuno agrees: "It seems to me patently obvious that, like institutions of higher learning, art museums are by their very nature elitist...." This, he says, is what the public expects: "This is the way we honor the public trust."

"Museums exist," Cuno elaborates, "as sacred precincts, places apart, and we need to articulate that purpose well. I firmly believe in the civilizing role of the museum. We have preserved, pulled aside from the tumult of the world, these precious things, and have made them accessible. And really that is the public trust: providing our visitors access to works of art, not to entertain them, but to change them, to alter their experience of the world, however slightly, to make it come alive anew, and to have them walk away at a different angle to it."

That sounds something like Paul Sachs himself. And it sounds as if the Sachs-Cuno legacy will flourish.

The Getty's director emeritus, John Walsh and, from its collection, Paul Cézanne's *Young Italian Woman at the Table* (ca. 1895-1900)

Contributing editor Janet Tassel most recently reported, in "Antioch Revealed," on a major exhibition of classical art at the Worcester Art Museum (see November-December 2000, page 50). She wishes to thank the Harvard University Art Museums Archives for enabling her to consult Paul J. Sachs's unpublished memoirs, "Tales of an Epoch," and Sally Anne Duncan's doctoral dissertation on Sachs.

Photographs courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum