

Teaching Curators to Run the Whole Show

With the new Center for Curatorial Leadership, Elizabeth Easton is equipping her colleagues with the skills—and business savvy—to become museum directors **BY HILARIE M. SHEETS**

With some two dozen museum directorships currently open at such institutions as the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, and, most recently, the Guggenheim Museum in New York (see “Guggenheim Director Joins Sotheby’s,” page 92), the question of where the next generation of leaders will come from has

rarely been more pressing.

While candidates for director posts have traditionally risen from the curatorial ranks, the demands of the job have changed in recent years as museums have mushroomed into huge enterprises frequently involved in multimillion-dollar expansions. More than ever, directors have to be not only art historians and fund-raisers but also contractors, lobbyists, and specialists in the arcana of everything from union negotiations to zoning to tax codes—a turn of events that has often sidelined curators from the executive track.

As the first president of the Association of Art Museum Curators until last year and former chair of European painting and sculpture at the Brooklyn Museum, Elizabeth Easton has been keenly aware of this professional stumbling block. “Curators from the most senior to the most junior wrote to me about their frustration with career advancement potential,” she says. As a result, she went to Agnes Gund, president emerita of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, and asked her to help, in Easton’s words, “figure out a way for curators to learn how to become more a part of the whole picture and less the mandarins that they are considered.”

Now, in an effort to provide curators with the full skill set

required of directors, Easton and Gund have cofounded the Center for Curatorial Leadership. Based in a town house on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, the program will be funded by Gund for its first three years—meaning it will be free to curators and the museums where they work. To oversee the center, Easton and Gund have assembled an 11-person advisory board that includes Philippe de Montebello, director of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, and directors of other major museums. At the founding of the AAMC six years ago, de Montebello spelled out the main challenge facing the center: “If we are to win the battle of the ‘curator-director’ over the ‘administrator-director’—a profile with which, increasingly, boards of trustees are instinctively more comfortable—then it is essential to enlarge the pool of curators with the qualifications to be tomorrow’s museum directors.”

While developing the center, Easton extensively researched business schools and programs such as the Getty Leadership Institute in Los Angeles and the Clore Leadership Programme in London. “Curators form under 10 percent of the people who go through the Getty program,” she notes. Easton modeled her center’s six-month curriculum on aspects of the existing programs but customized it for curators.

A native New Yorker, Easton joined the Brooklyn Museum as assistant curator in 1988 as she was finishing her Ph.D. thesis on Édouard Vuillard at Yale University. She organized numerous exhibitions at the museum and in 1999 was appointed head of the European painting and sculpture department. Last year, faced with a major reorganization of the Brooklyn Museum’s curatorial departments, Easton left the institution to cofound the new center. “I had been at the museum for 18 years, and it was a good time for me to go and do this thing that there was a lot of energy behind,” she says.

Clearly passionate about the project, Easton emphasizes that curators at all levels are eligible for the program and says she has been inundated with calls, e-mails, and applications. She adds that she has found overwhelming support nationwide from directors willing to meet with the participants, serve as mentors, and host individuals for weeklong residencies. This month Easton will announce the first ten fellows, whom she selected with the help of an anonymous reviewing committee of sitting and former museum directors. In January, the curators will come to New York for two weeks of intensive course work, led by Columbia Business School professors, in such areas as conflict resolution, strategy, and negotiation. A morning class in finance, say, will be followed by a day’s schedule that might include lunch with the director of a New York museum, an afternoon meeting with the chief financial officer of that institution, and dinner at the home of one of its trustees. “It will be a vertical slice from theory to practice, with all the different points of view of leadership at a given institution,” says Easton.

Easton doesn’t expect to hatch ten new directors in six months, but she believes the program will give her colleagues new tools and vocabulary. “For the senior people who have been fund-raising and running their departments,” Easton says, “they’ll be more familiar with a different kind of language when boards are talking to them. For the younger people, my hope is they’ll send out a signal that they’re willing to work for the broader museum team, beyond the curatorial. Museums are certainly a huge business now, and my dream is that this changes the culture a bit.” ■

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Promoting curators:
Elizabeth Easton.