

New York

Can you teach a curator to lead a museum?

Philanthropist Agnes Gund is providing \$1m over the next two years to fund a new programme which will try

NEW YORK. The Center for Curatorial Leadership has been established in New York to train curators in the skills needed to become museum directors. The programme offers working curators an all expenses-paid six-month programme of study that begins in January. The first ten fellows have been selected by an anonymous committee of museum and foundation directors and will be announced early October.

The centre has partnered with Columbia University Business School where fellows begin two weeks of classes on 7 January, supplemented by lectures and seminars with industry professionals. The curriculum focuses on developing skills that museum boards increasingly deem necessary to running multi-million-dollar institutions: non-profit management, finance and budget analysis, fundraising, board development, cultural properties law, marketing and the media, conflict resolution and strategic long-range and short-term initiatives. (The Getty Trust already runs a Museum Leadership Institute for upper level museum administrators, but the new centre is the first programme designed to train curators to lead museums.)

Halfway through the course, fellows will have a one-week residency at a US museum, followed in May or June with another week of study in Los Angeles. Throughout the six-month period they will be mentored by museum directors.

The centre is co-founded by Elizabeth Easton, the former curator of European paintings at the Brooklyn Museum, and

Agnes Gund, a philanthropist and past president of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who is bankrolling the centre with over \$500,000 a year for the first two years.

The idea for the centre emerged from discussions within the Association of Art Museum Curators where Ms Easton served as president from 2003 to 2006. Members reported frustration about professional advancement, noting that in selecting directors, museum boards are reluctant to hire individuals without management and fundraising experience—something curators typically do not have. Malcolm MacKay, a museum expert with the executive search firm Russell Reynolds, notes that: “To go from curator to director at a large museum requires the board to take risk [and] only some boards are willing to do that.”

Philippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum and an advisor to the centre, has referred to “the battle of the ‘curator/director’ over the ‘administrator/director’ and underlined that “it is essential to enlarge the pool of curators with the qualifications to be tomorrow’s museum directors [to] reassure trustees that hiring curators as directors will not compromise the business-like running of a museum’s affairs.”

Writing in this issue of *The Art Newspaper* (p45), Peter Marzio, director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, says that business skills and aesthetic sensitivity are not mutually exclusive. “Leading an art museum is not that difficult,” he says,

adding that “many businessmen have better eyes and a greater passion for art than curators, and many curators are better leaders than many businessmen.”

Also in this issue (p45), Maxwell Anderson, director of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, says trustees’s attention to business acumen is misguided because museums derive their funding mainly from donations, not from earned income. What is needed in a director, he says, is not a business degree, but art expertise and a passion to convince patrons to contribute money and art.

The debate about whether museums should be run by scholars focused on connoisseurship or by managers devoted to the bottom line reflects broader concerns that traditional values are being sacrificed as museums seek to expand their facilities, audiences and revenues. There are fears that senior curator-directors such as Mr de Montebello and the

Philadelphia Museum of Art’s Anne d’Harnoncourt are a dying breed. The new centre has been created to equip a new generation of successors.

The issue is crucial at a time when two dozen US art museum directorships are vacant and the pool of candidates is dwindling. Because museum boards prefer to hire people who have already directed a museum, filling the posts has become a game of musical chairs as directors leave their institutions to lead others. It remains to be seen whether the new centre can teach a curator how to be a director, and if the certificate fellows receive at the end of the course will have much impact on trustees’ hiring decisions.

Jason Edward Kaufman

□ For commentary by Peter Marzio, director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Michael Shapiro, director of the High Museum in Atlanta and Maxwell Anderson, director of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, see p45.

Teaching doctors to look at art

NEW YORK. The Carnegie Museum of Art, the Andy Warhol Museum and the University of Pittsburgh Medical School have established an art course designed to sharpen the observation skills of medical students. The four-week elective course entitled “Art and Medicine” is for students in their first year and is taught by curators and conservators during sessions held within the museums. Speaking to *The Art Newspaper*, Dr Arthur S. Levine, senior vice chancellor for the University of Pittsburgh Schools of Health Sciences and dean of the medical school says that “this course trains our students to gain an awareness and understanding of the conscious and unconscious factors that influence observation and interpretation of visual information...which are imperative to the practice of medicine”. Similar collaborations between medical schools and art institutions have taken place between the Frick Collection and Weill Cornell Medical School in New York as well as the Yale Center for British Art and Yale University Medical School in New Haven. **E.S.**

Leading an art museum is not that difficult

By Peter C. Marzio
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The ongoing debate in the art world about whether curators or businessmen make better museum directors is a red herring. Whenever the debate is dragged into a discussion about hiring a director for an art museum, it diverts attention from four important questions: 1. Does the individual believe in fine art? 2. What values drive the person's thought process? 3. Is the individual big enough intellectually to embrace diverse ideas and attitudes? 4. What are the management and leadership skills of the candidate?



Neither curators nor businessmen automatically qualify. Many businessmen have better eyes and a greater passion for art than curators, and many curators are better leaders than many businessmen. The search for a director should focus on the best person, not someone who qualifies according to an inflexible, bureaucratic job description.

The real challenge is to find high-quality talent. So many non-profits, like museums, have become havens for mediocre managers. Businessmen who fail at business and curators who cannot keep their jobs often turn to museum administration as their "true" calling. This situation is sanctioned by the salary structure for directors of non-profit institutions such as museums. Despite headlines about overpaid museum directors, the simple fact is that the salaries are not high

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enough to attract the best people. Until that changes, it will not matter whether or not directors are recruited from curatorial departments or business schools.

Curators should be rewarded for their fundraising, collection development, and leadership skills. In fact, these functions should be considered elementary to any curatorial position. By writing high-quality catalogues and organising exhibitions that are insightful and dynamic, curators will develop a legion of supporters who will become sources for support. This requires not only brilliant writing skills and acute vision, but a willingness to work with a variety of people, from trustees to school groups.

A great curator is a team player who is intellectually tolerant, driven by the highest aesthetic standards, and willing to help society at large participate in fine art.

With this type of profile, curators will become the major source of candidates for directors' positions. But how many curators come close to this standard? How many art museums demand that curators participate in development efforts? In education? In trustee cultivation?

From my point of view, I see our profession as self-indulgent and all too willing to view the outside world negatively. Just look at the endless stream of articles that bemoan the rise of businessmen and corporate leaders on museum boards. These dunderheads, so the storyline goes, do not value art the way the old-time trustees did. The new guys care only about the bottom line, about self-glorification and social climbing. What is the innocent art expert to do with these barbarians?

Aside from constructing a mythical past, this negative assessment destroys our chances of breaking down boundaries between art and commerce. It is this attitude of "us versus them" that leads to a fear among art professionals of declining art standards, and leads business people to conclude that curators do not value sound fiscal policies.

Let's take this divisive red herring and put it back in the can. Leading an art museum is not that difficult—it certainly is not the "impossible job" that one prominent newspaper observed. Fiscal responsibility, fundraising talent, love of community, and faith in art are not contradictory. They are the essential elements needed for a museum director to succeed.

The writer is the director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum leadership

Better trained curatorial candidates are what's needed

By Michael E. Shapiro
High Museum of Art, Atlanta

There is a rising concern among many in the museum community about the number of open directorial positions in American art museums today. The worry stems mainly from the purported lack of "qualified" individuals to fill these positions, as well as a view that many curators and other candidates are not properly prepared for the expectations of bottom line-oriented boards and the fundraising demands of being a museum director. Moreover, given recent references to museum directors as the chief executives of their institutions, there is a renewed debate over whether today's art museum director would be better served by an MBA or a PhD.



Like most colleagues from my generation, when it comes to museum management, I learned simply by doing it. And as with any profession where you are learning on the job, people make mistakes—as I did, many years ago, when assuming my first directorship. However, that experience in hindsight was a great growing experience, vividly sensitising me to a wide range of issues including human resources, budget, consensus building and a healthy respect for luck and timing. These days, institutions and their boards seem less tolerant of on-the-job growth.

Do I think that the scholar-curator director role is in danger of eroding? I don't see the current situation in such fraught terms at all. In fact, there are some remarkably able museum directors who did not receive advanced degrees in art history. They have often formed creative and productive alliances with their curators and have a passionate attraction to the art and the mission.

The field is different today than it was when I began my career—the art community has resources available to help train a new generation of leaders and to provide them with the insight that I gained only through direct experience. The Getty's Museum Leadership Institute (MLI) has been a superb beacon of light—encouraging and training experienced and ambitious museum workers, educators, curators, administration alike in a unique three-week programme each summer. By definition, that programme is limited to about 30 individuals from a variety of institutions around the world. The new Center for

Curatorial Leadership, opening in New York in January 2008 (p6), will also be an important asset. Under the direction of former curator Elizabeth W. Easton, the Center's aim is to better prepare those traditionally best-suited to direct museums—curatorial candidates.

I am delighted at this news. It has been a long-time challenge for curators to receive proper training in areas of fiscal and organisational management. The traditional training programmes in art history, whether at the Courtauld Institute in London or those at NYU, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, etc, do not—nor should they—address issues conveniently grouped under the heading of "leadership development" or management training.

In addition, excellent management programmes are also provided by Harvard Business School, among others in strategic planning, as well as leadership development programmes such as the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina (with branches in other cities). We at the High Museum use all these programmes in a series of professional development opportunities for our staff—both in curatorial and a wide range of other areas.

We must continue to find opportunities to broaden the scope and experiences of curators so they can contribute more productively to their current institutions or can lead other art museums creatively and effectively in the future. While the Center for Curatorial Leadership may have been created in reaction to a proliferation of more business-driven directors, I think it is a smart, practical step. Like the Getty's MLI, the Center will better prepare curators for future expectations, so that they can understand a budget and be sensitive to how the varied pieces of an art museum fit together.

I believe that American art museums will continue to be led by the scholar-curator model. However, the most successful leaders will be those who have a real feeling, not only for works of art, but for new organisational models, new ideas of partnership and forms of collaboration. I expect a renewed flow of inspired leaders who have a passion for works of art, and for the museums that care for them, to lead us into an exciting future.

That being said, I do believe that there will continue to be opportunities for non-curators to become great museum directors. Extraordinary individuals will appear from many different museum roles and experiences who can appropriately lead an important art museum. This is true now and will continue to be in the future.

The writer is the Nancy and Holcombe T. Green, Jr director of the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia

Hire who's best at raising money, not running shops

By Maxwell L. Anderson
Indianapolis Museum of Art

There is a startling number of open directorships at major art museums in the US—as of this writing, some two dozen. This impressive vacancy rate is a function of a greying workforce, impatient boards of trustees, and position-hopping, in about that order. The positions will, of course, all be filled within a few months (in some cases resulting in other vacancies), but the question keeping search committees up at night is: should we hire an erudite curator or a corporate chieftain?



Sitting art museum directors' sympathise with the plight of search committees—no one wants to take a risk on an art scholar lacking experience with fundraising, board governance, and management, not to mention turnstiles, stores and restaurants.

Or perhaps it's exactly the last unmentionable category that most consumes those responsible for hiring a professional leader. The 21st-century museum, it is reasoned, is more of a business than its predecessor, and it needs an executive director skilled in earning income. Which explains why, although the majority of new appointments continue to be art historians who have shouldered administrative burdens, there is a nagging tendency to assume that those from the corporate sector are better prepared to run multi-million-dollar cultural organisations.

While non-American museums rely on state support, most US museums (with the exception of the Smithsonian Institution and the National Gallery) rely on self-generated revenue.

Those search committees imagining that corporate credentials trump art smarts should pause and consider where that self-generated revenue comes from before rushing a businessman to the altar. In the US, the vast majority of revenue is contributed, not earned through commercial activities. According to an unpublished statistical survey of the Association of Art Museum Directors, the combined operating budgets of the largest 100 art museums in the US (leaving the outsized Metropolitan Museum and Museum of Modern Art out of the calculation) totalled \$1.5 billion in 2006. The combined total of ticket sales? \$67m.

The maths are clear: it's not commercial experience that's needed,

it's the ability to attract millions of dollars from potentially generous patrons who populate boards of trustees, foundations, and the museum's membership. Notwithstanding the 1990s' infatuation with the "Bilbao effect", leading to some ill-considered expansions hoping to repeat that convergence of tourism and branding, philanthropy is the future of American art museums. The future, that is, if they can contain themselves from further mission-contorting commercial ventures which tempt lawmakers to ratchet back the extent of their tax-exempt status, like the for-profit Tutankhamun exhibition on offer at present; exorbitant admissions fees; or dubious licensing schemes.

Curators need to be trained to run art museums in a business-like manner—but not to run them as businesses. The challenges facing art museums demand innovative solutions to chronic underfunding, careful management of new energy-draining expansions, nimble relations with myriad stakeholders outside the museum, and skill in getting the best out of staff.

Programmes like the UK's Clore Fellowships, the Getty's Museum Leadership Institute, and perhaps New York's new Center for Curatorial Leadership (p6), are one way to provide art scholars with administrative insight, and some on-the-job experience.

The choice of who to hire should turn, therefore, on who is best equipped to raise money, not who is best equipped to run the shop, gate, and restaurants. These necessary but peripheral functions should be run by a chief operating officer or chief financial officer reporting to the director. A widespread experiment in the 1980s with dual leadership (administrative head and artistic head) at many of America's leading art museums, including the Metropolitan, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, all ended, in most cases with a thud, and in all cases the incumbents today are art experts who are business-like but not business-oriented.

When considering hiring a new director, search committees on both sides of the Atlantic should pause before offering the post to business leaders unlikely to quicken the pulse of patrons when speaking about a proposed acquisition, exhibition theme, or scholarly breakthrough. It is more likely that art scholars are better equipped—once fluent in spreadsheets, budgeting, and marketing—to make a compelling case, to well-to-do patrons and governments alike, that their museum is an indispensable community asset.

The writer is the Melvin and Bren Simon director and chief executive of the Indianapolis Museum of Art