Editorial

Art History and the “Blockbuster” Exhibition

Not many years ago, it was assumed that the days of ambitious loan exhibitions of “treasures” and “masterpieces” were numbered. It was agreed among museum professionals that the shipping of major works of art could no longer be justified unless what was called a “scientific” meaning historical-intellectual purpose would be served by bringing together fragile objects whose visual juxtaposition in the exhibition had the potential of expanding an understanding of the parts and the whole. Art historians cannot claim credit, if credit is due, to creating that atmosphere, although they increasingly were filling important curatorial — but much more rarely directorial — positions. Rather, the extraordinary costs of such exhibitions, especially insurance in relation to skyrocketing market values, placed them beyond practical reach.

A variety of developments during the past two decades, including federal insurance indemnification and exhibition support from corporations and the national endowments, have made nineteenth-century-style “treasure” exhibitions popular again. The motivation and history of these so-called “blockbusters” can be traced back to 1967, when Thomas Hoving was appointed director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and instituted widely influential policies designed to draw upon, and create, broad-based public interests, which were tapped through sophisticated marketing techniques. Whether motivated by a new sense of social “relevance” (“Harlem on My Mind”) or the potential of mass appeal (“King Tut,” “The Splendors of Dresden”), the early blockbusters attracted enormous crowds, which created unprecedented revenues for art museums: from admissions, and especially from sales of related merchandise such as miniature replicas of the King’s celebrated gold mask that the Metropolitan Museum advertised as “small original sculptures” and King Tut porcelain mugs. Altogether, sales of “official” Tut reproductions by the initial six-museum consortium totaled $17.4 million. The economic impact of such programming is evident: of the $4.5 million income from admissions at the Metropolitan Museum in 1979, $2.8 million was attributable to the Tutankhamun exhibition. Approximately forty percent of the museum’s gross income that year came from merchandising. Since 1981, net proceeds from its “auxiliary activities” (merchandise and catalogues, restaurant, parking, auditorium), which are particularly augmented by special exhibitions, have grown seven-fold and now account for nearly ten percent of its total net income.¹

The momentum of this success was predictable, all the more so in a climate of post-1960’s anti-elitist consciousness, tightened operating budgets caused by rapid expansion, and governmental and corporate assistance for popular exhibitions. However, the large crowds, which generated the increasingly essential income (profits from “The Vatican Collections” and “Van Gogh in Arles” can be credited for putting end-of-the-year accounting at the Metropolitan in the black), had four consequences of particular interest to the art historian, all the more so because the newly created public expectations could not be met without still bigger and better blockbusters, which often were promoted with alluring titles promising gold, treasures, or a glimpse into a great “age.” First, exhibitions of substantial historical value based on intellectual rather than marketing considerations were curtailed or modified, not only by many of the largest institutions, but by smaller museums as well, whose policies have been under strong pressures from a ripple effect. When scholars now are invited by museums to contribute to exhibition catalogues they often join teams working under very short deadlines, with little or no coordination of a historical overview. Second, the blockbusters have placed curatorial staffs under such daily pressures to attend to exhibitions, which seem to follow one another like stories on the evening news (quickly, without depth, and aimed at an undeveloped attention span that needs to be whetted by what comes next), that the permanent collections are badly neglected: not solely by the museum’s visitors, but by those whose very title signifies the caring for works of art, physically, and through research and the attendant publication of catalogues. (It hardly needs emphasis that the scholarly museum catalogue, which still remains rare, ironically can be the most valuable tool for the preparation of major exhibitions.) Third, works of art of the very greatest aesthetic, historical, and commercial value routinely are circulated in exhibitions with little or no art-historical coherence. Inevitably, those loans will prejudice subsequent efforts to borrow the same objects for scholarly purposes. Finally, the mechanization of exhibition attendance (Ticketron, Acoustiguide, etc.) and the crowded viewing conditions threaten to dehumanize the entire experience.

Two recent projects must serve to represent the wider whole and provoke reflection on the lasting educational value of many similar loan exhibitions of recent years. (It is imperative to recognize the focus of these remarks: the intellectually vacuous blockbuster, not large exhibitions with a critical purpose.) “The Treasure Houses of Britain” was the most successful blockbuster mounted yet, if gauged by the number and variety of loans, the installation techniques, the lavishness of the catalogue, and the coverage in the media and public interest — which seemed to focus as much, if not more, on the social activities as on the works of art. Undeniably, some rarely exhibited, important works were made available for aesthetic pleasure and scholarly study alike. But, it must be asked, at what expense, literally and figuratively, and with what permanent contribution to knowledge?

The direct and subsidized costs of that single-venue exhibition might be considered comparatively: they approached the entire annual budget (for exhibitions, conservation, publications, etc.) of the Museum Program of the National Endowment for the Arts; or they were sufficient to have funded publication of illustrated, scholarly

¹ See the museum’s published annual reports for these and related data.
undertaken budget exhibition's museums. This Atlantic drawing able catalogue of the permanent collections of paintings in all of America's largest museums. A very large portion of that budget was allocated for installation, which proved to be the nexus of the exhibition. A panel by Wouvermans, for instance, like other paintings by Velázquez and Tintoretto, as well as ancient marble sculptures, were hung so high that their sole effect was decorative, evocative perhaps of some country house installations but nonetheless indistinguishable from that conveyed by reproductions. Similarly, a pen drawing by Mantegna was placed so far back within its "library" case "environment" that a facsimile would have sufficed as well. Singly, these examples seem minor, but they point to a larger, serious whole: that great works of art were taken from their walls and flown across the Atlantic in order to be subordinated to a multi-million-dollar fiction of museum design. That is, an inversion of basic art-historical priorities occurred because the effects of installation subjugated both curatorial-scholarly interests and the integrity and originality of the individual works of art. This strongly suggests that no substantive ideas motivated the exhibition. To the contrary, potentially worthwhile issues such as the socio-economic foundations of "five hundred years of private patronage and art collecting" (the exhibition's subtitle) were passed over in total silence.

The second case, which is pending rather than realized, has been aired in the German press but received little attention in its host country. Two of America's largest museums have arranged to borrow from the West Berlin museums one hundred and twenty-six works of Northern Renaissance art, including twenty-six panel paintings and thirty-four sculptures. In reaction to the inevitable dangers of shipping such very fragile objects, to the awful prospect of diminishing the cultural patrimony of one city, and to the apparent lack of scholarly motivation behind the enterprise, nine professors of art history at Berlin's universities, the chairman of the German association of art historians, and the chairman of the German association of conservators appealed for cancellation of the exhibition (their letter and a reply from the director of the West Berlin museums have been published in Kunstchronik, xxxix, 1986, 11-14). At least two arguments have been made to justify the loans. One, that a special conservation study undertaken by the participating American museums concludes that transportation of panel paintings is no more hazardous than that of paintings on canvas (the report completely avoids the crucial issue of how, for the duration of the exhibition, fail-safe microclimates could be created to match Berlin's conditions); and, two, that the risks of exchange exhibitions are no greater than of moving works of art in-house. Whatever credence such surprising positions merit, the consequences of catastrophic loss through an air accident cannot be mitigated, and therefore the wisdom of lending masterpieces such as Jan van Eyck's Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and Roger van der Weyden's "Miraflores" Altarpiece to a "Berlin" exhibition wants the closest assessment. This has been done, if only in camera, by the advisory committee on federal indemnification, which (the aforementioned report notwithstanding) has voted unanimously to deny recommending insurance coverage for the twenty-six panel paintings, whose evaluation alone exceeds $200 million. At the date of this writing, the exhibition is scheduled to open in 1988.

For art historians and many museum professionals alike, the essential purposes of the art museum are the collecting, cataloguing, and preservation of works of art. These and related activities have been recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as "educational," a determination, it should be stressed, that constitutes the sole basis for the art museum's status as a tax-exempt, charitable organization, without which the museum's economic structure would founder. Its exhibitions program closely parallels an academic curriculum insofar as it determines what is available for study. Where this analogy collapses, however, is critical. While academic curricula are delimited by specialists teaching in their historical disciplines and rarely are determined by cost-accounting analyses, the large museums' exhibition programs often are guided not by educational priorities, or by personnel trained to make art-historical judgments, but by the complex social and economic interests and dependencies of trustees, corporations, and museum management. The recent trend to appoint administrative "presidents" as chief executive officers of some leading museums is only symptomatic of this development. Whatever case might be argued on behalf of the blockbuster exhibition, its dominant role in America's art museums clearly mirrors a growing divorce between art-historical objectives and institutional aggrandizement.

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2 See "Special Section: Museum Blockbusters," Art in America, June, 1986, 19-37, which appeared after this editorial was in press. One attractive "pro" blockbuster position repeated there, that "a successful blockbuster is one of the best pieces of evidence for the argument that tax-supported museums benefit the public at large" (p. 24), wants careful scrutiny. Studies indicate that a large percentage of the museum audience is economically and educationally privileged, which means that a poorer "democratic majority" is subsidizing a socially advantaged class. See A. Feld, M. O'Hare, and J.M. Davidson, Patrons Despite Themselves: Taxpayers and Arts Policy, New York, 1983.