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Hiring out the collection: the Whitney does, MoMA doesn’t

Collection leasing provides a fundraising alternative for some museums, and a surrogate permanent collection for others

Jason Edward Kaufman

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The Whitney Museum of American Art has signed a seven-year agreement with the San Jose Museum of Art in California, whereby the Whitney will send from its permanent collection four one hundred-work surveys of twentieth-century American art, each to remain on view in California for eighteen months. The first installation—”American Art, 1900-1940”—opens in May. The museum is paying the Whitney $1.4 million ($350,000 per show), and the City of San Jose, through its Redevelopment Agency, is giving another $3 million, for a total leasing fee of $4.4 million. “They have more money than art; we have more art than money. We become nicely complementary”, notes Whitney director David Ross, bluntly delineating the factors conducive to collection leasing.

Other prominent American museums are about to make extended loans of segments of their permanent collections: the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum will send art to Bilbao, Spain; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, to Nagoya, Japan. Details of these agreements are secret, but both involve long-term loans of surplus art for a fee. In the case of the Guggenheim, the Basque government is building a $120 million, 250,00 square-foot, Frank Gehry-designed museum in Bilbao. When it opens in 1997, the Guggenheim will supply a yet-to-be-announced collection, lend traveling shows, consult on acquisitions, and manage the projected $15 million budget. "This is not a money-making endeavour", maintains deputy director Michael Govan, who notes the partnership is "decades-long—intended to be permanent". He told The Art Newspaper, "The benefit for us is being able to reach our European audience and to share the cost of organising exhibitions. As far as our collection, it should actually help us to expand by giving us more space in which to display gifts". Which is to say nothing of the Guggenheim's reaping a $20-million fee and all expenses relating to the new institution.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Nagoya, Japan, are fine-tuning a twenty-year agreement to develop the Nagoya/Boston Museum of Art. The city is about to build a 55,000 square-foot museum, designed by Nihon Sekkei, Nikken Sekkei, Tokai Sekkei, in a municipal archive and hotel building adjacent to the train station. When it opens in 1997, its collection will consist entirely of works from the MFA. Boston will send four five-year "permanent-collection surveys from across the collections", and two temporary shows per year. Nagoya staff will be responsible for daily operations, but major decisions, such as the contents of the exhibitions, will be subject to Boston's approval. The specifics remain confidential, but it is known that Nagoya will pay all expenses and an undisclosed "substantial" annual fee, said to be several million dollars a year.

Whitney chairman Leonard Lauder believes collection leasing is inevitable in America because the country's population has shifted away from the long-established downtown repositories of art, creating demand for loans from those repositories. San Jose is a case in point. An hour and a half from San Francisco, the capital of "Silicon Valley" has 6 million residents, making it the nation's eleventh largest metropolitan centre. But its museum lacks an art collection adequate to its affluent population's demand. "In twenty years", Mr Lauder predicts, "the Whitney-San Jose project will be a model of the landscape of American cultural life".

Stephen Weil, deputy director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, also expects the trend to escalate: "There is a considerable mismatch between the portability of museums and the mobility of populations", he says. "How are we to provide art museums to newly settled parts of the country like the South-west when it is longer practical to try to acquire historical collections?”

Richard Oldenburg, director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, agrees that the obstacles to building up a historical collection make it “perfectly reasonable to explore the possibility of borrowing classic works from other institutions”. But because it is known that MOMA does not enter into such agreements, they are not even approached. The Guggenheim, however, according to Mr Govan, has received inquiries from potential lessees in the US, Europe, and Asia.

James Wood, director of The Art Institute of Chicago, states categorically, “We have a responsibility to keep our collections here in Chicago for our audience and for those who come to visit us here. We loan a tremendous volume of individual works for shows, but we are not contemplating any kind of satellite museum”. He is not alone in arguing that the practice disserves the lending museum’s audience. At the very least, the practice raises questions of ethics and governance, and may have legal consequences as well. Yet neither the American Association of Museums nor the Association of Art Museum Directors has issued guidelines for its members. And the lack of public discussion of the practice might suggest some form of illicit, covert activity.

Asked what the New York audience can expect to see of the Whitney’s permanent collection over the course of the San Jose lease, Mr Ross told The Art Newspaper, “The intent is that at all times one of our three major exhibition floors will be devoted to the permanent collection. And the San Jose project in no way compromises our ability to do that on the highest level”. Whitney curators will periodically mount one-floor thematic shows, as well as the one-room “Collection in Context” series in the lobby gallery. And four European guest-curators—Jean-Christophe Amman of the Modern Art Museum, Frankfurt; Rudi Fuchs of the Stedelijk, Amsterdam; Nicholas Serota of the Tate, London; and Susan Paget of the Museum of Modern Art, Paris—will have an opportunity to interpret the Whitney’s collections. These “Views from Abroad” will travel to the corresponding European institutions (mid 1995-97).

Asked why he does not offer visitors a permanent chronology of modern American art, Mr Ross announced to The Art Newspaper that he plans before the end of the decade to commit the entire building, for an entire year, to a show called “The American Century”, an in-depth survey of American art 1900-2000. And why not devote one or two floors to such a survey now? “I don’t like the idea of a simplified chronological survey”, he explains.

One of the most successful inter-museum arrangements involves the MFA, Boston, and the Dallas Museum of Art. From its various archaeological expeditions, Boston accumulated an enormous array of antiquities in need of conservation. In 1990 they worked out an arrangement with Dallas whereby in exchange for a ten-year loan of nearly 400 Egyptian objects, the Texans would pay to conserve the materials. A foundation established by Dallas MOMA ex-chairman Betty Marcus and her husband underwrote the project with a $500,000 grant. (A second group of ancient works went to San Antonio in a parallel agreement.)

There is tremendous potential for this kind of exchange, whether for two or 200 objects—and foundations have begun to sponsor them. The first were The Pew Charitable Trusts, whose $1.5 million collection-sharing program for Philadelphia-area non-profit institutions commenced in 1990. The initiative recognised that when museums' missions change, portions of their holdings may lose relevance. Accordingly, "The purpose was to shake loose some collections and let them roll toward others", says Cultural Affairs director Marian Godfrey. Pew coordinated more than a dozen transfers, complete with preliminary conservation treatment. Pew considered a national program, but deemed resources too limited. Instead, they assisted the Texas Association of Museums in planning a statewide "resource sharing" program, complete with a directory of collections and services available for exchange or lease.

At the national level, it appears Knight Foundation is taking the lead. They've committed $300,000 to the Whitney-San Jose project in an effort "to initiate a model collection sharing program". They also have hired a consultant to survey US museums' willingness to make long-term loans, and smaller museums' interest in securing them. A Knight spokesperson told The Art Newspaper that depending on the results of the survey, "We might pay for a database that lets museums know what's out there, and maybe fund an administration to help route the loans". It's an intriguing concept: imagine if all non-profit institutions reflected on their missions, examined other holdings, and determined which gaps they needed to fill and which segments might be utilised better elsewhere. This information might lead to countless mutually beneficial partnerships. Yet there is no guarantee that museums would participate—even those with deep collections. Pew's Ms Godfrey sensed that such programs are less suitable for art museums which have "extraordinary implementation and logistical problems", and are reticent about loans.