

New book gives an unsurprising look at the Metropolitan

A collection of interviews with museum employees— from director Philippe de Montebello to a café waitress —reveals few secrets

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With a subtitle like *Behind the Scenes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, one might expect an exposé of the politics and infighting that plague so many large organisations. But *Museum*, a collection of interviews with 49 employees is nothing of the sort. From director and chief executive Philippe de Montebello to the plumber who maintains the

30-odd bathrooms, no one carps about a colleague and only a waitress confesses that she is not thrilled with her job. The author Danny Danziger— a non-expert in art whose previous works include a similar composite portrait of the London Philharmonic—has pushed none of his interviewees so much as a millimetre out of their comfort zones.

The book has the anodyne lightness of a Renoir and not an inkling of the promised social acuity. Nonetheless, it gently reveals something of the character of the people who work in the museum, and none more fully than Philippe de Montebello, its seigneur for the last quarter century.

He describes his journey from affluent childhood in Grasse to his career as director as a matter of inexorable destiny. And he acknowledges that as a result of his success he has become identified with the museum to a degree that may not be healthy. “The institution and I have totally merged,” he says.

“I am the Met, the Met is me” (or as that other roi said, “l’état c’est moi”). He knows his shoes will be hard to fill, and, without hinting at retirement, he imagines a “last walk” through the galleries. “A huge number of emotions will be awakened,” he says. “I cry easily, so I might weep.”

Curators vs trustees

In contrast to his poignant reflection, most of the curators dutifully offer pocket histories of their fields, often with reference to works in the collections they oversee. Among the best are Thomas Campbell’s introduction to European tapestries, and Netherlandish paintings curator Walter Liedtke’s primer on Vermeer. Occasionally,

they provide more personal recollections, such as Islamic department chairman Michael Barry’s account of youthful equestrian sojourns in Afghanistan where he later participated in humanitarian relief efforts before resuming his studies. The atrocities he witnessed induced fierce anti-nationalism, and he says his forthcoming reinstallation of the Islamic wing will be organised not by country but by dynastic capital cities.

Public statements about one’s place of work are bound to be guarded, which is why strong opinions are rare and startling. Drawings and prints chairman George Goldner deplores museums pandering to the masses, a trend that he traces even into the board room. “Rather than have collectors who think the museum should be about art,” he says, “boards have become increasingly full of businessmen. When you look at them, you wonder, how much do any of these people know about art? And it’s damn little.”

It is not clear if his critique applies to the Metropolitan’s trustees, none of whom address the issue directly. But their attitudes come across nonetheless. Wall Street magnate Henry Kravis says he knew he was

“a true collector” when he mourned his mother having thrown out his baseball cards, but he displays only superficial knowledge of the works of art he now collects. E. John Rosenwald minces no words when he states that he was invited to become a trustee because he is an accomplished fundraiser, and he takes his role as salesman extremely seriously. Chairman James Houghton, the head of Corning Incorporated and self-described “WASP from

upstate New York”, conveys a more lax commitment to his office, informing us that because he lives out of town, his duties at the museum are compressed into one day a month.

Michel David-Weill, of the Lazard banking family, projects the air of aristocratic entitlement one associates with the trustee of an art museum. He alludes to Old Masters distributed among his seven homes and declares: “I am somebody who is not terribly impressed by people,”

as opposed to art. Not all art suits his taste: he quit the Guggenheim board when director Thomas Krens purchased the Panza Collection of Minimalist art, and left the Pompidou when, “a curator walked me into a room and said, ‘Isn’t that beautiful?’

And I looked around and didn’t see anything”.

Sanitised secrets

Here and there are interesting bits of trivia: admission buttons come in 16 colours, the museum’s 2m sq. ft makes it second in size to the Louvre, and Mr de Montebello summers in Quebec and “likes a man who orders cheese”. There are a few shocking anecdotes, such as the man who tragically fell to his death from the roof, and the woman who was escorted from the museum after screaming and spitting at Rembrandt’s *Woman with a Pink*, whom she accused of being the whore who broke up her marriage. But in general, the book feels cautious, even sanitised.

The Metropolitan was given an opportunity to “correct” the galleys, which spokesman Harold Holzer says was not a precondition for access. The process involved some minor expurgations. A passage in which Mr Kravis bragged about buying impressionist paintings by the “dozens” was removed, perhaps for perceived crassness. And trustee Jayne Wrightsman’s more innocuous account was excised entirely.

Some of the interviews are not of great interest. Do we need to know that the waitress is an opera singer manqué, or that the plumber, who passed away before the book was published, was a former cocaine addict? There are regrettable omissions, including any mentions of the Greek and Roman

antiquities curator Carlos Picón and the 19th-century, modern and contemporary art chief Gary Tinterow, who were either too busy or wary about participating. Moreover, the interviewer's questions were removed from the transcripts to make the narrations appear continuous, but the results are often disjointed, jumping from answer to unrelated answer.

What emerges is a patchwork of personalities, lightly sketched, that convey a collective pride in the institution. If that is Mr Danziger's intention then his work is a success, but we will have to wait for another study that fulfils his title's promise to delve deeper.

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