

WHY DO UNIVERSITIES HAVE MUSEUMS?

By Kimerly Rorschach, the Mary D.B.T. and James H. Semans Director of the Nasher Museum

Over the past 15 years or so, many university museums in this country have matured from somewhat sleepy, internally focused teaching collections to much larger and more complex public museums with ambitious exhibitions and programs and varied audiences. I have found it useful to reflect on this phenomenon, and on the history of university museums in this country, as I face the challenge of planning for the growth and development of the new Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, opening in October 2005.

I want to begin with an anecdote from my own college days, way back in the 1970s. I arrived as a freshman at Brandeis University, expecting to major in history and political science and to learn Russian so I could concentrate on the Soviet Union. But, my first semester, I signed up for a survey course in art history. After the very first class, I knew this was the subject for me and I never looked back. I majored in art history and went straight on to graduate school, emerging from Yale with a Ph.D. in 1985 and going on to a series of jobs in museums. Although I had been dragged by my parents to museums when I was growing up, my first adult experience with a museum was at Brandeis's university museum, the Rose Art Museum, and it was there that I learned to love museums and to understand the excitement and challenges of working in such a place.

Two fellow students who "hung out" at the Rose Art Museum, as I did, were Adam Weinberg, now the director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, and Gary Tinterow, now a distinguished senior curator of European paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We have all kept in touch, and there is no question that we all feel our college museum experience was absolutely seminal in starting us down the paths we have taken. I relate this anecdote because I feel it illustrates the central place of the university art museum in visual arts education in this country more clearly than almost anything else I could say to you.

Nonetheless, I do have a talk prepared. What I want to do today is to tell you a bit about the history of university art museums, as I see it, and touch on some of the challenges and opportunities that these institutions face, both within the context of higher education, and in the broader milieu of the art world in general, for after all many of the artists, scholars, curators and museum directors that define this broader world were educated within this context.

No one has yet written a history of the university art museum (and perhaps no one would read it if they did!), but it is in fact a fascinating tale. We need to go back to Renaissance Europe, to the phenomenon of the Cabinet of Curiosities, the princely collections amassed privately, and privately displayed, as part of a gentleman's education in the 16th and 17th centuries. The goal was to collect objects representing all the world's knowledge in one room, quite literally, as you see in this example.

One of the earliest, if not the first, university museums was the Ashmolean, founded in 1683 at Oxford University, thanks to the donation of (in effect) a Cabinet of Curiosities by Elias Ashmole. This museum was well known to 18th-century English immigrants to the American colonies, and it served as the model for the earliest American university art museums. Even in the 18th century, there were museum collections based on this example at Harvard, Dartmouth and Bowdoin College, and there may have been others. Most of these have been dispersed for various reasons and we know relatively little about them,

other than that they existed and included mixed collections of art and natural history objects such as those in the Cabinet of Curiosities.

The first university art museum was established at Yale in 1831-32 with a gift from the artist John Trumbull. Trumbull gave a large group of his own historical paintings in exchange for a life annuity. Note that this idea seems to have been generated by the donor, not the university, although the university did determine to accept the gift and make a significant investment in providing a gallery to house it.

We must also keep in mind the Philadelphia Museum, established in the 1780s by the artist Charles Willson Peale on the Cabinet of Curiosities model, but within a public context. As you can see from this admission ticket, the museum charged admission, and it's important to understand that this was a for-profit enterprise, from which Peale expected to generate enough revenue not only to keep up the museum and pay his staff, but also to feed and house his numerous family. He repeatedly tried to persuade President Thomas Jefferson to take over the Philadelphia Museum as a national museum but, despite his own personal interest Jefferson repeatedly refused on grounds of expense.

In 1836, the United States received a bequest from the Englishman James Smithson, for the purpose of "the increase and diffusion of knowledge." Congress spent over 10 years debating exactly what this meant, and how it could be done, and at first they focused on the idea of founding a national university. But this was rejected (they felt a university might diffuse, but would not increase knowledge) and it was decided to establish the Smithsonian Institution, a museum (or group of museums and research institutes) instead, as the best way to accomplish this goal.

In the post-Civil War era, by the 1870s, what we now call the Museum Movement arose. The reasons for this are complex, and I don't have the time to go deeply into them in the context of this talk, but suffice it to say that, beginning in this decade and into the 1890s, the great public museums in this country were founded, including the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Natural History in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Field Museum.

In his 1998 book, "Museums and American Intellectual Life", 1876-1926, the historian Peter Conn argues that during this period, it is museums that were seen as the key contributors to new knowledge and research, not universities. This conclusion seems to echo the thinking behind the Smithson debate of 50 years earlier. And Conn attributes part of the vitality of the "Museum Movement" to a strong conviction that museums would be key producers of new knowledge in our rapidly industrializing and urbanizing nation. By the late 1920s, Conn argues, the situation had changed, largely because the scientific and natural history fields that had earlier depended on specimens of various kinds (that had to be collected and housed and preserved in museums) had evolved in ways that made such specimens much less central to research, and thus the stand-alone museums lost their central importance. Interestingly, Conn sees the situation differently in terms of art museums-and I think he is correct. He asserts that original art objects did not lose their relevance in the same way, and that the academic teaching of art and art history continued to rely on original objects much more than these other disciplines.

Turning back to the university context in the late 19th century, however, it's easy to see why universities would feel that museums were important to their teaching and research mission, in light of Conn's thesis. For example, at the University of Chicago's founding in 1892, museums were recognized as essential components of a university of the highest intellectual caliber, which is what the founders aspired to create

right from the beginning. Two of the first buildings constructed were museums: the Walker Museum for natural history and the Haskell Oriental Museum for religious artifacts from the ancient Near East.

Interestingly, the Walker's collections were finally transferred to the Field Museum in the 1950s, presumably because they were no longer essential for university teaching and research; while the Haskell's collections were transferred in 1931 to the new Oriental Institute, which remains to this day a research institute for the study of all aspects of ancient Near Eastern culture on the University of Chicago campus. The University of Chicago did not establish an art museum until 1974, and it seems to have done so in response to the fact that Chicago was by that time almost the only leading research university with aspirations to excellence in art history that did not have such a museum.

I spoke earlier of the 18th and early 19th-century history of university art museums. Turning back to that chronology, you'll remember that the first university art museum, the Yale University Art Gallery, was established in the 1830s. This was followed by a few others, including Vassar in 1863 and Mount Holyoke in 1875. Others such as Princeton (1882), Stanford (1885), Wellesley (1889), and Harvard (1895), appeared only after the Museum Movement that we spoke of earlier was well advanced. These university art museums built collections for teaching and research in the field of studio art and the emerging discipline of art history. Many also recognized a more general mandate to give students an opportunity to develop into more cultivated, well-rounded and well-educated adults through contact with original works of art in a university campus setting. This motivation grew even stronger in the twentieth century, especially during the expansion of higher education after World War II. Just to continue my quick list of the founding dates of university art museums: Oberlin (1917), Smith (1920), the University of Oregon (1922), the University of Washington (1927), the University of Kansas (1928), Indiana University (1941), the University of Michigan (1958), the University of North Carolina (1958), the University of California at Berkeley (1965), the University of Iowa (1967), and Duke University (1969), to name but a few. You might be tempted to note that there seems to have been more impetus to create a university art museum where there was no nearby access to a major municipal art museum, and although there are many other factors also in play, this seems certainly to have been an important one.

I want to pause for a moment on the war years, to introduce you to a curious and very interesting little book by Laurence Vail Coleman, Director of the American Association of Museums, published in 1942. It's entitled *College and University Museums: A Message for College and University Presidents*, and that title has always struck me as a somewhat ominous one, even though the book makes a strong argument as to why universities should have museums, and is full of practical information about how to establish them, and under what administrative scheme they should be managed. Coleman's message (Conn's arguments notwithstanding) is that universities must have museums, both art museums and natural history and science museums, to hold and make available the collections that are essential for teaching (in a college) and research (in a university) in the related fields. Coleman likens university museums to laboratories and believes they are just as essential for any serious institution. He notes that the collections must be accessible, and must therefore be housed in proximity to classrooms, although he stresses that the buildings that house them must be "museum-like" in their aspect, and differentiated from other university buildings. He devotes much space to discussing who should be in charge; he notes the advantage of having a professor in the relevant subject manage the museum, for that will ensure that its mission remains close to the teaching and research mission, but he cautions that this is likely to be unsuccessful if

the professor has no particular knowledge or experience of museum management, and that the collections are likely to suffer or even disappear. He advocates that someone with professional museum experience be put in charge, but that that person should also be capable of teaching, research, and participating fully in the relevant department, so that the close connection is maintained. Here I think he is right, and that this model is still the strongest one for university museum management, especially as these museums have grown and become more complex and specialized operations, and as their collections have skyrocketed in value.

Coleman also cautions against orienting the museum too much to the public at the expense of the primary university constituency. I quote (p. 5):

The first duty of a university or college museum is to its parent establishment, which means that the faculty and student body have a claim prior to that of the townspeople and outsiders in general. Public service, including cooperation with schools and other work for children, is no more the first business of a college museum than of a college library. There are campus museums run by people interested wholly in the public, people whose enthusiasm for this kind of good work will listen to no question of whether their efforts are appropriate to the place in which they hold forth. There are campus museums, also, that try to be all things to all men; but unless such museums are conspicuously useful in their proper work - that is, work with students - they are inadequate, and no extenuating circumstance can alter that fact.

It is this issue that has been most problematic over time - and thus most interesting - for reasons that I will now explore.

During the 1970s and 80s, the public role of municipal art museums expanded dramatically (and by this time all major cities had such museums). This was stimulated by the new phenomenon of the "blockbuster" exhibition and by the increasing availability of public funds to support museums' activities. These funders included the cities themselves, who usually contributed significant portions of the museums' yearly operating budgets, the new federal agencies including the National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, and Institute of Museum Services and the state arts councils. These government funders insisted that the museums they supported should continue to broaden their audiences and educational impact, for very good and obvious reasons. This development also affected university art museums, many of which, despite their traditional internal focus, often served by default as municipal or regional art museums for the cities and towns in which they were located. In many cases, parent universities encouraged this, for they were eager to build stronger relationships with their local communities and, especially in the case of public universities receiving large state appropriations, to show that they were giving something tangible back to the community despite their tax-free status. Universities also discovered that their museums were capable of attracting donors and outside support on their own, as it were, and that there was no need to support them financially at the 100% level. As they grew increasingly dependent on this outside support, of course, university art museums were ever more mindful of the fact that they needed to engage this outside audience on the level of programming as well as support, and their attention to students and faculty could no longer be undivided.

Turning back the clock again for just a moment, let's recall the rapid expansion of higher education in the immediate post-war years, spurred by the G.I. bill. As it turns out, a number of artists who had served in the war took advantage of this to further their studies of fine arts, and the expansion of studio art

departments in this country can be linked to this phenomenon. During the Cold War era, there also grew an interest in the new field of "Creativity Studies" - using a combination of psychology and other disciplines to try to unlock the secrets of creative genius such as artists possessed, in order to apply these lessons to all disciplines including math and science so that we would not be dangerously outstripped in these areas by the Russians (remember Sputnik). It was thus believed that everyone would benefit from time spent studying art to help get in touch with their creative side. This too contributed to the expansion of studio art programs in this country after World War II (and thus to the role of university art museums in supporting these studies).

Remember too that many artists and intellectuals, including distinguished art historians, had emigrated from Europe to the U.S. because of the war. These European art historians played key roles in strengthening, and in some cases even establishing, what became the top art history departments in the post-war era: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia and NYU's Institute of Fine Arts. Like studio art and for some of the same reasons, art history flourished and expanded during the post-war years, linked more and more to the expansion of art museums and their collections. By the 1980s, however, the situation had changed. The discipline of art history had become increasingly theoretical, heavily influenced by structuralist and post-structuralist literary theory, and original art objects began to play a less central role in academic art history. This coincided with the public factors mentioned above, and further contributed to the university art museums' strategy of moving away from the internal audience and toward a broader public audience.

But, during the past decade, many academic art historians have refocused their interest on museums, not only as repositories of individual objects that interest them particularly, but also as art historical phenomena, highly significant modes of organizing and representing knowledge, and important intellectual elements of modernity. Academic scholars in many other fields too are exploring new ways of working and teaching, with objects and visual evidence as well as texts, and new ways of presenting their work to wider audiences. In the age of the public intellectual, the university art museum is newly relevant.

Or, it could be. In my view, university art museums have not always been very quick to understand this opportunity, and many are still much too heavily invested in operating just like a municipal museum. There is no question that university museums must continue to reach out to broader audiences, just as municipal museums do, but the university museum must never forget that it is in fact a very different kind of beast, with a different mission and access to a different, and very strong, array of intellectual resources within its parent university. University art museums can do things that larger municipal museums cannot do, and in my view they ought to do these things, indeed must do them. What kinds of things? More intellectually risk-taking exhibitions; real engagement of students in creative and meaningful ways that have the potential to nurture life-long lovers and supporters of the arts; meaningful involvement of faculty across disciplines, that can lead to a broader understanding and appreciation of the key importance of art and visual culture in civilizations and cultures throughout human history; and new ways of thinking about collections, including long-term loans from underused collections in larger museums, experimentation with new media in partnership with related university disciplines and resources, and the building of important collections in new areas not yet recognized by the major museums. In fairness, some university art museums are responding very creatively to these challenges, and they are recognizing that, as for any institution, their strength must lie in pursuing their distinctive mission and capitalizing on their unique

resources. Herein lies the creative tension, for most university art museums, including the new Nasher at Duke, will still be expected to serve broader audiences and to reach well beyond campus, and this requires the deployment of resources and programs specifically to meet those goals, sometimes (it might even seem) at the expense of our work with university students and faculty. But we have a great advantage here in our new museum building, which was specifically designed with these multiple goals in mind. It includes both exciting public spaces and serene galleries, designed with the utmost flexibility for showing works of art. It also contains classrooms and a lecture hall designed with students in mind, and study storage and display areas so that the collections will be easily accessible for student projects and classes as well as exhibitions for broader audiences. We will also provide the amenities that the public has come to expect, and that make a museum visit much more comfortable and pleasant: a café with good food and coffee and adequate public parking.

I look forward to working with our many audiences and supporters to realize all of these goals, and I hope I've given you some sense of why, in my view, universities have museums.