
January 30, 2008

Learning to Mix Business With Art

By [RANDY KENNEDY](#)

Correction Appended

Hospital administrators usually do not find themselves offering advice or encouragement to art museum curators. But in an elegant Upper East Side town house the other day, Harold E. Varmus, the Nobel laureate and president of [Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center](#), told a group of prestigious curators something that made several gasp audibly.

“I would say that I spend less than 5 percent of my time on fund-raising,” said Dr. Varmus, who added, almost in passing, that he had helped raise nearly \$2 billion during his eight years at the hospital.

The common language in this encounter was one of precious resources: time and, especially, money, as important in the museum world as it is in the health industry. And the money usually comes, Dr. Varmus reminded them, from a relatively small group of people familiar to everyone around the table. “My donors,” he said, “are your donors.”

The 10 curators — several from New York, but others from around the country and one from London — had taken two weeks off from thinking about art to think instead about the nonart subjects that increasingly dominate the time of their bosses, the museum directors: attendance, donations, construction, endowments, media attention, governmental support, budgets and more budgets.

They were the inaugural class of the Center for Curatorial Leadership, a fellowship program founded last year to address what many in the museum world see as a need for curators to become better business people. In part, the goal is that business people — or at least those with far more financial acumen than art training — do not end up running museums. And it is also to help the next generation of museum directors cope with the growing financial pressures on art institutions as they compete for visitors with one another and with the pop-culture industry.

The center is run by Elizabeth W. Easton, former chairwoman of the European paintings and sculpture department at the [Brooklyn Museum](#), and it relies partly on faculty members from the executive education program at Columbia Business School. It is supported by more than a half-million dollars a year from Agnes Gund, president emerita of the Museum of Modern Art, who said she hoped the program would “keep the people who are in charge focused on the most important thing about museums, which is the art part.”

“I’ve seen time and again when the selection committees just wouldn’t consider curators because they hadn’t been in directorship positions, and they didn’t think they had the wherewithal to assume such jobs,” said Ms. Gund, who serves on several prominent museum boards. “And I think curators just need the imprimatur of something extra to show that they can do this.”

The opening of the program seemed even more timely after this month's announcement of the retirement of [Philippe de Montebello](#), director of the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), who has come to be cast by many curators as a kind of Platonic ideal of an art-above-all museum leader.

In a 2001 speech Mr. de Montebello described his view of the debate like a general marshaling troops. "If we are to win the battle of the 'curator/director' over the 'administrator/director,' a profile with which increasingly boards of trustees are instinctively more comfortable, then it is essential to enlarge the pool of curators with the qualifications to be tomorrow's museum directors," he told the Association of Art Museum Curators.

To do that, the fellows in the inaugural program — including Colin B. Bailey, chief curator at the [Frick Collection](#); Eleanor Jones Harvey, chief curator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum; and Gary Tinterow, a longtime Met curator who is often mentioned as a potential successor to Mr. de Montebello — delved into subjects that rarely invade their art-historical domains.

They learned about endowment management and conflict resolution. They heard from executive-search specialists, the kind who could someday help determine the fates of the curators in the room. And they listened to an expert in the booming business of museum marketing — a field many museum leaders view with suspicion — talk about focus groups, audience expectations and branding ("the B word," as the expert, Arthur Cohen, delicately described it).

"If you don't manage your brand," Mr. Cohen warned, in terms heard more often these days in political campaigns, "the external world will, often inaccurately."

If the discussions ever seemed abstruse in the way that business-world strategizing can, they were quickly brought back to earth by reminders of what is at stake, especially for smaller institutions with intense pressure to increase attendance, but for major ones too.

The program included a story of a wealthy trustee at one large New York museum who advised the museum's director not to mount a particular exhibition that was in the planning stages — essentially questioning the director's intelligence.

"Now can you ever imagine one of your trustees telling you that you're an idiot?" one curator asked Dr. Varmus, the Sloan-Kettering president, during his presentation.

"No," Dr. Varmus replied emphatically, to laughter around the table.

Many curators said it was crucial not only for talented curators to rise to leadership positions but also for them to find ways for museums to compete in a more corporate world without becoming too much a part of it or of the pop-culture realm. (Museum exhibitions often cited as examples of crossing those lines came up again during the course, like the Brooklyn Museum's "Star Wars" memorabilia show in 2002 and a display from [Ralph Lauren's](#) car collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 2005.)

"In the last 15 to 20 years museums have looked to the M.B.A., the outside world, to corporate heads, to give us direction in how to assess what we're doing as an institution," said Laurie Winters, a curator at the Milwaukee Art Museum and one of the fellows. "And I think all of us sitting at this table and in the museum world in general have had experiences where we're saying, 'O.K., that's not working.'"

Mr. Tinterow, who as part of the program will serve a residency with Neil MacGregor, the director of the [British Museum](#) and another candidate often mentioned to succeed Mr. de Montebello, said that he felt that museum boards were once again beginning to value deep art experience over business acumen in their searches for leaders.

But what that means in today's museum world, he and other curators added, is that candidates for the top jobs need not only the skills of an art historian, but also those of a chief executive, investment banker, motivational speaker, political infighter and veteran diplomat.

"I almost feel that a battle has been won," Mr. Tinterow said, "but now the proof is in the pudding."

Correction: January 31, 2008

An article in The Arts on Wednesday about a fellowship program intended to help art museum curators deal better with the business aspects of their jobs misstated part of the name of the institution where Eleanor Jones Harvey, who took part in the program, is chief curator. It is the Smithsonian American Art Museum, not Gallery.

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