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Museum Directors on Collectors and Exhibitions

By **Robin Pogrebin** November 11, 2009 3:30 pm

An article on Wednesday described concerns in the art world over the propriety of a coming show at the New Museum that will feature the private collection of a museum trustee, Dakis Joannou. In interviews, the directors of the Brooklyn Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art discussed their recent exhibitions featuring private collections.

Arnold Lehman, the director of the Brooklyn Museum, talked about his museum's policy on showing the holdings of private collectors, its decision to feature the "Sensation" show, comprised of work owned by the advertising mogul Charles Saatchi, in 1999, and the recent show of works by Hernan Bas, a young Miami artist, from the Rubell Family Collection:

"For us, there is no policy," he said. "There's nothing written. Our position is to try to show the most engaging and best art. Those collections that are available to us to show and that relate in some fashion either to the strengths of our institution or to gaps in our own collection. We've never felt there is any issue here."

"We never felt the Saatchi business was an issue because we've done it over and over," he said. He also noted that the Brooklyn Museum asked Saatchi for "Sensation"; not the other way around, and that Saatchi made no donation in connection with the exhibit.

"It doesn't raise any issues for me," he said. "The commitment is to show the best and most interesting art that you can." Of the exhibition at the New Museum, he added: "I am certain, knowing my colleagues at the New Museum, that there's no more to it than that."

Regarding the Hernan Bas exhibition: “We just fell in love with that exhibition and also thought his work was little known in the Northeast,” he said.

One of Mr. Bas’s works was subsequently donated to the museum. “We received a fairly spectacular gift,” Mr. Lehman said. “We didn’t know that going into it and had there been nothing we still would have been thrilled with the exhibition. That was never part of any agreement.”

Thomas Campbell, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, talked about the museum’s history of showing private collections, as well as the exhibition of Old Master drawings from the collection of its trustee Jean Bonna:

“The Met wouldn’t be the Met — the Met wouldn’t have the collections it has — if it hadn’t been for private collectors. We’ve been working closely with collectors and exhibiting private collections since the 1880s.

“Two of the five in the Vermeer exhibition were first exhibited here as part of private collections,” he said, referring to the museum’s current Vermeer show, which runs through Nov. 29. “The issue is how it’s done. For us it’s very much a case-by-case basis.”

“Our curators and department heads are well acquainted with collectors in their field,” he said. “Part of their job is to cultivate relationships with them.”

“Obviously significant collections in private hands, if circumstances are right, can on occasion be a great opportunity to bring great works of art to the public. We’re not in the business of promoting private collections for sale. They’re not going to be selling the pictures off the wall. But there’s a limit to how much you can police that.

“Contracts may say certainly that objects can’t be sold during the period of exhibition and occasionally further out. We’re not in the business of showing things that are imminently for sale.”

“There’s often a delicate dance between collectors and institutions that would like to acquire important works of art,” he said. “On a number of occasions, we have subsequently benefitted from gifts that have first been here in the context of

temporary exhibitions. That's not a contractual stipulation, though it might be an understanding."

Regarding the terms of its show earlier this year (Jan-April), "Raphael to Renoir: Drawings from the Collection of Jean Bonna," which featured the collection of Mr. Bonna, a Met trustee, Mr. Campbell said he could not "cite the specifics of contracts."

"Jean is a significant collector of master drawings well known to our drawings department," he said, adding that Met curators had selected the pieces for the exhibition. "If you're going to do a show like this, of course we are always dependent on the largesse of donors and benefactors," Mr. Campbell said. "At the same time, we are strong enough to assert our curatorial independence and integrity."

"You sometimes run into trouble if a private collector wants to be the curator in place of our curators," he continued. "That's not going to happen here."

"Proposals have come forward that weren't appropriate. Collections in formation might be looking for a sale sooner rather than later."

Regarding the Bonna collection, Mr. Campbell added: "All such decisions are treated carefully. They're all treated with care. Our trustees are not involved in any way in determining the exhibition program. All of our shows or the vast majority of our shows are proposed by the curatorial departments."

As to whether or not Met curators advise collectors on their personal collections, Mr. Campbell said: "We don't comment on works of art in the marketplace as a policy." At the same time, he added: "Over the years, working with collectors in the course of conversation, there is going to be mutual expertise. Relationships develop."

"The relationship between museums and private collectors is one that has existed ever since the museum started coming into being. It's a fruitful and important one. I think one can be overly puritanical. It's complex. Therefore it's especially important for museums to be vigilant about potential conflicts of interest."

"With the prosperity generated through the city in the last 20 years, a lot of people have invested very heavily, especially in the contemporary art market. Both

they and the dealers with whom they work have a vested interest in creating profiles for their artists and maintaining high prices. There is pressure to keep these artists in the public eye.” While there may be an intellectual rationale for showing a certain artist, “museums have to be vigilant not to be serving the commercial interests of a dealer or a collector.”

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