

Museum-Making:

TRANSITIONING FROM PRIVATE COLLECTION TO PUBLIC MUSEUM

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“There is much truth in the remark that the best museum is that which a person forms for himself... the person who has formed a private collection can most successfully manage one for the use of the public ”
~ 1896, George Browne Goode, Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution¹

Many of America's most cherished museums are built on the solid foundations of once-private collections. Some house continually-evolving collections, while others try to preserve the original vision of their founders by changing almost nothing at all. Diverse in their content and mission, these private-collection, single-donor museums share a common history intimately tied to the benevolent, yet self-preserving egos of their creators. By offering to the public the product of their lifelong passion, private collectors leave humanity with institutions that enrich and challenge our understanding of the arts, all the while maintaining control over their domain. Subsequent caretakers of these collections are faced with both ensuring the continuity of the original mission and helping their institutions adapt to changing professional demands and modern cultural trends affecting the museum field.

INTRODUCTION TO PRIVATE-COLLECTION MUSEUMS

G.B. Goode's words read like a memorial to those who transformed their private treasure-houses into places of public admiration, inspiration and education. While Goode's conclusion is contestable, the namesake museums of private collectors serve as a testament to

¹ Goode 1896, 161.

their founders' important role as museum-makers. American history is rich in art patrons who proudly created museums to serve the needs of the public, as well as their own. Since the first U.S. museum, the Peale Museum, was created by Charles Peale in 1783, the tradition of private-collection museums has continued through present day.² During the Gilded Age, many cities benefited from the trend among art collectors to establish private museums showcasing their collections; institutions that today count among their most important cultural landmarks, e.g., the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (Boston, 1903), the Frick Collection (New York City, 1931), and the Phillips Collection (Washington D.C., 1921). The recent return to extravagant personal consumption has resulted in a second Gilded Age and a new wave of personal-collection museums further enriching the national museum landscape, e.g., the Menil Collection (Houston, 1987), the Rubin Museum of Art (New York City, 2004), and the Broad Contemporary Art Museum (Los Angeles, 2008). Both a lasting tribute to an individual's life and a gift to the public, these museums serve the larger community while providing intimate insight into the men and women devoted to their creation.

Even though further subdivisions are possible, there exist two general types of museums established by collectors: permanent memorials and evolving institutions. In the first category are included the homes and collections of individuals like Albert Barnes, Henry Frick, Marjorie Merriweather Post, and David Kreeger. The collections of these collectors are preserved, for the most part, intact and in situ, with limited flexibility afforded to their future stewards. The second category includes museums that continue to develop beyond the scope of the original collection; examples include the Guggenheim Museum, the Rubin Museum of Art, and the

² Sellers 1980.

Hirshhorn Museum. These museums, while based on the collections of individual collectors, are not restricted by a founder's specific parameters and gradually lose their personal qualities. For the purpose of this study, both types of museums are considered, but emphasis is placed on the first model as it, more so than an evolving museum, cannot be fully understood without considering its founding collector. Nevertheless, in both instances private-collection museums result from an individual's passion and dedication to a cause and serve as a permanent reminder of their largess.

For the purpose of this study, specific attention was focused on two local, Washington D.C. institutions and their respective collector-founders:

- Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens – Marjorie Merriweather Post
- The Kreeger Museum – David [and Carmen] Kreeger

For these two museums, interviews were conducted with their current directors – also the first professional directors at their respective institutions – in order to gain insight into the transition process as well as into their managerial styles. Where relevant, publicly-available information has been used to supplement these interviews and relates to a number of other institutions, including:

- Rubin Museum of Art (RMA) – Donald and Shelley Rubin
- The Menil Collection – Dominique [and John] de Menil
- Barnes Foundation³ – Albert Barnes

The motivations, goals and approaches to museum-making are quite different in each case, though the common thread of a great collection united by a single vision allows them to be studied together. Each collector pursued a specific mission and created a new museum

³ The Barnes Foundation was created as an educational institution, but its art gallery has become its defining element and is often discussed as a museum.

manifesting a personal collecting style. Their similarity is not in their structure, management or content, though there are certainly overlaps, but rather in the shared desire of their founders to offer something once uniquely personal to a larger audience. Of the two local examples, both are permanent-memorial museums, but their presentation style is quite different and each reflects the personality of its founder. Hillwood Museum exhibits the home of Marjorie Merriweather Post more or less as she left it when she died. Current director Frederick Fisher explained that minor modifications are made on occasion, such as moving a particular dish or trinket, but the focus is on maintaining the look and feel of the home as it was when it was inhabited. The Kreeger residence has been transformed into a museum in a more traditional sense, with empty rooms where paintings hang on the walls accompanied by labels. The difference in arrangement reflects both the different visions of the collectors and the way in which the collection is currently contextualized. Evolving museums such as the Rubin Museum of Art and the Neue Galerie, both in New York City, present the collections of their founders in a new space designed specifically to house a growing museum. This approach changes the understanding of the art and the public's perception of the collection and, over time, will result in a museum relatively detached from its original founders. Nevertheless, these collectors, dedicated to enriching the public's understanding and access to art, should be remembered as the institution develops.

THE COLLECTOR

It can be argued that without collectors we would have no museums. Collectors are not only the founders of their own institutions, but also the source of donations for many already-

established museums. According to a 2007 statement issued by the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), “more than 90% of the art collections held in the public trust by America's art museums were donated by private individuals.”⁴ In part limited by funding, established museums are also subject to conservative procedures and bureaucratic obstacles that prevent them from acquiring objects as they come on the market. However, perhaps more importantly, the museum is also a workplace, and rare is the organization that can boast of a staff that places work above all else. The private collector, on the other hand, pursues his passion at extraordinary personal expense of time, emotion and capital. The unrivaled dedication, natural intuition and keen insight of private collectors cannot be replaced by systematic institutional collecting. While institutions may be better equipped to create more comprehensive collections, often for the sake of objectivity, private collectors can take risks on the unknown and the controversial and be as partial as they choose. The result are private collections that are just that, *private*. They are more than the sum of their parts and are held together by a single person's vision and his or her personal way of approaching and interacting with art. Consequently, understanding collectors and their motivations can offer perspective when considering their role in shaping the contemporary museum landscape.

From the objects of their desire to their methods of acquisition, collectors are nothing if not diverse. Collecting, in its basic form, has always been a democratic pursuit, for even when not able to afford fine art, even the poorest man could collect beetles, rocks, or poems. “To the discerning collector, knowledge is far more important than money,” asserts Rachel Campbell-Johnston, chief art critic for *The Times*.⁵ While the poor man is not the subject of this study, it is

4 AAMD, January 2007.

5 Campbell-Johnson 2007.

important to draw attention to the fact that the activity of collecting is not limited by social standing – though specific types of collecting certainly are. Collectors are not always wealthy financiers cut from the same cloth. Likewise their motivations, approaches to collecting, and future museums are not all the same. Amassing objects of “value”, in every sense of the word, is often an expression of personal identity and gives the collector a sense of pride and satisfaction. The motivations to collect are many, including the preservation of memory, realization of self-worth, and achievement of financial wealth.⁶ Furthermore, any motivator has potential to inspire a collection that transcends personal significance, though few can stand alone and retain meaning in perpetuity, both necessary elements of a donor-museum collection. It is the few “great collectors” that achieve such collections that form the subset of collectors at the heart of this study. Not surprisingly, however, museums structured around different motivations are equally multifarious, each possessing its own unique qualities, as exhibited by the included case-studies.

When asked what inspired the establishment of Hillwood Museum, director Fred Fisher said it simply: “Vanity!” And while little research has been done to better understand the motivations behind private museum-making, vanity, egoism and other less-offensive variations are often the first to be identified. However, what greater purpose is served by seeking posthumous vainglory? Surely there is something more. Insight can be gained by viewing the collector as an artist, as suggested by Pamela Smart in her assessment of the Menil Collection.⁷ Building on theories introduced by other scholars, she presents collecting as an “exercise in making the world one's own, [gathering] things around oneself tastefully, appropriately,” which

6 Nemeth 2005, 44.; McIntosh 2004, 87.

7 Smart 2006.

in turn, “generates a fantasy in which [the collector] becomes producer by arrangement and manipulation.” The collection thus becomes a reflection of the collector's creative ambitions, “a materialization of a heterogeneous self that allows a unified expression in the form of a signature.”⁸ Rachel Campbell-Johnston agrees, stating that private collections are, “pursued with the same sort of passion and energy, courage and dedication, discernment and sensitivity that the artists themselves put into their works.”⁹ The collection, a “project of self” to borrow a term from Smart, then becomes an eternal gift to society when transformed into a public museum and, more than just vanity, the collector pursues immortality through his or her artistic creation. Vanity is even less applicable when considering what motivates a collector, such as Frank Rubin or Solomon Guggenheim, to found an evolving museum where their collection merely serves as a starting point. Adrian Ellis, columnist for *The Art Newspaper*, elaborates by claiming that museums such as the RMA are, “not vanity museums. They are permanent, vital additions to the cultural fabric of the city, with a full range of curatorial, conservational, public and scholarly programmes.”¹⁰ This acknowledges that the collector has created something that will adapt to best serve the community, not just speak to his grandeur. This is not to say that personal-memorial museums are not “permanent” or “vital” institutions, for often that is what they become, but the original motivation behind museum-making is quite different in the two scenarios. In both cases however, vanity alone is rarely enough to sustain a museum indefinitely, as will be demonstrated in later sections.

Current director of The Kreeger Museum, Judy Greenberg, gives three reasons why she

8 Smart 2006, 26-27.

9 Campbell-Johnson 2007.

10 Ellis 2008.

believes collectors create their own museums. First, collectors grow emotionally attached to their collection and see the art as their children. Giving the collection away is not an option they are comfortable with and so they devote their time and finances to providing their collection with the best future possible. This sentiment was echoed by psychologist Hilary Rubenstein during an *Art Talk* at the Frieze Art Fair. Rubenstein said that collectors use their collections to, “act out their parental feelings... they care for the works... the works become like people and really take their place in an emotional sense.”¹¹ Secondly, collectors feel a sense of personal pride and importance in relation to their collection. This is closely related to the vanity concept discussed above, but acknowledges the power of the collection to legitimize the collector and offer a sense of accomplishment. Third, collectors desire to keep their identities and maintain control of their collections after they die. In the context of this study, this explanation applies more directly to the permanent-memorial museum than to an evolving institution, though both, especially when named after the founder, support this theory. By creating a museum devoted to their personal belongings a collector hopes to live on past his worldly life. Furthermore, by dictating the terms of its organization, management and expansion, a collector can effectively assert a level of control over the collection after he dies. Far from exhaustive, this list is meant merely to impress upon the reader the value of collections to their creators and to show that they are more than the result of indiscriminate, obsessive behavior as they are often characterized in popular literature.

11 Frieze Foundation 2004.

OPTIONS

It is only natural that serious collectors who devote such care to cultivating their collections become permanently attached to them. As they actively make decisions and choices that shape their collections, they continually assess how best to care for and preserve the results of their efforts. Eventually, and for many the question comes relatively early, they are faced with what to do with their collection when they are no longer able to maintain it. Some collectors decide betimes to either transition their collections into museums, continuing to play a key role in their development, or donate them so that they can enjoy them displayed at other institutions. However, even if the decision is not made until their death, great collectors, as demonstrated above, care deeply for their collections and are interested in ensuring them a sound future.

In general, collectors have three options for the eventual disposal of their collection, donation to an established institution, sale, or creation of a new museum. Leaving a collection for descendants merely prolongs the process, but the final options remain the same. For the great collector, selling a collection is likely a last resort as this would mean dismantling a lifetime of work. "Many people see their collection as a self-portrait," says Michael Auping, chief curator at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, "giving it away piecemeal is like ripping up that portrait."¹² Furthermore, most collectors facing this decision acquired art as a passion, not an investment, so they are not motivated by financial return. Thus, the only two seemingly-logical options are either to donate to an institution or make a new museum. Don Fisher, founder of Gap and wealthy art collector, commented on the decision-making process:

¹² Berman 2004, 151.

“I’m concerned about what happens to this collection. I don’t want to turn around and sell it, and I don’t want it to be sold when I pass away. I’d like it to be seen.”¹³ Fisher, who intended to create a museum, encapsulates the sentiments of many collectors. Peter Brant, owner of one of the world’s largest collections of American art, made the decision to share his collection with the public early, but hopes for a grander museum in the future. In an interview with *The Art Newspaper* he said, “if I could afford to, I would like to have the collection put away in the [Brant] Foundation in perpetuity... Many times when you give works to museums they’re not put on display. I would very much like the [...] works [to] be shown to the public.”¹⁴ Brant and Fisher touch on two of the most important things collectors consider when contemplating the future of their collections: public access and personal cost.

Apart from the psychological motivations discussed earlier, the decision to build a new museum is often prompted by the desire to keep artworks exposed and available to the public. Artworks donated to museums rarely experience much wall-time and many collectors dread having their objects packed away in storage. With expansive collections already housed at many major museums, a collector cannot expect donated works to be constantly exhibited and museums rarely allow for any such stipulations in a deed of gift. Except for extraordinary collections, museums usually have the upper hand when imposing donation terms, often leaving donors frustrated. Susan Frunzi, a Manhattan lawyer specializing in trusts and estates, explains that when it comes to negotiating the conditions of a donation, “the power has swung to the museums.”¹⁵ For many collector-donors, this conflicts with their personal mission.

13 Vera 2007.

14 Kaufman 2009.

15 Fabrikant 2007.

Collectors must also consider the extent to which they can provide financially for the preservation of their collections. A private museum is not only expensive to build, but requires a large endowment to preserve it for the future. However, many museums too, expect an endowment for the care of donated items, and, since the tax benefits of creating a new museum may be significantly greater than donation, the decision is further complicated.¹⁶ Ultimately, many collectors considering either donation or museum-making feel a responsibility towards their art and want it cared for and preserved.

If a collector can afford to establish a new museum, he should also consider the sustainability of the endeavor in the chosen community. A city with several contemporary art museums may receive little benefit from another similar institution and could put unnecessary strain on local resources. This is often the case with historic house museums and professionals have warned about the dangers of their proliferation for over a decade.¹⁷ Barbara Silberman, a specialist in historic sites, expressed at a national conference of the American Association for State and Local History in 1999, the belief that, “there are too many historic house museums,” which local communities simply cannot support.¹⁸ New museums should fulfill a specific need or at least complement existing institutions, not reproduce already extant collections or experiences. Even though each private collection is different, a collector must consider the community and other leisure activities that could compete with a new museum. If a new institution does not benefit the larger community, alternatives should be considered. Eli Broad, founder of the Broad Contemporary Art Museum, supports museum making when done right,

16 Fabrikant 2007.

17 Dubberly 2001, 35.

18 Barrientos 2008.

financially speaking. He is of the opinion that, “these museums will survive if they are fiscally sound with a strong endowment,” though there is no comment on the needs of the public.¹⁹ Money can certainly go a long way, but eventually a private-collection museum without local support will become a burden to its trustees and the community.

A final consideration for the museum-minded collector is the shape that their museum will take – do they intend to build a permanent memorial or an evolving institution? This too, is likely decided early in the collecting process as it helps define the collection's scope. Any collection could potentially survive as either, but collectors should assess the unique benefits and setbacks of each model. A permanent memorial will serve the purpose of immortalizing the founder while allowing the public to experience art as the collector intended. Such an immersion into the psyche of a collector can captivate visitors and allows for a deeper understanding of collecting practices and personal aesthetics. AAMD president Michael Conforti issued a statement in January 2010 in which he said: “The taste and vision of private individuals in assembling collections of works of art is fascinating to audiences.”²⁰ Both Hillwood and The Kreeger Museum can attest to this fact as they continue to succeed at attracting audiences interested in experiencing art through the eyes of another. On the other hand, an evolving museum can use a private collection to build something greater with a broader scope that offers more opportunities for education and cross-cultural understanding. Martin Brauen, chief curator at the Rubin Museum of Art, says, “It cannot be the future of the museum to concentrate only on Tibetan and Himalayan art, or only on our own collection.”²¹

19 Fabrikant 2007.

20 AAMD 2010.

21 Taylor 2008.

Unlike the other museums examined in this study, the RMA is a collecting institution that continually assesses the needs of the public with relation to its programing and exhibitions. Over time, if it is successful, the RMA will become much like the Guggenheim, continuing to collect and creating exhibitions long after the founders are gone. While evolving museums are often better equipped to address future needs of the public, all museums should be created with the public in mind. A vanity museum, in the strictest sense, will likely lose its appeal and support within a few generations of its creation and the collector will have failed in his search for immortality.

For those collectors who chose to embark on museum-making, their responsibilities are not limited to ensuring sustainability. Individuals interested in creating museums are accountable for all decisions related to their collection and should abide not only by legal codes, but preferably by the higher ethical standards expected of all public institutions. Further, since collectors can rarely anticipate the specific managerial and organizational challenges related to running a museum, they should seek outside help from professional museum staff, subject-matter experts, and legal advisers. Some collectors hire curators or registrars to help develop and document their collections, as did Marjorie Merriweather Post. This approach can help a collector fill gaps and allows them to explore new ways of presenting and understanding their own collection. The presence of a museum professional will often ease the transition between collecting for personal pleasure and operating a public museum. Fred Fisher and Judy Greenberg both said that their museums' founding collectors kept meticulous notes pertaining to their collections, which greatly helped future staff understand and more accurately interpret the collections to visitors. Professional staff are also helpful as they can point the collector's

attention to specific needs of their collection related to storage, exhibitions, loans, and conservation, which will impact their future museum decisions. Often, a collector will try to preserve their personal collecting style in perpetuity, so if they develop a sophisticated approach during their lifetime, they will likely create more professional guidelines for managing the collection after they are gone. Inevitably, the decision to create a museum will shape the collection and influence how the collector approaches new acquisitions, documentation, organization, and the conceptualization of their final vision.

MANAGING PRIVATE-COLLECTION MUSEUMS: CHALLENGES

Regardless of the type, managing any institution is a complicated and multifaceted operation. Many of the skills that characterize a successful business or nonprofit leader also apply to those directors who, like as Fred Fisher and Judy Greenberg, oversee the now-public museums housing once-private collections. However, besides the general skills required to run any museum, there are further considerations for managing one based on a single-donor's collection and mission. In addition to personal managerial style and professional objectives, the director of a private museum must consider the creator's wishes when making decisions impacting the collection and the future of the museum.

Aligning professional goals and the founder's wishes is less of a conscious concern when the transition happens during a collector's lifetime. In this case, the collector must consider what role he will play in the development of the institution. For many, assuming the role of director is only natural. At the Rubin Museum of Art, founder Donald Rubin has always retained some control, but has experimented with different management structures. Currently, according to

the museum's webpage, he serves as CEO and Co-Chair, together with his wife, of the Board of Trustees. The couple thus continues to exert significant influence over the collection and the future of the museum. Rubin acknowledges, however, that his position is not eternal and says, "when my time [here] is up, there will be somebody with a different personality, a different organizational structure, and a different corporate culture."²² According to Fred Fisher, founders can be involved in their museums, but should "recognize when its time to bow out." And once they do, they need to keep their ego in check and realize the collection is no longer their private domain.

After the original collector-founder, many private-collection museums enter a period of professionalization and standardization under their first professional director. Good leadership is crucial during this phase to ensure the future success of the institution. The new director is faced with reconciling professional standards and personal goals with those of the founder. Consequently, the underlying principle impacting every aspect of managing the museum is continuing the founder's vision. This can be difficult if the collector left too little, or too much, guidance for the future. Judy Greenberg commented that very little was written related to how the Kreegers intended their museum to function. Thus, she explained, she makes decisions based on her understanding of how the Kreegers lived and interacted with their art. As an example she offered the chamber festival held annually at the museum. She said that it is important for the museum to offer string quartet concerts, because that is the what the Kreegers listened to in their home and she is interested in continuing their vision. She added that she tries to organize events and programming that "the Kreegers would have liked." Fred Fisher

²² Taylor 2008.

too, keeps Mrs. Post's vision in mind when making decisions related to the administration of Hillwood; however, he has more guidance thanks to the “ ten-page document [she left] on how she thought things should be done.” While the document is not legally binding, it influences how the staff views and interprets the collection, and helps keep them focused on the original mission. Furthermore, the Boards of both museums are controlled by family members. The Kreeger Museum Board consists of only three members – five is the maximum the Kreegers allowed – all of whom are family members. The Hillwood Board is larger with the founder's granddaughter serving as president and other relatives having an important voice as well. In the case of private-collection museums, such Boards can be beneficial as they help maintain the family tradition and preserve the founding-collector's voice.

To contrast with the opposite extreme, one need look no further than the current situation at the Barnes Foundation, the cultural institution established in 1922 by Albert C. Barnes in Lower Merion, Pennsylvania. Barnes transitioned his personal collection of art, currently worth around \$25 billion, into an educational foundation and semi-public museum whose activities are limited by strict legal guidelines.²³ Barnes had a specific approach to his collection and controlled who had access to it, how it was displayed, and stressed its educational function – an approach he hoped could be eternally sustained. Following his death, the activities of the Foundation were overseen by Barnes's close confidante Violette de Mazia. Together with four other trustees, each personally selected by Barnes, de Mazia strove to continue Barnes's founding mission. Following her death, power legally transferred to Lincoln University and Barnes's voice slowly faded. Now, more than eighty years later, his will is being

23 Argot 2009.

broken, his wishes disregarded and his collection is moving to a new home in Philadelphia.²⁴ Whether or not this solution is best for the art or the public is the subject of serious debate, but the fact that the collector's vision is being neglected cannot be contested. Barnes deliberately situated his collection outside of Philadelphia, away from the people who ridiculed his taste in art. He established a foundation and left money for its continuation and hoped a well-written legal document would seal its fate. What did he do wrong? When asked, neither Fred Fisher nor Judy Greenberg had a straight answer, though both had opinions on the handling of the case. As a director of a similar institution, Fisher acknowledged the challenges of perpetuating a collector's vision, but focused more on the differences between the two institutions and founding collectors. His main concern related to a collector's flexibility when envisioning a future museum. "You can't set something in amber," he said, appropriate for the caretaker of the largest Russian imperial art collection outside of Russia. "[A collector] should create a legal document, but keep in mind that times will change." Greenberg went further, supporting the move and saying that Barnes's collection should be re-interpreted by curators and re-arranged so it can be viewed better. This is reflective of her experience managing a collection restricted by few written guidelines that has entitled her to substantial artistic and managerial freedom. It would seem that to accomplish what he wanted, Barnes did everything right. But his vision, now supported only by concerned citizens, conflicts with too many louder voices and the interests of politicians. One could argue that his personal-memorial foundation no longer serves the public, or enough of the public, and so it has failed. While he left a sizable endowment, which according to Eli Broad should be enough to sustain a private museum, money can only

²⁴ Barnes Foundation (n.d.).

go so far. Without enthusiasm from a vested Board, support of the public, and enough flexibility, a private-collection museum cannot survive intact. The purpose of looking at the Barnes Foundation in greater detail is to draw attention to how it differs from many other private-collection museums. Albert Barnes was pursuing too many self-serving agendas and created a public institution fueled by spite, perhaps an even worse motivation than vanity.

At its core, a museum must serve the public.²⁵ Thus a museum maker must consider the needs of the community and anticipate that those needs will change over time. By drafting flexible guidelines, a collector can better prepare his museum for the future. No one can predict exactly what the future holds, but, according to Fred Fisher, there's no need to. A museum-making collector should empower future professionals to care for his collection and continue his vision by avoiding legal barriers that hinder efficient operation. By being forward-thinking and creating guidelines that offer suggestions, not oppressive restrictions, a collector will serve the best interest of his collection, the public, and his name.

MANAGING PRIVATE-COLLECTION MUSEUMS: OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the challenges related to managing private-collection museums, they present a number of unique opportunities and offer the public a unique way of experiencing art. By design, these museums are different from large institutions and encourage a different approach to viewing art and its environment. Directors and visitors alike speak to the intimate experience afforded by this class of cultural institutions. Private-collection museums allow the public to see how someone lived with art and how their collection was a reflection of their identity. Often, the

²⁵ Ambrose 2006,16.

home and grounds are also incorporated into the experience and the staff help visitors to view the museum as a liveable space, not just a series of walls supporting artworks. The private-collection museum offers an immersive and personal experience largely unattainable at major institutions. Furthermore, the collection as a whole can be studied as a social and cultural phenomenon. Building on the discussion introducing the collector as artist, the position of artworks and their arrangement is art in itself and elevates the collection to more than the sum of its individual parts. Both of these concepts are reinforced by their centrality to the debate surrounding the Barnes Collection. On its website, the Barnes Foundation claims that, “maintaining the intimate character of the original, distinctive layout has been the foremost priority for Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects.”²⁶ *The New York Times*, in its architectural review of the building, agrees that, “The architects have tried to... [lay] out these spaces in an elaborate architectural procession that is clearly intended to replicate the serenity, if not the eccentric charm, of the old museum.” However, it continues, “every detail seems to ache from the strain of trying to preserve the spirit of the original building in a very different context. The failure to do so, despite such an earnest effort, is the strongest argument yet for why the Barnes should not be moved in the first place.”²⁷ “The building and site design are an integral part of the collection, and vice versa. Separating them vastly diminishes the value and purpose of both,” adds renowned American architect Robert Venturi.²⁸ Based on such criticisms, it is clear that a private collection is more than individual works of art, and removing them from their environment effaces the intimate experience a collector was trying to create. Offering the public

26 Barnes Foundation (n.d.).

27 Ouroussoff 2009.

28 Knight 2009.

access to a personal and fresh interpretation of art can create a healthy dialog to complement the formal, curator-organized exhibitions in “traditional” museums. Furthermore, directors of these museums themselves feel a personal attachment to their institutions and make an effort to maintain the unique experience. Judy Greenberg takes pride and pleasure in managing a personal museum saying, “I know everything that's going on and I like it.” Her personal involvement in various aspects of running the museum make for a more “mom-and-pop” museum experience that visitors and staff alike can appreciate.

In addition to the intimate experience offered by single-donor museums, there are other benefits as well. Among them are the ability to focus on special programming and the dedicated pursuit of a specific mission. Speaking to the first point, Greenberg explained how The Kreeger Museum is able to offer art-immersion programs to special-needs groups, including students with learning disabilities and Alzheimer's patients, which are harder to organize in larger museums. When such programs are scheduled, the museum is closed to the public and all attention is focused on creating an environment in which these groups can personally interact with the art and the space. Greenberg believes the museum is a great place to offer such opportunities and they allow the collection to impact a greater audience. Private-collection museums can also help fill gaps not addressed by institutions already in existence, as is the case with the RMA, which currently focuses exclusively on Himalayan art. The Rubins considered donating part of their collection, but found that no institution was prepared to showcase their collection in the context of its origin.²⁹ Thus the Rubins decided to create their own museum and develop a mission around the unique cultural origins of their collection. The museum's current

²⁹ Fabrikant 2007.

mission is: *to establish, present, preserve, and document a permanent collection that reflects the vitality, complexity, and historical significance of Himalayan art and to create exhibitions and programs designed to explore connections with other world cultures.*³⁰

Private-collection museums can also become accredited by the American Association of Museums (AAM), giving them further exposure and continuing their founders' missions. Additionally, there is room for expansion and growth when appropriate and consistent with the original collector's guidelines. This is certainly true for evolving institutions, but also applies to a number of personal-memorial museums. Unless precluded by the founder, a private-collection museum can often add additional items to the collections that support and further the founding vision. Hillwood Museum has acquired numerous pieces since Mrs. Post's death, however each accession is considered carefully and must be of the style and period collected by Post. Fisher's previous experience, however, allowed him even more flexibility at a single-donor museum where he added a new wing to the existing museum. To maintain the original structure and vision intact, the museum built a separate building that was connected to the main structure by a glass walkway. In this way, Fisher felt that he was both preserving the original museum, while developing the collection to serve the needs of the public and honor the founder. Indeed, Fisher stressed the importance of a single-collection-museum director to engage in a balancing act of both continuing the original vision while, at the same time, modernizing it.

REACHING WIDER AUDIENCES & KEEPING THE MUSEUM CURRENT

One of the most demanding aspects of managing a museum based on a single person's

³⁰ Rubin Museum webpage.

vision is how to keep it current and reach new audiences. While these museums are founded by individuals, they become integral elements of the community and must strive to remain relevant outside of the family, friends and supporters of the original collector. Hillwood Museum is an exceptional example of a museum that succeeds at these goals. Director Fred Fisher explained that the goal of any museum should be to not only satisfy its existing followers, but to attract new audiences and seek out opportunities for growth. When the museum was closed for renovations from 1997-2000, Fisher and his staff realized the need to appeal to a wider audience and identified the local gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community as a good fit for the museum.³¹ A GLBT advisory committee was established and annual events at Hillwood were developed to focused on GLBT outreach and community involvement. According to Fisher the initiative has been a great success. With regard to how such outreach fits into the founder's mission, the museum's website refers to Mrs. Post's hospitality and gracious manner in which she welcomed all visitors into her home.³² Every community is welcome at Hillwood and it is the director's task to invite as many groups as possible. Fisher also believes in the power of objects to tell a story that can always be modernized. He explained that his focus as director was to use objects to paint a picture of Mrs. Post as a collector, admitting that this was only one element of her personality. He hopes that future directors will interpret the objects differently to show her other sides – businesswoman, mother, wife, etc. – and help people understand the collection as a reflection of a complex woman. With respect to Hillwood and all private-collection museums, Fisher believes it is important, “to include the collector as part of the interpretation... [and] for visitors to

31 Hillwood, *Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual...* (n.d.)

32 Ibid.

understand the collector." Over time, every private collection should be re-interpreted so that it remains meaningful to each successive generation. In terms of keeping the museum modern, Fisher believes his successor will take further steps in this direction by developing new programs and introducing the institution to social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. Fisher explained that museums needs to embrace new initiatives not anticipated by their founders. It is important for the collection to be appreciated by the local community and for the museum to continually evolve to adhere to accepted professional standards.

The Kreeger Museum also engages in community outreach and has developed partnerships with a number of local organizations. The museum works with local painters and sculptors and offers activities where visitors can experience the collection as interpreted by a living artist. Since the Kreegers were avid supporters of practicing artists, Greenberg considers it important for the museum to engage in similar partnerships and encourages visitors to see art as a process, not just a product. The museum also sponsors an Artist Award highlighting local artistic talent, because Greenberg feels, "the Kreegers would have liked it." The museum also offers programs for children such as Storytime, where children are exposed to art early by hearing stories somehow related to works of art on display. However, The Kreeger Museum has not been as successful at growing its audience, something Greenberg has been constantly pursuing, adding, "we need to remind the public what we have to offer, why we're relevant." While clearly possible, identifying opportunities for growth can be a challenge when restricted by an individual's concept for the institution. Both directors stressed the importance of keeping the founder's mission in mind when developing new programs and expanding the scope of activities at their museums. While it's necessary that museums operate within the guidelines

drafted by the founders, they shouldn't use them as an excuse to limit development.

In contrast to the successes of Hillwood and The Kreeger Museum, another private-collection museum recently closed its doors, despite its \$220 million endowment and a relatively sizable collection of American art collected by founding millionaire Daniel Terra. The Terra Museum, which opened in Chicago in 1987 and closed in 2004, never succeeded at fulfilling the founder's mission or gaining local support. Reactions were mixed at the closing of the institution, but blame was cast primarily on the public. Chairman of the Terra Foundation emphasized the lack of public interest in the collection, claiming, "what Dan chose to collect was in a field that didn't particularly resonate with people."³³ Edward Lifson, host of a *Chicago Public Radio* arts series lamented: "If Chicago can't support a museum for American art, that's embarrassing. What are we saying about ourselves?"³⁴ In the context of this study however, blame should shift rather to the director and trustees, who failed at making the collection relevant. With a large endowment and a fine collection located in the heart of a major city, surely there were additional efforts the Foundation could have initiated to strengthen the museum's role within the community. What the founder may have overlooked in planning should have been identified by the professional staff and steps should have been taken to modernize the collection and engage the local community. Despite restrictions and obstacles related to managing single-donor museums, there exist plenty of opportunities for growth, as evidenced by the two Washington D.C. examples.

33 Bernstein 2004.

34 Ibid.

THE FUTURE

The future looks bright for private collectors both interested in creating new museums and having their work exhibited in other institutions. While there has always been a strong relationship between private collectors and museums, the growing interest in seeing private collections has resulted in new forms of collaboration giving a new voice to collectors. Traditional museums are now looking to incorporate the vision of private individuals into their public programs. The New Museum in New York City recently began a exhibition series devoted to private collectors and their collections titled “The Imaginary Museum”. The first exhibit, presenting the collection of contemporary art collector Dakis Joannou, opened in March of this year and has been the source of significant controversy. The exhibit features artworks by fifty artists from Joannou's collection and is curated by artist Jeff Koons, whose work is also featured in the exhibition. *The Art Newspaper* columnist Tyler Green says:

These shows are unethical, improper and raise questions about the museums' adherence to guidelines the US government lays down for non-profit institutions... There are two main problems with these exhibitions. First, and most importantly, they diminish the role of curators as independent scholars, historians and discerning, informed selectors in favour of the consumerist whims of the richest guy in the room... Second, these shows violate the spirit—and possibly the letter—of museums' tax exemptions. The US Internal Revenue Code mandates that tax-exempt organizations must not operate for the benefit of private interests.³⁵

Arguments against both of these claims have been presented throughout this study. More than serving a private need, such exhibits also operate for the benefit of the public, which is increasingly interested in experiencing art through collectors' eyes. Since private-collection museums are fixed in a given location and cannot be moved, exhibiting a private collection in a

35 Green, Nov. 2009.

museum is much like showing Egyptian artifacts without moving the pyramids. Furthermore, Green's main argument seems to be that such exhibitions threaten the traditional role of the museum curator. On the contrary, they simply present a different view. These exhibits are not presented as scholarly interpretations of art, but rather as uniquely private visions of it. Lisa Phillips, director the the New Museum, explains: "The culture of museums is undergoing a sea of change, and the long tradition of public-private partnerships is evolving... It is clear that new models of collaboration must be explored and tested, and we all need to approach that process with an open mind, recognizing that conventional wisdom will be challenged."³⁶

As the public becomes more interested in the private aspect of art – consistent with America's fascination with celebrities, candid photography, and voyeurism – museums will surely try to find new ways of capitalizing on the trend. There are certainly unethical ways of going about exhibiting such collections, but hopefully the New Museum and others will make the difference between exhibition and scholarship clear. One way to approach such exhibits is to contextualize the collector as an artist and creator of something worth understanding. In this way there is both educational and entertainment value in such exhibits and they will not "violate the spirit" of museum professionalism. In response to why the New Museum developed the series, Phillips answered: "because we're an educational institution and we're here to share new art and new ideas. That's our mission. We're here to share that with the public and to be open and to be fearless in our approach. So we feel it's very relevant."³⁷ As the privately-curated exhibition is a relatively new model – museums have previously displayed professionally-curated private collections as a perk associated with donation – there will surely

36 Douglas 2010.

37 Green, Oct. 2009.

be more debate in the months and years to come. However, the public's fascination with the personal interpretation of art by private collectors is likely to persist.

Speaking more directly to the future of private-collection museums, there is, as has always been, room for growth. As new art forms are discovered and recognized, new evolving museums will be created to showcase them. And as long as there is personal wealth, there will be those who wish to leave their mark on society by creating personal memorials. The question of sustainability will surely have an impact on the museum landscape as a whole, though there is little reason to believe that single-donor museums will suffer disproportionately. The second Gilded Age which we are experiencing will see the creation of more museums in coming decades. And as museum standards impact collectors more directly, we will see more collectors seeking the advice of professionals in the field, resulting in collections better prepared to long outlast their creators. These intimate museums will continue to play a formative role in the public's understanding of art, its interpretation, function, and patrons, while challenging their directors to seek out new opportunities to engage wider audiences.

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