



## The Association of Art Museum Curators

### **A Statement by the Association of Art Museum Curators**

The situation unfolding at the Brooklyn Museum is of great concern to curators at museums across the country. It raises issues that are central to the health of art museums in North America, and in fact, throughout the world.

The Brooklyn Museum proposes to eliminate its existing curatorial departments and create two overlapping teams from the remaining curatorial staff. Reducing the core activity of the museum's fewer than twenty curators to two administrative functions—one responsible for collections management, the other for organizing exhibitions—undermines the traditional vocation of the curator-as-scholar whose commitment to a particular collection renders him or her uniquely qualified to make recommendations regarding its care and interpretation. For more than a decade the Brooklyn Museum has been functioning with a barely adequate number of curators to manage its extraordinary collections, renowned throughout the world. Without recognized expertise for each major area of art—of particular urgency in encyclopedic collections—the museum cannot fulfill its primary mandate: the preservation of works of art and the responsible presentation of them to the public for whose enjoyment and appreciation they have been brought together. It goes without saying that collectors and donors are unlikely to continue giving works of art to an institution that lacks adequate staff to maintain and study its collections.

Curators have primary responsibility for the conservation, display, understanding, and interpretation of works of art placed in their care. They collaborate with many other museum professionals—conservators, registrars, and educators, for example—but curators are the experts who have fundamental responsibility for the collections. They

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have typically undergone lengthy training, in academic programs and through years of on-the-job experience. Curators have the expert knowledge needed to develop displays of the permanent collection, to research and publish that collection, and to organize temporary exhibitions based on scholarship and inspiration.

In many ways, curators are like faculty members of a university, recruited for their expertise, accomplishment, and passion for a particular field of knowledge, or like doctors in a hospital, each of whom has a special task to perform. In big institutions, professionals may be able to specialize on a narrow field of interest; in institutions of any size with fewer staff members, professionals may be called upon to act as generalists, with responsibility for several areas. Still, it is impractical for a biologist to teach poetry, or for a cardiologist to become a brain surgeon. In the same way, curators' specialized training enables them to act as custodians of a specific kind of collection. It is their expertise, furthermore, that gives intellectual authority to their institutions: visitors can believe what they learn while visiting a museum because acknowledged experts have prepared the material that they see.

Administrators in Brooklyn surely know that other museums, such as the Guggenheim in New York and Britain's Tate, adopted equivalent organizational strategies in the past decade and are gradually abandoning them as unwieldy, expensive, and misconceived. These museums realized that the curators responsible for their collections were a great intellectual resource and the bridge to community support. No doubt the Brooklyn Museum is facing financial difficulties. As at Philadelphia's Barnes Foundation, creative solutions must be found. But the long-term viability of the museum will rest on the foundation of its superb, world-famous, collections. Knowledgeable curators are needed to preserve and interpret them. To think otherwise is penny wise and pound foolish.

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