

IMPOSSIBLE JOB: THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE MUSEUM DIRECTOR

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If the next six years resemble the last, you may (as the Harvard Law School legend goes) look to your left, then look to your right and know, statistically speaking, that one of you will not be directing your current museum. In fact, the news is a bit worse.

When I was asked to assemble this panel more than a year ago, I retrieved an old AAMD membership list from my first meeting – Hawaii, January 2002. More than one third (35%; 40% including announced resignations) of our membership then no longer directs an AAMD museum today. An additional 15% now directs a different AAMD museum. In other words, half of our member institutions have changed leadership.

Most of us saw the July 29, 2007, *New York Times* article – the one with the picture of the empty chairs – *Impossible Job: Here's What You Need For It*. It brought to public and trustee attention the plight some 24 AAMD museums then in mid-search, casting a sense, however false, that the demands of the position had outstripped the talent pool.

But even before this, the topic had been percolating: turnover is high; vacant directorships remain open for painfully long periods; there exists wide-spread perception that the job has gotten too difficult, or that the seemingly competing interests of a museum's financial stability and its cultural mission are somehow in competition; that the pendulum of a director's responsibilities has swung so far to the business end that shaping collections and driving exhibition schedules seems now to occupy left-over time, not the heart of the job. Bad stories have not helped: renegade board members can create conflict from above; disruptive staff members foment disruption from below; and the arts media seems on the lookout for the next cultural train wreck.

Is there a crisis? Probably not: half of our member organizations enjoy stable management; collecting continues in the face of rising market values; exhibitions circulate despite onerous insurance premiums; and educational and cultural programming seems as vibrant as ever – maybe even more so.

Yet we read interviews of one of our own most tenured figures that state, “Were I offered the job again I’m not sure I would take it” (“A Conversation with Philippe de Montebello,” *New Criterion*, Sept. 2006).

Burnout is a problem, but it has been for a long time. Fund-raising pressures us without pause, but can anyone remember a time when raising funds was not important?

Has the job really changed? By how much? What knowledge and credentials do boards really seek? Are they aligned with the skills truly needed to succeed? Are there other skills – possibly new abilities not needed some years ago – that can now mark the difference between future success and failure?

There is something inherently foolhardy about attempting to forecast for the accomplished members of this organization the future of their own profession, so I will limit my observations to only three: 1) time, 2) the maturing of our industry, and 3) professional training.

First: Time, As We Know It, Will Change

Around the time I was asked to assemble this panel, *Museum News* published an article authored by Charles Faulkner Bryan, Jr., “Stages in the Life of a Museum Director.” It posited three phases in a director’s career:

- 1) “The Learning Stage” (1-3 years), a honeymoon period of listening and preparing for action;
- 2) “The Shaping Stage” (4-10 years), a period of transformation, new construction, major funding campaigns, and the like; and
- 3) “The Golden Years,” control that seems to occur following a decade of good work.

I have never met Mr. Bryan, nor do I doubt that his service has shined bright amidst the firmament of museum leaders. But however true the sequence of his stages, his timeline harkens back to a past now swept away by the demands of change. There may be a few institutions where a new director can test the waters for 3 years without taking an actionable stand, but I submit there are not many. Ten years to make an impact – that time has been cut in half.

Time imposes upon us today pressures that differ from decades ago. Information comes to us faster, and in greater volume, than ever before. Instant Internet communications assault our many electronic devices, especially those we carry wherever we go. Expectations rise as trustees and our publics learn about the most popular exhibitions and programs of other museums, and demand them at our own. Time, we will increasingly find, will pressure us and, in all likelihood, cause us to change how we lead.

But time offers a two-sided coin: on one face we have pressure to perform more, faster, and better than ever before; while on the verso there exist techniques that can powerfully leverage our assets on hand.

Management schools used to teach that there exist only three means of competition: price, quality, or differentiation. You either compete by making your products or services 1) the cheapest (commodities such as wheat, coal, or sugar), 2) the best (fine wine, designer apparel, etc. – where high cost actually signals quality) or 3) one-of-a-kind (patent protected pharmaceuticals come to mind).

This “three-legged stool of competition” held sturdy for decades until a fourth dimension emerged: time. U.S. carmakers learned this during the Gas Crisis of the 1970s when Asian auto firms routed Detroit by quickly positioning fuel-efficient economy cars in the U.S. Since then, American management schools have taught that speed to market and rapid adaptability can offer a competitive advantage as real as low price, high quality, or uniqueness.

The fundamental technique is called “time compression” – decreasing the period required between the start and completion of a project, or process, or decision. This is not about more resources, money, or people, but about changing how business is done, empowering small teams, streamlining, cutting out needless approvals, and learning to

embrace change. The core values are speed and flexibility – not, I would conjecture, the traditional values of the art museum.

Nevertheless, I know of one museum that cut in half the time it takes to hire a curator. Another museum lost a blockbuster show for being 15 minutes late to respond to an offer. Cutting standard meeting times at one institution saved the equivalent of two full-time positions. Donor thank-you notes go out within 24 hours of all gifts and memberships. And there are plenty more examples – possibly at many of your museums.

Becoming faster also implies a flattening of the knowledge-based hierarchy, as complex projects require small-group task-forces that value teamwork even over individual expertise. The good news: agile organizations can adapt quickly and become astoundingly efficient, especially smaller institutions, where legacy systems and departmental turf is far less established, and change can happen quickly.

We are, at the end of the day, measured by our accomplishments: exhibitions, programs, collection development, publications, new facilities, and behind-the-scenes, the shaping of a professional culture that leads our boards and staff to work together toward common, worthy goals. How quickly we can deliver results affects how many accomplishments we may pursue. Successful directors of our future will, I would venture, know how to manage time in ways more effectively than we were ever taught.

Next, Consider the Evolution of our “Industry”

As there are stages in the lives of directors, there are stages in the lives of enterprises, as business strategy courses ably describe: start-ups, growth companies, and mature industries.

Some of us direct new museums, often collector-based. Others manage relatively young museums that are still forming their core collections. But for many, we are pursuing the activities of a classic growth company: new facilities, expanded programming, greater community outreach, and of course, popular exhibitions to boost attendance. And what are measures of success for such growth? Square feet, size of budget, acquisitions, attendance, and the like.

But there comes a point when doubling again becomes too much, or when crowds diminish the gallery experience, or when the classic measures of growth – size, budget,

attendance – can only be marginally grown, possibly even at the expense of quality. The professors in business school call this a “mature industry,” otherwise known as a “cash cow,” valued for spinning off quarterly dividends to shareholders – the stuff of so-called “widow and orphan” stocks.

So what are our dividends?

- The quality of the art we show;
- The fulfilling nature of how we interpret art, be it through visual labels, tours, audio guides, gallery inter-actives, publications, Internet activity, and the like...;
- The richness of our cultural programming;
- The depth of the learning experiences we offer; and
- The transformative experience of a meaningful engagement with art.

As our industry transitions from growth to maturity, our measures shift from volume to quality, from girth of budget to richness of experience, and from facility size to aesthetic wonder. And I think, and hope, this may lead us to rediscover the many values of our own permanent collections.

The discourses we have been hearing at AAMD and elsewhere about measures of success in museums are really, I would venture, part of this larger paradigm shift in the life of our museums from growth to maturity. The leaders of the future will simply have to position themselves accordingly, because the measures of their success cannot be the same as ours.

Now, Let Us Consider Our Credentials

Just scan the program agendas of AAM or AAMD and observe what issues concern us: international property law, the ethics of collecting, museum design and construction, the movement to go “Green,” copyright, form 990s, and we could all go on....

Healthily refreshed from national conferences we return to our offices to rededicate ourselves to visitor services, IT investment, brand-building, retail sales, restaurant service, and to occupy our evenings and weekends, of course, fundraising.

Seen any of these topics in the course catalogue of your university's art history program?

We can lament that the board-room seems to value sound business management more than aesthetic acumen, but we cannot change that soon. So how can a Ph.D. and curatorial prowess possibly remain the ticket to a director's corner office?

Let us think of this another way: how can we dedicate 2, 4, 6, 8 or more years at a graduate department learning the history of art, and spend but 1, 2, or 3 weeks at a seminar learning how to manage?

You can ask, in fairness, who can afford the time for courses, training, or supplemental degrees? But a better question might be, who cannot? Whether J.D. and M.B.A. will become prerequisites for future directors, I do not know, and hope they do not. But it is becoming increasingly obvious that early and mid-career training will become evermore needed for advancement, and the necessary preparation for success. Museums will be pressured – rightly so – to invest far more in their own people, widening the paths of internal advancement as younger generations, far less loyal to any status quo, will otherwise leave for advancement elsewhere.

Let me offer a simple observation: the people in this room today have more power to mold the next generation of leaders than all the arts management administrators and their programs combined. And if we consider ourselves educational institutions for the general public, why shouldn't our professional staffs enjoy the fruits of learning themselves? Here are some suggestions:

- Increase investment in staff training, even if that means delaying the next new hire;
- Exchange promising employees with other institutions – if only for a week or two;
- Hire from within, cross-departmentally if possible, which means hiring promising, smart, hard-working employees even when outsiders come with lengthier resumes and glitzier credentials;
- Mentor rising stars (as many of you already do);
- Encourage promising employees to pursue supplemental degrees – they need time to do this, and we should give it to them; and

- Adopt a policy for sabbaticals.

But regardless of what we do, we must recognize that there is, on our horizon, an arms race of credentialing. We may perceive this race as neither beneficial nor necessary, but it has already begun, and woe to the curator who wants to advance solely on aesthetic knowledge or erudite charms.

Before leaving the arena of training, let us recognize that for all the ‘how-to’ courses one could possibly take, probably half of a museum director’s success is made, not learned. It depends on the good-faith investment of the local board and community, who together commit their personal resources of time, money, and social connections unreservedly to the director’s success. There are no Ph.D. programs in the social and philanthropic landscapes of your next job.

In attempting to scan the horizon of our profession in so short a time, I have omitted important topics, among them:

- Internationalism – especially opportunities now available to small and mid-size museums that will increasingly advantage directors with foreign knowledge and language skills;
- Technology; and
- Our moral obligation to promote diversity throughout our ranks.

There may be other avenues of change. But as we explore further and further “outside the box,” we run the risk of missing what is truly required within.

At the end of the day, as we build our collections and are forced to decide what to show against what not, we come upon a concept now out of fashion in the academy but still vital to our professional core: quality. Despite the protestations of generations of revisionism, I would bet every one of you assembled here today, that the paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings and even conceptual installations in your galleries are, for lack of a better term, just “better” than the ones in your storage vaults. And our art museum directors of the future, notwithstanding their J.D.s, M.B.A.s or other super-credentials, will have to know that difference too.

But they will need even more: the ability to love that difference. The enthusiasm, passion and sheer joy of standing before a magnificent creation of aesthetic value – and the ability to convey that emotional fire to others – remains the unassailable advantage

that our best museum directors have over their counterparts from the world of commerce. It is that passion – transferred to the potential corporate underwriter, philanthropist, or political backer – that holds the power to generate the support that our art museums truly and desperately need.

I have been blessed to be taught by some of the great professors of art history, one of whom in particular comes to mind in this context. In his late 90's, when age's advancement confined him to a wheelchair, Lane Faison still visited the world's venerated museums, looking with childlike wonder upon the masterworks of civilization's greatest masters. When coming upon an especially brilliant object of beauty, he would stop, look with admiring concentration as his eyes twinkled and a wry smile would come to his face, rise from his chair, feebly, and in the respectfully quiet gallery scattered with fellow viewers all around, would break out into loud applause.

Where one enrolls now to acquire this heartfelt joy in art I do not know, but I am certain that somewhere on the personnel rolls of our own art museums, there exist people, perhaps quite a few, who have it. I would not worry too much about the future of our profession, so long as they are the ones to take charge.