

Review Essay: On Collectors' Donations to Museums*

On Collecting: From Private to Public, Featuring Folk and Tribal Art from the Diane and Sandy Besser Collection. Joyce Ice, ed. Santa Fe, NM: Museum of International Folk Art, in association with the University of Washington Press, 2009. 160 pp.

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Introduction

This volume was published to mark an important donation from the private collection of Diane and Sandy Besser to the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, NM. The seven chapters are written from the perspectives of the collector, a curator at the museum, the museum director, two artists represented in the collection, an art dealer, and a lawyer. The book is richly illustrated with marvelous pictures, such as those of the very decorative (folk art) slingshot collection at the collector's home, in the drawers of the museum's storage space, and in a public exhibition (pp. 16, 113, 118). The donation of the more than eight-hundred-and-fifty artworks was spread over several years and is not yet complete, probably for tax reasons (see discussion below). From the dedication of the book and the final line of the epilogue, we can also deduce a part of the family story behind this important art gift: Diane Besser is deceased and her husband Sandy and their two sons dedicate the book to her memory. With this in mind, we may see it as a double gift: one to the museum and the interested public and another to the deceased wife and mother, who was a co-initiator of the collection.

To Make the Artist Known in Museum Circles

The thread of the book—though not the order of the chapters—is the journey of the various collectibles from the artist's studio, via the art gallery and private ownership, to the public trust. Arthur López, one of the featured artists, produces sculptures, often with religious allusions, in order that these will be collected and exhibited by collectors and museums. He distinguishes between collectors who buy art because of the name of the artist (the investment motive) and those who do so because of the quality of the artwork without any afterthought of making a profit. López does not hesitate to make work on commission, sometimes even representing his buyers' pets in his art. Many of his colleagues look down their nose at this practice, believing that it tarnishes the integrity of their work. Another artist, Luis Tapia, for example, did not want to respond to a repeated request to integrate a cat in his sculpture saying, "I don't do cats" (p. 70), and is aware that this kind of reluctance costs him money. For López, however, the relation with the collector is primary. He emphasizes that collectors are important for the marketing of art because they show this art to their family and friends. Moreover, it gives him a good feeling to

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know that collectors really appreciate his work. In this same spirit López has built his own art collection together with his wife, blurring the dividing line between artist and collector. Tapia also underlines the importance of the relation between artists and collectors, arguing, in spite of Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh, that an artist without clients is an amateur. He is proud that some collectors donate his work to museums and make him known in those circles.

Daniel Cook is an art dealer who travels twice a year to Asia to buy collectibles for his trade. There, he has observed the transition from the sale of original artworks in the 1970s and 1980s, to the mass production of replicas for the growing tourist market, and, finally, to the more recent international retail trade. When he first traveled to Asia tribal cultures were, according to Cook, hardly integrated into the modernization process, or what is now called globalization. Now, however, the internet has stimulated an increasing internationalization and a steep rise in prices. Cook also appears to be a kind of collector, although this usually does not last long. For example, he wanted to live with a Himalayan mask for a while in order to better understand other Himalayan masks. He advises potential collectors—his clients—to become aware of which kinds of art moves them deeply. A good means to do so is by attending exhibition openings and public lectures and participating in discussion groups; in short: frequenting the meeting points of collectors and dealers. Potential collectors should also build their own art library and subscribe to the appropriate journals. Cook correctly points to the fact that the accumulation of a large number of objects is not the same as the construction of a good collection. A dealer should offer his customers unique pieces that fill in the gaps in their collection. For this reason the dealer cannot have his own collection: “I have not developed my own collections because I feel that if I did so, there might be a conflict of interest with my clients” (p. 48).

The artist López once visited Besser at home, which, for him, was a revelation: “I couldn’t believe my eyes. There was literally art everywhere—from the floor to the ceiling, in the bathrooms, closets, library, and kitchen. There was art from all over the United States and from many other countries as well” (p. 54). In the collecting plan of Sandy Besser is to buy “one of anything doesn’t look right” (p. 15) and his strategy is to “learn and look, look lots, ... listen little, locate, love, [and] ... leap” (p. 15). In his eyes collectors are “a little, or a lot, nuts” (p. 16) and, moreover, they seem to be proud of it. Besser collects fine art, craft, Hispanic religious art, tribal art, ceramic sculpture, and folk art. He does not store art, because hiding it from view is not the intention of the artist. When he is lacking in enough space, he donates part of his collection to a museum, a win-win strategy. However, the museum has to be aware that the egos of collectors need to be massaged: “For some, banners flying at every street corner would not be too much!” (p. 16). About the collaboration with the museum Besser says that the donor is part of a team, but is not the leader. The museum has to be aware that, often, donors know more about the objects concerned than the museum staff. Also, a serious collector who collects work of a still unknown artist, also increases the reputation of the artist in circles of collectors and the museum world, by making that artist known among other collectors and by donating his or her art to museums.

On Museum Perspectives and Legal Advice

Tey Marianna Nunn, a curator at the Museum of International Folk Art, admits to being a collector herself, and her various private collections—from panda representations to Latino

Barbies—stand for the different periods in her life. For her, collecting means storing memories and she refers to the role of tourist items purchased on long journeys, a phenomenon that possibly originated in the tradition of getting souvenirs from pilgrimages to holy places. Nunn is both a private and a public collector, since as a curator she buys objects that become part of the permanent museum collection.¹ Both activities, private and public, satisfy her fascination with popular culture, art history, and social commentary. Collecting makes her feel alive and it strengthens her memory: “the thrill of the hunt, the zest in the quest..., the educational component..., the magical attraction..., and the affinity... for an object from another culture” (p. 103). The underlying idea is that one object is not enough to tell a story. For that we need at least three of them.

Joyce Ice, the museum’s [former] director, underlines the role of museums: research, interpretation, stewardship, maintenance, conservation, and exhibition. She recognizes that her museum has taken advantage of the generosity of private collectors from the start. This was also true for the museum founder who chose not to have her own name integrated in the name of the museum. She decided, instead, to call it the Museum of International Folk Art in order to encourage future donations by other collectors. Such donations, small and large, did follow, sometimes with extreme conditions attached, such as the requirement to exhibit 80 percent of a donation of 2,600 collectibles (including many textiles) within the the first five years of the donation. The museum’s ability to meet this condition was due to the complementary sponsoring of extra museum space and personnel. Museums compete amongst each other for these important donations and appeal to mediators to lobby with the collector in order to haul in the loot for one’s own institution. Moreover, one donation seems to incite others, particularly when the name of the donator is praised to the skies. Ice appears to have a distant view on collectors expressed in a religious metaphor: “Collectors are devotees to a cult of art and beauty, practicing rituals of pursuit and possession” (p. 108). But she also considers collecting to be a creative act:

The process of collecting can be regarded as a performance art, an act of creativity, and an art form in and of itself. Collectors make artistic, aesthetic, and financial choices when they interact with dealers and artists about what works of art are to be collected.... Collectors tend to have a strong visual memory that allows them to recall salient details of their own objects as they consider the purchase of other pieces to assess how the objects will look together. This keen visual sense is also key in deciding how to best display pieces in relationship to one another so that the individual pieces call attention to the aesthetic properties within a grouping. [p. 110]

It is clear that the sympathetic attitude of Ice may have a positive effect on future donations. Here, the director speaks explicitly about private collectors, but we could also apply her words to public ones (i.e. museum employees). She discusses the question of the kind of criteria that is used to determine whether donations should be integrated into the museum’s collection or refused. Disappointments or conflicts may result from “cherry-picking,” whereby the museum makes a choice out of the donated collection instead of accepting the collection as a whole. In these cases Ice advises her colleagues to adopt a very diplomatic attitude.

Art gifts from private collections also have important legal implications. This is the subject of the last chapter, written by the lawyer Susannah Evans. The favorable advantage granted to U.S. museums through Federal tax law is remarkable. Gifts to museums—not those to family or friends—provide a fiscal advantage because they may be deducted for the equivalent of their fair market value from one's annual income, within a limit of 30 percent of the donor's gross income. Gifts exceeding this limit may be transferred to the following year. It is even possible to keep part of the ownership of an art donation and still have tax advantages over this. A clever combination of gifts before and after one's own death is most advantageous to both museums and family members. We are dealing here with complex legal constructions, explained and documented in great detail by the author, with the additional words—not devoid of professional interest—that “collectors are strongly advised to consult with tax experts” (p. 144). The analyzed legislation is specific to the American situation and is, in my view, directly linked to the private origin of so many museums in the United States in contrast, for example, to Europe (cf. Pomian 1987:293-312).

Conclusion

The 98 footnotes in the final chapter concerning legal issues contrast sharply with the thin scholarly documentation and discussion in other chapters, in particular those by the curator and the director, from whom one would expect more in this area. The volume's co-publication by the University of Washington Press suggests that it is a scholarly publication. The extreme asymmetry between the rock-solid foundations of the last chapter and the light-hearted absence of literature references in the preceding ones is a rupture of style indeed. During the last decades, interest in private collecting has not only increased in museum studies, but also among economists, psychologists, sociologists, historians, and anthropologists. Unfortunately, in this book we find no references to the resulting rich, interdisciplinary discussion. Striking, for example, is the absence of any reference to the work of Susan M. Pearce (1995) who, sixteen years ago, published a now classic study with the exact same title. The lack of a serious positioning within the international debate on collecting—in spite of the reflexive suggestion of the title—puts a bit of a blot on the original and many-sided approach found in this beautiful book.

Note

1. Often, private collecting is seen as incompatible with working in a museum as an acquisition officer and sources in which curators and directors discuss this dilemma publicly in terms of their own collections are scarce. An exception to this can be found in an article by the archeologist Peter Ucko (2001).

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