



A World Changed? Art Museums After September 11

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The 1855th Stated Meeting of the Academy was held at the House of the Academy in Cambridge on February 13, 2002. Speaker James Cuno is completing an 11-year tenure as both a professor of the history of art and architecture at Harvard and the Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot Director of the Harvard University Art Museums. In January 2003 he will assume the directorship of the Courtauld Institute of Art at the University of London.

Immediately after the events of September 11, commentators, politicians, journalists, heads of security, celebrities, and even folks on the street began to say easily, almost reflexively, that the world had changed and that things would never be the same again. We felt guarded, secretive, even afraid. Our confidence was shaken, and our optimism about the future was judged naive. We were a changed people—and we weren't very happy about it.

We can see now that in many ways, this was an exaggerated response—an understandable display of hyperbole in the wake of events too horrible to imagine and made all the more horrible for having been captured on television, close-up and in real time.

I want to refrain from hyperbole tonight and reflect on the condition of our art museums since September 11. I want to try to mark just how much they've changed since the tragic events of that day and to judge their current condition in the context of a decade of extraordinary growth and stability. For this, I think, is a better way to consider the impact of September 11: as a challenge, to be sure, and as a reason to pause and rethink our



James Cuno (Harvard University Art Museums).

museums' course of action, but not as a threat to their success or true value as public institutions.

Since September 11, journalists have frequently asked art museums about the effect of those events on our attendance, finances, and building projects. Is our attendance down? Does this have a significant effect on our budget? Are we confident we can continue to raise monies as once we had? Will our building projects continue, be scaled back, or be put on hold? Has our bubble burst? Were we mistaken in our popularizing strategies of the 1990s? Having lived by the numbers, will we now die by the numbers?

We've all read of the immediate effect of September 11 on New York's museums. Initially, people came to the museums in surprisingly large numbers. Perhaps, for stranded tourists, there was little else to do. But also it seems that people just wanted to be there, in the company of others looking at rare and beautiful things, and the museums responded appropriately to the needs of those living in and stranded in the city. Museums were open free of charge and with extended hours. They offered special lectures, poetry readings, and concerts. They even drew their visitors' attention to

relevant works of art—not only Islamic pieces but also works that represented themes of (or originally functioned as instruments in acts of) healing, mourning, and meditation. Soon enough, however, the tourists began to go home, and local residents began rebuilding some kind of normalcy, with a renewed focus on economic and personal stability, if not survival. The number of visitors to New York museums began to drop off. And while the numbers remain lower than last year at this time, and lower than projected, they have begun to increase over those of November and December.

The Metropolitan Museum has admitted to a decline in attendance, with a consequent loss of revenue from admissions, restaurants, and retail shops—and so have the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, and the Guggenheim. But the two financially stronger museums, the Metropolitan and MoMA, can absorb the revenue loss, at least for this year. They intend to continue with their building projects and capital campaigns; the Modern even announced that it was increasing its campaign, so successful has it been in reaching its original goal. Only the Whitney and the Guggenheim, each with surprisingly small endowments compared with those of the Met and the Modern, have released figures of real impact.

In a December 1 article in the *New York Times*, the Whitney announced a package of layoffs and budget cuts, described as necessary because of the sudden and drastic drop in out-of-town visitors. It canceled an exhibition of works by Eva Hesse, to have been loaned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It put on hold an exhibition by contemporary artist Michal Rovner while it continued to search for sponsorship of that exhibition. It also announced a layoff of 12 full-time and two part-time employees, or 6 percent of its staff, mainly in administration and support services, including the staff of the Whitney's website, which is now managed outside the museum.

The museum's director, Max Anderson, explained that the cuts would save about \$1 million in the

museum's \$23 million operating budget and were due to a significant drop in the number of visitors who pay the \$10 admission fee. He said, "Attendance is up, but what is strange is that admission income is down to a dramatic extent." Evidently, although the Whitney was getting an average of 14,000 visitors a week, many were members, students, and others eligible for discounted admission. In other words, as half of the Whitney's attendance was typically from non-New Yorkers, and as admissions accounted for 11.4 percent of the museum's operating income, a 40 percent drop in paid admissions accounted for a loss of about \$1 million. Still, the director asserted, "We have no intention of keeping the institution from growing just because of a short-term problem." And the Whitney Biennial will open as planned later this spring.

The Guggenheim's problems were more severe. A few weeks after the Whitney's announcement, the Guggenheim announced in a *New York Times* article that it would lay off 80 employees, or almost 20 percent of its staff, from almost every department of the museum, in what the museum described as an initial round of layoffs. This attracted a great deal of attention, as the Guggenheim's director, Tom Krens, was widely known as an aggressive risk-taker and promoter of the museum's global ambitions. To quote the *Times*, he "has always been



Bruno Rossi (MIT) with Secretary Emilio Bizzi (MIT).

something of a high roller, a larger-than-life character who rides around on a BMW motorcycle and challenges conventional notions about art, money and museum management.” The *Times* noted that admissions were down by almost 60 percent (not distinguishing between the Guggenheim New York and the global Guggenheim, although implying that it was referring to the former) and that revenue was about half of what had been projected for that point in the budget year. Besides the staff cuts, which the *Times* reported may ultimately reach 40 percent, the museum scaled back its exhibition schedule, postponing exhibitions by Matthew Barney and Kasimir Malevich; announced the closing of its SoHo branch; and threw into question the fate of its \$20 million website, *guggenheim.com*.

With this news, the *Times* took delight in speculating whether “Mr. Krens is in part to blame for having reached too far too fast.” To this, Krens responded, “I think it is appropriate for an institute to reexamine its core mission. This is an opportunity for us to do that, triggered, perhaps, by September 11,” adding, “I think the things we are doing are extremely prudent.” The *Times* put the Guggenheim’s current plight in the context of the museum’s larger ambitions—described by the paper, referencing the opinions of Krens’s peers, “as a house of cards, a global empire with colonies in Venice, Bilbao, Berlin and, most recently, Las Vegas that is fatally addicted to new streams of revenue to cover old debts and risky gambles.” The newspaper further noted that some of the museum’s latest ventures were particularly vulnerable, especially its two “minimuseums” in Las Vegas, which opened on the October weekend when the war in Afghanistan began. Attendance at the Las Vegas sites in their first month of operation was only 3,000, or about 40 percent of expectations.

Although Krens insisted that all the Guggenheim operations were self-sustaining, the *Times* pointed out that in each of the past two years, the Guggenheim Foundation, which runs the museum’s global operations, shifted money from its

endowment to meet both operating costs and debt payments. The reported total amount that was shifted over the two years was \$23.3 million, of which \$10.5 million was taken just in the year 2000 to help dramatically reduce the museum's outstanding debt from \$42 million to \$28 million. This, together with the dramatic decline in attendance-generate revenue and the museum's dependence on foreign tourists' expenditures, raised many eyebrows among museum professionals. Almost 70 percent of the Guggenheim's visitors are from out of town, and 50 percent are from abroad. Admission fees account for 25 percent of its total revenue, as compared with 12 percent at the Metropolitan Museum.

Typically, museums, like other nonprofit institutions, dip into their endowments rarely and only as a last resort. By using the endowment for operating expenses over many years, the Guggenheim has been left with a relatively modest endowment for a museum of its stature and scope. As of December 31, 2000, its endowment was \$37 million, having increased by only 54 percent over the past decade—when, in contrast, the Harvard Art Museums' endowment increased almost 300 percent, from \$90 million to \$360 million, largely because of the performance of the stock market and other investments during that period. In other words, because of what must be judged as risky fiscal strategies, the Guggenheim found itself ill-prepared to take on the sudden and unanticipated economic impact of September 11.

Obviously, the dramatic drop in tourism to New York affected not only the museums but also the city itself, making it unlikely that the city will be able to respond to help the museums as it had in the past and as it had promised to do in the near future. Each major museum was affected substantially, two more than the others, and one especially. All of New York's arts institutions, large and small, were affected, some of them critically. The Mellon Foundation and the Andy Warhol Foundation have stepped in to help with grants totaling more



Charlotte and Irving Rabb.

than \$50 million. But as helpful as this will be, it will not be enough to turn things around anytime soon. The economic impact of September 11 is making New York museums rethink their reliance on tourist revenues. They are looking instead to more stable sources of support and, evidently, in the case of the Guggenheim, to more prudent financial practices and planning.

What about the rest of the country? The Association of Art Museum Directors, an organization representing 175 of the largest art museums in North America—museums with a large majority of the art museum visitorship in Canada and the United States—conducted a survey of its members. The 134 respondents (three-quarters of the AAMD membership) represent all kinds of art museums and markets. While not scientific, the survey provides a snapshot of current trends and thus is helpful when considering the larger impact of September 11.

To the question of how the events of September 11 affected attendance, 80 percent of the AAMD respondents reported current attendance at or above levels prior to that date, and 20 percent reported a sustained increase in attendance since that date. Included in these figures are the New

York and Washington markets, where not only admissions-paying tourists were down in number; so were non-admissions-paying school groups (since September 11, school groups from around the country have been kept from visiting cultural centers in big cities; such is the fear among parents and school administrators). As for revenues, half of the reporting museums saw no change, or even an increase, in revenue levels since September 11; of these, almost half saw an increase. It is not surprising that the decrease was greatest in corporate funding: two-thirds of the museums either reported a decline in funding or noted that it was too early to tell. After all, September 11 came in the midst of an economic downturn, and corporations, wishing to be seen as good and responsible citizens, rushed to donate their dwindling available funds to charities directly involved in the recovery of our cities; art museums were, and still are, a lower priority. Equally not surprising, the funding source for which the greatest number of museums reported an increase was individuals: 21 percent of museums reported an increase in individual gifts, as opposed to 8 percent each in donations from corporations and foundations, and 5 percent in government funding. Individuals are most closely identified with their local institutions, are least likely to seek a burnished public image, and have always been the greatest source of support for art museums.

Perhaps most interesting, and surprising: of the 104 museums responding to the question of how September 11 affected their building projects (the other 30 museums must not be in the midst of planning or executing renovations or new construction), 102 reported that they are continuing with their plans, with three-quarters of *those* reporting that they are doing so without any changes, and the rest reporting that they are continuing after modifying the scopes or time frames of their projects. Art first this seems extraordinary, especially when one recalls that over 100 museums in the United States alone have building projects for which they are raising almost \$3 billion in capital

campaigns. The only answer to this is that building projects are generally undertaken only after years of self-study to determine the institution's programmatic needs and fundraising capability. If the needs are judged appropriate and the capability thought sufficient, then and only then do art museums embark on months, if not years, of the so-called quiet stages of their campaigns, in which they test their capability and constantly review and adjust the scope of their program. By the time museums go public with their plans, they are typically confident in both the scope of their projects and their fundraising capability, and even have as much as half or more of the necessary funding in hand. The events of September 11, while certainly not anticipated, were not likely to derail an art museum's building project—only, at worst, to modify its scope or stretch out its schedule for completion. One can even imagine that funders, individual and otherwise, saw continuing to invest in museums' building projects as a sign of support for their cities, a much-needed expression of optimism.

When the results of the recent AAMD survey are set against a comparison of surveys conducted by the organization in 1990 and 2000 (it does such surveys annually), we see a picture of sustained growth among art museums. These ten-year trends show that despite the story of the Guggenheim, art museums experienced a doubling of their endowments between 1990 and 2000. Over the same period, their investments in capital improvements increased almost 500 percent, their attendance increased 22 percent, the number of family and individual memberships increased 29 percent, and the number of works of art donated increased 50 percent. At the same time, our art museums increased their investments in their core mission of curatorship, conservation, and public education by 85, 93, and 96 percent, respectively. In other words, in the context of the past ten years, the impact of September 11 has been slight overall, although much more severe in our nation's cities and tourist destinations.

This said, the events of September 11 have had a real impact on the way our art museums go about their business and even see themselves and their role in their communities. The first impact—just now being felt, and one hopes only briefly so—is in the area of insurance. Almost immediately after September 11, insurance companies notified museums that they would no longer be covered for acts of terrorism (because they themselves were no longer being covered for terrorism by their reinsurers) and that such acts would be an exclusion to their insurance policies, just as acts of war have been for some time. Art museums that wanted terrorism insurance, if they could find it, would have to pay very high premiums for policies with very high deductibles and very little coverage. Some museums expressed alarm about this, saying that they were worried that they couldn't get loans of rare and valuable works of art for their exhibitions because either their boards of trustees or the potential lending institutions were demanding terrorism insurance. Either way, the high cost of such insurance, if they could even find it, was thought to be prohibitive and likely to curtail lending and to render extinct the major exhibition.

Of course, this is true for everything from hydroelectric plants to skyscrapers. Insurance companies took a beating on September 11 and are acting quickly to reduce their exposure and to recoup losses. And like everything from hydroelectric plants to skyscrapers, art museums are being approached by the insurance industry with all kinds of proposals for remedying the situation. One recent proposal would add insurance capacity to the federal government's Indemnity Program. Funded through the National Endowment for the Arts, this program indemnifies exhibitions that include works of art coming into this country from foreign countries when the loaned works are judged to be important to the exhibition in question and when the exhibition itself is judged to be in the national interest—that is, when it is thought to significantly benefit the communities it is scheduled to visit.

This proposal claims that there is an excess capacity in the Indemnity Program—perhaps as much as \$500 million, although some say it is closer to \$250 million (an excess is the result of exhibitions in the aggregate not requesting the sum total of the coverage set aside by the government). Some insurers are proposing that the excess be set aside as terrorism insurance and matched by reinsurers. This would provide a pool of up to \$1 billion in terrorism insurance for half the cost (the first half would be covered by the government and the second half purchased by the insured).

The rub here is that even at half the cost, the premium would be prohibitive (hundreds of thousands of dollars, typically), insurance would be limited to one claim annually, and any changes to the Indemnity Program would require congressional approval. Not only are most of us loath to have Congress review the Indemnity Program—what an easy thing it would be to reduce or eliminate it, in this day of budget cuts and fears about a slower-than-expected economic recovery—but Congress has already considered a bill to make the federal government responsible for terrorism claims above a certain amount (while it passed in the House, it failed in the Senate). The insurance industry will continue to press its case this term, but some of us see such efforts more as a way to enrich the insurance industry, which of course was badly battered by the events of September 11, than as a way to help museums. After all, we wonder, what's the risk? Wasn't this more than likely a dreadful but isolated incident? And doesn't the risk pertain to relatively few museums in relatively few locations across the country? Still, in the short term, fears are out there, and many exhibitions may be affected.

Of course, most museums will address the threat of terrorism by changing and increasing their security. Any of us who have gone to art museums in New York or Washington have already seen this. Our bags are checked individually on entry, we are allowed to carry fewer things into the galleries, and more and more obvious security attendants are

everywhere. But this has been standard practice for many museums in Europe, especially in London during the years of the IRA troubles. We all had our bags checked then, and security was vigilant and visible. Once, in London's National Gallery, I left my daughter's baby carriage unattended while I held her and walked around; a security guard quickly barked at me to never leave the carriage unattended, as it could be confused for a means of hiding a bomb and be taken away and destroyed. Just as in London, we will see increased security rise and fall over the next few months, though any increase will have a real and negative affect on museum budgets (additional expenses at a time of reduced revenue).

The real and, one hopes, lasting effect of September 11 is how art museums are beginning to talk about how they see their role in their communities changing as a result of those tragic events. People are rightfully questioning the role of museums as tourist destinations. During the 1990s, museums often described themselves as "economic engines" and commissioned reports to show just how much money they brought into their cities by way of tourists traveling by plane and train, occupying hotel rooms, going out to lunches and dinners, buying goods in the museums and elsewhere, attending other cultural activities, such as plays and concerts, and paying taxes everywhere they went. Museums even developed special travel packages with their cities' tourist bureaus and leading hotels. Museums meant tourist dollars, so the argument went, and thus ought to be supported by increased city government support.

To cater increasingly to tourists, museums have to allocate more and more dollars to specific kinds of public amenities, like restaurants and souvenir shops (as opposed to book shops; have you noticed that in some museum shops, it's even hard to find the books, shelved as they are in the back of the store, behind the knickknacks and luxury goods?), and to promotion and advertising. After all, out-of-town visitors have to be attracted to museums

(they want to know *what's on*; hence the success of the magazine-format series (*Museums New York*, *Museums Boston*, *Museums Houston*) and the special advertisement vehicles in the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times*, in which museums from most major cities and elsewhere feature upcoming temporary exhibitions). Tourists have to plan their trip and plot out their visit, given their limited time. Once attracted to the museum, they are likely to stay a few hours to get their money's worth, and they will need to eat and want to buy something to take away as a reminder of their visit. They aren't likely to stay for classes or attend lectures or symposia. They are retail customers, attracted more to the museum's temporary exhibitions than to its permanent collection.

The Guggenheim Museum knew this, and its director codified the successful twenty-first-century museum experience accordingly: "great collections, great architecture, a great special exhibition, a great second exhibition, two shopping opportunities, two eating opportunities, a high-tech interface via the Internet, and economies of scale via a global network." Over the past ten years, he developed a museum that, as noted earlier, was increasingly dependent on tourist dollars: almost 70 percent of its visitors were from outside New York City, and 50 percent of them were from abroad; admission fees accounted for 25 percent of its total revenue (twice that of the Metropolitan Museum); and when the tourists began to stay away after September 11, the Guggenheim was forced to lay off 20 percent of its staff.

Attracting tourists, while appropriate and perhaps necessary, is a dangerous principle on which to depend financially. As New York is showing us, not only are tourists staying away from big-city museums; they are staying away from big cities too, making it less likely that the affected cities will be able to help their museums with direct funding as once they had. A downturn in tourism hurts at least twice: in direct tourist dollars and in city government support. It is likely to hurt in corporate

support too, as corporations give to maximize the exposure on their investment: before, a grant to a big-city museum meant that not only the city's residents but also its tourists saw the corporate funder's name. It was a concentrated and relatively inexpensive way to maximize exposure in affiliation with a fixed entity like a museum—as opposed, for example, to a form of print or television media that is mobile, appearing in any number of markets simultaneously and, for that reason, more expensive.

A better, surer strategy for museums is to cultivate their host communities. Local visitors don't disappear in the same numbers as tourists. Also, they are more likely to develop life-long relations with their museums, becoming contributors to both their museums' annual appeals and their capital campaigns and endowments; as such, they are, in principle, more stable sources of income. Local visitors are also dependable defenses against the kind of crisis dollars that have plagued museums in the recent past—dollars typically sought in support of exhibitions, and therefore dollars that, in addition to being risky, do not permanently enrich the museum. By “risky” dollars, I mean those sought (all too often) in response to an urgent, deadline-determined need—those that come with restrictions or expectations that prove not to be in the best interests of the museum and that are negotiated under the pressure of time, when the museum is most desperate. Most obviously and most recently, one thinks, in this regard, of the various funders of the Brooklyn Museum's “Sensation” exhibition, but there are plenty of other examples. Under the pressure of bills coming due, museums, like all of us, entertain risks they wouldn't otherwise—and that's typically not to their advantage.

It's not just exhibition dollars that carry such risks. Operating dollars can as well, and again under the pressures of time and bills coming due. Here one thinks of the multimillion-dollar gift to the Guggenheim Museum by fashion designer Giorgio Armani, which was followed by an exhibition

heavily criticized by the press and which, in the end, didn't prevent the museum from suffering its current financial crisis. The most celebrated recent example, however, may be the Smithsonian Institution, which faces \$1 billion in current needs and has, under secretary Lawrence Small, reached out to donors and offered them levels of involvement in the programmatic affairs of the Institution that are unparalleled in recent memory.

You may remember that Catherine Reynolds offered the Smithsonian \$38 million if it dedicated a 10,000-square-foot hall to a theme of her choice, in which her foundation would have a considerable say. The so-called "hall of achievement" was to be devoted to "life stories of eminent Americans," in keeping with the standards of the "Steps to Success" of the American Academy of Achievement—an organization run by her husband and intended to include, according to Ms. Reynolds herself, such individuals as Oprah Winfrey, Sam Donaldson, and Martha Stewart. A similar and overlapping purpose was a big part of the reason that another donor, Kenneth Behring, gave the Smithsonian an even larger gift. The Institution's curators revolted. Directors of the National Museum of American History, the National Portrait Gallery, the Hirshhorn Museum, and the Freer and Sackler Galleries left. Letters of opposition were written.

Just last month, Milo Beach, the departing director of the Freer and Sackler Galleries, wrote a "Special to the *Washington Post*" article entitled "Why I Think the Smithsonian Is Misguided." According to the article, a "head of a major research activity at the Institution" had reported to Beach that Secretary Small had directed him to no longer use the word *research* but to speak only of *education*. When Beach reported his own research projects to the secretary, Small instructed him not to pursue any of those interests or even to think about them until after he retired. "I was to concentrate," Beach wrote, "solely on fundraising and bringing more people to the galleries."

Other problems have plagued the secretary. He tried to shut down the National Zoo's Conservation and Research Center, but after a very public campaign of opposition by Smithsonian and non-Smithsonian scientists alike, he reversed his decision. Recently, the federal government has stopped or delayed various building projects because they were badly over budget and judged to have been mishandled. Then Catherine Reynolds withdrew her \$38 million gift to the Smithsonian, saying that "apparently, the basic philosophy for the exhibit—'the power of the individual to make a difference'— is the antithesis of that espoused by many within the Smithsonian bureaucracy, which is 'only movements and institutions make a difference, not individuals.' After much contemplation, I see no way to reconcile these diametrically opposed philosophical differences." Money comes and money goes—sometimes, when accompanied by controversy, leaving the institution for which it was intended much the weaker.

Endowments are the safest way to avoid these crises while raising money. They are not intended for immediate effect. They can't even be spent until they have earned enough income to fund their purpose in perpetuity, and then only a part of their income is spent; the rest is reinvested to keep the endowment fund's capital ahead of inflation. Endowments do not offer quick fixes. They are rarely raised against the pressure of time. They are long-term investments raised to permanently enrich the institution. Generally, they are raised from long-term friends of the museum and rarely, if ever, from occasional visitors. Indeed, the long-term cultivation of donors—typically, the course of action when seeking endowment funds—means that over time, a museum has made its case often and clearly and has sold that case to someone the museum judges to have its (not his or her) best interests in mind. There are always exceptions to the rule, but less so in endowment fundraising than in exhibitions and current-use fundraising.

One hears this a lot lately, whenever museum directors gather. They are talking about increasing their museum's endowments, stabilizing their finances, and strengthening their relations with long-term friends—not only because of recent embarrassments among museums but also because of the changes that have come over museums since September 11.

Now museum directors often talk about deepening their visitors' experiences of their museums, searching for ways to slow their visitors down, seeking their frequent return, and cultivating long-term relations. One hears less about multiple retail opportunities in museums and more about permanent collections and sustained engagements with works of art. This change is remarkable. The mantra for much of the 1990s, when it wasn't about earned income and the potential magic of electronic commerce, was about community outreach and the museum as an agency of social therapy. It was about after-school programs for at-risk kids and about teaching all kinds of things, from analytical and computational skills to ways of building better self-esteem and self-discipline. Rarely was it about the varied mysteries of art or the aspects of art that have no immediate application or presumed efficacy. Even more rarely was it about museums standing back and letting their visitors search about on their own, at their own pace, among the permanent collections. Everything had to be predicted and determined, and the visitor had to be served, and the results had to be verifiable and quantifiable. That was how public value was measured in the 1990s; it seems to be measured less in that way now.

Whereas one once heard museums described as contested sites, where ideas and social identities were in contest, one now hears museums described as sanctuaries, places of retreat, sites for spiritual and emotional nourishment and renewal. Surely, this is a caricature of the changed museum—a case of the pendulum swinging too far to the other side: the new, inwardly directed museum in place of the

old, outwardly directed museum. But there is something to it. It is about the deepening of the museum experience, in the way the painter Elizabeth Murray meant it when she replied, in response to a question about how September 11 affected her, “Everything went deeper.”

I don't think that September 11 alone has led the change of feeling about art and the experience of museums. Something was already at work in this direction as early as 1998, when Elaine Scarry gave the Tanner Lecture on Human Values at Yale University, which was later included in her book *On Beauty and Being Just*. It was evident in the recent exhibitions at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington and at SITE Santa Fe that explored and celebrated beauty as a condition of art, and in James Elkins's recent book, *Pictures and Tears*, which explored the phenomenon of people finding certain paintings so beautiful, sad, or otherwise deeply affective that they become overwhelmed and begin to cry (evidently, this happens most often in front of paintings by Mark Rothko and Fra Angelico). The National Gallery of London mounted an enormously popular exhibition last year, entitled “Seeing Salvation: Images of Christ in Art,” that spawned not only a catalog but also another book and a very successful television documentary. In the catalog's introduction, exhibition curator and museum director Neil MacGregor wrote, “Because every life was held to be in some measure divine, the language of Christian art still allows Leonardo and Rembrandt, Michelangelo and Rubens, to speak to us of love and suffering, loss and hope.” Such a sentence would never have appeared in the hardboiled exhibition catalogs or academic texts of most of the 1990s. But toward the end of that decade, for any number of reasons, things began to change, and all of a sudden, an author's feelings could be more openly expressed. September 11 was not the beginning of a change in museums; it was the confirmation that the change was justified and well under way.

In my view, this post–September 11 way of thinking is not only justified but also necessary. It encourages museums to put works of art front and center and to trust that art is what the museum-going public wants most. Before, museums put all kinds of other things front and center: retail operations, exhibition promotion, social agency, outreach efforts, and, above all, words—all kinds of words proscribing the visitor’s experience by any number of verbal aids. Now there’s a sense that a quieter, more personal experience of works of art is okay too—that the museum’s job is at least, and perhaps at best, to provide the visitor with unfettered (or at least less fettered) access to works of art, leaving the whole educational apparatus at the ready only if and when it should be requested by the visitor. Museums are, after all, and *pace* Horace, “to delight as well as to instruct.”

This is not, I hasten to say, meant to do away with the role of the curator. It is only to redirect the curatorial role to matters of collection building and research and away from auteurship, away from the idea of the curator as “producer,” as one curator recently described herself in a *New Yorker* profile. This is about putting the art and the artist ahead of the museum. It is to propose a much more modest role for art museums (at least in terms of public, headline-grabbing attention) than they once sought for themselves. I think it is also the basis for a renewed sense of trust between the public and the art museum.

As some of you know, we at the Harvard Art Museums have been exploring “Art Museums and the Public Trust” this year in a series of lectures by leading art museum directors. The idea for this series preceded September 11, as did all of the books and exhibitions I just mentioned. But like those, our series has taken on new meaning as a result of the tragic events of that day. This, I think, is necessary. The real change in museums since September 11 is that museums care more about their visitors’ experience of works of art in their collections than they do about increasing the num-

bers of their visitors and attracting them to various retail options.

The bloom is off the rose of museums' 1990s expansionist ambitions, and that is good. Of course, museums still have to worry about making ends meet and diversifying their income streams. But these seem to be less ends in themselves than they once were and more means to an end—an end that is less determined and proscribed than before.

So, at least as far as art museums go, things *have* changed since September 11, but they were changing already. The events of that day only drew our attention to that change and heightened our regard for it. The impact of September 11 on our New York, Washington, and other big-city, tourist-destination museums is real, but it is more isolated than news reports might suggest—and even that impact has to be measured against the decade of real growth our museums enjoyed during the 1990s. The good news—and the real news, at least as I see it—is that despite September 11, and in part because of it, our art museums are stronger than ever.

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