

In Search of Versatile Museum Leaders

By DOUGLAS C. MCGILL

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pg. 11

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Eighteen of the country's leading art museums are seeking new directors, a fact that reflects tremendous growth, mounting financial pressures and other fundamental changes in the art-museum field.

Indeed, those changes point to the emergence of a new kind of art museum across the country — one that differs strikingly from the traditional image of art museum as a tranquil showcase for art. The new art museum, experts say, is a multimillion-dollar institution that is part school, part theater, part merchandise shop, part restaurant and part museum.

Yet many art-museum directors are men and women originally trained as art historians and curators, leaving them ill-equipped to manage the complex tasks now required of art-museum directors.

"They're burning out," said Luisa Kreisberg, a public-relations consultant to many leading art museums around the country. "Who are these directors supposed to be? Businessmen or curators? Are the museums like universities or Broadway theaters? What are they? There's a re-definition of these institutions that is going on."

A 'Growth Industry'

The 18 current vacancies are reported by the Association of Art Museum Directors, the professional group whose 150 members represent the art museums in the United States and Canada with the highest yearly operating budgets, most of them over \$1 million.

Six of the vacancies were caused by resignations forced by the museums' board of trustees, according to Millicent Gaudieri, who heads the art-museum director's association. The vacancy rate is the highest ever recorded by the group, she said.

"It's been a big growth industry, and museums have perhaps overgrown," Ms. Gaudieri said. "The boards think that if they build a major new museum or a big wing, they are going to triple their membership and have more money coming in. But it doesn't always work that way."

Among the museums seeking directors are the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York.

In interviews with museum directors around the country — including some of those who have announced their resignations — some said that their institutions had just completed a period of sustained growth and that they were taking the opportunity to return to the scholarly work with which they began their careers.

"The pace of life in museums has changed," said the director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston for the past 12 years, Jan Fontein, who will leave his post this summer to resume his career as a scholar in Asian art. "We have many more visitors, and a large amount of our activities as di-

rectors are related to negotiating for exhibitions and trying to drum up corporate support. I enjoy enormously doing it, but it is also a strenuous profession."

Other art museums seeking directors include the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford; the Carnegie Institute, Museum of Art in Pittsburgh; the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York, and the Hudson River Museum of Westchester in Yonkers, N.Y.

Turnover among directors has also been high in recent years. Sixteen major art-museum directorships, for instance, changed hands last year, including those at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, the Frick Collection in New York, the Seattle Art Museum and the Worcester Art Museum in Worcester, Mass.

In the past decade, art museums have undergone tremendous growth. While comprehensive statistics have never been compiled, several new art museums have been built, such as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and the Terra Museum of American Art in Chicago. Major expansion programs have recently been completed at many others, including the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Yearly operating budgets, fund-raising quotas, staff sizes, museum programs and other aspects of art museums have also increased in recent years.

Three institutions whose rise in yearly operating budgets over the last 15 years are fairly typical are New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, whose budget rose to \$8 million from \$1.5 million in that period; the Art Institute of Chicago, to \$37.7 million from \$8.7 million, million, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, to \$34.2 million from \$5.5 million.

Some institutions have responded to such growth by instituting split directorships, whereby a "director" handles artistic decisions and some aspects of fund raising, and a "president" manages the museum's business aspects and other fund-raising tasks. The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, for instance, both reorganized their leadership in this way in the last decade.

Henry Hopkins, the former director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, resigned last year after 12 years in the post. A curator and art historian by training, Mr. Hopkins said he left because the job had increasingly become one of administration and fund raising.

The situation at his museum, he said, reflected a wider trend among art museums in the United States that began with economic growth in the United States in the 1960's. At that time, wealthy, self-made businessmen and women increasingly became members of museum boards.

"The museum board room became like a business board room, a competition among men of wealth and power," Mr. Hopkins said. "What transpires now is that 11 businessmen in the board room speak the same language automatically as the administrative head of the museum and don't speak the language of the director. So if it becomes an issue of program or money, money always wins."

Some dangers to the integrity of the institution came along with this change, Mr. Hopkins said. "These new board members are increasingly collectors with limited knowledge of the history of art but are quite adept in a certain area of expertise where they've been groomed by an art dealer," he said. "This immediately sets up a possible conflict of interest for acquisition and exhibition, since they would like to show their art to get a stamp of approval."

Jan van der Marck, the curator of 20th-century art at the Detroit Institute of Arts, resigned from the the Center for the Fine Arts in Miami in 1985, where he had been director since 1980. He said he had a fundamental disagreement with his board over whether the museum should spend its limited money to originate exhibitions of art or to borrow shows organized elsewhere and spend the money on promotion.

"The trustees felt that promotion and marketing was the answer to the problems of attendance," he said. "They had far less interest and iden-

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Jan Fontein, at top, director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, is to leave there this summer. Jan van der Marck, curator at the Detroit Institute of Arts, resigned as director of the Center for the Fine Arts in Miami.

tification with the actual product, which should be a fine exhibition and a careful program of collection. That's basically the clash everywhere."

Many museum trustees, however, said that the financial facts of life today required a museum director who has both a knowledge of art and of the balance sheet.

"A director, if he's a good art scholar, should be a decent communicator," said Eli Broad, a California housing tycoon and the founding chairman of the board of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. "He should be able to really sell a show. When a donor says, 'Tell us why with limited resources we should show this instead of three or four other things,' if he can't answer that question he's in trouble and he ought to be in trouble."