

A FAILURE IN ACCURACY AND RELIABILITY: Art Museum Research on Contemporary American Craft



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Abstract

The field of contemporary American craft, and its sub-category of contemporary American fiber art, can be examined as a clear, instructive example of significant research problems at contemporary art museums in the U.S. While art museums in the U.S. place emphasis upon their traditional roles as research institutions, they are evolving into key players in the entertainment, tourism and retail industries which has created significant controversy. Key ethical research principles seem to have been lost or forgotten, including standard academic safeguards that help protect against creating defective, inaccurate, and misleading research records.

Introduction

How often have you gone to a museum exhibition of contemporary art and wondered why that particular work was selected for examination, exhibition, and recording over other art work? How do art museums examine the field of contemporary art to determine what is significant and worthy of exhibition in the museum? Exactly what are the criteria they use? And exactly what procedures are used to apply those criteria?

These kinds of questions are arising as American art museums become major players in the entertainment, tourism and marketing industries, while at the same time attempting to continue to assert their traditional aura of academic integrity and authority. Increasingly, museum exhibitions of contemporary art are raising serious questions about whether the research that art museums execute has sufficient integrity. The outcry is becoming particularly urgent as art museums are being

accused of defective research and as more information becomes public about criminality in the art market with which art museums do business.

The public has an ethical right to know if the museums enjoying partial or full public funding are actually executing the proper research they claim they do. If the museums are not doing proper research in the process of selecting work to exhibit and create a permanent official record on contemporary art, then what other factors are affecting the museums' selections? And what damage is being caused to the permanent official record where those other factors dominate behind doors tightly closed to reasonable verification and open discussion?

Isn't this one of the most important questions in the contemporary art world today? It certainly is in the field of contemporary American craft.

History

Many of the key art museums in the U.S. arose in the second half of the Nineteenth Century after the Civil War, funded by the new plutocracy in the newly industrialized economy. In part, these museums focused on linking European aristocratic culture with the newly rich in America. These museums established traditions of studying connoisseurship, identifying works of art by their qualities, and presenting this all to the public in glorious "temples of culture." This was more than simple preservation, storage, and display of items collected. This became highly trained, academic quality study and research.⁽¹⁾ Those responsibilities are so important that universities developed graduate degree programs in museum studies. And professional museum organizations feature periodicals and national conventions which include these responsibilities within their focus.

As inheritors of that scholarly tradition, museums still strive to be known not only for the art work they show the public, but also for the excellence, authority, and integrity of their research; that is, of their surveys, screening, examination, criticism, judgment, selections, display, explication, and — perhaps most important — their official permanent record. Implicit in this desire of the art museum community in America is their assertion that what they choose to exhibit constitutes their selection of what they deem to be among the best available of that particular context — not merely the discretionary, personal preference of the curatorial staff or the most profitable for the museum, but based upon a careful and exhaustive study of the specific field from which the work was selected. This is not an arcane distinction of little significance. This public image of excellence is so aggressively promulgated by art museums nowadays that it has spawned the all-too-familiar marketing term: "museum quality."

Ethical Elements of Research

But can art museum claims of proper, qualified research be verified? Well, normal academic research in the arts and sciences enjoys several simple, effective safeguards to help maintain integrity and its accuracy. These safeguards are so simple and effective, that when they are missing, their absence raises suspicions.

The first safeguard is open discourse and inquiry about the research. When the research is open to discussion, conclusions can be questioned. So can the examples and/or the reference materials used to draw those conclusions. The logic used and even the research's original question can be vetted this way as well. This open discourse is then instrumental in ratifying or correcting the research to make it more accurate and more reliable.

But too often art museum research seems to be the very antithesis of this. Art museum research no longer seems to acknowledge any such necessary safeguards. In sharp contrast to research in the rest of the arts and sciences, museum research on contemporary art is typically characterized by secrecy and unaccountability providing little apparent opportunity to challenge the permanent record that museum exhibitions and catalogues generate. When the research is challenged, art museums typically respond that challenges are improper and purport that art museum research is not scientific, but founded upon matters of personal judgment and taste. In effect, those museums thereby lay claim to the integrity of proper research and the benefits that accrue from it without the standard safeguards this research actually requires.

The second simple safeguard enjoyed in academic research is a primary ethical requirement. Where a researcher claims or implies the examination of materials leading to a final selection, the researcher is ethically obliged to have really done such an examination. In most research in the arts and sciences, the failure to examine materials cited or implied as examined in the judging process is deemed to be simple academic fraud, which constitutes a fatal defect.

This ethical principle too is neither complicated nor arcane. This principle is common sense and basic ethics.

For example, in 1987, the National Books Awards was scandalized when one of the judges disclosed that he had not bothered to read most of the nominated titles in the process of evaluating and judging them. His failure threatened to render the awards a total sham.⁽²⁾

There was no confusion as to what this ethical breach meant and the question of fraud was addressed openly. But when questioned about this same type of ethical lapse in museum research, art museums seem to act either as if it does not exist or as if it does not apply to their activities.

For example, in 1983, the Chicago Institute of Art opened a solo exhibition of a fiber artist with the publication of a catalogue for the permanent record. The catalogue described not only how James N. Wood, the Director of the Chicago Art Institute, deemed the art to be significant, but also how the artist was a friend of the Chairman of the Board of Trustees. The catalogue also thanked “the American Express Company and private contributions to Textile Arts Foundation for their support in making this exhibition and catalogue a possibility.”⁽³⁾ Such foundation support certainly sounded like a very weighty endorsement of the art’s importance and significance.

However, the Institute failed to disclose in its permanent record that the foundation board had a significant conflict of financial interest: The board was comprised of the fiber artist and her immediate family.⁽⁴⁾ Not only was there an undisclosed close financial relationship between the foundation and the artist, but the foundation’s President (the artist’s husband) wrote that the foundation had little other purpose than to support and protect that artist’s work.⁽⁵⁾ Why did the Chicago Institute of Art not disclose all that information in the permanent record?

When the Institute was asked what actual examination of the immediate field was made to support the Institute’s research conclusions and its selection of this particular fiber artist for exhibition and permanent record over some other artist, Curator of Textiles Crista C. Meyer Thurman responded:

“I regret that I do not have the time to debate the application of scientific methods to art exhibitions.”

“ . . . the reason for selecting her work and featuring her in a Retrospective was based on my selecting her. [sic] It was based on over 20 years of Museum textile curatorship at the time. The exhibition was of great importance to our Chicago audience. Over 20,073 people saw the installation and it was very well received and reviewed.”⁽⁶⁾

Does this assert that when research is on art, then the research is permitted to be secretive and unaccountable? Media praise and box office success do not address the troubling roles possibly played by cronyism, undisclosed conflicts of financial interest, and lack of examination of the immediate field in the selection process.

So, if the National Book Awards does not examine the field fairly, there is a *bona fide* question of academic fraud. But if the Chicago Institute of Art does not examine the field fairly, it suddenly becomes well-founded valid research? That must be the general understanding, since in 2000, the American Craft Council, Inc. gave Curator Meyer an “Award of Distinction” for her research in this field.⁽⁷⁾

The question of art museum research in the U.S. is growing very serious. Art museums, particularly museums dealing with contemporary art, purport that they are the unquestionable experts and that their selections represent their conclusions after a reasonable examination of the surrounding field. So the key questions confronting us regarding art museum research are: 1) What examination of the field represented has actually taken place in museum research on contemporary art? 2) What research safeguards were incorporated or omitted by those museums? 3) Did any other criteria play a role in the selection process; e.g., cronyism, media popularity, box office success, undisclosed donations or funding opportunities, etc? 4) Were those other criteria disclosed in or omitted from the permanent public record? 5) Did any limitation occur in the formal survey of the related field? 6) Did any other undisclosed criteria cause the research to be fatally defective or result in significant distortions in the exhibition’s permanent record?

These are crucial questions. The public is encouraged to look to our art museums to learn what is the best available art produced in various cultures. If any art museum research is unreliable or even outright misleading, then the public and the art community merit an open, brisk discussion on what is really happening behind the doors of our art museums and how we might begin to correct the permanent record they create for posterity.

An Example of Research at the Brooklyn Museum of Art

Only very rarely is the public permitted a glimpse into the museum research leading to the selection of exhibitions of contemporary art. Although the example from the Chicago Institute of Art was instructive, an even more illuminating glimpse occurred in 1999, when the Brooklyn Museum of Art featured “Sensation,” an exhibition of contemporary art which the museum promoted aggressively. It wasn’t a pretty sight:

“Far more than has been previously disclosed, the ‘Sensation’ exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art has been financed by companies and individuals with a direct commercial interest in the works of the young British artists in the show, according to court documents and interviews with people involved in the exhibition.”

“Mr. Lehman and his assistants solicited donations of at least \$10,000 from dealers who represented many of the artists whose works are on display. They offered Christie’s [art auction house] special access to the museum to entertain clients. They secured a pledge of \$160,000 from Mr. Saatchi [the current owner of the art collection] and then tried to conceal his financial support from the public.”

“David Bowie, the pop musician, pledged about \$75,000 Soon after, his private, for-profit Internet company was given the right to display the ‘Sensation’ exhibition on Mr. Bowie’s Web site, www.davidbowie.com, which sells art . . . Mr. Bowie’s financial contribution has been kept in confidence by museum officials”

“For its donation Christie’s was given, among other benefits, ‘unlimited opportunities to entertain in the museum during the run of the exhibition with the \$5,000 rental fee to be waived,’ according to an internal Christie’s memorandum. . . . according to an internal Christie’s memorandum, the \$50,000 ‘represents Christie’s most significant financial commitment to an external exhibition to date.’ . . . ‘I would like to see us capitalize on it as much as possible,’ Allison Whiting, director of museum services at Christie’s, wrote in the memo.”

“Mr. Lehman, known to be adept at boosting museum attendance through aggressive marketing, defended his fund-raising as **no different from what other museum directors do.**” [*emphasis added*]⁽⁸⁾

These disclosures certainly constitute an urgent reason why it is important and appropriate to discuss questions about museum research on contemporary art. In the case of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, financial considerations did not merely compromise research standards. It turns out that there was no art research whatsoever underlying the museum’s selection of the exhibition:

“In interviews and sworn court papers, [Brooklyn Museum of Art Director] Mr. Lehman has underscored this point [whether a body of art is worthy of exhibition] by describing how he decided to pursue ‘Sensation’ after seeing it at the Royal Academy in London and coming away impressed both by the art and the long lines at the museum door.

“But Mr. Lehman was not as informed about ‘Sensation’ as he has suggested. **The documents show, and the museum now concedes, that Mr. Lehman never actually saw ‘Sensation’ in London.** His initial overtures began in January 1998, two weeks after ‘Sensation’ closed.” [*emphasis added*]⁽⁹⁾

While it is a very sad thing to hear about Mr. Lehman’s perjury, this kind of ethical conflict by museums is certainly not news for many people studying the art museum world. Marie Malaro, the retired Director of

Museum Studies at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. warned about the particular threat of what she deemed the “commercialization” of museums in the keynote speech at the First Annual Museum Studies Symposium on April 15, 1999:

“THEN corporate sponsorships were introduced. These are marketing contracts negotiated by the corporation’s marketing department. In a sponsorship the goal of the corporation is to fund an exhibition that will advance the marketing goals of the corporation. Such arrangements started out with corporations asking just for larger billing on exhibition signs and more parties for corporation clients. Over the years the demands have grown to where museums are now actually displaying corporation products in conjunction with exhibitions and are agreeing to allow the use of the museum’s logo in advertising corporate products. All the while museums have vigorously denied that this change in the method of funding has affected its choice of exhibits or the content of exhibits. Just talk to the rank and file of people who work in museums about whether this is true. But equally important, what is this doing to our tradition of philanthropy? If corporations expect — and get — something in return for their financial support for exhibitions why shouldn’t owners of art or historical objects bargain with museums when they are asked to lend their objects for exhibition?”⁽¹⁰⁾

Financial and commercial interests seem free to run wild in the absence of standard academic research safeguards and ethical guidelines.

Several books have recently branded art museum research as becoming compromised, unreliable, or non-existent. In *Eyewitness: Reports From an Art World in Crisis, a Collection of Essays* by Jed Perl, the art critic for *The New Republic* focuses on visual art criticism and the disappearance of careful examination.⁽¹¹⁾

Mr. Perl writes about the signs of diminishing opportunities for serious work to be seen and discussed and notes how “in recent years, most grant-giving processes have become hopelessly tied to the market values of the public art world.”⁽¹²⁾

Referring to the role of art museums, Mr. Perl writes that this is:

“. . . the Age of the Deal Makers. This is the apotheosis of context, the final annihilation of content. Of course the deals are often designed to keep the art stars’ reputations alive. The deal makers include some commercial dealers, along with some curators, some museum directors, and some collectors who not infrequently double as museum trustees. . . . If you’re a deal maker, you will find an artist’s work interesting because you think it will look good in a certain space; you want to fill the space so you can get press attention and bring in the crowds; and you

want to bring in the crowds so that donors will decide that yours is the hot institution and give money for a building expansion.”⁽¹³⁾

And Mr. Perl notes that this problem is widespread.

“I can understand why the big museums are unable to respond to all the dissatisfaction out there; they’re basically in thrall to the money interests, to the deal makers. But I do wonder why we aren’t seeing more innovative programming in the smaller museums, where there may still be some independent curators and trustees left. And what about the colleges and universities, which have their own network of galleries and small collections?”⁽¹⁴⁾

Richard Feigen is one of today’s most influential art collectors and dealers. His book, *Tales from the Art Crypt: the Painters, the Museums, the Curators, the Collectors, the Auctions, the Art*, is a series of engaging stories and histories woven together by a number of themes. One is the question of what will become of the kind of museum we had known for the past 100 years? Another is the rise of the corporate culture that threatens to turn “the museums into box office palaces and mail-order houses.”⁽¹⁵⁾

Mr. Feigen presents an engaging and forceful case against today’s art museum culture:

“The old connoisseur museum director felt it his mission to show and teach people what they did not necessarily yet know about, to surprise and excite them with new images and ideas. He seemed to respect the public’s intelligence.”⁽¹⁶⁾

But as to art museums today:

“Certainly, as museums’ costs escalate, and as their management becomes corporatized, they look more to corporations for funding, and the projects being funded relate more to the sponsors’ products. The Metropolitan Museum showed Cartier jewelry and Versace dresses, the Guggenheim BMW motorcycles and Armani clothes. Clearly, the reason these companies spend all this money is to burnish their products in the museums’ aura.

“This is the more troubling conflict. To the broad public, anything exhibited in these institutions is high art. So if dresses and motorcycles are exhibited in a museum of fine art, the message is that they are art. The public is being deliberately confused for commercial purposes.”⁽¹⁷⁾

He refers to the bumpy transition of the “corporate takeover” as “museum wars” and provides thumbnail histories on many major art museums. The

end result, he concludes, is that there is no longer a focus on the art object itself. Mr. Feigen's book is strong and sometimes controversial stuff, but he is always interesting and informative, and his argument is heartfelt that museums are morphing from educational institutions to entertainment mass-marketing institutions.

Lynne Munson, an analyst and research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC, a right wing think tank, wrote a detailed and investigative book, *Exhibitionism: Art in an Era of Intolerance*. Ms. Munson's research is thorough and the facts are utterly sobering. In addressing the debate about public funding of artists and art museums in the U.S., she acknowledges the polarized extremism of both the right and the left of the political spectrum feeding the art controversies of past decades:

"These artists' critics and defenders have appropriated this exhibitionist strategy, framing every dispute in a way that is sure to generate much heat but little truth. The combatants take their positions each time along the same battle lines. On one side is arrayed the army of the offended, rallying around cries of blasphemy. Against them are amassed the troops of art advocacy, rousing to the charge of censorship. After a full-scaled barrage — in the press, via direct mail, and even in the courts and on the Senate floor — the dust settles each time to reveal that the debate has not advanced. The art wars have accomplished nothing aside from bloating the coffers of the opposing armies and propelling the careers of the artists who started them. Least of all have they served the public, which has been left wondering what happened and why."⁽¹⁸⁾

As to the goal of her research: "I hope to set the tone for a new art discourse which does not exploit the public square but instead fills it with facts."⁽¹⁹⁾ Regarding government funding of art in the U.S., she tracks the birth and life of the National Endowment for the Arts in great detail, and provides statistics showing how the NEA bureaucracy grew far faster than actual benefit to artists.

Ms. Munson too focuses on the changed role of art museums:

"From start to finish, block busters are designed to inspire shopping and socializing but often fail to provide an environment that is conducive to the close examination of art objects."

"And many of the institutions entrusted with the task of assembling the art historical record are today driven by concerns that undermine objectivity."

"My gripe with 'Sensation' was not that it contained art that was offensive to some, or of marginal quality in the view of many, but that there was no scholarly or civic rationale for an American public museum to host it. After all, none of the 'Sensation' artists,

whose average age was thirty-five, had been making art long enough for anyone to know whether their work would be worth including in a museum show in even ten years. . . . [N]ot one of the artists in 'Sensation' lived, worked, or even was born in the United States, let alone in Brooklyn.

"I was also suspicious of the motives reflected by the museum's marketing campaign, which included a mock health-alert warning that the exhibition could cause 'vomiting, confusion, panic, euphoria and anxiety.' Why did the museum go out of its way to hype 'Sensation's shock potential and to fan the flames of controversy? And why had the museum's director so self-consciously placed his institution on the firing line? After all, no other American museum had been willing to take the show. . . . Wasn't this more likely a case of bad stewardship than censorship? I suggest that this was the kind of question that was being overshadowed by the fever-pitched uproar over 'Sensation.'"⁽²⁰⁾

Criminal Collusion in the Art Market

Just how corrosive are the undisclosed influences in the art field?

Among the hundreds of thousands of dollars of undisclosed finances underlying the Brooklyn Museum of Art's less than scholarly selection of "Sensation" was a \$50,000 donation from Christie's art auction house that "represents Christie's most significant financial commitment to an external exhibition to date."⁽²¹⁾ The close and rarely disclosed relationships between art museums and art auction houses raised suspicions about art research in the Office of the Federal Prosecutor in New York City.

At about the same time that the Brooklyn Museum was asserting that its selection of "Sensation" was founded upon valid inspection and research, both Christie's and Sotheby's art auction houses were already under investigation by federal prosecutors. Soon thereafter, the government brought federal charges of criminal collusion and illegal price-fixing against the heads of Christie's and Sotheby's some of the most powerful people in the art world according to the New York Times.⁽²²⁾

The former Executive Director of Sotheby's, Diana ("DeDe") Brooks, and the former Executive Director of Christie's, Christopher M. Davidge, both pled guilty and testified in court against A. Alfred Taubman, the Chairman of the Board of Sotheby's and Sir Anthony Tennant, the Chairman of the Board of Christie's. Both chairmen resigned.⁽²³⁾ In December, 2001 Mr. Taubman was convicted in the jury trial and he awaits sentencing in April in 2002.⁽²⁴⁾ The Federal Court was unable to extradite Sir Anthony, but if he ever comes to the U.S., he too will face criminal trial.

HBO cable television has produced a movie of this scandal with Sigourney Weaver playing DeDe.

During the same federal investigation, Christie's and Sotheby's settled civil claims against their acts by agreeing to reimburse cheated customers a total of half a billion dollars.⁽²⁵⁾

Exactly what role have art auction houses and art dealers played in the examination and selection of art museum exhibitions? How can we even begin to ask, when museum art research is permitted to be secret and when even the teaching institutions disclaim the importance of fundamental ethical guidelines?

AAM Call for Transparency and Accountability

The climate of public distrust of art museum claims has grown so serious that the American Association of Museums finally responded in 2000, issuing its New Ethical Guidelines stating:

"As society has come to rely more on museums for education about, as well as preservation of, its cultural heritage, it has also come to expect more of its museums—more accountability, more transparency of action, and more leadership in the community."

"Museums in the United States are grounded in the tradition of public service. They are organized as public trusts, holding their collections and information as a benefit for those they were established to serve. Members of their governing authority, employees, and volunteers are committed to the interests of these beneficiaries."

"Museums and those responsible for them must do more than avoid legal liability, they must take affirmative steps to maintain their integrity so as to warrant public confidence. They must act not only legally but also ethically. This Code of Ethics for Museums, therefore, outlines ethical standards that frequently exceed legal minimums."⁽²⁶⁾

After decades of wide-ranging obfuscation, it is now official. Secrecy in art museum research is just now being officially seen as unethical and unaccountable, just like it has always been seen in other fields of research in the arts and sciences.

"'Sensation' may have served as the immediate incentive for these guidelines, but in fact they address a set of basic conflicts that affect all museums. Museums are supposed to serve as cultural cathedrals, repositories of our most significant artifacts. Yet art makes its way to museums in ways that are often labyrinthine, closely caught up in the politics of power and money, the push and pull of international art markets, individual collectors and powerful patrons. The public has had no way of

knowing whether an exhibition of borrowed objects represented the best artistic judgment of the professional curators, or was staged at the behest of hidden donors.”⁽²⁷⁾

An Example of Distorted Art Museum Research

The damage caused by a deficiency in safeguards and ethical principles in art research by museums can be devastating. I can illustrate this by referring to the research record in the subject area in which I have been working over the past quarter century — “contemporary American craft,” and more specifically, “contemporary American fiber art.”

When I earned my doctorate from New York University in Ancient Near Eastern Studies, my professors inculcated into their students the understanding that when one claimed to examine reference materials and examples in the process of formulating a research conclusion, one actually had to examine those reference materials and examples. Otherwise, the false claim would be an act of academic fraud.

And yet, major art museums and teaching institutions like the Brooklyn Museum of Art and the Chicago Institute of Art have challenged those ethical principles and even emphatically denied their applicability to museum art research.

While I was working on my doctorate in ancient Near Eastern Studies, I became enamored of the Near Eastern carpet making arts. I was enchanted by the important meanings that carpets and their designs held for key stages in one’s life — prayer; meditation; sleep and dreaming; love, conception, and birth; sickness and convalescence or death.

I then studied the skills of wool selection, preparation, and spinning into specifically designed yarns. I worked with growers of rare breeds of sheep to secure original types of wools. I mastered the arts of natural dyeing and wool spinning. With those specially prepared yarns, I was then able to weave carpets based upon the ancient traditions, but using my own contemporary, personal artistic designs.⁽²⁸⁾ This particular corpus of work is categorized by the art world as “contemporary American craft” and within that subject area, it is “contemporary American fiber art.”

As a trained academic researcher as well as an accomplished artist, I have been alarmed about the purported art museum research on contemporary American fiber in the field of contemporary American craft.

Contemporary American Craft

First, what is this particular category, “contemporary American craft”? “Contemporary” does not seem to be a specific style, but seems only to mean work created in the 20th Century or later. “American” seems self evident. Otherwise, there appears to be little other clear definition to recite.

In writing about a group exhibition “of the handmade in the 1980’s” at the American Craft Museum, then Director Paul Smith stated “Looking at this rich landscape of works, one can see the plurality of purpose that has been and continues to be a characteristic of the object-making movement. . . . Curiously, although more distinct activities are developing, specific limitations on individual creative pursuit are lessening. When specialization increases, the categories blur; today’s artist has access to a broader range of creative possibilities than ever before.”⁽²⁹⁾

Perhaps his more helpful clarification is where the former American Craft Museum Director referred to American craft as representing “many of America’s outstanding artists specializing in clay, fiber, glass, wood, and metal.”⁽³⁰⁾

Yes indeed, when one goes to an exhibition of contemporary American craft, one can find art done in materials that one tends to associate with traditional craft media. Sometimes the works created are also in traditional forms, but sometimes they are not. Sometimes the work requires traditionally prized excellence in craftsmanship, but sometimes it clearly does not. Sometimes the work is functional in more than merely a decorative way, but frequently it is completely non-functional; and sometimes even non-decorative. And sometimes the work is the result of the artist’s individual original artistic expression, and sometimes, like Shaker furniture or like work from a major “workshop,” it is not. As Mr. Smith noted above, it is the use of “craft” materials that most seems to characterize the subject area; otherwise it patently lacks any dominant philosophy or style.

According to its “Statement of Purpose,” the Renwick Gallery is “dedicated to the collection, exhibition, research, and interpretation of American craft and decorative arts. Through these programs, the Gallery seeks to increase and extend the appreciation and understanding of crafts and decorative arts. The Gallery is administered by the National Museum of American Art, and its programs complement the Museum’s focus on the visual arts of the United States.”⁽³¹⁾

While stating that there had been a specific movement focusing on teaching traditional craft skills in the Industrial Age, the Curator-in-Charge, Kenneth Trapp, also opined that:

“Today I think of the craft worker largely as a disparate group of practitioners defined by their medium, and they organize along those lines too. It’s the curator, in fact, who is the pan-theoretician or the pan-arbiter, trying to bring together these disparate groups in a collection for example.”⁽³²⁾

Beth Ann Gerstein, Executive Director Society of Arts and Craft in Boston, Massachusetts stated:

“I sort of feel like within the crafts community there are — there’s probably some subdivisions which would include potentially country crafts, or fine crafts, or sculptural crafts. I think it’s up to each institution to decide what they feel fits their, you know, mission as far as what they show. We show functional and nonfunctional crafts both in our exhibit space and in our retail space, and it just depends on the particular set up of that show or that exhibit, whether function or not plays a role.”⁽³³⁾

As to the more traditional American crafts such as Shaker furniture of recent vintage, Mr. Trapp stated:

“I’ve also heard this called, lately, heritage crafts, when I was in North Carolina recently. They’re divisions of craft within the greater craft world — I think that function is one of those words that we usually trip over. . . . So, it’s existing in two worlds and can do so beautifully; it can exist as design as function as art.”⁽³⁴⁾

So top names in the field of curatorial research on this subject area find little to confine a definition of contemporary American craft beyond period of creation, national origin, and general types of materials used in the work. Beyond that, they seem to say that any further definition is arbitrary and usually up to whatever the curator thinks. There is no reference to the role of commercial dealers, market activity, funding sources, box office popularity, or media attention in the formulation of a definition, even though such factors clearly play a major role, as stated by the Chicago Institute of Art.

But these unmentioned factors remain powerful. After all, the American Craft Museum itself gave a special award to Martha Stewart⁽³⁵⁾ and turned over space in 2000 to act as landlord to Phillips Gallery, the third largest art auction house doing business in New York City.⁽³⁶⁾

Even the factors of materials used and national origin are unclear. The American Craft Council, Inc. claims to champion journalistic coverage of this amorphously-defined category of art. This organization publishes a beautiful glossy magazine, *American Craft*, with lots of “artspeak” about

the work it selects and features, raising more questions about definitions than it answers. Apparently, the publication of the American Craft Council, Inc. helps best with definitions where one can poke one's forefinger onto its pages and exclaim, "Ah ha! Since this is in the *American Craft* magazine, this surely must be contemporary American craft!" But what is the relationship between the art work that is selected by the editor to dominate the publication and the art work promoted for sale by the commercial galleries buying advertising in the magazine? This is difficult to evaluate clearly because the editorial selection policies are not open to inspection and questioning, even by the Council's own members!

Contemporary American Fiber Art

Mr. Smith defined the subject area as work from "artists specializing in clay, fiber, glass, wood, and metal" and Mr. Trapp defined the artists "largely as a disparate group of practitioners defined by their medium." So not surprisingly, artists using fiber as their medium are sub-categorized as "fiber artists."

This sub-category of contemporary American fiber art includes a wide range of techniques and media all related by the material structure being a composition of fibers, in contrast to being composed from non-fibrous solids like ceramics, metal, wood, etc. This categorization by curators too is just as amorphous as that of its parent field, contemporary American craft. But in general, the field of contemporary American fiber includes the major areas of weaving, knitting, lace, needlepoint, quilting, fashion, felting, fiber sculpture, and others.

The second half of the 20th Century enjoyed a particularly vibrant burst of fiber art and craft. Both separately and in combination, conservatively traditional and radically futuristic elements have been intertwined by contemporary fiber artists and craftspeople to create new aesthetic expressions. Similarly, fiber artists and craftspeople have been able to work with brand new materials as well as with the classic materials that had seemed lost, but have been rediscovered through modern conservation of rare breeds of plants and animals. This burst of fiber art encompasses a breathtaking spectrum of work which integrates the past and the future into art and craft.

This has of course fostered further confusion. Now, even baskets made of intertwined wood and jewelry made of metallic wire are often interpreted and categorized as forms of fiber art. For example, the American Craft Council, Inc. recently bestowed an "award of distinction" upon the Textile Museum in Washington D.C.⁽³⁷⁾ Since the Council's magazine focuses on contemporary American craft, the article on the award created a confusing

impression that the Textile Museum was actually doing some kind of awardable work of distinction in contemporary American craft related to textiles. But while the Textile Museum does excellent work on historical textiles, the Textile Museum has emphatically stated that it does no research on contemporary American fiber and has no idea who else might be doing it.

"I am therefore not conducting any such survey as you ask about, nor do I know enough about fiber art politics to know who is. . . . We do have some fiber art exhibitions, but we have to be very selective and we therefore do not regard our role as the discovery and promotion of new talent, however worthy an activity that might be. The one-person exhibitions we have had have only been of people who have already achieved international recognition, and who have reached retirement age (or are deceased). Most of our other fiber art exhibitions have been group shows organized elsewhere."⁽³⁸⁾

If the Textile Museum believes research survey to be "fiber art politics" and if most of its exhibitions originate elsewhere, then why was the ACC award bestowed on the Textile Museum? When questioned about this, Leilani Lattin Duke, Chair of the Board of Trustees of the American Craft Council, Inc. wrote that the Textile Museum merited the award for booking exhibitions of a British weaver and an American jeweler whose work was fibrous.⁽³⁹⁾ To confuse curatorial definitions of contemporary American fiber art even more, the Textile Museum accepted the award without any clarification why it received it, if it writes that it doesn't research the field and doesn't know who does.

In short, museum research in the U.S. is confusing the definition of contemporary American craft, and within that subject area, the museums are confusing the definition of contemporary American fiber art as well. The definitions seem to be only whatever the museum arbitrarily claim at any given point.

Research by Contemporary American Craft Museums

The only anchorage in this chaotic storm of unclear definitions seems to be a common thread of artists specializing in materials like clay, fiber, glass, wood, and metal.

In the U.S. there are several museums of contemporary American craft of which the most visible is the American Craft Museum in New York. Like the Museum of Modern Art, the origins of the American Craft Museum were ones nurtured by the Rockefeller family in New York City. Throughout most of their history, the American Craft Museum and the American Craft Council were two parts of the same not-for-profit

organization. They became separate independent organizations only recently.

The American Craft Museum presents itself as performing top echelon curatorial research in the field of contemporary American craft. When David McFadden, the Chief Curator at the American Craft Museum, was asked about its curatorial research on fiber, the museum responded that it wasn't currently executing any research itself in that key sub-category. If the American Craft Museum wasn't currently executing any research on fiber, then upon whose research did it depend in its current decisions of what art work to include and what to exclude in the formulation and selection of its own exhibitions? The American Craft Museum then responded that the resource for their research was the Mint Museum of Craft + Design in Charlotte, North Carolina and the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C. The museum also volunteered that little research actually occurs:

"Should you wish to pursue this further, I have taken the liberty of enclosing a list of all museums with costume or textile collections from the most recent publication of the American Association of Museums; unfortunately there is no section devoted to contemporary textiles that I could send you."⁽⁴⁰⁾

While the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C. has a reputation of doing excellent professional research in historical textiles as noted above, the Textile Museum denies that it does any research on contemporary American fiber and that it believes such research would be a form of "fiber art politics." [sic] Therefore, the American Craft Museum cannot really base its selections upon research by the Textile Museum.

What about the second resource cited by the American Craft Museum? The Mint Museum of Craft + Design asserts that it is one of only three museums in the U.S. researching contemporary American craft and identified the other two museums as being the American Craft Museum and the Renwick Gallery. As to that identification, however:

"The correct answer is the American Craft Museum in New York City. . . . Certainly, there will be others in the near future, but I'm not sure how many on the scale of MMC+D [the Mint Museum of Art + Design]. But I am not a definitive source on this. I let writers and editors decide such matters."⁽⁴¹⁾

Let writers and editors decide is what the Mint Museum of Craft + Design considers to be the foundation of its curatorial research?

The Mint Museum of Craft + Design then responded that it too was not doing any significant research on the fiber sub-category of contemporary American craft.

“Contemporary fiber art is one of our weaker areas. If you know of collectors who wish to change that, Mark Leach would be more than happy to talk with them”⁽⁴²⁾

Collectors do the curatorial research for the curators at the Mint Museum of Craft + Design? The director, Mark Leach, is also the Chairman of the Publications Committee of the American Craft Council, Inc. which decides what work will or will not be featured in *American Craft*. He did not respond to questions about his research.

The National Museum’s Research

As noted above, the Renwick Gallery is responsible for generating the official research record on contemporary American craft on behalf of the federal government for the American public.

The American Craft Museum and the Mint Museum of Craft + Design are “private” museums depending upon private donations and grants, entrance fees, while enjoying significant government benefits. The Renwick Gallery, however, receives most of its funding directly from the U.S. Congress and the Federal government. And with that government funding comes the crystal clear obligation for the Renwick Gallery to research and create the nation’s official record on contemporary American craft in a fair, accurate and professional manner.

The unique responsibility of the Renwick Gallery can be seen as particularly crucial where Curator-in-Charge Kenneth Trapp advises that:

“I could probably name the curators in the museums on two hands with 18 [*sic*] digits missing, that are really committed to the field.”⁽⁴³⁾

So how exactly does the Renwick examine and select work in the process of researching and creating the official record for the American public? In 1995 the Renwick Gallery curated an exhibition of contemporary American craft, well known now as “The White House Exhibition.” The director at that time, Michael Monroe, surveyed, researched, examined, evaluated, and judged the field, selecting more than 75 participating artists within a 48 hour period.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Was it really possible to have based those selections on reliable research so quickly?

Only later was it revealed that the quickly selected artists had to fulfil one little-disclosed criterion that is highly unusual in *bona fide* academic research: they had to agree to hand over ownership of their art work to the Renwick.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Aren’t museums expected to work out loan agreements to avoid even the appearance of requiring artists to pay bribes to be researched and exhibited?

Was the Smithsonian's "White House Collection" a valid careful record of some of America's most significant contemporary craft? Or was it just a record of the Renwick's best connected contacts who could afford "to pay to play"? Is the answer clarified for future researchers in the permanent record generated by the exhibition?

When questioned later about research at the Renwick requiring donations, Mr. Trapp said it was:

"a good thing if they [the artists] can add it to their resume. I personally don't ask artists for donations to the Renwick Gallery. I'm not opposed to accepting something that's offered"⁽⁴⁶⁾

But that is different from what he wrote just three weeks earlier when U.S. Congressman Jerrold Nadler asked Mr. Trapp how one was actually supposed to apply to be "researched" by the Renwick. Mr. Trapp answered that applicants should send written proposals:

"The proposal should be accompanied by a preliminary checklist, updated resume, no more than 20 slides, **suggestions for funding**, and some idea of how extensive the publication might be if there is an accompanying catalogue." [*emphasis added.*]⁽⁴⁷⁾

The White House Exhibition became the target of significant criticism from contemporary American fiber artists as inaccurate because it included very little fiber art. Shortly after Mr. Trapp succeeded Mr. Monroe at the Renwick, the *Bulletin of The Friends of Fiber Art* International questioned that deficiency in the research. Mr. Trapp responded by claiming that there was insufficient wall space available to accommodate a fair amount of fiber art in the exhibition.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Was this purported limitation publicly disclosed in the permanent record to avoid misunderstandings among future researchers?

The biennial conference of the Handweavers Guild of America always features an internationally acclaimed exhibition of miniatures, "Small Expressions." Such miniatures take up very little wall space. The *Bulletin* of FOFA reminded Curator Trapp that contemporary American fiber art includes fiber sculptures and basket work which do not even belong up on walls.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Two years later, Mr. Trapp was questioned a second time in the official journal of the Handweavers Guild of America about the deficiency of fiber in the "White House Exhibition." And the expert curator reiterated the previously disproved claim that contemporary American fiber had to be omitted due to insufficient wall space. It was as if much of the field of contemporary American fiber did not really exist for the Renwick and as if the previous published exchange of information had never taken place.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Unfortunately, the author, a curator herself and an advisor to the Friends of Fiber Art International, did not ask Mr. Trapp on behalf of the HG A why he was repeating the inaccurate information he previously stated in the FOFA *Bulletin*.

In other words, the federal museum of contemporary American craft too has an amply documented history of performing research that cannot be separated from the improper influences of cronyism, financial payments, funding considerations, and deficient knowledge of the field. And all of this while the curators feel perfectly free to define contemporary American craft as they wish, without any open discussion, accountability or even responsibility to make normally expected disclosures of any of this in the permanent record they create for future reference on contemporary American fiber.

Curatorial Acknowledgment of “Unexpected Distortions”

According to the museums of contemporary American craft, their subject area consists of the work of recent American “artists specializing in clay, fiber, glass, wood, and metal” as explicated by “the curator, in fact, who is the pan-theoretician or the pan-arbiter, trying to bring together these disparate groups in a collection for example.”⁽⁵¹⁾

The American Craft Museum, the Mint Museum of Craft + Art, and the Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art claim to research contemporary American craft in a professionally responsible manner. But upon questioning, the first two claim that they do not examine and research contemporary fiber art. And the third has a history of poorly disclosed financial conflicts-of-interest and its deficient knowledge of contemporary fiber art has been reported separately in two of the field’s publications.

As striking as this is, there seems to be only one published curatorial acknowledgment of this problem:

“[T]he recent history of craft as it is reflected in print is subject to some unexpected distortions. For example, although ceramics is not the largest field of activity — **that honor almost certainly belongs to fiber** — in the recent history of American craft ceramics is more fully recorded than work in any other medium.”
[emphasis added]⁽⁵²⁾

So a failure of museums of contemporary American craft to research, examine, and record contemporary American fiber is not a minor deficiency. It is a deficiency of arguably the field’s largest constituent!

And except for this one official acknowledgment published by the American Craft Museum, there seems to be no reference in any of the museum exhibitions, curatorial research, and professional articles of recent decades that warns scholars and the public that this significant omission characterizes the curatorial research. And it is an ongoing omission whose possible remedies curators repeatedly demonstrate they do not want to discuss.

The College Art Association

In 2000, the American Association of Museums issued its *New Ethical Guidelines* calling for greater transparency and accountability from our museums. But what does the professional field of art history and education in the U.S. have to say about this, since the creation of a distorted and defective permanent record falls directly into their professional ethical bailiwick?

The College Art Association is the national professional organization for teachers of art and art history. Among other things, its Mission Statement states that the College Art Association:

“Promotes excellence in scholarship and teaching in the history and criticism of the visual arts and in creativity and technical skill in the teaching and practices of art.

“Facilitates the exchange of ideas and information among those interested in art and history of art.

“Advocates comprehensive and inclusive education in the visual arts.

“Speaks for the membership on issues affecting the visual arts and humanities. . . .”

“Articulates and affirms the highest ethical standards in the conduct of the profession.”⁽⁵³⁾

The CAA has an impressive *Code of Ethics for Art Historians and Guidelines for the Professional Practice of Art History*. While the CAA is very attentive to many serious research issues such as illegal exports and potential conflicts of interest in researching gifts, the CAA seems to say nothing about the basic question of whether art museums must actually examine work when those art museums claim or create the impression that they have examined the work in the process of formulating a final conclusion in a permanent record.⁽⁵⁴⁾

In response to questions about the ethics of research practices that claim to examine work in the formulation of professional judgments, but fail to

execute that examination, former CAA president, Dr. Larry Silver responded:

"I am not shocked (any more than Claude Rains's inspector in *Casablanca*) to learn that museums are imposing their own coercive force in building their collections through exhibitions, and I do hope that Dr. Kushner's committee will address this ethical problem, but it can only do so with a statement of principles, with no force of law or other compulsion. Moreover, I am hardly surprised to learn that museums, never overfunded with unrestricted monies, turn towards funding sources as the sunflower faces the light. Are you?"⁽⁵⁵⁾

Prof. Silver directed me to contact Dr. Marilyn Kushner, the Chair of the CAA's Museum Committee. When I did in the spring of 2000, Dr. Kushner failed to address the question.⁽⁵⁶⁾ About a year later, current CAA president Dr. Ellen Baird also asserted that Dr. Kushner is the CAA officer who should respond.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Recently, Dr. Kushner finally responded that the issue would be on the Museum Committee's business agenda at its national convention in February of 2002.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Unfortunately, CAA members are not permitted to attend Museum Committee meetings if they are not Committee members.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Is Dr. Kushner, the Chair of the CAA Museum Committee as well as a curator at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the only CAA official who is permitted to address this issue?

The CAA did invite me to participate in a roundtable discussion on "Museum and University Publications" scheduled for later at the same convention. Regarding professional art research, I was able to ask if the CAA had an official position on situations where a researcher has claimed or created an impression that he or she has examined work in the formulation of a final conclusion in a permanent record when that researcher has not examined the work.

Although I was questioned at great length, the CAA professed only sincere confusion about what this question could possibly mean. At the end of the Roundtable, the CAA responded that it currently had no formal position on this professional issue to point to.

The Handweavers Guild of America

Not only is this research issue not openly discussed, there seems to be a chilling atmosphere of intimidation attending it. I have been warned innumerable times that there would be professional penalties for raising this question.

The Handweavers Guild of America is a not-for-profit organization with many members and participating local guilds from all across the United States and Canada, including representatives from all around the world. It sponsors a biennial conference, a quarterly magazine, and certification in weaving and yarn spinning. It's mission statement states that it is "dedicated to encouraging excellence, inspiring creativity, and preserving fiber traditions through education."⁽⁶⁰⁾ Indeed, the HGA is widely recognized as being largely responsible for the preservation and education of the skills and traditions that are the foundation of contemporary American fiber art, especially while work incorporating these skills and traditions is deficient in art museum research.

While the HGA focuses intently upon education and research, it states:

"that negative attitudes and tearing down of organizations and institutions such as HGA, the American Craft Museum, the College Art Association, the Mint Museum of Craft and Design, the Renwick and its curator, and others involved in the field, whom you wish to engage in dialog and/or work toward developing curatorial research in contemporary American craft, will gain nothing for any of us. Far better to develop a positive relationship, educate, and work with these groups than to continually criticize and mount attacks against them. These kinds of aggressions benefit no one."⁽⁶¹⁾

But isn't free inquiry is the *essential validating hallmark of accurate reliable research*? Over past decades, the HGA and its membership have suffered from the creation of a defective curatorial record which inaccurately asserts that there is relatively little contemporary American fiber work of significant value and importance to be found. After all, curators of contemporary American craft do state that they are not researching the subject matter.

In deeming open inquiry to be "aggressions," the HGA sounds as if curators are threatening the organization in some way. And so the coup de grace against necessary open discussion is delivered by the victim's own intimidated advocate.

Conclusion

While becoming major players in the tourism, entertainment, and retail industries, American art museums are still asserting their traditional roles of presenting, explicating, and recording significant examples of art based upon reliable, professional curatorial research. In selecting, explicating and exhibiting art work, the museums claim they are creating a permanent, accurate, reliable research record.

In recent years, an increasing number of serious questions has been raised challenging that claim, especially regarding exhibitions of contemporary art. Those questions have arisen in tandem with the public disclosures of major scandals and criminal activities in the art world that undermine the public's trust in museums' claims of executing reliable, accurate academic research.

These scandals involve hundreds of thousands of dollars of undisclosed private funding, secret business arrangements, and other hidden financial conflicts-of-interest as illustrated recently by the Brooklyn Museum of Art. These criminal activities include criminal collusion and price-fixing. For example, Christie's and Sotheby's, which are often business partners with art museums, recently reimbursed \$512 million to the customers they bilked.

Half a billion dollars is not petty larceny. It illustrates the enormous hidden financial pressures in the art and museum world that easily have the ability to corrupt art museum research, especially where safeguards and ethical guidelines are omitted.

Fatally flawed curatorial research can be easily illustrated by examining the research of museums of contemporary American craft performed upon contemporary American fiber. Fiber is arguably the largest sub-category of contemporary American craft, but it is one of the least exhibited and recorded by those museums. Upon formal questioning, museums of American Craft are unable to identify accurately what research they themselves rely upon to include so little fiber. Two of the country's three key museums of contemporary American craft stated they were not performing research on contemporary American fiber in the process of mounting their exhibitions. The third one, funded largely by the federal government to create the public's official record, executes research which seems to be fatally flawed by poorly disclosed financial conflicts-of-interest, cronyism, and deficient expertise.

The Handweavers Guild of American, the principle advocate for education and research in contemporary American fiber, discourages open inquiry, fearing the curatorial displeasure, even after the flawed curatorial record has been officially acknowledged in print by the American Craft Museum.

This chronic problem in contemporary American fiber constitutes a clear dramatic example of defective art museum research that merits immediate remedial attention. However, in addressing the germane principles in the larger community of professional art research to seek clarification, the problem of missing professional research guidelines and ethics in contemporary American fiber has unexpectedly unearthed the very same

deficiencies at the very highest levels of art research and policy formulation.

After two years of repeated questioning, the College Art Association sincerely claims that it does not understand what research guidelines and ethics might ever be appropriate to address the defective record on contemporary American fiber. And it is the College Art Association which formulates and suggests policy on art research and education to all American colleges and universities, including those schools offering graduate programs in museum studies!

And so, as art museums evolve into profit driven institutions, these new commercial priorities conflict with their ability to produce reliable, accurate research. And without a professional understanding and application of safeguards and ethical guidelines standard in all other areas of academic research in the liberal arts, it is difficult to counterbalance those powerful, hidden, commercial pressures. Today, there is less and less to distinguish art museum research from crass entertainment, advertising and promotion. The research record is already suffering fatal defects. This can only foster a very serious crisis of public confidence in art museum research.

There has been great professional resistance against discussing these crucial issues constructively. As the newspapers publish alarming disclosures about art world research with increasing frequency, isn't it time now for us to begin talking about this issue openly?

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