ART MUSEUMS IN A NEW WORLD

As a former student in Harvard’s fine arts department and now a professor of art history, I eagerly read Janet Tassel’s “Reverence for the Object” (September-October, page 48) on the program and its influence on generations of art museum directors. I was very disappointed that critical interventions into the discipline of art history are dealt with in such an ignorantly and fatuously way.

These interventions— spearheaded by scholars such as T.J. Clark and Norman Bryson (who is dismissed as having studied, horrors!, literature and linguistics, rather than art history), not to mention women scholars such as Harvard’s Irene Winter and other luminaries (Linda Nochlin comes to mind)— have transformed the field and, in most cases museums themselves. The current Museum of Modern Art, with its focus (as the Metropolitan Museum’s Philippe de Montebello, in his inimitable homophobic and misogynistic way, puts it) on “AIDS, sex, AIDS, feminism, AIDS, homosexuality, AIDS and patriarchy,” is thus considered a far more important institution for the display of art since 1800 among younger generations of artists, art historians, and art critics than the hidebound Metropolitan.

The fact that all of the museum directors discussed in the article (with the sole exception of Anne d’Harnoncourt) are white men is testament precisely to what is best called “fine art” and the connoisseurship that goes with it. But now noisseurship is not the only model the far more diverse world of global culture confronting museums today. Connoisseurship is not the only model the fine arts department has taught over the years. Unfortunately, it was the dominant one when I was there, but thank heavens its authority has been sufficiently undermined that even Harvard’s own scholars are challenging the status quo.

Amelia Jones ’83
Professor, University of California, Riverside
Riverside, Calif.

Editor’s note: The quote attributed to de Montebello is actually from Heather MacDonald (see page 55 of the article).

Tassel’s excellent article might be a book, the subject is so large. She discusses most of the dilemmas facing museology. But it is not possible to find a unitary job description for the museum among them because “art” (however indefinable) has changed. Museums are used totreasuring what is best called “fine art” and the connoisseurship that goes with it. But now “art” is different, society is different, and museums are (and must be) changing.

Art no longer has to be permanent (Christo), or complete, or even careful.
much less “beautiful.” Art may even destroy itself (Tinguely). Art was always political and activist whether the connoisseurs realized it or not, so de Montebello should not deplore a “misplaced emphasis on social activism” as if it were new.

Henry Clayman ’52
Denver

Tassel does not mention Bernard Berenson, A.B. 1887, whose spirit, if not ghost, still pervades both collecting and fine-arts education in the American art world. She is right to give Harvard and Paul Sachs credit for engendering many American museum directors and curators, but the true origin of Harvard’s prominence in this field lies with its famous son Berenson.

Can you let us know what the two drawings are that Sachs is studying in the photograph on page 51?

Jerome M. Garchik, J.D. ’70
San Francisco

Editor’s note: The drawing on the easel, says Miriam Stewart, assistant curator of drawings at the Fogg Art Museum, is Portrait of Frédéric Villot, by Eugène Delacroix, circa 1840. In 1848 Villot became curator of paintings at the Louvre. Sachs gave the drawing to the Fogg in 1949. The drawing lying on the table is a puzzlement. As to Berenson, please see “Viva I Tatti,” Tassel’s comprehensive article on Berenson and I Tatti (March-April 1994, page 34).

From my brief quotation in Tassel’s fine article, readers might think that I care little about the consequences of archaeological looting. The complete opposite is true. My yearly fieldwork in Mexico and Guatemala focuses on the conservation and documentation of ancient Maya sculptures, often at sites that continue to be pillaged and destroyed at a horrific pace. My original statement, taken from another publication and woefully incomplete in Tassel’s article, emphasized that many looted objects housed in museums and private collections still possess intrinsic intellectual and cultural value, even when stripped of their original archaeological contexts. Rather than reflecting an uncaring attitude toward looting, the study of unprovenienced Maya texts in decipherment research aims to salvage as much as possible of a diminishing cultural heritage.

David Stuart
Barlett curator of Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions, Peabody Museum Cambridge

Missing from Tassel’s detailed article was mention of Paul Sachs’s interest in African and Oceanic art. In 1934 members of his famous museum course mounted an exhibition of 56 works of Oceanic and African art at the Fogg Art Museum and wrote a small accompanying catalogue. This is one of the earliest art museum exhibitions of African and Oceanic works anywhere, and among the very first to present these works as “art.” That the word “art” is used in the catalogue title and text is groundbreaking for this era, the writers emphasizing not only the “aesthetic merit” of the works, but also the impact that “beliefs and prejudices inherent in our Occidental tradition” had had on our perception of these traditions in the past.

The exhibit was a precursor to the well-known exhibition of African art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1935. Two years later, in 1937, Mrs. John D. Rockefeller Jr. gave the Fogg a magnificent early Benin bronze head. Since that time, Harvard’s art museums have lagged behind other museums by not including works of African and Oceanic (as well as pre-Columbian/Native American art) as part of their ongoing exhibitions. Premier examples of these arts should be included. Ideas of prejudice promoted in part through forms of visual segregation (including whose works get exhibited where and how) develop early and have an enduring impact on students of all ages. Until the 1920s, ancient Greek and Roman art, Chinese art, and Egyptian art were generally all classified as “primitive art.” Slowly, these and other arts have

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been pulled away from this highly pejorative and illogical taxonomy. Sachs was in the vanguard of this process.

**Suzanne Preston Blier**

Professor of history of art and architecture and of Afro-American studies

Cambridge

**FIGHTING FAT**

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry when I read “The Party Line on Flab” (September-October, page 16). After interviewing 909 people, researchers Taeku Lee and J. Eric Oliver seem to have concluded not only that Americans aren’t concerned about obesity, but also that further stigmatization of obese people should be encouraged by the government. Somehow, the millions of dollars that Americans already spend each year on weight-loss products, the pressure that American culture already exerts on people to prize thinness, and the discrimination already faced by the obese don’t count in Lee and Oliver’s analysis.

Even assuming that there is “a national reluctance to tackle obesity” by public means, the article itself inadvertently provides the explanation: “Health experts,” it says, blame obesity on “factors like genetics, social inequalities, and sedentary lifestyles.” The survey’s 909 respondents probably realized, unlike Lee and Oliver, that government can’t do anything about the first factor and has had the second and third factors on its agenda for decades. Lee and Oliver would also do well to re-examine their apparent assumptions that obesity is equivalent to ill health and that someone knows how to make people thin. For example, some research shows that, while obesity may aggravate pre-existing conditions such as heart disease and diabetes, it does not cause such conditions; Americans’ life expectancy has increased during the same period that they have been gaining weight; and, as the New York Times magazine recently noted, it may be the government itself that has caused the obesity “epidemic” through its promotion of high-carbohydrate diets.

I think the 909 respondents were absolutely right to show “little enthusiasm for fat-fighting policies.”

John Paschetto, J.D. ’98

Kennett Square, Pa.

**BUILDING THE SCIENCE CENTER**

On page 74 of the September-October issue, the Science Center is reported to have cost $12.5 million, and on page 88K it cost $19 million. Why the discrepancy?

**Michael Sherman ’72**

Cambridge

Editor’s note: Further investigation, by Jeffrey Cushman ’69, project manager for the current $24-million enlargement and reconfiguration of the Science Center, confirms $19 million as the project cost of the original construction. “The $12.5 million figure,” he says, “is the sum of two ‘anonymous’ gifts received in 1965 and 1966” toward the construction.

**THE MERITS OF TESTING**

Richard Elmore’s polemic against test-based accountability (“Testing Trap,” September-October, page 35) fails to acknowledge the many positive aspects of standardized assessment, such as those clearly evident in the recent summary of PISA 2000, a survey by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) of 265,000 15-
year-olds across 32 countries, which “assessed their preparedness for adult life.” This measurement of literacy in reading, mathematics, and science has already overturned a number of “truths” similar to those that Elmore upholds. Several wealthy countries such as the United States, Denmark, Switzerland, and Germany showed surprisingly mediocre results, whereas relatively poorer Finland and Korea, as well as Canada and Japan, were top performers. It is clear that public policy can promote equitable learning. In Canada, Finland, and Korea, socioeconomically disadvantaged students nevertheless outperformed the OECD average. And the greatest between-school differences in student performance were not in the United States, but rather in Belgium, Germany, and Hungary. In America, within-school differences accounted for more variation in student performance than differences between schools.

The information from PISA 2000 shows that some countries and schools perform better and more equitably than others. These results have already led many countries to closely examine and reevaluate their educational systems, particularly those countries long assumed to have stellar schools, such as Switzerland and Germany, which significantly underperformed the OECD norm. Rather than focusing on accountability, perhaps testing in the U.S. can be similarly used to understand variations between states, districts, and schools to develop better-informed solutions to improve the nation’s schools.

Emily Kim ’82
Freiburg, Germany

There is an interesting contrast between the views of Professor Elmore and those of the chief executive officer of Chicago’s schools, Arne Duncan ’86 (“School CEO,” September-October, page 881), on education in low-income areas. Elmore criticizes standardized testing and its concomitant “performance-based accountability” in large part because schools in poor areas can’t compete with those whose students have high socioeconomic status. He does not believe students in disadvantaged neighborhoods can or should be held to the same level of performance as their wealthier peers. Duncan, in taking rather drastic action with respect to underachieving schools, states that “we had to stop perpetuating a culture of failure.”

As long as the Elmore views prevail and students in low-income inner-city districts are not expected to perform as well as their wealthier peers, they will not perform as well as those peers. They should be encouraged to compete with the best and brightest, and not accept the false premise that they are not as good as the rich kids. Perhaps Elmore is correct in saying that their economic condition will prevent them from achieving equality on the tests, but their effort to do so and to prove their worth will surely improve their education and value to society.

Clifford J. Meyer ’54, LL.B. ’60
Newport Beach, Calif.

SACHS ON THE RECORD

Your article on the Center for International Development (“Developmental Troubles,” September-October, page 63) was incorrect in many important respects.

In a brief period of time, through my own efforts of creating and directing CID, and in collaboration with Dean Joseph Nye and faculty across the University, the CID had quickly become one of the leading academic centers for development studies. Far from creating financial problems, my personal efforts had mobilized several million dollars of outright donations to CID right from the start (many times the $1 million you erroneously cite), as well as millions of dollars more every year in funded research projects. The overhead from those projects alone provided around $800,000 to the Kennedy School of Government last year.

More importantly from the point of the University’s mission, several hundred students from the College and graduate schools became actively involved in CID activities, and CID was widely and rightly regarded as one of the premier research, teaching, and policy centers on the campus. CID-affiliated undergraduates won a slew of prizes and fellowships for work and research related to their CID activities. The master’s in international development (MPAID) at the Kennedy School of Government (KSG), which I conceived, is regarded from near and far as a tremendous success, with an enormous applicant pool of top students each year from around the world.

Your statement that research salaries
“easily outpaced” revenue sources completely misrepresents the whole process of building an institute in close partnership with the University leadership. I was repeatedly told by Presidents Rudenstine and Summers that the University would fund part of CID’s research activities, precisely as it should. Moreover, the KSG was committed to helping CID raise a significant endowment, a crucial point not mentioned in the article. CID is a part of Harvard University, not a consulting firm. In short, the “deficit” mentioned in the article simply did not exist since the University leadership had given repeated assurances that it would cover an agreed part of the Center’s research activities and would continue to do so, especially as the KSG commitment to help raise an endowment for the Center had not yet been achieved.

While I regretted leaving CID and Harvard, after 22 years on the faculty and 8 more years as a Harvard student, I made every effort to minimize any disruptions resulting from my departure, almost exactly contrary to what you imply. It was not my idea to transfer to Columbia University the existing projects on which I was the principal investigator (PI), but rather the request of KSG administrators, who apparently felt that the projects should move with the PI despite my willingness to run them out of Harvard for another academic year. The KSG administrators were then dismayed to learn that many donors were not interested in maintaining their projects at CID under those conditions. When the pipeline of grant support therefore began to diminish rapidly, salaries that were once assured suddenly appeared to be “uncovered.” Moreover, if the University decides to hold back on its contributions to CID and instead uses CID’s internal funds, then a “deficit” appears where none existed even a month before.

I treasure Harvard and respect its leadership, and have confidence that Harvard will keep CID, the MPAID, and other economic development activities vibrant. I doubt that Harvard would cut back sharply on its global development work in the name of false economizing. And very happily, despite a move to a nearby campus, I continue to work actively with many close friends and colleagues at CID and Harvard University more broadly in pursuit of our common inter-
ests of sustainable development throughout the world.

Jeffrey D. Sachs ’76, Jf ’80, Ph.D. ’80
Director, Earth Institute, Columbia University
New York City

Editor’s note: According to the information available to this magazine, the Center for International Development indeed attracted several million dollars for sponsored research, but only $1.5 million in outright donations or gifts during the period in question. The amount matters, because it appears that CID’s financial projections were contingent upon raising a significant endowment—at least 10 times the $1.5 million in gift income recorded—to provide an income stream to support its operations. It appears that these funds were not raised. Whoever was supposed to “help” raise those funds, failure to do so would be a matter of serious concern to the director of a University academic center. Similarly, in ordinary Harvard usage, “overhead” means funding beyond direct project costs, applied to defray routine operating expenses incurred by any grant-receiving research center or project—office space, utilities, photocopying, library usage—rather than a separate stream of revenue.

Again according to information available to the magazine, during CID’s four-year start-up phase, the University agreed to defray research costs of $500,000 annually (subsequently raised to $750,000). Thereafter, CID was expected to become financially self-sustaining. The large deficits reported by the magazine exceeded the agreed-upon amounts.

The magazine’s telephone calls to Professor Sachs, seeking comment during the reporting of the article, were not returned.

HOW VIVID STILL
Thanks to Betty Vorenberg for the delightful and candid reminiscence “Mastering in the ’70s” (September-October, page 68) of life at Dunster House. It is incredible to me how vivid still are the memories of my three years there. Betty and her husband, Jim, were terrific, as were the tutors they chose. I have especially fond memories of Jerome Culp, whose nimble squash game defied the laws of physics to which his substantial size ought to have been subject. I also remember the erudite and witty Mike Roberts (the third from the left in Bob Young’s cartoon on page 71, not the second) and his lovely wife (lost to cancer a few years later). And Jeremy Sabloff with his tales about Cozumel and the Yucatan. And roommates and friends now scattered across the country and beyond. On my occasional trips back to Cambridge, I often feel as though I can still find these wonderful people on the other side of G entry, ready for a pick-up game of squash or a late night burger from “The Grill.”

Joshua Brain ’77, J.D. ’81
Greenwich, Conn.