

# A Place in the Sun

Brian Allen

**O**UR RAMBLING, ROBUST SYSTEM OF COLLEGE and university museums is nearly unique. Yes, there are university museums in the United Kingdom, but they have fewer than ten, while we in America have at least two hundred. No other country has a network of museums dedicated to students and faculty. The first in America—the Yale University Art Gallery—opened in 1832 via John Trumbull’s gift of a hundred of his Revolutionary War paintings in return for an annuity and graves for him and his wife in the gallery crypt.

There the Trumbulls still repose. Above them is an intellectual and aesthetic hive. Not every college and university has an art museum, but many do. All focus on students and academics rather than art appreciators and delectation, though many are to be found there and much is to be had. Still, the milieu’s scholarly and esoteric.

I’m an art critic and write often about these museums, usually called academic art museums. Often they do good exhibitions, though existing as they do on campuses, much of their work reflects curricular concerns and is too narrow to mine for a frothy, engaging story such as art critics like to write. That said, I’ve worked at four academic art museums over twenty-five years and was a student at two schools with historically important art museums. At Yale, I often passed by the Trumbull tomb, near the art history department bathrooms as it was.

I’ll write about some of the trends I’ve seen in the field of academic art museums over the last twenty years or so. Engagement with the general public, and interdisciplinary learning, are now prominent. These changes are so big I’ll call them revolutionary. I’ll also write about how these museums are doing in the face of the politicization, antisemitism, and relaxation of standards that makes so many colleges and universities husks of their once-great selves.

The healthiest, even most ennobling, change in these museums since, say, the year 2000, is public engagement. It’s safe to say that academic art museums historically had little, if any, interest in the public. By “public,” I mean not only the locals, but the big, wide world accessed and enlightened through traveling exhibitions. These are two publics, I know, but museum insularity and, yes, contempt for the *hoi polloi* each played a part in ignoring both.

It's the worst pair of tin ears in academia. Colleges and universities are tax-exempt. They often occupy prime real estate in the cities and towns they call home. Their art museums are often the only academic resource they offer to the public. Still, many academic art museums charge admission, and scandalously so. The Fogg, the popular collective name for Harvard's three art museums, until recently charged a hefty \$20 per head, a fee the very rich museum levied to discourage the indigenous people of Cambridge from coming. Harvard seems to mass produce ill will, I know, so it astonished me when the Fogg went free last year. A donor underwrote free admission in what is the positive thing Harvard served the public last year.

My experience of Yale's art gallery, a very long one since I grew up near New Haven and went to Yale, showed me a different mood. If the public wanted to come, that was fine. If the public didn't come, that was fine, too, and no one cried in their sherry. Among college and university art museums, I think this was, historically, the default sentiment.

Tradition, location, and a special curator, director, or founder made for degrees of interest in the public. RISD's art museum, Yale's art gallery and its Center for British Art, the Hood at Dartmouth, and Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery belong to schools, but are also the civic art museums serving big and sometimes sprawling population centers. These museums have always had good programs for local public school children, with the Hood especially engaged and imaginative.

The British Art Center at Yale, which opened in 1977, was conceived by Paul Mellon, its founder and core funder, as a civic museum that happened to belong to a university. The museum's always had a lively, accessible special exhibition program—one of my favorite shows there was on the art of British tea biscuit tins—and a lecture and film program that, from the beginning, packed its auditorium. Mellon, of course, steeped in a civic museum culture. His father established the National Gallery in Washington.

The Hood is a star among academic art museums for many reasons. It has a stellar collection and, for years, did very good, self-organized traveling exhibitions that put it on the circuit with civic, big city museums many times its size. So, at least in the 1980s and 1990s, was the Williams College Museum of Art.

Williams's collection is not nearly as good, but Tom Krens was director there in the 1980s, training for the part of supreme showman that he finally got as director of the Guggenheim. Timothy Rub, who later directed the big civic museums in Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Philadelphia, made the Hood an exhibition powerhouse while he was there. He had a natural talent for bridging the gap between art history and the public's understanding of art. This served the Hood well, along with the institutions that he subsequently led.

The Addison Gallery at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, where I was the director, also punched far above its weight in serving the local public with the same passion as the Hood. In part, this came from a brilliant education curator who developed collaborations with the public schools in Lawrence, the struggling old mill city adjacent to leafy Andover. I don't think Adam Weinberg, my predecessor, was deeply motivated by noblesse oblige, and neither was I. We simply both respected our education curator's passion and let her run with it.

I think Weinberg, his predecessor Jock Reynolds, and I shared a basic philosophy. The Addison had three audiences. The first and primary audience, in an academic art museum, has to be the students, faculty, and, riding on their coattails, the alumni. Second, I think the three of us felt, to differing degrees, that the Addison was the civic art museum for the Merrimack Valley, too. And, third, we were deeply engaged in a national audience. The Addison's exhibitions over our collective twenty-five or so years traveled to well over a hundred museums. The Addison's survey exhibition of art from historically black colleges went to a dozen venues. Traveling exhibitions during my ten years were seen by over a million visitors.

The Addison, though, is a great anomaly, in part because the museum is financially independent of the school. Andover Central gives it very little money, and that means *very* little. The school, in my day, paid the phone bill and plowed the snow. Everything else was on the Addison's dime. If something broke in the building, the school would send someone to fix it but bill us. The Addison has its own endowment that covers about 60 percent of the bills. I was fortunate in that Phillips Academy was concerned primarily with two things, vis-a-vis the Addison, at least in my day: My budget had to be balanced, and the Addison was a bad-headlines-free zone. Aside from those, I did what I wanted.

Few academic art museums were, or are, so privileged. Both the Hood, the Williams College museum, and nearly all other academic art museums are far more financially integrated in their parent institutions. This put considerable pressure on the two museums to drop what were once first-class traveling exhibitions with scholarly catalogues. They were expensive, to be sure, but administrators and the faculty—including the studio art and art history faculties—didn't see the point.

“Not seeing the point” is a faculty, administrative, and trustee pandemic, the prime victim of which is not the diseased but the college or university museum, regardless of how enthusiastic and imaginative the staff. This is a nearly universal condition, though it has evolved in two different ways. A growing fringe of schools don't “see the point” so aggressively that they're using their art museums as an ATM.

Valparaiso University and La Salle University both recently sold art, Valparaiso to build new and fancy dormitories and La Salle to balance its budget. Years ago, Fisk University tried to sell treasures from its Stieglitz Collection, arguing that it was broke. Crystal Bridges Museum bought part-ownership in Fisk's art, keeping it in the public's trust. The Valparaiso and La Salle sales both bombed at auction, and both generated so much alumni and art world scorn that such stunts are now toxic.

Engraved in the sensibilities of trustees and presidents is the epic flop that was Brandeis University's stab at closing its Rose Art Museum and selling the art in 2009 and 2010. During COVID, a cabal of museums, led by greedy trustees, tried to change the museum industry's stout ethical rule prohibiting the sale of art for operating expenses. I've seen this movement grow with the Association of Art Museum Directors over the years. COVID lockdowns debilitated museum finances to the point that advocates of art-for-cash vault raids, long a minority, saw their moment.

They nearly won, too, but didn't. When push came to shove, the museum community declined to allow their art to be plundered. Now, museum collections seem to be safe for the foreseeable future.

The biggest boosters of the cash grabs weren't academic art museums, most of whom worry about those among their masters with marginal interest in art. These masters would include school trustees more enamored of new stadiums and science buildings than Renoir and Tintoretto. Rather, MoMA, surrounded by millionaires and billionaires, and the Met, with a \$4 billion endowment, were among the key instigators in turning art into ATMs. In a key vote, the academic art museum directors uniformly voted "no" when it came to allowing collection raids. They saved the day from the greedy Manhattan institutions.

Still, earlier this year the University of New Hampshire closed its art museum to slice \$1 million off the school's \$14 million deficit. The collection, which is tiny, won't go on the block, and the husk of the museum will have an ad hoc, itinerant presence on campus.

These are, I'm happy to write, outliers, for many reasons. Academic art museums might not do splashy traveling exhibitions with catalogues, but most do very good collaborative programming with the local schools in their home cities and towns. The Yale art gallery's and the BAC's work with New Haven's public schools is impressive. The art museums at Colby College, Wake Forest University, the Hood, and Indiana University have very good K-12 programs, too.

Engagement with the locals goes beyond the public schools. Harvard's Fogg went free last year, and so did Smith College's very nice art museum. Endowing free admission is a winning fundraising product, of course, especially in communities where the academic art museum doubles as the civic museum, but colleges and universities

seem to be embracing a new spirit of good citizenship. They're seeing their museums as a means for the locals to feel emotionally and intellectually invested even though they might not be alums.

The Mother of All Tin Ears has to be Oberlin College, whose students, encouraged by the school's top administrators, mounted a riot aimed at Gibson's Bakery, a small, revered mom-and-pop shop on the town's Main Street that has served students and locals since 1885. Gibson's, its reputation and business trashed by Oberlin College, sued the school for libel and got a \$32 million check.

Colleges and universities, packed with credentialed people as they are, sometimes learn slowly, but parting with \$32 million from the endowment focused the academic mind industry-wide. Playing nice with the locals is more important than ever, and schools see their museums as a tool more keenly than ever. I'm surprised and happy to discover that many academic art museums now have visitor services departments.

Interdisciplinary teaching and learning are now so embedded in academic art museums that it's easy to overlook how new this is. A campus art museum historically served the art history department and, possibly, the studio art department, and that was the extent of its intellectual real estate. Now, college and university art museums have insinuated themselves into the teaching of history, literature, the sciences, especially ecology, and all aspects of the arts. Most museums now have a staffer dedicated to linking the curriculum campus-wide to their collections. Classes of all stripes meet at museums now. Curators design teaching exhibitions focused on classes beyond art history.

I saw this up close and personal at the Addison, where we designed exhibitions in tandem with teachers from the history and English departments, whose courses were planned years out. Art with environmental themes was in abundance, too. My first exhibition as director displayed Alexis Rockman's 24-foot-wide painting *Manifest Destiny* from 2003, which depicts the ruins of Brooklyn—under water—at some future point. I'm not a believer in climate apocalypse at all. Still, this bold and very good painting promoted debate in many classes and was the latest salvo of a long history of apocalypse painting. This exhibition was, at the time, unusual in its scope but now shows exploring all kinds of subjects are the norm.

Last year, I visited the Allen Memorial Art Gallery at the notably less rich Oberlin College and the Walker Art Gallery at Bowdoin College. Both had exhibitions that seemed too boutique and bespoke to me, but addressed advanced-level classes. At the Allen, shows on anatomy art and the photographer Dawoud Bey aimed at students far beyond art history majors. "Counting in Art and Math with Sol LeWitt," now on view, appeals to the pocket protector class. At Bowdoin's museum, a retrospective of the career of Mina Loy, mounted last year, was more about Surrealist poetry than art.

## The academic art museum as a class by itself seems to have found a place in the sun.

These are specialist shows that a civic museum wouldn't do (and really shouldn't, since their audiences tend to have more general interests). Academic art museums happily do such shows, and do them well. This is the great strength college and university art museums bring to America's cultural table. Vis-a-vis the tumultuous political controversies that regularly threaten colleges and universities, campus art museums seem to rise above the ugly fray.

Possibly I'm hardened or dulled or immune. Academic art museums have been dealing with identity art and identity themes for years, since "who am I" is a question of special salience to young people. They've had lots of practice and, by and large, deal with these rich, complex topics in a less ham-fisted, opportunistic manner than civic museums that slap a show of bad art by a trendy artist on the walls and think they've done God's bidding.

In the rush to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion, I've seen only isolated moves to diminish permanent collections of European art or American art before, say, 1900. I was aghast to learn that the Hood has no curator of European art, but see little change in staffing and gallery space dedicated to what some on campus would call oppressor art. Exhibitions? As an experiment, I looked at the exhibition docket at the Five Colleges network of art museums in the Pioneer Valley in western Massachusetts. In it are the museums at Smith, Mount Holyoke, Amherst, Hampshire College, and the University of Massachusetts. I added the nearby Williams College museum, which I consider one of my local museums, and the Fogg.

It's a mixed bag. The very good museum at Mount Holyoke wants to "raise the voice of marginalized communities and unseat the Eurocentric and colonialist perspectives that have dominated museums for centuries." There are far too many exhibitions at these museums on what's called "indigeneity," which embraces both Native Americans and people who have moved to this country. The Mead at Amherst is doing an exhibition on Latin American artists examining the "visitor economy regime" in the Caribbean. I'm pre-bored. An upcoming exhibition on Ukrainian contemporary art sounds promising. Smith's doing a Persian art exhibition that sounds worthwhile.

From the Williams College museum's utterly opaque, convoluted website, I learned that it's doing a large show for the 160th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. The Fogg did an exceptional American watercolors show last year in which almost all

the artists were dead white men or dead white women. Thinking about all of these shows, I see a disposition toward topics itemized in the “In This House We Believe” lawn signs ubiquitous in Georgetown, Chappaqua, and Santa Monica. There’s plenty of variety, though, and that’s good.

Museums are a lagging indicator in much of what we call life, since planning for exhibitions takes a long time, but not as long in academic museums as in big civic museums. Even in the slow-paced milieu of higher education, academic art museum staffs tend to be nimble. I’m sure some exhibitions on art from Gaza will be on some docket but I think the dearth of good material might be a barrier.

Over the last few years, many academic art museums have been renovated and expanded, often after big, even heroic capital campaigns. While some museums were in bad shape infrastructure-wise and needed upgrades, these expansions, as a rule, went beyond the call of preventing a building’s collapse.

College and university presidents and trustees saw—and continue to see—their art museums as compelling assets to be stewarded and augmented. I’ve written about their value as local amenities but students, faculty, and alumni want quality museums, too.

Yale’s and Harvard’s museums, after huge construction projects, now look and feel like big-city civic spaces. Princeton’s getting a new, vastly expanded art museum opening next year. The Hood expansion is wonderful and public-oriented. The museum wasn’t visible from Hanover’s main drag, but now it is.

Colby’s museum has a lovely new building. Williams is building an entirely new museum, too. Williams doesn’t need a new museum building, but it has more money than it knows how to spend. Still, I think the new museum will be stunning.

Each of these projects foregrounds student access to art in storage and good classroom space, and most of them involved distinguished architecture. These museums are campus showpieces. This is gratifying to see. The academic art museum as a class by itself seems to have found a place in the sun. **A**