

Museums: Art's final resting place?

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MUSEUMS: ART'S FINAL RESTING PLACE?

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Dorothee Messmer The number of artists is growing continually. Naturally, the greater the creative output becomes, the greater the number of estates that need to be managed when these individuals die, and the greater the pressure on museums to deal with requests for support, offers and donations. Yet the majority of cultural institutions are too short of resources even to include selected works in their collections, let alone sort through an artist's entire life's work. But museums react very differently to these kinds of requests. Some simply refuse to get involved; others have developed strategies ranging from expert consulting to accepting individual works or even managing selected estates in their entirety.

An International Council of Museums (ICOM) resolution passed in 1989 defines a museum as a "non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment." It is precisely their status as public, non-profit organizations that makes museums such popular targets when it comes to placing artists' legacies in a safe and professional manner.

Over the last two hundred years or so, museums have focused on three areas: collecting, researching and exhibiting. But society has changed dramatically in recent decades and rapid modernization has been accompanied by a massive proliferation of material cultural assets. In our "throwaway society" where

disposal of all types of materials is becoming an increasingly urgent priority, collectors and curators are having to ask themselves some tough questions: what is the point of collecting such artifacts? To what extent should aesthetic considerations outweigh cost? Why keep this particular object? What is its real value? How much space will it occupy? What kind of resources will be needed to maintain its value in the long term? These days, most museums therefore acquire estates, or partial estates, according to a clearly defined collecting concept whereby new pieces must contribute towards expanding, consolidating or complementing existing holdings. Museums are increasingly aware that the decision to accept works is the start of a long process of restoring, safeguarding, preserving and maintaining – all of which involves considerable professional expertise and cost, both in terms of personnel and storage/exhibition space.

It therefore comes as no surprise that museums are often cagey about accepting offers for donated estates unless the work or artist is genuinely exceptional from an art history perspective. In addition to the artworks themselves, estates generally also include sketches, drafts and other documents, correspondence and bibliographical materials. For many institutions, integrating such a medley of creative material into a collection entails not only risks but considerable financial, infrastructural and technical costs. And reviewing the estate is just the start.

The critical attitude of art museums towards managing artists' estates was borne out by an oral survey of

association members which suggested that many staff see the topic as a "hot potato", despite the fact that estates are generally highly valued for art history research as they allow scholars to engage deeply with the work and substantiate their interpretations on the basis of real-life evidence.

Several members noted that heirs to artists' estates often lack objectivity and misjudge the value of the works. The survey suggested they fell into two categories: those that regard the estate as worthless and intend to throw it away, and those that approach museums with greatly inflated notions of its value. This, as one colleague remarked, leads to emotionally fraught situations in which curators are "bound to get it wrong". Clearly, this lack of objectivity is connected with the often very close relationship of the heir to the artist, but also with the fact that they rarely have the knowledge and scientific equipment to evaluate the works professionally.

Many of those questioned also bemoaned the "all-or-nothing" approach of many heirs when it comes to transferring estates to institutions. Many museums, particularly the smaller ones with limited resources, are interested in acquiring representative groups of works by local artists, and donations or acquisitions from estates are an excellent way for them to expand their collections with selected pieces. In many cases it would make more sense for heirs and museum curators to sit together and pick out selected works which could then be donated to, or acquired by, an institution. This approach would, they claimed, be a

sustainable way to maintain the value of an artistic oeuvre.

Most members agreed that in an ideal world artists would have sorted, evaluated and separated the wheat from the chaff themselves. They urged artists to actively influence the fate of their works as early, and as objectively, as possible and to sketch a possible plan of action. The survey concluded that it was quite unfeasible for museums to make managing artists' estates a core activity and that their role should be restricted to that of expert advisor.