

# The New Criterion

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## Museum fatigue

*On professional fatigue in the top ranks of museums.*

Seven years ago, in the tenth-anniversary issue of *The New Criterion* (September 1991), we published an article that asked the question: “Has Success Spoiled the Art Museum?” In that article, it was observed that

Of all the institutions of high culture that have undergone significant change in recent decades, none has been more radically transformed than the art museum. In every aspect of its function, its atmosphere, and its scale of operations, in the character and number of the events that it encompasses, in the nature and size of the public it attracts, and in the role it plays in codifying--and at times deconstructing--our ideas about what art is, the museum has been so dramatically altered in our lifetime that in many important respects it can no longer be said to be the same institution we came to in our youth. And of all the changes that have overtaken the art museum in our time, the most crucial has been the elevation of change itself to the status of a governing principle.

Today, alas, this principle of incessant change seems finally to have reached its logical absurdity by producing an epidemic of professional fatigue in the top ranks of museums, where there are now more vacant directorships and fewer qualified candidates to fill them than ever before.

Of the many factors that have contributed to this dismal situation, surely one is the heedless, headlong pursuit of expansion that has burdened so many of our art museums with the need for budgets so vast, bureaucracies so unwieldy, and publicity campaigns so shameless, that a serious interest in art—and a capacity to make serious judgments about art—has come to seem almost marginal to the most pressing concerns of those charged with directing these institutions. Is it any wonder, then, that some well-known and highly respected museum directors have lately elected to quit the profession to take up offers in the auction houses and the art galleries where, in addition to higher compensation and shorter hours, they are likely to have more daily contact with works of art than is any longer possible for the occupant of the director’s office? What these departures from the profession signify is a loss of experience, a loss of connoisseurship, and a loss of mature judgment, all of which are proving to be irreplaceable. Such are the casualties of a

principle of change and expansion that has inevitably made dynamism, salesmanship, and show business a more compelling priority than the serious study of art itself.

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Runaway expansion in the museum world is thus having some of the same effects on the quality of our museums that corporate mergers have had in the book-publishing world. We no longer expect the ceo of a major trade publishing house to have any expert knowledge of books as anything but saleable commodities. We no longer even expect what are still called “editors” in the book-publishing business to function as real editors—which is to say, as “line editors,” as they are now demeaningly stigmatized. In some major houses, editors are now actually forbidden to spend their office time at such fundamental editorial matters, which are either “outsourced” or abandoned altogether. All “editors” are now to be “acquisition editors” on the prowl for potential best sellers. The only “line” that now counts is the bottom line.

Museum curators now face similar imperatives in organizing exhibitions. If the shows they have in mind to organize cannot be expected to command media attention on a scale that will register at the box office, curators now know better than to propose them. Box office has become in the museum profession what bestsellerdom has become in the book-publishing industry. What in book publishing is called “buzz,” in the museum world is called “sizzle,” and we have lately been treated to the spectacle of a major New York museum promoting “sizzle” as its principal appeal in full-page advertisements in *The New York Times*. Aspiring scholars and connoisseurs whose interest in art is not the kind that can be expected to produce “sizzle” will know better than to enter the curatorial profession—and thus the best recruits for future museum directorships will continue to be radically reduced in number. All of which means that the current epidemic of museum fatigue at the top may only be a prelude to greater losses and disasters to come. The crisis in book publishing is already demonstrating what the outcome will produce in the way of lower standards, increased bureaucracy, and declining quality.

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