



Association of Art Museum Directors

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October 19, 2010

Director's Message

It can be challenging to describe the contributions art and art museums make to society. Articulating the answer to this question—Goal 1 in AAMD's new strategic plan—often confounds us, especially when we think about the intrinsic value of personal encounters with art. However, a recent trip to Minneapolis led me to one answer on a very personal level. As I visited three wonderful museums—the Walker Art Center, the Weisman Museum of Art, and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts—a common trait emerged having to do with the way art museums, by definition, invite visitors to make visual comparisons. Within the space of a museum visit, past and present are juxtaposed, diverse cultures or periods of time are introduced, and myriad styles, functions, and materials are presented. Visitors add their own histories to the mix and form serendipitous and meaningful connections between works of art. Even as we observe differences between these works, we discover commonalities in the human impulse to create. Looking at art reveals how each of us is linked to a common humanity that has ties through time and place.

This train of thought began at the Walker Art Center, where an exhibition of paintings was introduced with the following statement: *All art was at one time contemporary*. Works from the permanent collection were installed salon-style on two walls of a large gallery. One wall featured paintings from the late 19th and early 20th century donated by lumber magnate T.B. Walker early in the museum's history. The facing wall displayed paintings from the second half of the 20th century, works that formed the identity of the Walker as we know it today. Ideas were bouncing off the walls: how styles of art evolve, how contemporary art stops looking new, how museum collections grow and transform—how some things stay the same. The exhibition, which invited these lively comparisons, also conveyed a reassuring message: artists will continue to make art and the museum will continue to collect and care for our collective history.

The Weisman Museum of Art at the University of Minnesota is in the midst of an expansion, adding a wing to its dramatic Frank Gehry building. With its aluminum-clad, jagged exterior, the museum proclaims its place on campus as a center for new ideas and new generations. Inside, an exhibition of recent art by Minneapolis artists featured works made with mundane materials: thread, sheetrock, tape, wire, even office memos. The contrast was striking: Gehry had transformed the appearance of a traditional museum with totally new materials and forms; the artists in the exhibition converted everyday materials into something totally new. Different artists, different creative methods; in each case, however, they had succeeded in transforming ordinary materials into something extraordinary.

At the MIA, the elegant progression of galleries showcasing its great encyclopedic collection contained some fascinating surprises. What was a painting by Kehinde Wiley doing in a gallery of Baroque art? Or a photograph by Cindy Sherman in a Renaissance gallery? The visual similarities were startling, as were the differences; the comparisons across centuries invited a closer look. These examples are part of a new initiative at the MIA called Art ReMix, in which curators are inserting examples of contemporary art into the museum's historical collection. The arresting juxtapositions prompt visitors to consider the continuity and change in art over time, and in so doing, rethink their understanding of both past and present.

Each of these museums provided a multitude of pleasures. It is exhilarating to see familiar works of art in new contexts, or to encounter unfamiliar ones for the first time. Making connections between diverse works of art opens doors to new ways of seeing the world and contemplating where we fit in its history. Above all, recognizing the shared passion of art and artists across time affirms our common humanity, which is the greatest discovery to be made.

Janet Landay