

Dear Jolley,

October 28, 2005

“The only proper place to talk about art is in front of it.”

--Paul Cezanne

As Chair of the Art Department and Director of the Museum Studies Program, I write this letter on behalf of the Art Department. Please note that while the Art Department works closely with the Maier Museum staff to plan curriculum, exhibits, and programs, our Maier colleagues have nothing to do with this letter. The tenured members of the Art Department take full responsibility for its contents.

We look forward to talking to members of the Board of Trustees during the Maier Museum meeting on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, but felt that before that time, the Board needed to know our concerns, hence this letter.

It is our understanding from the September faculty meeting that the Board has been having discussions about the paintings in the Maier Museum as *financial assets* of the college. We do not know what the Board plans to do with the insurance and market values of our paintings that have been requested from the Maier, and we certainly do not want to assume that any decisions have been made to de-accession our most historically and aesthetically valuable art works. But the mere fact of these discussions taking place has caused us to be extremely worried about the future of our collection and about our reputations as academic and museum professionals. Until we get more information from the Board, we can only speculate. But even with the little information we have, we are disturbed that we have not been privy to discussions that seriously affect our Department.

First and foremost, we would like to inform the Board that using funds from de-accessioning an institution's art works for that institution's operating budget is highly unethical, according to the *Code of Ethics* set by the Association of American Museums, to which we belong, and which all reputable museums follow. These funds are to be used solely for replenishing and/or preserving a museum's collection. Any other use of these funds could cause our museum and its affiliated staff to be blacklisted in the larger art world. We are aware that Karol Lawson has provided Board members with copies of the *Code of Ethics*.

Because the Maier's collection constitutes the core of our teaching, curating, and scholarship, we felt it was time for the Board to know just how deeply upsetting their discussions have been to us. It has been very difficult to proceed with *business as usual*, that is, to plan our future classes, programs, and exhibits at the Maier, sensing that the foundation on which we base all this curricular activity is not secure.

We are deeply troubled that we feel placed in a position where we must demonstrate the value of our art collection to our pedagogy. Do English professors have to justify the value of their books in their teaching? Do physics professors have to prove

that their laboratories are essential for their work? While it is true that our “equipment” is more monetarily valuable than books and labs, it is also true that our “assets” are more historically rich and more deeply integrated into the history of the college. Indeed, the history of the collection (which was founded by Louise Jordan Smith, the first president’s cousin) almost exactly parallels the history of the college.

If paintings were to be de-accessioned, how would we explain to our students that a part of the college’s cherished history, and that which has given it a national reputation, may be sold to the highest bidder? How would Karol Lawson and I—in good conscience—explain to our Museum Studies students that the *ethics of museums* about which we teach (and preach) do not apply to the Maier Museum?

We were hoping for more clarity on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, when we planned to make presentations to the Board, but then we were informed that we were not the appropriate people to speak about the collection. This decision does not recognize who we are as accomplished professionals. Collectively, my colleagues and I have won awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, Smithsonian Institution, Prix de Rome, Fulbright Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, National Gallery of Art, Henry Luce Foundation, among other institutions. I have a Ph.D from Yale and was a Visiting Curator at Harvard for 7 years (thus, I’ve worked with the finest university art museums in the world and am in an ideal position to judge the worth and quality of a college art collection). I was honored to take my position as the Americanist at R-MWC, and to follow in a long line of distinguished Americanists, who, in part because of their remarkable experiences with our collection, have gone onto further distinguish themselves in the profession.

If the Board needs a more objective opinion of our collection, they need only look at the essay in the Maier’s book, American Art, American Vision by John Wilmerding, professor emeritus at Princeton and former curator at the National Gallery of Art, who agreed to write his essay gratis because of his high regard for our collection. They need only look at the long list of Mary Frances Williams’ Lecturers in American Art, the top scholars in the country, who come here, year after year, because of their respect for our collection. Or, they need only consult the Maier’s letters from experts in the fields of American and contemporary art who must approve of our key purchases before they enter into the permanent collection.

Many of us in the Art Department came to teach at R-MWC because of the Maier’s stellar collection. Our mentors and colleagues encouraged us to take these positions because they knew what the collection could offer us in terms of teaching, curating, and scholarship. Indeed, we have embraced those possibilities and for over a decade have cultivated donors, advised on acquisitions, built teaching collections (on artists like Ben Shahn), organized exhibitions (and toured them), brought to campus major Visiting Artists from New York City, and have used all of our well-earned connections in the larger art world to strengthen the Maier’s holdings and its national reputation.

We have done this because we believe—as educators—that the art collection is our most powerful resource for promoting a liberal arts education. We have done this because we take our mission seriously, that is, carrying on the 100 year old tradition of women artists, professors and scholars building a collection of the finest American art for the education of women. We have done this because we believe that as the inheritors of a rich cultural heritage, we are responsible to preserve it, research it, and exhibit it, for both the benefit of our students and the general public. (Museums operate in the public trust, thus the Maier--as the only art museum in Lynchburg--serves not only the college community, but the larger regional community as well).

We believe that to dismantle the college's art collection undermines both the work of our predecessors and dismisses our tireless efforts to carry on that high-minded work for the enrichment of future generations.

We would like the Board to know that the art collection is not only at the core of our teaching endeavors, but it is also at the core of our Museum Studies and Internship Programs. The Maier is our laboratory for exposing students to the theory and practice of museums. Our Museum Studies Program, founded in 1992 by Marianne Doezema (now the Director of the Mt. Holyoke College Museum of Art), educates students with the best examples of American art, and prepares them for future internships and museum jobs. Indeed, their training with this top notch collection has helped them to obtain internships at the most prestigious museums in the country, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. In the late 1990s, four of our Museum Studies students were accepted into the competitive Smithsonian Summer Internship Program, which had only ten slots available that year.

Many alumnae art majors who worked with our collection are aware of how it helped to launch their museum careers. Alicia Longwell, who was just appointed the Lewis and Dorothy Cullman Chief Curator at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, NY, spoke in the July 2005 issue of [Plein Air Magazine](#) about how her experience at R-MWC reinforced her powerful attraction to art: “On your way to the dining hall or sitting in the library, you could look up and see extraordinary works by Whistler or George Bellows. I knew then that I wanted to be around art on a daily basis, and that’s really what led me into museum work.”

We feel the Board needs to know that to dismantle the art collection (or even to sell off a few key paintings) destroys the comprehensive nature of the collection, which makes it ideal for teaching and exhibition. Since the Maier typically owns only one great painting by any given artist, losing one representative work leaves a huge gap in the collection, which in turn hinders our teaching of the major periods in American art history. To dismantle the art collection also destroys any possibility of rebuilding it. For once these art works go, we would never again be able to afford paintings of that caliber. In other words, we would never again be able to build a historically significant collection like the one we have. We would lose a gem that distinguishes us from our peers like

Sweet Briar and Hollins--a gem that places us in the company of colleges like Williams and Smith.

If we were to breach the AAM Code of Ethics, other museums may never again loan paintings to us, and future donors would necessarily be hesitant to give works of art or make donations to the Maier. Because we respectfully adhere to the AAM Code of Ethics, and because of the Maier's professional reputation, museums like the National Gallery of Art and the Albright-Knox consistently loan paintings to the Maier, enabling us to mount impressive exhibitions (such as the current Elizabeth Murray show, curated by Kathy Muehleman and Karol Lawson) that put us in a dialogue with the larger art world. Should the Board engage in unethical de-accessioning, it would weaken if not destroy the Maier's most effective bargaining power (embodied in our best paintings) with major museums around the country and the world.

We feel the Board needs to know that the short-term financial gains obtained from selling off a few key paintings would be far outweighed by the negative media publicity that would ensue from such actions. Unethical de-accessioning is the stuff of front page articles in the New York Times, as witnessed recently by the New York Public Library's scandalous sale of its most important historical painting, Kindred Spirits (1849) by Asher B. Durand. Unethical de-accessioning would compromise the integrity of our pedagogic and scholarly work. Such actions would necessarily place the college and its professors in a precarious position.

We hope that the Board will give us the opportunity to express our views on matters as serious as our art collection. Our historical paintings will far out live all of us (*as art is long and life is short*), and therefore they assume the lofty role of carrying on the reputation of R-MWC for centuries to come. These unique and precious products of culture, not a new library or a student union, are what our college will be remembered by.

Thank you for your time and for considering our concerns. We look forward to fruitful exchange on November 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Respectfully yours,

Laura Katzman, Chair  
Associate Professor of Art and  
Director of the Museum Studies Program