

[From Laura Katzman]

**Response to the Board of Trustees Draft**

**8/14/06**

As a tenured faculty member who has taught at Randolph-Macon for a decade, I share the Board of Trustees' concern for the future of R-MWC. I appreciate seeing the draft on *The Future of the College* as well as having the opportunity to respond to this document. As a member of the Art Department, a scholar of American art, and Director of the Museum Studies Program, I write with great urgency regarding the Business plan that the Board has described as necessary for the implementation of their stated Goals. "The plan will need to consider reallocating selected existing assets..." I know that these assets include the Riding Center, the Reading Program, and the Art Collection. While I feel it is short-sighted and detrimental to sell any of these *assets*, my bullet points refer specifically to the one to which I can speak with knowledge--the venerable American art collection housed at the Maier Museum of Art.

--Please note that like many of my colleagues, I am open and eager to see change at the college. We understand the need for dynamism and flexibility in order to stay viable in the future. We want to embrace the goals put forth by the Board, but not at the price of selling off our most cherished values, our history, and our cultural patrimony to the highest bidder. This is too high a price to pay for change. We therefore urge the Board to slow down their proposed Business plan, that is, to first see what the seemingly imminent Co-ed decision brings *before* any drastic, irreversible decisions are made about our art collection or any other *financial asset*. We also ask that the Board engage directly with the faculty, staff, and students who will be most affected by the proposed Business plan.

--**Many faculty take issue with the term financial assets.** To discuss our paintings as assets that can easily be converted to hard cash diminishes their integral role in the Academic Curriculum. Programs have been built around the art collection and/or utilize it in central ways: Studio and Art History Programs; Museum Studies Program; American Culture Program; Creative Writing Program; Maier Museum Practica and Internships; Student Docent Program; Visiting Artist Program; Exhibition Program; Mary Frances Williams Lectureship; Campus Symposia, etc. Faculty members in Art, English, Classics, History, American Culture, Communication, Romance Languages, Theatre, Music, Philosophy, and Dance, among other departments, regularly use the art collection and its related programs in their courses to enrich their students' education.

--**The art collection is our crown jewel**, perhaps the most distinctive aspect of R-MWC. If the Board were to put our top paintings on the market, I hope it would recognize the profound irony of selling off that which makes us distinctive in order to make us distinctive. None of our peer institutions own such a focused and comprehensive art collection. In fact, Sweet Briar and Hollins have compensated for this by building major art facilities or art centers with the hope that such attention to the arts will generate funds to amass what our visionary fore sisters began collecting in the early twentieth century. We are leaps and bounds ahead of our peers in this regard, and the caliber of our collection puts us in the league with our aspirant institutions such as Williams, Smith, and

Wellesley. To sell off our collection, even a few paintings, would cripple us in ways I will enumerate below.

**--The Maier Museum is a member of the American Association of Museums (AAM),** which sets strict guidelines on the problematic practice of de-accessioning. The AAM states explicitly that the only ethical de-accessioning of art work in a museum is that which is done to enrich the existing collection of that museum. In other words, the funds gained from sales of de-accessioned artworks from a museum are to be used *only* to strengthen the collection and not to enrich the operating budget of that institution. The oft-frowned upon process of de-accessioning, if justified, should be generated by curators and directors who are most familiar with the artworks under consideration and who are the only ones with the expertise to determine what is best for the paintings under their stewardship.

**--Museums have been taken to task publicly for not following AAM guidelines.** Negative press will follow from any significant de-accessioning activity. *The New York Times*, for example, frequently covers de-accessioning scandals on their front pages. Unethical de-accessioning can damage careers and destroy reputations. The reputation of the college, the Maier and its staff, as well as museum affiliated staff in the Art Department who function as advisors and guest curators, are all at stake here. Many of us were inspired to come to R-MWC by the quality of the Maier's collection and the opportunities it offers for teaching, research, exhibition, and public outreach. (Painters and art professors Kathy and Jim Muehlemann have built an impressive Visiting Artist Program on the strength of our collection, and have strengthened the contemporary art holdings of the college, which was one of the weaker aspects of the collection when they first arrived at R-MWC 11 years ago).

**--We risk being blacklisted in the art world,** should the Board sell our most valuable paintings. Our long and distinguished history as an institution that collects, cares for, and exhibits world class art, has given us a solid reputation in the art world. Even though we are not yet accredited by the AAM (a goal towards which Karol Lawson, Director of the Maier, aspires), major museums across the country, including the Albright-Knox and the National Gallery of Art, agree to lend us their paintings on the basis our national reputation. In other words, the status of our collection is used as leverage to obtain major works of art for display, to bring influential artists to campus like Elizabeth Murray, which in essence, allows us to participate in a larger art world conversation. De-accessioning artworks would seriously diminish our ability to obtain loans from major institutions; it would destroy our chance to gain AAM accreditation, as well as our chance to play an even more vital role in the burgeoning American art scene in this country.

**--Donors may stop giving works of art to R-MWC,** should the Board sell our most valuable paintings. Donors have given works of art to the college with the faith that their gifts would enrich students' education, contribute to their cultural enlightenment, and be cared for long after their deaths. De-accessioning artworks would damage donor relations and could stop future gifts to the college and to the Maier. (As one who has cultivated numerous donors to the Maier over the past 10 years, I can tell you that there are donors

who at this very moment are re-considering their decisions to give their collections to a museum that may sell off its artwork).

**--Obtaining major grants will become difficult if not impossible**, should the Board sell our most valuable paintings. Karol Lawson brilliantly obtained a highly competitive \$100,000 Luce Foundation Grant for an on-line collection catalogue. Again, this was made possible by the quality of our collection and by the fact that such foundations recognize the value of making important collections like ours publicly accessible. De-accessioning would surely damage our chances of obtaining such prestigious grants in the future.

**--Museums operate in the public trust**, as stipulated by the AAM, and by other organizations that oversee non-profit institutions. As the only art museum in Lynchburg, and as one of the best collections of American art (outside of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts) in the state, the Maier has a responsibility not only to the college community, but also to the larger Lynchburg and surrounding communities. The Maier's collection is one of our most effective outreach tools to the general public, to school children, and to underserved communities in the region. To de-accession works of art that are used to train students and docents in their outreach efforts would weaken our programs and demoralize our resourceful and devoted educators, most of whom are volunteers. Karol Lawson's Annual Report, and Martha Johnson, Curator of Education at the Maier, can speak to the great success of the Museum's educational outreach programs in recent years.

**--Our Museum Studies Program**, recently expanded to allow students in departments beyond Art to do the Concentration, would also be negatively affected. Karol Lawson and I co-teach the core course for the Museum Studies Program, which we build around a strong foundation of topics, including Museum Ethics. How can we, in good conscience or with any integrity, continue to teach such courses and indeed continue to run a Museum Studies Program, when our own museum--our laboratory for learning--is the subject/target of unethical practices? Our teaching would be seriously compromised under such circumstances.

**--While students may not come to a college for its art collection, once they encounter it through their studies, the rewards are eye-opening and mind-expanding.** We need to focus on what students take away from first-hand encounter with the country's finest art, both historical and contemporary, as this is what will stay with them when they graduate. (I cannot imagine that many students actually come to R-MWC for the Physics or Math Departments--given the prevalence of science and math phobia--and yet these programs are not asked to defend their worth to a liberal arts education). When we take students on field trips to larger museums, they begin to recognize that the Maier owns representative artworks from America's greatest painters. They make connections, put what they've learned in a bigger context, and begin to feel part of a larger cultural conversation. It is exciting to watch this process of enlightenment unfold.

**--Selling off paintings is akin to selling off R-MWC's cultural patrimony and its heritage**, as the history of the collection directly parallels the history of the college. I cannot begin to describe how faculty and student morale would be negatively impacted by such actions. How will faculty be able to muster the energy and enthusiasm to support the new goals of the Global Honors College when that which they cherish and take pride in is sold off? How can we be true to Roberta Cornelius's 1951 words: "The conservation of the best elements in the heritage from the past... is the principle that the College has heretofore observed and that will likely govern it in the future." Are not the college's invaluable artworks, with their rich historical, cultural, and artistic significance, exactly what Cornelius meant by the "best elements in the heritage from the past?"

**--The art collection is the sum of its parts**, built largely over the last century by visionary curators and art professors, who carried on the tradition set out by Louise Jordan Smith of women educators amassing great art for the education of women. The Maier's staff and Art Department faculty continue this tradition today, as we regularly enrich the collection with new acquisitions, with one eye on quality and the other on historical significance. In other words, we continue to acquire the best art we can while simultaneously filling in gaps in the collection in order to strengthen it as a teaching tool. To sell works of art from this carefully and methodically crafted collection is to dismantle the work of our predecessors. It not only disrespects their labors, but ours as well. We, as directors, educators, advisors, art professors, and guest curators, have devoted years of our lives to strengthening our art collection, to caring for the legacy we have inherited, to educating with it, and to keeping it relevant for future generations. (Ellen Agnew, Associate Director of the Maier, has been a part of the college for nearly 30 years, and has devoted her life's work to the art collection). De-accessioning our top paintings will leave huge gaps in the collection—a collection which we've worked so hard to make comprehensive. Once again, such actions would cripple and compromise our pedagogy and our strategic planning for the future.

**--To sell great works of art under most circumstances is penny wise and pound foolish**, to quote Kathleen Placidi, Adjunct Professor of Art. First of all, the art market is volatile. And second, while the sale of a painting or two might fund a new building on campus, that building will inevitably become obsolete, and in the meantime timeless works of art will be gone forever. I am sure the Board is well aware that if it were to sell our Bellows, Hopper, or Benton, we would never again be able to afford to buy such paintings. These paintings were acquired from the artists or from their dealers, in their day and during their lifetimes. They come with rich pedigrees and provenances, which add to their collective historical value. Is the Board aware, for example, that our O'Keeffe painting comes directly from the gallery of Alfred Stieglitz, the most influential American art dealer and photographer in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Or, does the Board know that our 50+ paintings of Arthur B. Davies come from Lizzie Bliss, one of the three founders of New York's Museum of Modern Art? Irreversible decisions to sell the college's artworks would yield very little in the end. Is a new building really worth the loss of such irreplaceable treasures? Is the short-term cash gained by the sale of paintings, worth the long term ramifications and irreparable damage triggered by those sales?

## **Suggestions for innovation and creative solutions**

**--To use a financial expression, why not capitalize on our art collection?** Why not make it the center of the next fund raising campaign, as it was in 1990-91? The collection toured around the U.S. to major museums in Atlanta, Chicago, Washington, D.C., etc. A significant book was published on the collection and important press was generated. This brought great attention and accolades to the college. This collection catalogue is now out of print. Why not produce a popular book on the collection with a major press, as Smith College did a few years back with much fanfare? (their collection toured the U.S. with the new book).

**--Why not use the Maier as the centerpiece of the Global Honors College?** After all, our Bellows' painting was just requested to tour with a Guggenheim Museum exhibition in China and our Hopper traveled to Japan, where we have our largest number of sister-schools. As Assistant Professor of Art Andrea Campbell has said, we spend thousands of dollars to send our students overseas, to experience other cultures, to see great art and major monuments first-hand, when we have real art and great treasures on our very own campus. What message would selling these treasures send to students whom we encourage to travel and learn about other cultures through their art? It seems to me that there are infinite ways to use our American art collection to not only help students learn about their own history and culture but also to prepare them to better appreciate what they will encounter abroad.

**--Why not commission a distinguished architect to build a signature building to house our art collection and to function as a larger Arts Center for dance, theatre, literary, and music performances?** Such a space could have classrooms for teaching, a print study center, a working studio for visiting artists, an auditorium, a theater, a café, and a bookstore. The possibilities are numerous. Wellesley's phenomenally successful Davis Center is a case in point and can serve as a model, if we go down this road. Make the Maier Museum a destination point not only for students, staff and faculty, but for visitors far and wide.

**--Why not develop a one year certificate or graduate program in Museum Studies?** This would involve hiring more staff, but may be worth it because Museum Studies is a burgeoning, interdisciplinary field that encompasses art, archaeology, classics, history, anthropology, American studies, among other disciplines, and has become quite popular on college campuses. We have the advantage that many colleges do not of having an art collection and a museum, which functions as our laboratory. With more course offerings and instructors who could contribute to such a program, the Museum Studies Concentration could be transformed into a new major. There are many models at which to look, but we should be sure to look at Bard College's Program in Curatorial Studies, the only of its kind in the country, to my knowledge.

**--In expanding our Museum Studies Program, why not partner with a larger museum in the state like the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond or the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.** to enrich our Museum Studies Program and its offerings for post-undergraduate opportunities? The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. has just joined forces with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to found a new program in Museum Studies. Why not partner with Sweet Briar, which has a Museum Management Program (which we do not have) but lacks a strong art collection (which we do have)? Our summer internship program, which has sponsored R-MWC students to work at major museums such as the VMFA, Richmond and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, have enabled us to establish strong relations with museum professionals across the nation who could guide us in these endeavors.

**--Why not tap into our most successful alumnae in the Arts who were nurtured by the R-MWC art collection?** Many alumnae who have made impressive careers and important contributions in the arts attribute their success in part to learning from and with our art collection, which set a high standard for them. Symposia, workshops, exhibitions, etc. could be organized to highlight the accomplishments of our alums in the art world, which would in turn serve as inspiration for our current students. Anne Tucker, Senior Curator of Photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, who was recently voted by Time Magazine as the best curator in America, is just one of hundreds of success stories.

I have many other ideas, and if the Board is interested in hearing them, I would be happy to share them. I will be a Senior Research Fellow and scholar-in-residence this academic year at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, but will be happy to come down to campus, should the Board want to meet with faculty about the matters discussed here. I thank the Board for its time and consideration of the issues raised in this letter, and especially for its devotion to R-MWC and its future. I look forward to more fruitful discussions soon.

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