OPINION

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OPEN FORUM *On Generating Funds*

Art sales ignore museums' mission

Value of collected works is cultural, not financial

By Charles Desmarais

Here's an idea: Let's make admission free to certain national parks. We'll just sell off other parks, perhaps the ones with the lowest attendance, and use the proceeds to fund the popular spots for a while.

That's the logical extension of an argument put forward in The Chronicle's Jan. 14 Insight section. Author Michael O'Hare attempts to make a case that works of art in museums that are not always on display should be sold to meet institutional operating costs, or to provide free admission to the public.

It is hard to know where to start schooling the UC Berkeley professor of public policy. One place is to point out that if conservation is a primary mission objective, then such a sale violates an institution's very reason for being.

A certain amount of prudent trimming can make sense. Agriculturally valuable parkland, for instance, might be traded for significant, but less commercially useful, wilderness. But for nonprofit trustees to generate funds for operations by selling off what they are supposed to protect is a grave neglect of duty.

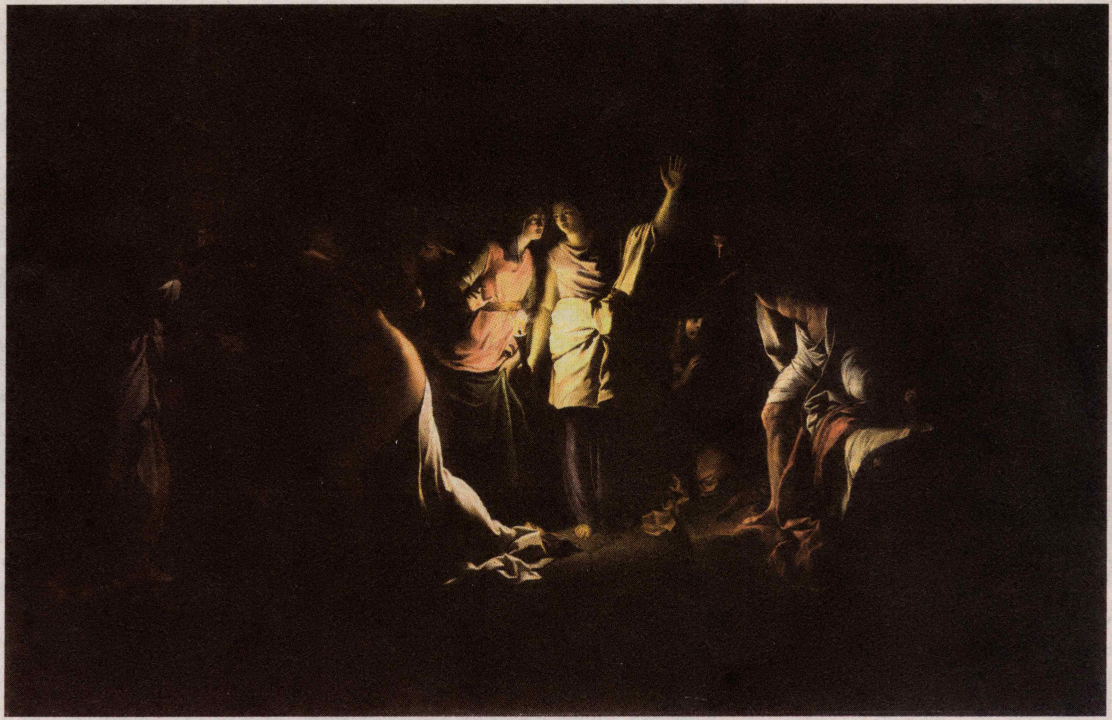
That is true in virtually any case. But O'Hare, who has the gall to end his piece calling for "conversation with some facts on the table," disingenuously characterizes a controversy surrounding the Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield, Mass.

He cites a proposal "to sell a couple of Norman Rockwell paintings." Yet he knows full well that those paintings, donated by the artist half a century ago as a gift to his neighbors, are but the tip of an iceberg. The Massachusetts attorney general describes as the auctioning, not of two pictures, but of "40 works of art that amount to substantially all of the value of (the museum's) fine art collection."

O'Hare calls the sale of major museum works "rare," yet he is surely aware that barely six months after the Berkshire Museum announced its intentions, La Salle University sent word that it would strip its art museum of 46 of its most important paintings and sculptures. According to the Philadelphia Inquirer, the potential sale "includes masterpieces by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Georges Rouault, and Albert Gleizes, (and) could raise more than $7 million" to be used to fund ill-defined "teaching and learning initiatives in its new strategic plan."

The college made its announcement over the winter break, presumably in an attempt to forestall the inevitable outrage. One opening salvo came from a La Salle undergraduate, Dan Parker, writing on Medium.com. He writes that his school has "failed to understand how their decisions mirror disturbing trends in universities across the country that flatten and warp the liberal arts mission."

O'Hare willfully disregards the La Salle controversy and conveniently ignores the deterrent effect thus far of ethics policies — promulgated by the Association of Art Museum Directors and the American Alliance of Museums, and embraced by virtually all curators and museum professionals — that prohibit art sales to pay for operations. If the public and the ethical professionals who care for our cultural heritage were not so vocal in their opposition, then more museums — the ones, let's dare to say it, with spineless directors and lazy boards — might well seek the quick, if unsustainable, fix.



La Salle University Art Museum

This late 18th century oil-on-canvas painting by an unknown French artist is one of 46 artworks that La Salle University announced it will sell to help fund the university's five-year plan.

O'Hare assumes someone will pay handsomely for "1 percent off the bottom" of museum collections — material he himself calls "all that stuff in the basement that has no prospect of ever being displayed." That assertion has yet to be proved: All the attempted museum sales of recent years have involved not the dreck, but prized objects — objects taken right off the gallery walls and shipped to the auction house.

He issues a clarion call for "trustees and state attorneys general (to) ... insist that art museums value their collections (and) put the result in the balance sheet." But he certainly should know that the Financial Accounting Standards Board, the final word on American accounting, proposed that very thing in 1990 but backed off when it understood the rationale that museum collections are not fungible financial assets.

Art writer John Anderson disputes the very premise that free museum admission is a panacea for poor admissions statistics, in an era characterized by cutbacks in humanities education at all levels, reductions in art coverage (The Chronicle excepted), and other social changes. He points out that research on the effect of fees at the turn style is incomplete (when two Baltimore museums went free, their attendance actually dropped).

It is simply incorrect to say that works in museum storage have no public purpose. Often, objects are rotated on exhibition. They are frequently loaned to other museums for temporary exhibitions. And, notwithstanding O'Hare's inexplicable denigration of art history scholarship, collections do have research value — should a library get rid of all the books that are not being read at a given moment?

Collectors and auction houses hunger after what they often call "museum quality" objects. It should be obvious that those are the objects we should work to keep in our museums.

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