

**ALLEN STALEY  
151 CENTRAL PARK WEST  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK, 10023**

**TELEPHONE & FAX: 212 362 6428  
EMAIL: ASTALEY113@AOL.COM**

January 24, 2007

Linda S. Ferber  
New-York Historical Society  
170 Central Park West  
New York, NY 10024

Dear Linda,

I reply to your recent letter about the Historical Society's plans. I sympathize with your complaints about the problems presented by exhibition spaces in the building as it now exists. However, you are not very specific about the steps that the Society wants to take to solve the problems. I would support --and write letters to support -- an architectural reorganization of the interior of the present structure. I also believe that it would be appropriate and acceptable to build an extension of reasonable height on the Society's so-called garden, the land that has long stood vacant immediately behind the building on 76<sup>th</sup> Street, and that, of course, would provide substantial additional space, solving many of your problems.

But, as we all know, word is about that the Society wants to undertake a much more ambitious project involving a high-rise tower, a proposed undertaking that goes unmentioned in your letter. If there is any truth to what is being said, you are asking for support of a wolf, in the form of a real-estate deal, masquerading in the sheep's clothing of your legitimate curatorial concerns. As I think I said when I last saw you at Lee Edwards's Xmas party, 76<sup>th</sup> Street between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue is one of the most beautiful blocks in New York (much more beautiful than my block on 75<sup>th</sup> Street), and I believe that a large scale construction of the sort that seems to be envisioned can only be to its detriment.

We also all know that the Society has had a long history of needing more money, a matter not mentioned in your letter, and that larger need, even more than your curatorial needs, is certainly the main factor behind the planning for which you are seeking approval. More gallery space, improved circulation patterns, and so on, do not require a high-rise tower. But a real-estate deal might seem like an easy way to pay for them, and indeed to help keep a financially shaky institution afloat, and pointing to your needs provides an argument for the need for such a deal. Nevertheless, I wonder if building a tower provides the best or only possible solution to the Society's problems. Other places find other ways of raising money, and I respectfully suggest that your trustees might try a little harder before they set about lessening the attractiveness of a particularly attractive street, and, in doing so, alienating not only a few neighbours, but also many other people who care about such things. We all hear constantly about the obscene amounts of money being made in hedge funds and otherwise on Wall Street and in corporate America, and we hear now and then about the vast amounts of money some very rich people pay for American art. I think it would not be impossible to find and recruit some person or persons with the means, the interest, and the philanthropic inclinations to support needs such as those you describe. Among other enticements, a new extension built on your vacant land would provide a fine naming opportunity for a potential donor with dreams of immortality.

Should the Society be unable to attract the local support that should be there but may not be forthcoming, it might consider thinking a bit more creatively about exploiting its resources, following the example of such distinguished and venerable institutions as the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, or, as we are currently hearing, the Louvre. In other words: consider forming a partnership with an institution elsewhere that is rich in other ways, but without much of a collection. I expect that there should be numerous possibilities, but one springs to my mind: the museum of American art being formed in Arkansas by a Wal-Mart heiress. A partnership would allow many of your pictures for which there is insufficient space on your walls to come out of storage for the sake of being seen and enjoyed by an appreciative mid-American public, either as extended loans or as part of a program of temporary exhibitions. As its contribution to the exchange, the benefactors of your partner institution should certainly be prepared to help meet your needs. In a true spirit of partnership, they might even consider paying for construction and endowment of your extension in the vacant space: a Wal-Mart Wing of the New-York Historical Society!

If that wonderful idea leads nowhere, please try to encourage your leaders to come up with something better than a real-estate deal. There must be other possibilities that will allow an institution as worthy and revered as the New-York Historical Society to follow some other path than the one not mentioned in your letter, but, nevertheless, certainly somewhere behind it.

I am sorry to have to respond in this way, and I apologize for being so long-winded, but it is my attempt to suggest something constructive, and not be entirely negative. I do love the New-York Historical Society. I am a long-standing member and a frequent visitor. I wish it well, and I wish you well, but not as a builder of towers.

Sincerely,

Allen Staley

there was a single entrance on 77<sup>th</sup> Street. That allowed the entire sweep of galleries on the Central Park West to serve as unbroken (or only moderately broken) exhibition space, without the disruption of an entrance, coat-check facility, etc., smack in their middle. I respectfully suggest that you consider reverting to that arrangement, or, if you feel that the entrance must be on Central Park West, you should consider a radical architectural restructuring and remodelling of the space behind the now unneeded 77<sup>th</sup> Street entrance, so that it does not remain a largely wasted, albeit beautiful, luxury.

Finally, I must add that I am appalled by the notion of sacrificing prime gallery space for the sake of a restaurant by an institution which so desperately claims to need more gallery space. Do you really need a restaurant at all? Is there demand for one? You are in a neighborhood not lacking places to eat.

I write as a former museum curator, who has some understanding of your practical needs; as an art-historian, who has written catalogue entries about works in your collection; as a teacher, who, in the past, brought classes to the New-York Historical Society and assigned works from the collection as research projects for my students; and as a friend and neighbor. Following the initial presentation at the recent meeting, I had hoped to ask questions and make comment there, but the unfortunate way in which the meeting was conducted made that appear impossible. My questions and suggestions are serious, and I look forward to hearing your answers. I want to be supportive of an institution I know well and love, but, like many neighbours, I worry about what is likely to happen and I now wonder if what I heard described last Wednesday will indeed serve the Society's best interest unless it is considerably rethought.

I enclose a copy of my earlier letter to Linda and am sending a copy of this to her.

Sincerely,

Allen Staley  
Professor Emeritus of Art History  
Columbia University

Should the Society be unable to attract the local support that should be there but may not be forthcoming, it might consider thinking a bit more creatively about exploiting its resources, following the example of such distinguished and venerable institutions as the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, or, as we are currently hearing, the Louvre. In other words: consider forming a partnership with an institution elsewhere that is rich in other ways, but without much of a collection. I expect that there should be numerous possibilities, but one springs to my mind: the museum of American art being formed in Arkansas by a Wal-Mart heiress. A partnership would allow many of your pictures for which there is insufficient space on your walls to come out of storage for the sake of being seen and enjoyed by an appreciative mid-American public, either as extended loans or as part of a program of temporary exhibitions. As its contribution to the exchange, the benefactors of your partner institution should certainly be prepared to help meet your needs. In a true spirit of partnership, they might even consider paying for construction and endowment of your extension in the vacant space: a Wal-Mart Wing of the New-York Historical Society!

If that wonderful idea leads nowhere, please try to encourage your leaders to come up with something better than a real-estate deal. There must be other possibilities that will allow an institution as worthy and revered as the New-York Historical Society to follow some other path than the one not mentioned in your letter, but, nevertheless, certainly somewhere behind it.

I am sorry to have to respond in this way, and I apologize for being so long-winded, but it is my attempt to suggest something constructive, and not be entirely negative. I do love the New-York Historical Society. I am a long-standing member and a frequent visitor. I wish it well, and I wish you well, but not as a builder of towers.

Sincerely,

Allen Staley