

# Should Old Masters Be Fund-Raisers?

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

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**O**N THURSDAY MORNING, A SALE OF Old Master paintings that shouldn't have been allowed to happen will take place at Sotheby's. The works belong to the New York Historical Society. It is hoping to raise money, not to buy other works, as public institutions are supposed to do when they sell art from their collections, but to replenish an endowment that has been squandered over the years.

To be sure, the 190-year-old Historical Society is not like most public institutions: decades of mismanagement finally forced it to shut its doors to the public

a couple of years ago. It has been on life support ever since, and many people have wondered whether it serves a purpose any longer. Maybe the society has outlived its usefulness, they have suggested, and should be allowed to die. Let its collections be dispersed among other, more resilient institutions, they say, that are already doing what the society is supposed to do.

They may be right. Betsy Gotbaum, a former New York City Commissioner of Parks and Recreation, became the society's executive director in June. She plans to reopen it in May, though her statements about showing antique roach traps and pictures of Elvis Presley don't suggest a compelling vision for the place either.

The sale on Thursday is the latest indication of just how out of touch the society still is. Many of the paintings up for auction were donated more than a century ago by the American collector Thomas Jefferson Bryan. In 1967, the New York State Supreme Court released the society from some restrictions of Bryan's gift. In the following years many of the 381 pictures he gave were auctioned off, but the best were spared until now. Several of these have come straight

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*A 15th-century salver celebrating the birth of Lorenzo de' Medici is among 183 works of art to be sold by the New-York Historical Society.*

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# Should a Museum's Treasures Become Its Fund-Raisers?

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out of the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum, where they were on loan. A salver celebrating the birth of Lorenzo de' Medici, painted by the 15th-century artist Lo Scheggia, the younger brother of Masaccio, is one of them. Another, an altarpiece by Nardo di Cione, is among the best examples of mid-14th-century Italian painting in America. Bryan's collection of such works was directly responsible for creating interest in early Italian art in this country.

In all, 183 works are on sale, and expected to fetch a total of \$10 million to \$13 million. The salver alone is expected to go for more than \$3 million.

The auction raises a basic question: should public institutions like the Historical Society ever sell or, as museums euphemistically put it, deaccession, works of art? The answer — for most of them, anyway — is yes, otherwise they couldn't control their own growth.

It is true that in the late 1980's, when museums tried to capitalize on a booming market, they sold some first-rate paintings, setting off, appropriately, an uproar. Recently, eyebrows have been raised by goings-on at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth. The museum has helped finance its acquisition of a number of expensive works by selling off many others it owns, privately and at auction, including a Redon, a Monet, a Canaletto, a Hals and a Tintoretto. On Thursday afternoon at Sotheby's, a Goya and a Rubens from the Kimbell go on the block, too.

**M**OSTLY, THOUGH, MUSEUMS sell minor works without incident. Even in the case of the Historical Society, many of the pictures for sale are of little value. In fact, when the society, on the verge of collapse in 1993, raised the prospect of narrowing its purview and jettisoning unneeded parts of its collection, the idea sounded plausible. It was accompanied by talk of civic responsibility. The society cited a collection of identical Civil War cannonballs as an example of what it wanted to sell: why pay to store them all when a single

cannonball would suffice? The point seemed well taken.

But cannonballs are one thing, important Old Master paintings another. And a fire sale of them is so unusual that the state government has stepped in to place restrictions on the auction. The New York Attorney General has stipulated that qualified mu-

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## Maybe the Historical Society has outlived its usefulness and should be allowed to die a peaceful death.

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seums and libraries may pre-empt the purchase of a work and buy it for a discount below the hammer price. The reason for this action is that the sale is a breach of public trust, if not of the law. Bryan gave his pictures to the society in 1867, when the Met didn't exist, to enhance New York's cultural life. They weren't meant to be exchanged for cash if the society got itself into a financial fix.

Unfortunately, the attorney general's plan doesn't go far enough. To begin with, it stipulates that a museum get a 10 percent discount on a work of \$25,000 or less, but only a 3 percent discount on one over \$100,000. Three percent of \$100,000 is more than 10 percent of \$25,000, but the higher the cost, the more difficult it is for a public institution to raise money fast enough to pre-empt. A larger discount on the priciest works would obviously have improved the odds.

More to the point, the best pictures should not have been put on the block in the first place. Alternatives have been found before. The society has placed extraneous parts of its collection at other institutions in the past: the Metropolitan got its costumes; Egyptian art went to the Brooklyn Museum, shells and minerals to the Museum of Natural History. Maybe a deal could have been

arranged this time around. None was. The cost to the society of fulfilling its civic duty might have been to accept a price for the best of the Old Masters below market value. Even if it had simply given the works away, it might have gotten good will in exchange.

You could say that good will doesn't replenish the society's coffers. But it translates into public and private donations from those disposed to donate because they know that what they give will be used as intended, that the society lives up to its word. On the other hand, when people see the city's cultural heritage put up for sale, they may well ask themselves why they should give to an institution that does such a thing.

New Yorkers are now left to ponder whether the sale of their art will get them an improved Historical Society. Ms. Gotbaum gives an indication in a statement in Sotheby's catalogue, and it isn't encouraging. The society, she writes, needs "to tell the stories of all the many diverse people who created New York." To her this means that the reopening exhibition in May will consist of "fascinating objects never considered treasures in the past, like a 19th-century ceramic roach trap."

Ms. Gotbaum says the society must also "address contemporary issues and interests, and use them to draw visitors into the past." Her example: "In October 1995 an exhibition of contemporary images of Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe will be augmented by fabulous images from our own collections of earlier celebrities from the American past." So much for the history of New York and its many diverse people.

Years of mismanagement have clearly put the society in a hole. It is sad that New York, unlike countless other places around the country, can't support its own historical society. The institution has a great library and an important collection. But the cure for its ailment may be worse than the disease.

Having exhausted the public's patience, the society is turning to a strategy that has been tried before and failed: selling what it no longer wants. This time, the stakes, involving some of the city's prized Old Masters, are too high. The society says it will serve the public better if they are auctioned off. But if this is the price the public must pay, the society isn't worth saving. □

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An altarpiece by Nardo di Cione is among works on the auction block.