

ACUMG Responds to Deaccession Issues

ACUMG's president, David A. Robertson, has dispatched a letter that was approved by board members to protest the University of Iowa Regents' proposal to consider the worth of deaccessioning the Mural by Jackson Pollock from the collection of the University of Iowa Museum of Art. He noted to the University of Iowa president, Sally Mason, "Beyond your borders, such actions very severely compromise all university and college museums and our efforts to expand and improve our collections with donor assistance. Such an action offends our life's work, threatens all our donor relations, and denies the seriousness of purpose with which we go about the complex work of developing important collections to enhance learning on our campuses and to share the learning with our communities."

Pamela White, interim director of the University of Iowa Museum of Art, has responded with a letter of thanks and vowed to continue to oppose the proposal. Many issues come into play, such as loss of public trust, loss of accreditation, and loss of one of the top educational resources of the museum. Unfortunately, this state school proposal has arisen directly on the heels of several other controversial deaccessioning discussions at private schools. In May 2007, the ACUMG meeting included a presentation by one of the attorneys involved with the proposal at Fisk University to sell their Georgia O'Keeffe painting, with billable hours exceeding one million dollars for that fray that was not yet resolved. Perhaps even more troubling is the Randolph College move to sell four museum pieces (at least in part to build a men's track complex for the institution's transition from being a women's college) including Rufino Tamayo's "Troubadour" which was already sold, Edward Hick's "Peaceable Kingdom," E.M. Henning's "Through the Arroyo" and George Bellow's "Men of the Docks." These pieces were documented with 1990 NEA funding in a catalog and traveling exhibition, with essays from scholars Ellen Schall, David Sokol and John Wilmerding. The Maier Museum of Art catalog entry on the Bellows reveals that the artist sold the painting at a reduced price given how impressed he was with the effort of the campus to raise purchase funds to found a quality collection. He appreciated that it would be an educational resource for generations to come.

As a further complication there was a September 3rd 2008 op-ed article in *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, written by on behalf of the attorneys representing Randolph College. There was a point where they stated that a dormitory also serves the educational mission of the college, so that a better argument for the sanctity of the art collection would have to be established. It was asserted that art museums must irrefutably document the intent of the donor in legal parlance if they want to argue issues of public trust, and draw up a contract that is endorsed by the college governing board.

The only tool to combat this tide seems to be the letter campaign, with communication that is updated and recorded on paper. Karol Lawson, who resigned her position at the Maier when the Randolph College sale proposal proceeded, as of September 29, 2008 has commented to the Virginia Association of Museums on *The Chronicle* article, "That piece, as well as the continuing struggle...at Fisk University and...the University of Iowa...make it clear that the issue of removing objects from museum collections to support parent organizations' finances is not confined to the Maier Museum of Art at Randolph College. Quite apart from the specialized concerns of the museum field, such actions have a real impact on the communities these museums serve." She further urges that letters of protest be written to The Honorable Robert McDonnell, Office of the Virginia Attorney General, 900 East Main Street, Richmond, Virginia 23219.

Likewise, letters addressing the Pollock Mural can be sent to Sally Mason, President, The University of Iowa, 101 Jessup Hall, Iowa City, Iowa 52242-1316; and Regent Michael G. Gartner, 100 Market Street #515, Des Moines, IA 50309.

Your letters, with an articulate and professional rationale of protest, may carry weight in the end.

-Sherry Maurer, Midwest Representative