

The Hard Sell

The National Academy sold art to pay its debts, sparking a debate over whether desperate times should ever call for such desperate measures **BY JOELLE SELIGSON**

When Carmine Branagan took over as interim director last July, the National Academy Museum and School of Fine Arts was at a breaking point. The New York institution, founded by artists in 1825, was struggling beneath large shortfalls. Fund-raising efforts were unsuccessful; the academy's professional artist members, known as academicians, had ruled out selling its Fifth Avenue town house. Seeing no alternatives, the members voted to sell art from the collection to pay off the debts.

The move fueled an ongoing debate over a dilemma that some observers have predicted will become more common as the economic crisis deepens: is it ever acceptable for a museum to sell art, other than to buy more?

In December the National Academy raised \$13.5 million from the private sale of Frederic Edwin Church's *Scene on the Magdalene* (1854) and Sanford Robinson Gifford's *Mount Mansfield, Vermont* (1859), news first reported by Lee Rosenbaum on her blog, CultureGrrl. The Association of Art Museum Directors censured the academy, pointing to its code of ethics, whereby museums can sell works only to acquire new ones.

"The AAMD is making a statement because there are always other options," says Michael Conforti, AAMD president and director of the Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. "They're just never as easy as finding a buyer and getting \$15 million."

The National Academy is composed of an association of

artists—including Chuck Close, Helen Frankenthaler, and Richard Serra—a school of fine arts, and a museum. With more than 7,000 works, mainly donated by the academicians, the academy has one of the country's largest public collections of American art—as well as longstanding financial problems.

"It's a 183-year-old institution that hasn't quite transitioned into the 21st century," says Branagan, who was promoted to permanent director in December. She notes that functions such as development and public relations are "just not fully in place." In addition, the academy has run a deficit on its \$4 million budget for several years and has borrowed from its partly restricted \$10 million endowment to



▲ **Frederic Edwin Church's *Scene on the Magdalene*, 1854, was sold by the National Academy to help resolve its financial crisis, a move that director Carmine Branagan (opposite) says was the only option.**

cover such expenses as security guards and the heating bill.

After paying off its deficit—around \$1 million last year—the academy will use the revenue from the sale to overhaul its infrastructure, as well as redo its galleries to bring more of the permanent collection out of storage, according to Branagan.

Before its members decided to sell the works, Branagan discussed the situation with the AAMD and the American Association of Museums. AAM president Ford Bell told her such a move "would be a violation of our standards and best practices" and would cause the academy to lose accreditation.

Nevertheless, in November 183 of the 337 academicians voted on the sale, with 181 in favor. The Church and Gifford paintings were sold to a private foundation that hangs works in "major public institutions," says Branagan, adding that she cannot identify the foundation because Sotheby's, not the academy, handled the transaction. The academy withdrew from the AAM and AAMD after deciding to make the sale.

Insisting that ethical museum practice "demands adherence to the principles governing accessioning," the AAMD issued a

statement asking member museums to suspend loans of art to the academy and to cease collaborating with it on exhibitions.

The Seattle Art Museum pulled David Smith's *Fifteen Planes* from the academy's American abstract sculpture exhibition scheduled for this year—threatening the show's viability, Branagan says. The Art Institute of Chicago rescinded loans of two Anders Zorn portraits for another forthcoming exhibition.

Branagan wrote to AAMD members, asking the association to lift its censure. "The AAMD used the National Academy for two purposes," she says: "one as a scapegoat, the other to make a statement and intimidate the rest of the museum world."

Los Angeles Times critic Christopher Knight, writing on the *Times* arts blog in December, stated that he sees the AAMD's reaction as a warning to other institutions: "America's financial turmoil is exerting pressure on all museums, and art collections held in public trust are now at greater risk of deaccession-for-cash than ever."

Around the same time, the New York State Board of Regents considered an emergency

amendment to its rules that would have let state museums sell art to pay debts that threatened their existence. Bell and others wrote to protest the amendment, which was then revised to meet the AAMD's standards before it was passed.

In the future, economic pressure to deaccession may be put on institutions that have considerable collections but are not held to the same standards as professional art museums, says Maxwell Anderson, director and CEO of the Indianapolis Museum of Art and a former AAMD president. "I don't think it will lead traditional art museums to abdicate their principles."

For its part, the National Academy is making "sweeping changes," Branagan says, such as restructuring its governance and instituting a long-range financial plan. The academicians have also approved the sale of John White Alexander's *Portrait of Mrs. Thomas Hastings* (1901) and Robert Blum's *Study for a Japanese Beggar* (1891). Branagan says those sales are on hold to ensure the academy will "get the best price for them." ■

Joelle Seligson is an associate editor of ARTnews.

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