

A Museum Director's Life

An Intimate History of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum, 1992 – 2011

Frank Robinson

This essay has three purposes.

First, this is a summary of what happened at the Museum during my nineteen years as Director.

Second, it is a look at the “unofficial” history of that period, different from the Annual Reports.

Third, this story can hopefully serve as a kind of example, a case study, of what is involved in running a small university museum, the issues and problems confronting a small non-profit organization serving a much larger organization and, at the same time, the wider community.

©2014 Cornell University and Frank Robinson

Released: October 20, 2014

This book – <http://dspace.library.cornell.edu/handle/1813/63>

Books and Articles Collection – <http://ecommons.library.cornell.edu/handle/1813/63>

The Internet-First University Press – <http://ecommons.library.cornell.edu/handle/1813/62>

Contents

Preface	i
I. The Mission and Purposes of a Museum.	1
II. The Staff.	2
III. Art	3
IV. Education.	5
V. Finances and fund raising.	7
VI. The new wing.	8
VII. Directors	9

See also the CORNELLCAST at

Museum Tour with Frank Robinson

<http://www.cornell.edu/video/museum-tour-with-frank-robinson>

POSTED ON JUNE 3, 2011 BY HERBERT F. JOHNSON MUSEUM OF ART

Abstract

This video represents a snapshot of the Johnson Museum in 2011, just before the completion of the renovation and extension project. Frank Robinson, the Richard J. Schwartz Director, highlights the many signature works from the permanent collection and shares his personal journey as a university museum director for more than 34 years.

A Museum Director's Life

An Intimate History of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum, 1992 – 2011

Frank Robinson

This essay has three purposes.

First, it is a summary of what happened at the Museum during those nineteen years, but from my own, narrow perspective, in other words, what I was trying to do and why, an *apologia pro vita sua*. For a more detailed, year by year history of what the Museum did, the reader can turn to its **Annual Reports**; what follows is more personal, and, no doubt, more biased.

Second, it is a look at the “unofficial” history of that period, different from those **Annual Reports**. This was an important moment for the Johnson, still a young museum in 1992; in the first month or so of my tenure, a distinguished member of the staff said to me during a walk through the galleries, “Frank, this is not a museum.” This is a story of the transition of this institution into a full-fledged museum in terms of programs, collections, and service, and then its commitment to the growth of its physical facilities, that is, the renovation of the main building and the construction of a new wing. All of this happened just after a recession, in 1989-1991, followed by a time of great growth for museums worldwide, a boom period even for college and university museums and galleries.

Third, this story can hopefully serve as a kind of example, a case study, of what is involved in running a small university museum, the issues and problems confronting a small non-profit organization serving a much larger organization and, at the same time, the wider community.

I am deeply grateful to all the people I worked with during those years, at the Museum, at Cornell, among our alumni, and among my professional colleagues, and, above all, my wife, Margaret Robinson. As a former museum director, she knew exactly what I was experiencing and was always patient and kind.

F. R.

I. The Mission and Purposes of a Museum

First, museums provide a place for the education, and self-education, of all our visitors – university students, children, adults, and, through its research and publications, our colleagues and the museum profession itself. The museum is a place for learning about art, and also about history, religion, the values and world views of other cultures, and our own culture. We have a special responsibility to artists and art historians, both professionals and students, but also to the occasional visitor, and even to those who have only a passing interest in art, who come to museums simply because they are a place for being alone or with friends or family, a place for quiet contemplation.

Second, an art museum is concerned, above all, with art, in all its forms and media, from every culture and century and continent. Museums preserve our past, our memory, in short, our identity, and they have a responsibility to present and interpret that great legacy to their visitors, in all its complexity and variety

and at the highest level of quality and comprehensiveness possible for them. At the same time, we have a special responsibility to present the new, the art that is being created now, and to respond to the changing definition of museums and of art itself. Our research activities and publications – the integrity of our scholarship - are an integral part of this commitment.

Third, museums are a forum for major ideas, issues, and concerns of individuals and society as a whole, including art and beyond art, not an advocate so much as a place for the discussion and exploration of these issues. Works of art tell us what human beings can be at their best and at their worst, they are a vivid, nonlinear way of revealing our inner lives, our passions and needs, and in this way can illuminate societal issues in a special, unique way.

Fourth, museums are rich in assets, they benefit from the support of their communities, both in governmental subsidies and tax exemptions and deductions and through the gifts of individuals, and yet the communities they serve are often in need themselves. This is a permanent dilemma and can only be addressed by a greater commitment to that service and to providing art for everyone. In the end, museums are an integral, essential part of a democratic society, a part of civilization itself, that vast, infinitely varied, powerful, intangible, indestructible, but fragile structure that we hope will survive the worst attacks and help us to rebuild our lives after them. Society still trusts us to fulfill that mission, and we have a responsibility to live up to that trust.

II. The Staff

Essential to any achievement in an organization is the staff; a good staff – a good team – doesn't happen overnight, and I was lucky to be blessed with an exceptional group of colleagues over the years (the great majority women, as it happens). In a museum, the core of the staff in so many ways is the curators. In 1992, Martie Young and Nancy Green were already in place, and over the next few years, Martie retired and was replaced by Ellen Avril, as curator of Asian art and chief curator; Andrea Inselmann and Andy Weislogel joined Ellen and Nancy, to make an outstanding team that was hardworking, collegial, and expert in their fields. Through them the exhibition schedule, the permanent collection, and the range and number of publications would grow dramatically. In the education department, Cathy Klimaszewski and Elizabeth Saggese were already in place, and Cathy added several exceptional people to her staff, notably Carol Hockett, who is still in what is a superb department. Their outreach to campus and community made all the difference to the Museum's achievement and reputation.

A museum's administrative staff is largely unseen by the public, but they are as essential as any other part of the organization. Special tribute must be paid to Jerry Regan and Peter Gould, as the two deputy directors for finance and administration. In reality, they largely ran the Museum on a daily basis during the director's many fund raising trips; they both had MBAs and solid administrative experience (in hospital administration and at the Smithsonian, respectively). Jerry was responsible for putting the Museum on a sound financial footing, with bottoms-up budgeting and clear, open accounting and staff organization; Peter was especially crucial in supervising on a daily basis the planning and construction of the new wing. Also crucial were Dorothy Reddington, Lynne Williams Conway, and Marrie Neumer, the Directors of Development, each one outstanding in her energy, commitment, and sterling character; I am very grateful to them. In a way, the relationship between museum director and development director is the closest and most complex in a museum, with its many trips and events, and innumerable personalities in the donor base to respond to, and over these two decades, I did not always choose the right person, perhaps because I was responding to pressures from outside the Museum, without instituting a search committee, my usual procedure.

Many other staff members made this a real museum, especially Matthew Conway, the registrar, his assistant, Meghan Reiff, his assistant, and their predecessors in this most difficult and important department, especially during the construction of the new wing, Wil Millard and his installation crew, the guard staff, under the leadership of Al Miller and Jim Haviland, Denise Gremillion and the other receptionists – the smiling face of the Museum for every visitor – Andrea Potochniak and a series of excellent editors, David Brown and his predecessors as photographers in charge of the digitization project, Ken Carrier on weekends, Brenda Stocum in finance and Jennifer Ryan, membership secretary, Nancy Dickinson, my friend and wonderful assistant for many years, and custodians and interns and others too numerous to mention. The key to success here seems to have been a healthy mixture of long-term employees (sometimes of twenty or thirty years' tenure) and the young and the new.

In this context, I must mention, first, the people I reported to at Cornell, who have been so patient and helpful, especially Larry Palmer, who hired me, and Ron Ehrenberg, Francille Firebaugh, and John Siliciano – as well as four truly interested and involved Presidents, and their Provosts. I am also very grateful to my predecessors and to my successor. The first, Alan Solomon, was director of the A.D. White Museum, in what had been the house of the university president; he acquired the great Rauschenberg and Bontecou and much else and organized dozens of exhibitions, without much money or staff and in an awkward building, to put it mildly. Inez Garson was interim director for several years in the 1960s, keeping it all going and preparing for the major transition to a larger home, and Tom Leavitt, of course, supervised the actual construction of the Pei building, oversaw the rapid growth of the collection, the staff and the education programs, and organized a multitude of shows, notably Earth Art, the classic exhibition of this important movement. For more of their achievement, the reader is referred to Cathy Klimaszewski's history of the Museum in the Handbook (1998). And Stephanie Wiles, my friend and successor, has already made her deep commitment to education clear to everyone, so the future is bright.

III. Art

Acquisitions. In 1992, the fifth floor was dedicated to Asian art, under the expert guidance of Martie Young; aside from that, the only gallery dedicated to the permanent collection was the large gallery on floor 2L (now the Gold Gallery), with ancient Greek vases next to the Daubigny landscape next to modern American painting. The rest of the Museum was for changing exhibitions. In the Fall of 1992, the two floors above the lobby, 1 and 2, were refocused to present the student with a more readable narrative of the history of European and American art, with the European collection (on 1) and the American works (on 2); the two floors below the lobby, 1L and 2L, became the site of all our larger temporary exhibitions. This, along with the fifth floor, allowed the Museum to show the full range of world art. This rearrangement also allowed – and encouraged - that part of our holdings to grow, and, in fact, over these nineteen years, over four thousand works were acquired for the permanent collection. They were remarkably varied, from ancient Chinese ceramics to Australian Aboriginal paintings, from African baskets to pre-Columbian sculpture, from ancient Greek and Roman glass, vases, and marble portraits to Rembrandt etchings to... contemporary videos from around the world. There were special emphases; for example, the drawing collection needed building up, not just in terms of quality but also in range of country, century, medium, and function, and this occurred through both purchase and gift, including important works by Fragonard, Grimaldi, Ghezzi, Bibiena, Van Ostade, Bloemaert, Van Goyen, Pynacker, De Moucheron, Schnorr von Carolsfeld, Klimt, Rowlandson, and Lear, among many others. The video collection grew from literally zero to a fine overview of the medium. The classical collection also needed some thought, so works in various media were added, especially a superb Antonine bust of a boy, a fine Egyptian shabti, a second Palmyrene funeral portrait, and a Greek vase painting attributed to Lydos. We added strength to our group of African

American art, acquiring works by over thirty artists, some well-known, like Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, and also Kara Walker, Ellen Gallagher, Willie Cole, Bob Thompson, Laylah Ali, Horace Pippin, Chakaia Booker, Kerry James Marshall, Beuford Smith, Iona Rozeal Brown, John Wilson, Emma Amos, Consuelo Kanaga, Vincent Smith, and many others. Over seventy works by prominent women came into the collection, mainly by purchase, from earlier artists like Barbara Regina Dietzsch, Mary Cassatt, Cecilia Beaux, Lila Cabot Perry, Julia Margaret Cameron, Anna Atkins, Jessie King, Vanessa Bell, and Suzanne Valadon to Susan Rothenberg, Carolee Schneemann, Shirin Neshat, Doreen Nakamarra, Amy Sillman, Nicole Eisenman, Sherrie Levine, Janet Biggs, Mary Ellen Mark, Candida Hofer, Julie Mehretu, Ursula von Rydingsvard, Imogen Cunningham, Jane Hammond, Kiki Smith, E. V. Day, Louise Bourgeois, Rineke Dijkstra, Francesca Woodman, and so many more. There were additions to our collection in older African art, especially from Ethiopia, contemporary African art (Essamba, Nour, Poulsen, Mthethwa, Kentridge, and, notably, Ibrahim El-Salahi) and contemporary Latin American art (Pujol, Chagoya, Mendieta, Morell, Iturbide, Salgado, and Wifredo Lam), as well as a major collection of twentieth century Native American artists, from Karen and Malcolm Whyte. It was also a pleasure to add works by distinguished alumni artists, including Susan Rothenberg, Richard Artschwager, James Siena, Squire Vickers, Storm Tharp, John Ahearn, Gordon Matta-Clark, Elfriede Abbe, and Frederick Sommer, as well as several Cornell faculty. I should add that many of the artists mentioned above were also represented in solo or group shows at the Johnson. And, at the same time, our outstanding collection of old master and contemporary prints grew dramatically, for example, with three Rembrandt etchings and important works by Dürer, Cézanne, Cassatt, and Picasso, as well as a large and interesting group of seventeenth century Dutch etchings, among other works; the same must be said of the Museum's holdings in photography, both from the nineteenth century and today. I don't include here the brilliant and exciting growth of the Asian collection, the crowning glory of the Museum, established by Martie Young and ably continued by Ellen Avril, simply because it is so far out of my expertise. The Annual Reports clearly document that achievement.

One important aspect of the Museum's acquisitions has been the number of very large gifts, sometimes their whole collections, from a number of generous donors: Isabel and William Berley's collection of contemporary art, the Ames Family Collection of Contemporary Photography, the Marqusee Collection of American medals, Constance and Bernard Livingston (again, modern art), Thomas Carroll (pre-Columbian art), Chinese and other ceramics from the Shatzman collection, Sheila Hearne (American art), the Schoff collection of Japanese Surimono prints, the Metzger gemstones, early American paintings from Gertrude and David Tucker, two major Spanish Renaissance paintings from Countess Tauni De Lesseps, Cuban art from Jay Hyman, the Whyte collection mentioned above, and, by promised gift, nine extraordinary works of early modern art from the Solinger Collection. The importance of all these gifts for the stature and usefulness of the collection can hardly be overstated.

One aspect of collections management not readily apparent to the visitor has been the slow but steady digitization of the collection, begun with a generous grant from the Mellon Foundation. Another aspect was the practice of curators preparing lists of desiderata; once they were filled, they prepared a second list. This helped ensure a steady, balanced growth to our holdings.

Exhibitions. Almost four hundred exhibitions were presented over these years, equally broad in their range and variety. In fact, many of the shows were of the collections that were subsequently donated to the Museum, especially a series of five shows of ceramics lent –and then given – by the Shatzmans, two highly scholarly groups of Surimono prints, and the Carroll collection of pre-Columbian art. Our shows traveled to over twenty other museums all over the country, and even to Taipei. Some of the most important were Icons of the Desert (Australian Aboriginal art), Byrdcliffe (the early artists' colony in New York State), A Room of their Own (Bloomsbury artists), the drawings of Susan Rothenberg, stop. look. listen. (videos), and the Solinger Collection (Picasso, De Kooning, Dubuffet, Klee, and many of their contemporaries).

Perhaps inevitably, given this director, there were half a dozen or more shows of seventeenth century Dutch prints and drawings, including works from the Dallett, Peck, Schaenen, Pelletier, and Elkind collections. Many other alumni collectors were kind enough to lend their collections, for example, Helen-Mae and Sy Askin (Italian drawings of superb quality), the Zimmerman collection of contemporary art from India, and the Theodorou, Simpson and Ostrander collections of ancient Greek and Roman coins.

The larger, single collection shows not only were interesting and intellectually coherent in themselves, but they were administratively and financially easier to put together – and they often led to gifts of funds and works, as noted. We usually put on a number of shows at the same time, to attract a variety of visitors and to respond to requests from faculty and students. Four or five of the twenty or so exhibitions each year were curated by faculty or students; the History of Art Majors Society (HAMS) conceived, chose, installed and wrote the catalogue for a show every year, a project supported by Betsey and Al Harris. The faculty/student shows ranged from contemporary Indonesian art to Near Eastern videos and other media, from pre-Columbian objects to Chinese ink paintings to ancient Greek and Roman coins. A special aspect of this was the four exhibitions conceived and curated by Professor Salah Hassan presenting contemporary art from Africa and the Near East; he was also crucial in acquiring such works for the permanent collection. All of this was in addition to the biennial art department faculty show.

As the only art museum in our area, we were delighted to present Ithaca Artists, Ithaca Ceramics, contemporary furniture made in the Southern Tier, artist members of the Ink Shop, artists in residence at the Saltonstall Foundation, and Ithaca Collects, as well as a series of quilt shows, many made or owned locally. Professor Peter Harriott established a fund in memory of his wife, allowing us to purchase work by local artists.

One faculty-curated exhibition reverberated on the campus well beyond the Museum: Revelaciones. Among much else, the artists put up a series of “billboards” on the paths across the Arts Quad, which inspired a sit-in in Day Hall. Another, very special event was the visit to the Museum by the Dalai Lama, and the sand mandala created at the same time. The dissolution of the mandala by the monks from the monastery downtown and the procession through the streets to pour the sand into Beebe Lake was an unforgettable experience.

Publications. Publications are an essential part of the service to the visitor and to the profession that a museum performs; it is also a wonderful way for curators to make their mark as scholars, and a way for that scholarship to become part of the permanent record. Aside from numerous exhibition catalogues written by the curators and, sometimes, faculty, the Museum also published catalogues of the permanent collection, notably the Korean collection and ancient Greek and Roman works in the Museum and elsewhere on campus. Annual Reports proved to be an exciting review of the year, a kind of “calling card” to explain to people who might not know us exactly what the Museum does every year; they also were a thank-you to all our donors, and an incentive to new donors, as well as a running history of the institution. In many ways, our most valuable publication was our Handbook of the Collection (1998), with a substantial history of collecting at Cornell by Cathy Klimaszewski and a fascinating summary of the design process for this iconic building by John Sullivan, the architect in charge, followed by extended entries on 170 works in the collection by a variety of authors.

IV. Education

Outreach to the campus. The Museum’s surveys show that over fifty thousand of our visitors every year are Cornell students, along with Cornell faculty, staff, and alumni; we are truly a meeting place for everyone

on campus. Probably the most important step forward in our campaign to become an even more intimate part of this great university was the challenge grant from the Mellon Foundation to establish the Mellon Coordinator of Campus Programs; this position has had a couple of name changes, but, no matter what its name, it was one of the first such positions in this country and it remains immensely useful. With the help of the Mellon Coordinator and, in fact, every member of the education department and the whole staff, much was done to make faculty and students an integral part of the Museum's planning and programs. These initiatives included the annual exhibition of the History of Art Majors Society, the Museum Club, which organized many shows and Jazz Nights and the like, the Student Advisory Committee, the Faculty Advisory Committee, and the endowment of several of the student internships, notably the two Nancy Bartels Scholars. Generous gifts endowed two annual lectures, the Lurcy Lecture and the Findlay Family Lecture. Our modest sandwich shop, the Two Naked Guys Café (named for our two life-size bronzes by William Zorach), encouraged our visitors to linger in the lobby; one professor's class met there every week. Our Annual Reports list the one hundred plus Cornell organizations that visit the Museum every year.

Another new committee, the Public Art Committee, was charged by the Provost with overseeing the placement and maintenance of works of art in public places throughout the campus. The committee had faculty members and administrators from Art, Architecture, Mann Library, Buildings and Grounds, and elsewhere, and we placed large works in various places, including on Triphammer Road, roughly opposite the Africana Center, and in the Africana Center, in front of the Appel Center, near the playing fields opposite Rhodes Hall, and in Goldwin Smith (a large Roman mosaic). We were responsible for the cleaning and reinstallation of the Lipchitz Song of the Vowels, in front of Olin Library, and we installed several rounds of paintings in the President's house in Cayuga Heights and in the President's office in Day Hall, as well as regular changing displays in the third floor corridor of Day Hall. We reviewed all the Museum's loans to faculty and administrative offices and brought many of them back to the Museum, as well as bringing several paintings in Willard Straight to the Museum for safekeeping.

The Annual Reports list the more than one hundred Cornell organizations and departments that visited the Museum every year.

Outreach to the community. The great effort here has always been the OMNI program (Objects and their Makers: New Insights), and this continued, reaching close to 10,000 K-12 students every year from fifty or more schools in the Southern Tier and northern Pennsylvania. Our most important initiative in this area built on this solid foundation, the Discovery Trail, and Kids Discover the Trail!, a subset of DT. The Trail is a virtually unique collaboration of eight collecting institutions in Ithaca, including science, nature, history, ornithology, gardens, geology, art, and the public library – a healthy mix of Cornell and city organizations, all dedicated to public service. Its collaboration on children's programs, publicity, and simple interdisciplinary communication will hopefully serve as a model for such projects in other communities. We also instituted a Community Advisory Committee and hosted several installations of the Ithaca Garden Club, with highly creative flower arrangements in every gallery of the Museum. We worked with at risk teenagers from local facilities, Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers, and other such groups, and student organizations from colleges throughout the Southern Tier, all listed in our Annual Reports. And more traditional activities, like holiday parties with visits from Santa Claus and the Easter rabbit, along with many family activities and the annual clearing of trash along the sides of one mile of a road in Ithaca, continued apace.

In addition, an event like the visit to the Museum of the Dalai Lama, and his blessing of the sand mandala, brought town and gown together at the highest level. And we continued to offer free admission to all our visitors, as well as 24/7 access to a superb light show on the façade of this iconic building and an exquisite Japanese garden behind it.

The staff continued with their own personal service to the community; this director served on committees within Cornell, such as the Cornell Council of the Arts, at the Museum of the Earth and the Sciencenter, and outside Ithaca, such as the Yaddo arts colony, the Association of Art Museum Directors (as chair of the education committee), and several accreditation teams for the American Association of Museums, as well as publishing exhibition catalogues, book reviews, and articles in *Print Quarterly*, *Museum News*, *Museum Views*, *Choice*, and various newspapers.

One sign of the success of our outreach efforts was the increase of attendance from roughly 65,000 -70,000 a year to 90,000 and even 99,000.

V. Finances and fund raising

In these nineteen years, the Museum went through two financial crises. The first was in 1992-93. In that year, the Museum's annual subsidy from Cornell (the so-called general purpose appropriation), at that time 70% of our operating budget, was cut that year by 20 %, that is, \$200,000; that subsidy had already been capped by the University in 1988. In that same year, the Museum's Agnes Denes exhibition went \$200,000 over budget, a debt that, of course, had to be repaid. In addition to these two amounts, totaling over 25% of the budget, the salaries of every member of the staff, with one exception, were at 25% in the range for that position profession-wide, instead of at the 50% median mandated by the University (only the director's salary was at the median, even though it had been cut by 20% in 1992) . As a result, not only were staff underpaid, many were leaving for other jobs, and turnover was a significant problem. A special part of the problem was the compensation (salary and benefits) for our guards; it was essential to remedy this particular situation quickly. It was clear that all staff salaries had to get up to the median (which they finally did, later on in this period). Also, fund raising was not as effective as it could be; for example, there were some members of the Museum Advisory Council who apparently had never been asked to give and thus had never donated a dollar to Cornell. As a result, the Museum's Annual Fund was a bit more than \$100,000 (it rose over the years to over \$600,000). Finally, the Museum had a top-down budget, one that, in essence, the staff did not understand in detail or participate in creating; we needed staff participation in and understanding of the Museum's budget issues and plans, and, frankly, an experienced administrative hand, an MBA, at the helm of this part of the ship. This we acquired with the hiring of Jerry Regan as Deputy Director, and then his successor, Peter Gould. In my first two years, as a result of the problems outlined above, we had to cut our staff by 5.4 full-time equivalents (not by layoffs, but by attrition, that is, by staff leaving for other positions and those positions not being filled). We also cut our exhibition budget in half, and cut travel and other expenses.

Difficult as all this was, this crisis was probably the best thing that could have happened to the Museum. We were forced to raise money, and we raised it fast. In those two years, Richard Schwartz, Steven Ames, and other generous donors, and the Mellon Foundation, allowed us to begin to climb out of this hole, donating a total of close to \$3,000,000. Staff salaries (and turnover) improved, and the percentage of the operating budget given by the University gradually declined to under 30%.

Cornell alumni are a legend in the fund raising world, and rightly so. The Museum Advisory Council, under the leadership of Dick Schwartz, Steve Ames, Genevieve Tucker, Ira Drukier, and Susan Lynch, led the way; no museum director could have had a more wonderful group of friends to report to. With the help of outstanding Directors of Development and their staff, I undertook a series of trips around the country, speaking to over fifty alumni clubs (some more than once), spending about a hundred days a year on the road, giving many tours of local museums and of art fairs at the Armory in New York, Art Basel Miami Beach, Palm Beach, Maastricht, Art Toronto, and Master Paintings/ Master Drawings Week in London.

I also led or co-led seven trips for alumni for Cornell's Adult University (six to Europe, one to New York City). With the expert hand of the Deputy Director guiding the Museum's finances at home, through many grants, and with the awareness and participation of the whole staff – and the extraordinary generosity of our alumni - we were able to grow the staff back to its pre-1992 size, increase funding for salaries, exhibitions, programs and acquisitions, add to our existing endowed funds (which went from \$2,000,000 or so to over \$32,000,000), and even set up several new endowed funds for exhibitions and acquisitions. It should also be remembered that throughout this period, the Museum solicited many significant and valuable gifts for the permanent collection (and often funds for such gifts), outside the operating budget.

The second financial crisis that the Museum had to weather was in 2009, as part of the world recession. Like so many other parts of the University, our subsidy was cut by 30%; this resulted in four layoffs (the number would have been even bigger if we had still been receiving 70% of our operating budget from Cornell), and most of these valuable staff members did find jobs at Cornell or were hired back part-time by the Museum. After the six-month pause in all campus construction in 2009, the Museum continued with construction of the new wing and did, in fact, achieve financial stability, as well. In particular, the staff returned to its pre-2009 size, but, in some cases, with different people filling different roles.

With my retirement looming, I was pleased that the Museum was in good financial health – and that the new wing would be completed debt-free, and even with a separate endowment to help run it.

VI. The new wing

By new wing, I mean the entire expansion and renovation project for the Museum. It is a story much better told by the people who made it happen – above all, Peter Gould, Deputy Director, and also Ellen Avril, chief curator and curator of Asian art, as well as Marrie Neumer, Wil Millard, Dave Ryan, and George Cannon, Matt Conway and Meghan Reiff, and Cathy Klimaszewski, in the Museum; and at Cornell, Kyu Whang, Bob Stundtner, and their colleagues; John Sullivan and his team at Pei Cobb Freed; and, as always, the many donors to the campaign, over two hundred in all. The largest donors to this effort were a family that chose to remain anonymous; we are deeply grateful to them. So many others were extremely generous, including Helen and Bob Appel, Gale and Ira Drukier, Susan Lynch, and Gen and Dick Tucker. A special thanks must also go to Becky and Jim Morgan, who so imaginatively funded the Japanese garden designed by Marc Keane. I must also thank the Ithaca City Council – we appeared before them four times, always a very pleasant and helpful experience – the Buildings and Property Committee of the Cornell Board of Trustees, chaired by Ira Drukier, and the Cornell architectural review committee in New York, chaired by Richard Meier, whose help was crucial more than once. The project could not have happened without the support and advice of the vice-provosts I reported to, notably, Ron Ehrenberg, Francille Firebaugh, and John Siliciano. God bless them all.

The whole process for this project took about fifteen years; this is not all that unusual: at my previous museum, in Providence, the new wing took fourteen years, and at Williams College, it took more than a decade. The plans at first were for an addition of 11,000 s.f., with only a modest, cosmetic change to the fifth floor of the main building and no real changes to the rest of the building. The cost was in the \$10,000,000 range. As the years went by and it became clear that the needs were greater than we originally realized, and as the financial support, all from individuals, foundations, and the government, continued to come in, we raised our sights, and the new wing grew to over 16,000 s.f., the fifth floor was totally renovated and, as it were, expanded (storage and offices were moved to the wing), the old “lecture gallery” became an extraordinary public, study storage, a new photography center was created, old offices became galleries and seminar

rooms, new systems were installed behind the scenes, and, not least, a Japanese garden was designed, and endowed, as part of the wing. And an endowment for maintenance for it all was raised, as well.

All of this required a number of decisions, and the building of a consensus for those decisions. The major decision was whether to concentrate our efforts on building the collection or on creating a new wing. Our collection certainly needed to add major works, notably in Italian Renaissance art, and in German and French painting, and I knew that a construction project, once begun, would be all-consuming and those needs would be difficult to fill. On the other hand, it was clear that we desperately needed to add more gallery and storage space, a task I had taken on twice before, at RISD and Williams, so it was something I felt I could help do. At the same time, by the early 1990s, art prices had reached extraordinary heights and clearly were not going to come down. For example, at about that time, I noted that over 1,000 works of art were sold at auction in one year for over \$1,000,000 each. That meant that even if we raised \$10,000,000 just for acquisitions (a challenge for our donors), we would end up with perhaps half a dozen good or very good works of art (great works were already going for eight and nine figures). In other words, if we wanted to bring the collection to a new level, it would have to be by gift. The third alternative, a separate building at another site, was not feasible at that point, given our recent history of budgetary ups and downs – assuming another site were available.

Other major decisions involved deciding on which side of the building the wing should go (the south side would have imposed on Libe Slope, sacred ground for Cornell, and would have compromised the iconic view of the main building, east and west weren't physically feasible, and, happily, the original plan in the Sixties was to build a wing on the north side); whether to use the original architect or have an extended search for a new architect (this was an easy decision, especially since both Pei and Sullivan were still working); whether or not to have a truly major renovation and rethink of the fifth floor – a project that Ellen Avril carried out brilliantly (a reinstallation of floors 1 and 2, assured by a generous NEA grant, was deliberately put off so that the new director could guide it); what the new wing would include, that is, how many square feet and how many floors, whether to have a second entrance, a lecture room, how much storage space, how much office space for the education department, etc.; the extent of the renovations to the main building; the Japanese garden (a visit to the Morgans' extraordinary home in California made such a decision inevitable); and, lastly, whether to stay open during construction or close the whole museum and lay off the guards and some other staff (there are many stories of such closures lasting much longer than expected – the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Musée Picasso are recent examples of the construction process being drawn out for a decade or more – and I didn't want to be tempted to go that slowly, I didn't want to lose the guards, at this point an excellent, loyal group of friends, and, above all, I didn't want to lose a generation of students not being exposed to the Museum). There were, of course, numerous smaller decisions on a regular basis. The planning at each stage was meticulous, a tribute to Peter and Ellen and the rest of the staff, and this resulted in very few, if any change orders, with their extra cost; the six-month pause in construction actually resulted in lower prices for some of that work. The end result was a new building seamlessly integrated into the classic main building – a new museum, really – and no debt for the new generation to worry about.

VII. Directors

What does a director do? Whenever I was asked that question, I always said, I clean the bathrooms. And that's true; in a museum, and other organizations, every detail counts, every staff member is essential to the business (otherwise, why employ them?), every visitor is important. At the same time, your job is to think big, to think long term, and to build a consensus around your major decisions, your major new

direction. And, always, your job is to raise money; without that, you can achieve nothing, or at least very little. In other words, a museum director is P.T. Barnum with a Ph.D., a showman with both scholarship and flair, and a love of people.

What are my regrets? First of all, so little parking and that blanket-blank elevator (parking was an even worse problem at Williams and RISD, and I never solved it there either). I wish I had filled a few gaps in the painting collection, especially with an Italian Renaissance altarpiece. I also regret not seeing to a firm close two major promised gifts; I have no reason to think they will not be honored, but I still wish I had gotten to the end of the road on both. And, of course, I envy my young and energetic successor, making this wonderful institution even more exciting. But one should always know when to leave the party, and this was the right time for me.

Frank Robinson
October 2014

