

Gratitude?

WHEN THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART announced in January that my husband, Dave, and I were donating our print collection to the museum, articles about the gift appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Our collection, of more than 5,000 prints by more than 2,000 American artists, spans from 19th-century etchings to Pop art. Its greatest strength lies in its pieces from the first six decades of the 20th century, particularly those done in the Depression era and under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration. Familiar names abound—George Bellows, Stuart Davis, Childe Hassam, Edward Hopper—but the collection’s uniqueness stems from the outstanding quality of its examples by lesser-known artists active from the 1920s to the 1940s.

Letters poured in thanking us for the gift to the nation, many of them from print collectors and dealers. Only three employees of other museums—two of them from London institutions—wrote to us, although we have circulated, at our expense, 18 exhibitions from our collection to about 100 museums.

Museum personnel have long amazed us. They seem to march to an unusual beat, if they march at all. Consider the Northeastern U.S. museum where two of our shows attracted good audiences and where, because the institution itself owned few prints, we offered to build a print room and help it acquire examples. The director invited us to look at “the perfect space.” The room was unsuitable—it had many windows, bright light, little wall space. When we demurred, he explained that he expected us to pay to have it converted into a restaurant. We asked, “What about the prints?” “Oh, you can hang a few in the restaurant,” he replied. We told him that we didn’t finance restaurants, and he became enraged, berating us for our lack of generosity. We never returned.

While touring a shabby Connecticut museum devoid of visitors except for us, we were asked by the director to describe the exhibitions we fund. We told her we support American-print exhibitions, preferably group shows, with a concentration on work from the first half of the 20th century. She listened intently, taking notes. The proposal she sent us asked for a substantial check to pay for a large exhibition of American Impressionist paintings. When we reminded her of the type of shows we support, she was irate. “But I don’t *want* a print exhibition,” she complained. “I want the show I described in the proposal.” We wished her luck.

These episodes reminded us of the famous *Harvard Business Review* article “Marketing Myopia,” whose author, Theodore Levitt, points out that corporate managers who ignore their customers’ desires reduce their chances of success. Change the word *customers* to *patrons*, and it’s easy to see that the two museums cited suffer from marketing myopia. Neither has flourished.

New York institutions we might have considered as homes for our collection displayed a similar lack of interest in our prints. For many years we had a close relationship with the Metropolitan Museum’s Bill Lieberman, a champion at attracting collections. Because of his interest in the category, we contributed funds to buy prints, underwrote an exhibition and in 1999 donated more than 200 rare examples by African-Americans working in the 1930s and 1940s. Since Bill’s death, in 2005, no one at the Met has shown the slightest interest in our collection.

Collector Reba Williams on how museums handle—or mishandle—their benefactors.

We have been members of the Museum of Modern Art’s Print Associates for 15 years or more and have financed one exhibition and assisted in financing others. But during the five years that our prints resided in a Stamford, Connecticut, building we bought to house them and that was available to tour by appointment, neither the MoMA print curator nor the associates visited. Shortly after we donated our prints and the building to the National Gallery, but before the donation was announced, the curator tried—too late—to arrange a group visit.

This odd behavior on the part of museum personnel does not affect just us. Members of a wealthy family whom we know collect American and contemporary art and specify these interests in the official description of their foundation. But they are still besieged with unrelated requests. Now they send out a form letter that begins “We do not support,” followed by a list. They also keep notes on institutions that haven’t properly prepared their requests.

Perhaps the robust U.S. economy of the past 25 years has allowed curators to show indifference to would-be donors capable of benefiting their institutions and to reject offered gifts, urging instead the

support of projects in which the donors have no interest. But the outlook for museums has changed with the recent downturn. Institutional endowments are down sharply. Trustees at Brandeis University have responded to the decrease in its endowment from \$712 million to \$540 million by threatening to close its Rose Art Museum and sell the collection. Corporations that once sponsored exhibitions have disappeared, as have many of the hedge funds that had enriched free-spending new collectors. Museum personnel, if they want to remain employed, will make patrons’ interests and desires major concerns of their future fund-raising. Marketing myopia has no place in the museum world today. ■

REBA WILLIAMS HAS WRITTEN TWO MYSTERIES SET IN THE PRINT WORLD.



Martin Lewis’s drypoint *Arc Welders at Night*, 1937, is one of the 5,000 prints given to the National Gallery of Art by Reba and Dave Williams.

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