VIEWPOINT: The So-Called Permanent Collection

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by Joan Altabe

The “For Sale” sign propped on the lawn in Edward Hopper’s painting *East Wind Over Weehawken* spookily prophesied the work’s fate last year when the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts museum sold it in order to quintuple the institution’s endowment coffers.

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“East Wind Over Weehawken” by Edward Hopper, 1934. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

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That transaction and others like it make the hullabaloo over Delaware Art Museum’s recent one sound a little like Captain Renault in “Casablanca” saying, “I’m shocked, shocked to find that gambling is going on in here,” as he palms his winnings from a croupier.

The Delaware museum is one of many treasure houses in the U.S. that market their holdings, either to balance a budget, expand a collection or enlarge an exhibition space. According to reports, Delaware Museum CEO Mike Miller told the Association of Art Museum Directors that financial distress was so dire that the choice was either to sell art or shut down.

That’s why the outrage from the AAMD, which has ruled against Delaware’s sales—complete with sanctions for violators already on the books—conjures the image of Captain Renault at Rick’s in Casablanca.

Whatever the reason, deaccessioning, the trade word for the sale of art in permanent collections, has been a way of doing museum business for years. When the Metropolitan Museum of Art was caught disposing of $4,500,000 worth of highly regarded art in 1971 in order to buy “world-class” pieces, Thomas Hoving, Met director, defended the action way back then as “time-honored and universal.”

Despite the long history of deaccessioning, when New York’s National Academy Museum sold two Hudson River School paintings to pay operating costs in 2008, the AAMD invoked its rule and levied sanctions that prevented the Academy from borrowing works from other museums for two years, followed by a five-year probation period.

This was no small thing. National Academy director Carmine Branagan told the press at the time that the sanctions prevented the Academy from planning exhibits and getting funding for shows.

The AAMD struck again recently when the Maier Museum of Art at Randolph College in Lynchburg, VA sold a George Bellows painting to the National Academy of Art in London to increase the college endowment.

Some museums have found ways to take on or push the envelope on AAMD's many admonitions. Defying the one that says museums can't collateralize their collections, in 2010 the Dali Museum in St. Petersburg, FL sought to use its collection as collateral to borrow money if fundraising efforts to finish its new building failed to cover costs.

Another end-run around AAMD strictures occurred when the Brooklyn Museum set out to "transfer" a trove of 1890s gowns from its costume collection to NY's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The way the press release read, it seemed like the Brooklyn Museum, unable to properly preserve the gowns owing to a squeezed budget, was acting responsibly by passing them to the Met for proper care.

But that's not the way the deal worked. The "transfer" meant that the Met could sell the gowns it didn't want and pass the sale money to Brooklyn.

Even the Clifford Still Museum in Denver, which has a specific ethics policy against selling from its collection for any reason other than for buying art, found a way around its own rule. In 2011, after the city received a trove of Still's art—a bequest from the painter's widow, who died in 2005—the museum petitioned a Maryland county court to sell four paintings and remit proceeds to the museum before it took possession of the works.

No matter the whys for these transactions, it's clear that museum collections are not brick-walled. The head-scratcher is that while AAMD decrees against museums selling their art to keep going, it okays them selling art to buy more art, even though selling to buy in the volatile art world can be a crapshoot.

Check this out:

In 2001, New York Museum of Modern Art curator Peter Galassi revalued the photography collection and sold 350 works at Sotheby's. Among them were photos by lens luminaries Alfred Stieglitz and Man Ray.

Galassi told me at the time that he considered it his duty to sell. "Museums are based on the principle of attempting to separate the great from the very good," he said. "It's not proper for current custodians to saddle future custodians with obligations that may keep them from doing their job."

How do you tell the difference between great and very good? I asked him. "There's no such thing as absolute unassailable judgment about the quality of a work," Galassi said. "You can make a mistake. There's no guarantee."

Speaking of mistakes, MoMA's founding director, Alfred Barr, deaccessioned a Picasso painting, "La Statuaire," some 40 years ago, believing it "too beautiful to be important." Today it is considered one of the most complex and masterful studies of Picasso's studio. A private collector paid $11.8 million for it at auction in 1999.

The auction was a kind of karmic payback: Some of the photographs that Galassi sold had been donated by Barr.

Given all the reasons why museum collections aren't permanent, including the one about staying afloat that irks the AAMD so much, shouldn't it be obvious to the group by now that its expectations are unrealistic? Museums are in trouble and have been for a long time owing to the rising costs of climate control, security and insurance.

Even in the '70s, decades before our current economic downturn, two mid-sized museums, the New York Cultural Centre and the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art closed their doors because they couldn't meet their operating costs. As well, the Detroit Institute of Art, fifth largest museum in the U.S., was forced to close temporarily for lack of funds.

So the question continues to nag: Why is it better for a museum to sell a valued artwork to buy what might only be perceived at a particular time as "world-class" than for a museum to sell artwork to keep its doors open? Isn't that the difference between a family selling its heirlooms to buy a higher-valued house and selling its heirlooms to pay the mortgage?