
Blockbuster Exhibitions: the Hidden Costs and Perils

A Report, in Honour of James Beck

By Michael Daley and Michael Savage

Introduction

In 1962 France's first Minister of Culture, André Malraux flamboyantly made a personal loan of the "Mona Lisa" to the President of the United States, Jack Kennedy, and his wife Jacqueline. Despite fierce opposition from the Louvre Museum's conservators, the centuries old, crack-susceptible panel crossed the Atlantic on the S.S. France and was put on public show by the Presidential couple first in the National Gallery Washington and then at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, early in 1963. At both venues people queued for hours to snatch a glimpse as they shuffled past the picture, marshalled by guards to prevent any loitering.

The exercise was deemed a great popular, political and technical success: several millions of people had "seen" the most famous painting in the world; Europe's finest and most revered had embraced America's most gilded and dynamic; and, despite being subject to the strains and risks of travel, a precious and fragile panel painting had, by courtesy of state-of-the-art packaging technology, suffered no (discernible) harm.

Success spawned imitation and somehow, an art-world monster has emerged in our times: the exhibition has taken over the museum. Even the "Mona Lisa" could be moved great distances with impunity, why not anything? In truth the Louvre had got lucky. An incipient split, which runs down the centre of the panel passing through the famous smile (as terrified conservators had warned) had not, in the event, opened.

Other carefully cosseted pictures have not fared so well. In 2000 the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston found its Turner oil painting "Slav-

ers throwing overboard the dead and dying – Typhoon coming on" (- previously considered one of the few Turner masterpieces in good condition) to be damaged and "extremely unstable" on return from the Tate Gallery. Despite having been "glazed and sealed against changes in relative humidity, the picture [had] reacted significantly to the voyage" and lost flakes of paint. A Tate spokeswoman said in response to disclosure of the damage: "It arrived here safely where it was examined thoroughly. Its condition was stable... However, Turner's paintings are notorious for becoming unstable." Then why was a chance taken? (See below and "Masterpiece by Turner Damaged on loan to the Tate", *The Times*, October 28 2003.)

As will be shown, the remorseless trend towards ever-bigger, bolder, more numerous, temporary travelling exhibitions – the so-called "Blockbusters" – has been widely criticised by scholars, critics and conservators in recent years, but its institutional apologists contend to this day that as the blockbuster exhibition draws crowds and fills coffers, it remains an unequivocally Good Thing.

Our report counters this complacent deception by bringing into the open the physical costs to works of art and the cultural costs to museums, their staffs and their visitors. We depart from the common fatalism that accompanies the sometimes snobbish criticism of the blockbusters. We believe that anyone can develop a meaningful appreciation of art but that gimmicks and sideshows demean us all.

Part One: Physical Costs

There are three essential areas of risk associated with travelling exhibitions.

First. Accidents and losses during and associated with travel: dismantling, packing, transit, unpacking, re-hanging and so forth.

Second. Injuries suffered during otherwise unnecessary conservation treatments required either by the exigencies of travelling and insurance, or in indulgence of the aesthetic prejudices and predilections of curators, conservators and publicists.

Third. Thefts.

The Dangers of Travel

Contrary to impressions fostered by museum and gallery administrators, the possibility of losing great masterpieces in a shipwreck or a plane, lorry, train or car crash remains real and ever-present. Modes of transport, particularly aircraft, are immensely safer than previously, but even with aircraft, as airline pilots will tell you, near misses are more frequent than admitted. Nicholas Penny, former Renaissance paintings curator at the National Gallery London, and present curator of sculpture at the National Gallery Washington has pointed out that no rebuttal of Francis Haskell's case (seen below) against loan exhibitions was made for fear of bringing to public notice "the near accidents of recent years" and the risk of drawing "public statements" from senior figures, like Sir Ernst Gombrich, known privately to oppose the practice.

Moreover, with the great increase in travelling exhibitions, risks, of whatever magnitude, are taken more and more often. Some acknowledgement of these risks is evident today among exhibition organisers themselves: three of Ghiberti's gilded bronze panels from the Florence Baptistery doors currently on transatlantic tour through Atlanta, Chicago, New York and Seattle, are

travelling on separate planes because “They’re too valuable to risk a crash”. Similarly, the 20 terracotta figures sent (in wooden – and therefore flammable - crates) to the British Museum’s Chinese Warriors blockbuster were flown in on two planes “to reduce risk”. Mathematically literate persons are quick to point out that avoiding the possibility of total loss in this manner *triples* the possibility of *some loss*. And actual losses do still occur. As we write, a China Airlines Boeing 737-800 was destroyed by fire on landing at the Japanese island of Okinawa. Passengers and crew escaped but possessions and cargo did not (- see Fig. 1.)

In 1997 the British Museum flew all of its Graeco-Roman encaustic portraits to Athens in a single plane. An entire class of objects at the Museum could have been lost in a single disaster.

On September 2, 1998, a Swissair jet carrying a Picasso oil painting (“Le Peintre”) valued at £1m, and a second unidentified painting, crashed into the sea off Nova Scotia at 300 knots, on a 20 degrees downward path and almost upside down in a 110 degree bank turn. All 229 people on board were killed instantly as the plane and its contents broke on impact into millions of tiny pieces.

On July 12, 2001, the then director of the National Gallery in London, Neil MacGregor, claimed that it had become safe at some point in “the past five to ten years” to jet works of art around the world because little widgets in modern packing cases alert handlers to any shifts of condition inside.

Three months later, in the aftermath of the September 11 hi-jacked airliners terror attack in New York, four Vermeer paintings that had been loaned to the National Gallery were stranded in London because of the reluctance of American museum couriers to fly to Europe to collect them. The Department of Homeland Security in Washington had received intelligence indicating that Al Qaeda terrorists were plan-



On August 20th 2007 this China Airlines Boeing 737-800 was destroyed by fire shortly after landing in Okinawa. All passengers and crew (narrowly) escaped. China Airlines has had four fatal accidents in the past 13 years in which 700 people have died.



Crowds queuing to view the Mona Lisa at the Washington National Gallery in 1963 – from the 1969 memoir “Self-Portrait with Donors” by the Gallery’s former Director, John Walker.



Former Barnes Foundation student Danni Malitzski captured this picture of the arrival of Matisse’s mural, La Danse, at the National Gallery Washington on April 5 1993 on a flat-bed truck – and not a climate-controlled vehicle as promised to a court hearing called to overturn the terms of Barnes’ bequest. For a full account of the damage suffered by the mural in transit, see pages 34-35.

ning to hi-jack cargo planes to crash them into nuclear plants, bridges or dams.

In September 2001, an elaborate, richly carved and gilded fifty feet high Baroque altar was wrenched out of its architectural and spiritual context in a Benedictine church in Brazil and despatched to New York for exhibition as the glittering centrepiece of a blacked-out and artificially lit Guggenheim Museum exhibition “Brazil: Body and Soul”. (See back cover)

In 2003, British Airways suspended all flights into Saudi Arabia for three weeks following the arrest of a terrorist with an SA7 anti-aircraft missile. In July 2007 the US homeland security chief Michael Chertof anticipated more summer attacks in Britain or America: “Al-Qaeda has to some degree regenerated itself.” In 2003 the fine art insurance specialists Hiscox disclosed that fine art insurance premiums had increased by 25 per cent in the two years following the events of September 11 2001.

Sea travel is no safer.

The great collector Sir William Burrell, who had made his fortune in shipping – and therefore fully appreciated its risks – insisted that none of the many works he left in bequest to the city of Glasgow between 1944 and, the year of his death, 1958, should ever cross any water – but in 1979 a Parliamentary commission recommended *the overturning* of the terms of his bequest. (Legislation to enact this has not followed.)

Henry Clay Frick stipulated that nothing should be lent from his collection, which was to be preserved in perpetuity at his (exquisite) New York mansion. *But this was subsequently deemed by administrators to cover only Frick’s own purchases and not artworks purchased for the collection after his death.*

Where risks are involved, what accounts for such differences of attitude and behaviour between private individuals and public administrators? The collector/donor Andrew

Mellon stipulated that none of the panel paintings he gave to the Washington National Gallery should ever be loaned. Chester Dale went further, insisting that nothing whatever from his bequest to the Gallery should go out on loan. Although a former director of the Washington National Gallery, John Walker, favoured such provisions and in 1969 expressed the wish that “other museum benefactors would similarly inhibit loans of fragile material”, nonetheless, *as Director*, Walker confesses involvement in loan exhibitions he believed never should have taken place.

One difference between the two groups would seem to be this: such collectors, having spent their own money “bagging” a desirable, coveted object, revelled in its possession and took no chances of losing it. Whereas, arts administrators who work with other people’s money and/or possessions, may well have fewer qualms about risks involved in, say, loaning or restoring works of art. They have the luxury of indulging in horse-trading, showmanship or in playing impresarios and beauticians with possessions not their own. Traditionally, as a check on behaviour, administrators were notionally answerable to their Trustees – in whom ownership of, and responsibility and *liability* for the art was vested. As shown below, that relationship has effectively been dissolved leaving the Trustees free to “sign off” their responsibilities on to (possibly reckless) museum executive staffs.

Certainly, Kenneth Clark testified to his own recklessness. A rich man, not needing to buy his own furniture, and free to buy the art he studied and sometimes coveted, he found himself at an absurdly tender age, Director of the National Gallery – in which capacity he indulged his admitted giddy, “careless and irresponsible” nature. When he saw “inconceivably reckless” risks being taken with his Gallery’s “National Treasures” by art handlers when on loan at the Louvre, he found the experience “rather exhilarating”. Under his directorial hat, he

launched the Gallery’s Great-Make-over-by-Cleaning with an assault on a Velazquez. The fruits of that still-running campaign, he later claimed, had left the collection “incomparably more exhilarating” than the one had inherited.

British Council apparatchiks crowed in their 1983-84 annual report about “spectacular success stories” and “huge crowds” generated by large-scale travelling exhibitions “from Mexico City to Madrid and Peking”. One such at the Grand Palais in Paris – “The most ambitious Turner exhibition ever staged abroad” – attracted over half a million visitors between October 1983 and January 1984. The 267 works loaned by the Tate, the British Museum and other collections, and insured (with Treasury assistance) for £70m, were despatched in wooden crates by two lorries to be carried on consecutive days from Dover to Calais by Sealink on board *The Spirit of Free Enterprise*. On March 6, 1987, her sister ship, *The Herald of Free Enterprise*, carrying 47 lorries, capsized and sank with a loss of 191 lives in calm seas.

In November 2004, a curator at the Wallace Collection, Stephen Duffy, warned: “It is only a matter of time before a major work is lost when a plane crashes or a boat sinks. We must ask ourselves if it needs such a tragedy before we stop.”

It was reported on July 12, 2007 that a plot to blow up (by car bomb) a Brittany Ferries vessel, the *Pont-Aven*, carrying thousands of British tourists and a crew of 183, had been thwarted when an Eta terrorist was arrested carrying detonators for a van packed with explosives. An earlier Eta attempt to destroy a ferry leaving Valencia failed when the intended van-bomb broke down and had to be abandoned.

Turner left his finished pictures to the National Gallery on condition that they be kept together in a single building expressly and solely constructed for the purpose. That condition has not been honoured. Indeed, the Tate itself, as (eventual) recipi-

ent of almost the entire bequest, has been accused of carelessness with his own Turners. Far from achieving safe haven on his death, Turner's paintings have been taken by the Tate to be its most eminently "swap-able", "dispatch-able" assets. In the 1953-54 Parliamentary debates on the National Gallery and Tate Gallery Bill, one M.P., a Dr Stross, joked: "I have heard it put this way: 'Do not send out our Rembrandts; take a risk with your Turners, and knock your Picassos about a bit.'" Kenneth Robinson drew attention to a Turner landscape that had been damaged while on loan to an embassy. By 1974, when museums and galleries were still not as obliging with their wares as today, the then Chairman of the National Gallery's Trustees, John Hale, disclosed that three of the Gallery's Turners had "travelled extensively – one or more of them has been seen in Amsterdam, Berlin, Berne, Brussels, Cape Town, Chicago, Liege, New York, Paris, Rome, Rotterdam, Toronto and Venice.

(We are greatly indebted to Dr Selby Whittingham, Secretary-General of Donor Watch, for this – and much other relevant information. selby_whittingham@yahoo.co.uk)

The perpetual recycling of Turner's oeuvre is increasing. The next project of Dr James Hamilton, the organiser of the 2003-04 travelling show, "Turner: The Late Seascapes" sent by the Clark Institute of Williamstown, USA, to Manchester and Glasgow in the UK is "Turner and Italy", an exhibition planned for 2008-9 at the National Gallery of Scotland and the Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara. (For an account of the much-criticised restoration of the Clark's Turner "Rockets and Blue Lights" made in preparation for the tour, see *ArtWatch UK Journal 19*)

In 2004, the art insurance company AXA-Art disclosed that it alone pays out around £3m a year for art damaged in transit. The true scale of damages is even larger, as museums and galleries generally repair (undisclosed) travel damage to works themselves to avoid increased insur-

ance premiums and unwelcome publicity.

In 2006, the British Museum packed 251 Assyrian objects - including its entire, incalculably important, set of massive, fragile, wall-mounted Nimrud Palace (easily scratched) alabaster relief carvings – in tissue paper and foam filled wooden crates, and sent them in two cargo jets to Shanghai for the "Assyria: Art and Empire" exhibition. The Museum's director, Neil MacGregor, claimed in a television programme on the Museum's workings: "It's easier to transport these big valuable objects now – but it's just as important to be certain they'll be safe at the other end." The other end was a long way away. The only flight capable of transporting all of the massive carvings to Shanghai left from Luxembourg to where the crated objects had to be moved by lorry/ferry/lorry. The planes stopped over in Azerbaijan during their 16 hours flights – giving a total of four landings and four take-offs on the round trip.

On arrival in Shanghai, it was discovered that the recipient museum's low doorways and inadequate lifts required the crates with the largest carvings to be "rolled in through the front door – which meant that we had to get a mobile crane to get them up the stairs" said Darrel Day, the British Museum's senior heavy-objects handler. The Laurel and Hardy pantomime was not over: "Even then we had to unpack three of the crates to get a bit more clearance...[one carving] was still too tall, so we had to lay him down on his side". (See also page 34)

When the collection was finally unpacked (- delay occurred when replacement had to be found for the museum's ancient, unsafe forklift truck), it was found that "a few little conservation things had to be done" and that a support had broken off one of the carved reliefs. Nic Lee, head of the Museum's Stone, Wall Paintings and Mosaics Conservation Section, was breezily unfazed: "that was a bit of nineteenth-century restoration that I'd been wanting to get rid of for ages anyway".

A restorer at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, has claimed that within the museum world there is a professional concept of "acceptable potential loss" when considering works for loans. There would certainly seem to be a high tolerance of failures to "forward-plan". The incoming (Morgan Stanley sponsored) exhibition of Chinese terracotta figures at the British Museum produced another art-handling pantomime. The more than two-dozen (wooden) crates required were delayed for two days in Beijing because they would not fit into the holds of the two chartered cargo planes. When they finally arrived at the British Museum, they would not pass through the door of the round Reading Room (from which Paul Hamlyn's gifted library has been evicted for the six months duration of the show). Even after the Reading Room's main door frame had been removed, the largest crates still could not enter the temporary exhibition space built above the famous circular desks of the library, and had to be unpacked outside the exhibition space in the Great Court. It would seem that entire libraries of books (even when only recently bequeathed), architecture (listed and restored), historical associations and auras, count for little today at the BM - where staff swooned over advance bookings to the Chinese Bonanza running "four times higher than those for the Michelangelo drawings show". (See also page 35)

Last year the British Museum loaned over four thousand objects. Mr MacGregor has said that he sees no reason why any work might not be loaned abroad providing it can be moved "safely". The difficulties of such arrangements are frankly discussed by one of his predecessors, David Wilson, in his "The British Museum: A History", (The British Museum Press, 2002 - pp 334-336, "Exhibitions – A Vicious Circle?"). Mr Wilson admits that objects occasionally get damaged and sometimes "go missing" and that the number of loans from the Museum doubled between 1985 and 2000, in which year 114 separate loans of

individual items or groups of objects were made within Britain and a hundred foreign loans sometimes of only two or three “objects of high importance” but sometimes with large groups of images - usually prints and drawings that are highly sensitive to light.

Although less spectacular than actual crashes, the net incremental effects of widespread and repeated travel cause much harm. Every time a painting is lent it is subject to changes in atmosphere that cause stress to its support. It is subject to the vibration of transit, and to the risk of careless handling – not necessarily an arm through the canvas, but the ongoing effects of brushing against it as it is taken down, crated, carried and, most vulnerably of all, hastily unpacked and re-hung at the other end in unfamiliar venues.

We know of some recent cases of such damage coming to light.

In 2000, pages of the *Book of Kells* were damaged by vibration when the precious illuminated manuscript was flown from Ireland to Australia. In 2004 a Raphael was found on arrival for the National Gallery’s “Raphael: From Urbino to Rome” show to have suffered “a raised crack” in transit.

Thefts

Accidental damage is not the only risk incurred when transporting art. Every year, more than £2bn of art is stolen, some of which is art on the move.

In November 2006, the Toledo Museum’s Goya “Children with a Cart” was stolen en route for an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

In 1994 the Tate Gallery loaned two of what it holds to be Turner’s “most significant works” and had insured for £24m, “Shade and Darkness - the Evening of the Deluge” and “Light and Colour (Goethe’s Theory) - the Morning after the Deluge - Moses writing the Book of Genesis”, to the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt. “We will not be sending a courier”, Tate director, Sir Nicholas Serota, told

the museum, “but as the works have high values we would like a member of your staff to supervise the arrival/depalletisation of the cases at Frankfurt [airport] and their transit to the Schirn Kunsthalle”.

The pictures were stolen from the Frankfurt museum on the day of arrival and only returned to the Tate in December 2002 after payment of a more than £3m ransom to the thieves in 2000.

Even when stolen art works are recovered, they are typically damaged as a result of careless handling. Two Picassos recently recovered from a theft in Paris were found to have been rolled so tightly that the paint had flaked. Two stolen Munch paintings were found on recovery in 2006 to have been scraped, punctured and to have suffered dislodged paint.

Such current risks and injuries would surely suggest that a very high bar should be set before the financial or other benefits of any proposed travelling exhibition be deemed sufficiently high to outweigh the costs of travel. Similarly, the manifest shortcomings of the present system of stewardship by Trustees suggests that some considerably more effective method of scrutiny and oversight is required to ensure that all travel damages be fully documented and reported if not altogether prevented.

Secrecy and Cover-ups

While it is self-evidently the case that paintings and other fragile works of art are susceptible to catastrophic damage whenever they travel (as, for example, in the fire that destroyed most of the paintings from Osterley Park en route to Jersey in 1949, including the great Rubens “Duke of Buckingham”), the risk of smaller damages from handling, which may never come to light as they can be swiftly covered by deft restoration – masks much cumulative harm that takes place. Although known instances of such damage are legion, given the secrecy of museums, these likely comprise the tip of an iceberg.

Francis Haskell noted in his survey of exhibitions (“The Ephemeral Museum”, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 147), that “many of the conservators best qualified ... are obliged to comply with the policies of the museums that employ them and are very much more eloquent in private than in public.”

Nicholas Penny, disclosed in 2000 that: “museum employees are obliged to stifle their anxieties.” (It is our understanding that the over-exposure of drawings to light during recent extended loans has been a source of considerable distress and anger among British Museum staff.)

In 1993, the New York Times art critic, Michael Kimmelman, reported the loss of a Boucher painting when loaned to a retrospective exhibition that travelled from New York, to Detroit to Paris. Plane crashes and acts of God, he added are not the only issues: “There are countless lesser kinds of damage – paintings that flake, sculptures that chip, art vandalized, bumped or dropped in the course of being moved...” Not surprisingly, Kimmelman added, museums invariably seek to conceal mishaps: “no museum, either as lender or borrower, wants the taint of irresponsibility or carelessness. Although conservators, curators and directors privately raise doubts all the time about fragile and important works of art being moved around by other institutions, they virtually never speak out. When they do, it is as one chorus: nothing goes wrong where they are.”

The fact that Copley’s “The Death of Major Peirson” was damaged in 1965-66 when loaned by the Tate Gallery to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, only emerged thirty years later when minutes of the Tate’s Picture Cleaning Committee were released at the Public Record Office, (now the National Archives) and spotted by the arts journalist Martin Bailey. The Committee learned that when the picture “had been removed from its frame without authority, probably in Washington the canvas had been torn away from the relining canvas

at the edge of the picture and a portion of the original paint was missing." In 1996 the Tate again lent the same Copley to the Washington National Gallery. It is not known whether the Tate's Trustees were made aware of the earlier injuries.

Dangers of Restoration

For ArtWatch it is axiomatic that: restoration and so-called conservation treatments alike, carry risks of injury to works of art; that works are put at *additional risk* of aesthetic damage whenever they travel; and that it should, therefore be a clearly accepted principle of good museum practice that *the fewer restoration treatments a work undergoes, the better.*

Proof of the risks incurred during travel is seen in the claimed "preventive" need for works to "conserved" or "restored" precisely to make them more capable of facing the traumas of their jaunts. (If travel constituted no threat or hazard at all, it would not matter what condition a work might be in – it would arrive entirely unaltered at its destination and would return in like manner.) That "preventive" measures notwithstanding, many works of art suffer damage in transit is a fact widely if quietly noted within the museum and gallery circles.

It is common to spruce things up before showing them, in order to add to the novelty of the exhibition and to make pictures look their best, as if mannequins at a fashion show.

Between January 1960 and May 1962, eleven paintings at the National Gallery, London, were, in the words of the then director, Sir Philip Hendy, "put into condition and cleaned in order that they might travel safely abroad and look their best in exhibitions." What Hendy took to be a picture looking at its best was a picture free of any yellowed varnish. But varnishes yellow as dogs scratch – it is their nature. The obsession with stripping varnishes with solvents to "bring out the colours" and then immediately re-varnishing with resins dissolved in solvents is perhaps one of the most

regrettable museum administration indulgences.

Such cosmetic treatments can backfire. Of the National Gallery's Abbey-sponsored 2006-2007 Velazquez show, Adam Raphael complained in the *Guardian* (Diary, December 9, 2006): "...a cleaner version of the past isn't always an improvement. Just look at the Velazquez exhibition at the National Gallery. There are paintings there that have been cleaned so much they are dirty. Sometimes glazes are put on for a reason."

The Gallery's earlier cleanings of its two portraits of Philip IV of Spain each triggered furious protests shortly before and after the Second World War. Its Velazquez "Philip IV hunting Wild Boar" had been disastrously restored and relined at some indeterminate point in the 19th century. In 1833 a restoration, attempting to "undo" and "redo" the effects of the previous treatment was carried out. It was again restored in 1846 prompting (with several other pictures) one of the first and most heated cleaning controversies at the Gallery. It was re-re-re-restored in 1950; re-re-lined, de-varnished and re-varnished in 1969; but then, less than forty years later all of this cumulative work was undone and redone once more for the 2006-07 blockbuster.

The National Gallery, London boasts in press releases that many paintings will be 'specially cleaned and restored' for its Siena exhibition from October 2007.

A particularly striking case of such ill-judged actions is detailed here in Nick Tinari's account (page 35) of the Barnes Collection dispersal, during which some thirty or more precious and historically untouched paintings (each judged by the Metropolitan Museum's Everett Fahy to constitute "a dream of what an Impressionist picture should look like") were threatened with (and only narrowly avoided) hasty restorations immediately prior to their lucrative whirlwind blockbuster tour in 1993.

In Washington in the 1950s, Duncan Phillips was less lucky. He sent his famous and most precious Renoir "Luncheon of the Boating Party" to the restorers Sheldon and Caroline Keck for a tiny remedial repair with specific instructions to "iron out a small blister on the surface and then forward the canvas to Paris for a major exhibition at the Louvre." Phillips was distraught to discover that the Kecks had not only cleaned his picture (then as pristine as those owned by Barnes) without permission but had even made a film of their unauthorised intervention. In it, Phillips told the art critic Alexander Eliot, colour stains are seen coming off the picture and on to restorers' swabs. The picture was so badly damaged that on arrival in Paris, curators at first "refused to accept the resultant ruin as a Renoir". Phillips implored Eliot "please don't report this tragedy. It's too dreadful."

Large museums offer, as "political" inducement to private collectors (and to take up slack capacity in large conservation studios?), to restore and conserve works for free. The Getty Conservation Institute often restores paintings free of charge for hard-up museums, in frank exchange for loans to the Getty Museum. Given the institution's wealth and influence, this behaviour will disseminate their 'house' conservation approach very widely. This is a particularly regrettable development as paintings in private collections have often escaped the systematic and intrusive restoration campaigns favoured by museums with large conservation departments. As the New York restorer Marco Grassi has pointed out, the condition of works by minor artists (which attract little attention from conservators) is often superior to that of major artists who attract the most attention.

It is almost a commonplace today to note that when large wide-ranging blockbusters are assembled, the greatly differing appearances of works by the same artist – and often from the same altarpiece or commissioned suite of works – testify to the various and cumulative injuries suf-

ferred by what restorers euphemise as works' individual "conservation histories". (See Martin Gayford's "How Clean is Your Art?" which appeared in the Autumn 2004 issue of *Art Quarterly*. Viz, on the Van Dyck blockbuster at the Royal Academy: "the comparison of pictures of precisely the same period, but from different museums was so glaring as to verge on tragic.")

By exposing variations of condition within artists oeuvres, blockbusters highlight a striking paradoxical asymmetry in the world's pictures: while within an artist's oeuvre, the range of conditions forever widens according to the varying treatments imposed by different owners, within a given museum, paintings come more and more to resemble one another because of the homogeneity of the given house style of treatment. On seeing the National Gallery in London for the first time, a professor of restoration from St Petersburg Academy of Arts, Anatoly Alyoshin, expressed disbelief at the way "all the paintings seemed to have been painted in the same studio at the same time".

Such is the scale and apparent haste of pre-exhibition "conservation" frenzy today that works in shows often bear strikingly different appearances from their own photographic illustrations in exhibition catalogues.

In the recent National Gallery Velazquez show catalogue, for example, the entry on the portrait of the artist's mentor, Don Gaspar de Guzmán, Count-Duke of Olivares, refers to the subject's hands, noting that one "grips the table, while the other is poised on his sword hilt, a stance which amplifies his massive form and animates its contours, reflecting his lively, tireless persona." What is not mentioned is that the hand-on-sword in the accompanying catalogue illustration no longer exists – that hand has evidently been repainted.

Virtual injuries

It would appear that we are entering an era where especial vigilance is

becoming necessary; that a new and additional means of falsifying pictures has fallen into the hands of museum staffs: the digital *manipulation of photographs*.

The catalogue for the Rothschild-sponsored 2006-2007 "Americans in Paris, 1860-1900", blockbuster (organised jointly by the National Gallery, London, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, and the Metropolitan Museum, New York) carried two large full colour images of John Singer Sargent's stunning portrait of Madame Pierre Gautreau, the notorious "Madame X" now at the Metropolitan Museum, one on the cover, and a full page detail inside. That portrait had been celebrated for its audacious profiled depiction of the subject wherein "head to toe, the form 'draws' itself – in one stroke it becomes a harmony of lines".

The profile of the head that features in the exhibition catalogue reproductions differed strikingly from one reproduced only a few years earlier by the Metropolitan Museum on the cover of its own (Spring 2000) *Bulletin*. The profile of the hair had changed dramatically in two respects: the bun on the top of the head had become sharper while, contrarily, the faceted back of the hair had become flatter, duller, and less anatomically expressive. (See page 30)

In 2000, alarmed by the picture's then recently restored appearance we had asked the Metropolitan Museum's director, Philippe de Montebello, to see its conservation records, but without success. (See "X LESS", *Jackdaw* April 2006) In 2006 noting further, apparent changes to the picture in the exhibition catalogue, we asked if it had been restored again. Not touched it since 1996, said the restorer, Dorothy Mahon. But then what accounts, we asked, for the clear changes evident in the latest catalogue illustrations? In support of the question, a scanned image showing the differing portrayals in the two publications was sent to the Metropolitan Museum conservation department. Ms Mahon replied, offering the explanation:

"After reviewing the two images you sent I can see for myself the discrepancy which is the cause of your concern." Colour proofs had been sent to New York [i.e. to the Metropolitan Museum, the owner of the painting]...and colour correction notes on the proofs had been made in front of the painting in the gallery. The annotated proofs had been sent off to London. "How the image may have been altered during colour correcting at the Italian printers I cannot say, but sometimes this process involves digitally masking off separate areas, Perhaps this could explain the contour shift in the hair."

Perhaps it could. But it does not mitigate the failure of anyone at the Metropolitan Museum to notice changes made to the design of one the Museum's most famous - and indeed "iconic" - pictures. It comes as no surprise to regular restoration-watchers that changed images go unspotted and unpunished within a museum – restorers have been redoing profiles and much else with impunity for decades. A restorer at the National Gallery of Scotland announced his intention to "improve Titian's contours" on the Gallery's Sutherland Titians. Arthur Lucas redid the contours of Bacchus's and Ariadne's hair in the National Gallery's great Titian in 1969.

But there is a most disturbing twist to this latest incident. If sloppy supervision of digital technicians were to render reproductions in future catalogues unreliable, then any visually corroborated criticism of restorers would be greatly handicapped. The veracity of the photographic record of pictures is essential to any proper appraisal of pre and post-treatment states of restorations because in producing the restored state, the pre-restored state is destroyed. It should be understood that those who bought the show's catalogue (£40 hardback, £25 paperback) paid for a misleading, artistically falsifying record. Perhaps, like misprinted stamps, the catalogues will become collectors' items. But it would be nicer to think that they might yet be withdrawn from sale.

Even curators who recognise the risks find it difficult to resist them. As we saw with the “Mona Lisa”, loans of great, valuable and fragile works of art do not arise easily. Often prior pressure is applied from the highest quarters. The Royal Academy’s Italian Art Show of 1930 was widely taken to be a celebration of Italy herself made at Mussolini’s behest via Lady Chamberlain, wife of the former British Foreign Secretary – Kenneth Clark considered it a calculated piece of Fascist propaganda. Many, including Bernard Berenson, were appalled at the idea of sending over three hundred of Italy’s finest works (including sixteen Titians, eleven Raphaels, eleven Botticellis, six Giorgiones and thirty six Leonardo drawings) on a single ship, the “Leonardo da Vinci”. Walter Sickert protested “If providence had elected to sink the good ship Leonardo da Vinci in the gale instead of, as it did the other day, a cargo of modern paintings, Society would have said ‘Oh! Hard lines!’ and passed on to more congenial occupations.

“That the Royal Academy should have succumbed to a sporting stunt is disappointing. The English adoration for taking risks, for the fun of risks, sometimes our own, and always somebody else’s, is ineradicable. But the Academy surely exists, one might hope, to say the becoming and scholarly word at the right moment.”

Leonardo’s “Annunciation” is being sent to Japan as part of an Italian trade fair, a loan again opposed by the institution itself. In March 2007 an Italian Senator chained himself to the Uffizi railings in protest.

In 1995, Sir Ernst Gombrich disclosed to ArtWatch UK that the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna had come under enormous pressure to release Vermeer’s great and celebrated *Art of Painting* for an exhibition to be held at the Mauritshuis, the Hague, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington: “...indeed in the end the Queen of the Netherlands rang the President of

Austria (who had no idea what she was talking about!). So the Museum called in ‘experts’, including a restorer from Germany, who all said that the picture was not in a condition to travel. So even restorers can do some good.”

But not for long: in 2001 the painting travelled over land and sea to the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the National Gallery in London in a *Vermeer-fest* held in replication of the 1995-96 Mauritshuis/ National Gallery, Washington show. Many Vermeers travelled to all four venues in the two shows. Many had been “restored” – to dreadful, *permanent* effect – for the temporary occasions. (The London/New York show had been made possible by an indemnity from the US Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities, and by the sponsorship of Ernst and Young.)

(See page 31)

Curators are not above political machinations themselves. Thomas P. Campbell, curator of tapestries at the Met notes that. “no one but the Met could have pulled off the exhibition of Renaissance tapestry we had here a few years ago, where there were forty-five tapestries on show. The politics involved, the financing involved, the leverage, and the expertise involved: No one else had that. We bribed and cajoled and twisted the arms of institutions around the world – well, we didn’t bribe, of course – but politically it was very complicated negotiating the loan of these objects” (Thomas P. Campbell in “Danziger”, p. 40)

Lawrence Kantner of the Metropolitan Museum of Art explains that they hesitate before requesting panels over 90cm, but notes that “it’s often a real song and dance to persuade anyone to let them go. But I would say the Met has a cachet that few museums can complete with: not only are we big and prominent, but also we’re in New York, and a lot of people want their things seen in New York. It’s exposure on the big stage.” (“Danziger” p.107). He also notes that: “Your stock suddenly rises” (“Danziger” p. 108).

Plautilla Nelli’s large altarpiece, Lamentation with Saints is being lent from San Marco to the National Museum of Women and the Arts in Washington D.C. This 113.5 in high canvas has been restored twice in recent years. Jordana Pomeroy boasted in the Museum’s bulletin: “In 2003 the Florence Committee of the National Museum of Women in the Arts sponsored more expensive conservation of the painting, effectively becoming its second patron four centuries after its completion.”

In 1996 the American ambassador to the Netherlands gained the reluctant release from the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam of a Max Beckmann painting for an exhibition at the SoHo Guggenheim in New York. The dealer Richard Feigen said that with the Beckmann exhibition, which he instigated, he had had – as with other cases of museum “hardball” – to promise loans from his own collection in exchange.

Today governments are promoting loan exhibitions to East Asia as they try to promote themselves in a fast-growing part of the world. Over fifty paintings from the Prado - including masterpieces by Titian, El Greco, Velazquez, Tintoretto, Rubens, Van Dyck, Tiepolo and Goya – will be sent to Beijing and Shanghai between September and November 2007.

Britain’s Neil MacGregor sometimes seems to be perpetually jetting to China, occasionally in attendance on the Prime Minister, and usually with a journalistic Boswell (or two or three) in tow.

As mentioned above, in his eagerness to bring to the British Museum a mammoth exhibition of life-size terracotta tomb figures, Mr MacGregor converted the recently and expensively restored Reading Room into a gallery by building a false floor over its historic circular configuration of desks. The *fact* of this architectural, cultural and historical violation is being used to “prove need” and launch a proposed £70-100m extension to the Museum that will accommodate both the world’s largest blockbuster exhibitions and a

conservation centre: "Knowing that nothing squeezes corporate hearts like a blockbuster exhibition, MacGregor has timed his proposed extension to musical perfection, anticipating that the great fund-holders of the 21st century will be challenged by the ambitions of an archetypal oligarch [- the First Emperor of China]", purred the *Evening Standard's* Norman Lebrecht, on July 27, 2007.

Here the perhaps unguardedly adulatory Lebrecht lays bare "blockbusterdom's" naked politico/power mechanisms: "MacGregor, 61, has gone the extra 20,000 miles to make this exhibition happen, flying to Beijing twice in a week on one occasion to convince officials that London was worthier than Paris, Berlin and other bidders. He blitzed the Chinese with London's core advantages – its selection as 2012 Olympic city in succession to Beijing; its new Eurostar terminal that will draw crowds from all over the continent; its access to English-speaking cyberspace, not least its free-entry museums that allow the glories of the ancient world to be seen by the international proletariat without prohibitive expense." (There is to be £12 entrance charge.) "It's going to be London's biggest attraction since Tutankhamun 40 years ago" MacGregor said.

It may not hold the record for long, however. In November Tutankhamun II opens in London at O2 (the former Millennium Dome). Its organisers are confident of bettering attendances at the 1972 British Museum Tutankhamun exhibition (1.7m) with an anticipated 2m paying at least £15 per head partly in order to "assist" Egypt's archaeological services. Dr Zahi Hawass, the secretary general of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, said that the show's various outings are expected to earn at least £50m to protect and preserve his country's heritage. The nearly 3,500 years old Tutankhamun artefacts, he threatens, will crumble to dust unless they are "conserved", better displayed and protected from "the ravages of mass tourism". The famous death

mask shown the last time will not be coming. Dr Hawass told Radio 4's Today programme: "It is unlikely to ever leave the Cairo Museum now. It's far too fragile and it is too risky".

Terracotta, lacking tensile strength, is one of the most fragile sculptural materials of all – where a dropped bronze might dent, a dropped terracotta object smashes, and yet, a number of (smaller) groups of the Chinese terracotta figures have already recently been, as Lebrecht noted: "crated up and shipped to Washington, Moscow, Rome and other pressure points on the global nerve system".

Part Two: Cultural Costs

The hidden costs of the blockbuster phenomenon fall principally on the museum-goer, in whose name this all takes place. Great museums are being debased and trivialised, their collections dipped into as raw material for exhibitions, their curators demoted to entertainers. People can travel thousands of miles to see a collection, and find dozens of key works missing. Not only do we lose the chance to see specific artworks; we also lose a sense of the coherence of the collections.

Museums beg for acquisition funds to 'fill gaps' or enrich particular parts of their collections. But once the purchase is completed, the coherent collection described in the grant application is broken up again into fragmentary exhibits. Sometimes this is an enriching process. But the scale of the exhibition phenomenon means that permanent collections are permanently disrupted, and many exhibitions are designed to be spectacular rather than illuminating.

This obsession with the temporary and the transient has deep roots, but as we will see the phenomenon today is qualitatively different and more worrisome.

Growth of Exhibitions

Francis Haskell's "The Ephemeral Museum" chronicles and criticises the rise of exhibitions. His masterly history sets out developments from

the earliest loan shows in seventeenth century Rome to the grotesque spectacles of our own age. The earliest shows were essentially ceremonial. It was only in the nineteenth century, with the exhibitions at the Royal Academy, or the great Manchester Art Treasures exhibition of 1857, that the art itself became the focus. The striking aspect of these exhibitions is that they had the character of a 'mini-museum'. These exhibitions borrowed the best they could get from inaccessible private collections. There was no particular unifying theme. They were organised independently of museums, which did not put on temporary exhibitions until much later.

Arguably the first truly modern exhibitions occurred from around the 1890s, with more specialised art-historical shows, such as Rembrandt in Amsterdam and London in 1898 and 1899, and Flemish Primitives in Bruges in 1902. There were earlier monographic exhibitions, including Durer and Rubens, but the late nineteenth century exhibitions involved greater art-historical seriousness. This was perhaps the golden age of exhibitions, when art was much less accessible than today and reproductions were much poorer, so these exhibitions represented a real leap forward for art-historical scholarship as well as providing a truly unique opportunity for the visiting public. Another change was that museums were increasingly involved in exhibitions, both as hosts and as lenders, as the great private and aristocratic collections were increasingly supplanted by museums after World War I, through nationalisation and purchase.

Later exhibitions grew to elephantine proportions, such as the criminally negligent Italian Art exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1930 mentioned above

More recently there has been a distinctly qualitative shift within, as well as quantitative growth of exhibitions. The focus of many institutions has subtly moved from concern with its collection to a focus on exhibitions. The common term "per-

manent collection” separates out the dowdy old stuff from the more exciting new roles of putting on shows. Famous exhibitions, such as Tutankhamun in 1972, captured the headlines. But it is the constant stream of exhibitions, with programmes arranged for years ahead, which has transformed museums more profoundly, changing the responsibility of the curators from looking after the collections to putting on shows.

David M. Wilson, a former director of the British Museum, identifies the pressures on curator as the main cost of exhibitions in his history of the museum: “Occasionally an object is damaged; very occasionally something goes missing. But the problems tend to reside elsewhere; the strain on the curatorial staff has increased enormously” (“The British Museum: A History 2002”, The BM Press, p. 335).

He notes that between 1985 and 2000 the number of exhibitions at the British Museum doubled. What Wilson saw as a problem, is now taken by some museum directors to be a positive opportunity. Mark Jones at the Victoria and Albert Museum aims to show all dozen or so of his museum’s exhibitions each year in at least three venues, six in Britain and six abroad.

Once, temporary exhibitions were modelled on ‘permanent’ collections; they most commonly aimed to give an encyclopaedic display of an aspect of the history of art, whether a national school, a regional tendency or an artist’s oeuvre. Today permanent collections are modelled on temporary exhibitions. As mentioned above, collections are often arbitrary, quirky and, repeatedly rehung. London’s Tate Modern has taken this furthest. It now has sponsored re-hangs of its permanent collection (“UBS Openings”), announced with all the fanfare of a temporary exhibition. Great works are often not on display; others are demeaned by inappropriate juxtaposition. But it has the virtue of being new, which some seem to imagine is the only reason anyone would ever return to a familiar gallery.

Even acquisitions are made with an eye to peripatetic roles as much as to their place in the permanent collection. A rare early panel by Cimabue acquired by London’s National Gallery in 2000 has already been in three exhibitions, in Naples, New York and London. The cataloguing of permanent collections is often neglected, whilst streams of exhibition catalogues are produced. The National Gallery of Scotland published a catalogue of its Italian and Spanish Paintings in 1993, but its fabulous French and Dutch paintings are still un-catalogued. Meanwhile the Gallery continues to produce catalogues of its regular summer blockbusters, timed to coincide with the Edinburgh Festival.

Professional power shifts are discernible in the little-regulated scramble. Tate Director Sir Nicholas Serota writes: “The gallery or museum has become a studio, prompting a significant change in the conventional relationship between the artist, the work of art and the curator. No longer can the curator be seen solely as the dispassionate judge of quality, who visits the studio or private collection to select works and to assemble a body of material which will be presented to the public in the museum. Instead the curator is a collaborator, often engaging with the artist to accomplish the work.” (“Experience of Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art”, p. 36). Here we see the curator elevating himself to the status of artist’s equal, aggrandising the creative role of the custodian through changing exhibition practices. Many art world dealers and exhibition secretaries have posterously taken to dubbing themselves “Gallerists”.

The Koninklijk in Antwerp has done much worse, allowing a contemporary artist to play around with its incomparable collection of Flemish art, interspersing the artist’s own work and using the permanent collections as part of his own installations. The effect was to make it impossible to appreciate the Koninklijk’s established collection, which – unlike the brutal upstart

brought in to shake it up – has stood the test of time. The Tate allowed a conceptual artist to make Rodin’s “The Kiss” her own work by binding it with string. And now even London’s National Gallery is following: Yinka Shonibare has been allowed to create a fatuous installation to commemorate the abolition of the slave trade, a trite intrusion of shallow politicking into the venerable halls of the National Gallery. The very character of the museum is, as Francis Haskell described it, ‘ephemeral’.

Even permanent collections are no longer permanent. Increasing prices and decreasing budgets have encouraged museums to club together to buy major works. Thomas Hoving revealed that the Metropolitan Museum of Art discussed the possibility of a joint purchase of Velazquez’s “Juan de Pareja”, before buying it alone. More recently, Van Dyck’s unusual portrait of Francois Langlois was jointly bought by the Barber Institute, Birmingham, and the National Gallery, London. The National Gallery and the National Museum of Wales jointly bought, and now pass Poussin’s “The Finding of Moses” between themselves at eighteen months intervals – though even this shifting arrangement is subject to further disruption, as when the picture was shown in Poussin exhibitions in Paris and London. And even the Getty Museum, with its famously deep pockets, has bought a Degas and a Poussin jointly with the Norton Simon Museum, the paintings travelling between them every two years.

Walter Annenberg’s valuable collection of French impressionists was moved between his home in California and the Metropolitan Museum of Art every six months until it finally moved to the Met permanently upon his death. It was a lapse in judgment by the Met to permit this collection, including large paintings, to be subject to such upheaval twice a year.

The treatment of Antonio Canova’s Three Graces, one of the greatest

masterpieces of neo-classical art, is particularly shocking. The first version is in the Hermitage in St Petersburg. A second, commissioned for Woburn Abbey, its installation in a purpose-built temple being personally supervised by Canova, remained intact and pristine with its highlights beautifully preserved until its recent sale, jointly, to the Victoria and Albert Museum and National Gallery Edinburgh. Thus wrenched from its original context at Woburn, it is carted between the two locations every seven years.

In 1998 it was moved in a purpose-built, climate-controlled crate, first by lorry from Edinburgh to Portsmouth, then by ferry from Portsmouth to Bilbao, and finally from Bilbao to Madrid by lorry. On arrival it was found to have suffered a crack. The journey to Madrid was a "thank you" to Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza, whose £800,000 donation made the purchase possible.

But worst of all is the behaviour of the Louvre, surely the greatest museum in the world. It now leases out large parts of its collection to outposts, most recently in Abu Dhabi, where it is being paid for its 'brand' and for the loan of masterpieces from its collection. This follows a previous lease deal with Atlanta, Georgia. These are purely commercial deals where a selection of works from the Louvre will be used to create 'mini-museums', taking them out of the larger context of the Louvre and allowing the highest bidders to establish their own museums.

The risk of damage arising from these grubby transactions is unconscionable. The new outposts dull the impact of the Louvre, depriving it of works that its visitors ought reasonably to expect to see. The money would better be spent on scholarships to allow Arabs and Georgians to travel to Europe to study the art in situ, rather than subject great art to ongoing strains of travel. Unfortunately this trend is catching. The Hermitage is setting up outposts, including one in Somerset House, London and in Italy. Mark Jones has

proudly announced that the V&A is forging partnerships with museums in San Francisco, Bombay and Beijing.

By pursuing the temporary, the travelling exhibition to such excessive degrees the museum has (in Britain) made a political rod for its own back. A philistine Labour Government has decided that it too can play the touring game. The great national art institutions are unacceptably "London-centric", one arts minister (-Estelle Morris, who fired herself for incompetence) has claimed: "We want to see the cultural centre of gravity start to move from the capital." Ever close to Government thinking, the Tate was by then already operating an exchange and exhibition scheme with five galleries. Fifth-columnists in the politicised and public sector unionised entity known as "the Museum Service" lend eager support to such moves: in 2006 the Museums Association report "Collections of the Future" called for museums to loan and tour their objects "more often, more widely".

The cost to the "museum goer"

If the cult of the blockbuster has proved subversive to the institution of the museum, the cost to the visitor is high indeed. Too often we find the paintings we had gone specifically to see in a permanent collection are out on loan. Too often also the disrupting visiting temporary exhibition itself proves to be grossly over-crowded and/or inane in content. David Lee's account of his typically grisly and frustrating experience at the recent Raphael exhibition at London's National Gallery (see page 37) gives plangent expression from one frequent, most dedicated "museum-goer" to a cry uttered by many others.

In key respects, the blockbuster is becoming victim of its own success. As more and more exhibitions are mounted by more and more museums and galleries in haste (often in direct competition among themselves) and with hurriedly ill-prepared catalogues and accompanying

literature, the inherent risks and the costs involved increase proportionally.

Among museum-goers, a covert two-tier system is emerging, where selected experts, apparatchiks, sympathetic journalists, politicians, business sponsors and the institutionally favoured few enjoy special and congenial out-of-hours viewings while the paying *hoi polloi* must brave the crowds, viewing heads and backs at every turn rather than paintings and works of art.

In 2001 the (then, now ex-) *Times* columnist, Mary Ann Sieghart showed how valuable a perquisite a favoured viewing can be: "Yesterday I had the rarest treat: a chance to wander alone around the Vermeer exhibition at the National Gallery. I had been once already, but I saw more of the backs of other people's heads than the delicate paintwork of the master. Then I received out of the blue, an invitation to a pre-breakfast viewing.

"I deliberately arrive a little early and feasted myself before anyone else joined me. The stillness of the paintings cries out for silent, solitary viewing...Catch it if you can."

From 1997 to 2002, Ms Sieghart served as a trustee on the National Heritage Memorial Fund, which in 1994 had been given responsibility to administer (through the Heritage Lottery Fund) the heritage share of the National Lottery funds. Although not an arts journalist, Ms Sieghart frequently declared an interest and participated in art funding and policy controversies in her *Times* column. On July 17 2002 she defended money poured into the converted Gateshead flour mill gallery known as "Baltic": "What houses contemporary art has become as important as the art itself...Baltic is a fabulous building with no collection at all, just a rolling series of Shows...Here the building is the brand. The art will change every month but the edifice remains the same. People will visit not because world famous paintings can be seen there but because the Baltic has a buzz...However variable the quality of the art inside, Baltic will blast an

air of excitement and creativity into an area which, until very recently, was blighted and depressed. Thanks to a subsidy of £15m a year from the Arts Council Lottery Fund on top of its £33.4m capital grant, Baltic has free entry. Already Newcastle's and Gateshead's taxi drivers and hairdressers have been given a preview [brain-washing?] evening of their own, so that they can spread the word to their customers." In her column of May 26 2005 Ms Sieghart praised the creation of "a renaissance [of Northern cities] that is truly inspirational [by means of] an explosion of cultural investment, thanks mainly to the National Lottery."

On December 31 2004 she revealed that: "When I was a trustee of the Heritage Lottery Fund and we promised the Victoria and Albert Museum many millions of pounds to restore its British galleries, we stipulated that the end result *had to be enjoyable as well as educational.*" (Italics added.)

Popular shows such as the Vermeer are often packed throughout their 'run'; museums often operate timed entry to restrict numbers, but seem to consider a ratio of three or four people to even the tiniest exhibit to be quite acceptable. Indeed, the art itself is seen as less important than the 'experience; the New York Times reported on the 'Atlanta Louvre' that, "Many visitors found the long lines as gratifying as the art". Being part of the crowd at a blockbuster brings a qualitatively different – a debased and poorer – experience than the unhurried contemplation of art that museums sometimes still and always ought to permit. The fairground and its barkers ought never to have been taken as operational paradigms by the museum and gallery worlds. So why has it been?

It is now time to consider the balance sheet, explicitly to assess the claims made for the blockbuster, and to summarise our criticisms.

The Case for the Blockbuster

Temporary exhibitions have clear theoretical attractions to visitors,

museum administrators and governments.

They provide:

- Publicity

Major exhibitions grab the attention of the critics and provide opportunity to publicise the institution. Carefully orchestrated publicity campaigns trickle details to the press months in advance, taking selected journalists on overseas trips to see the treasures to be brought to the masses, providing special previews to journalists, and advertising widely. The theory is that people drawn in to see a particular exhibition will return to the museum again and again.

- Revenue

Glamorous exhibitions entice generous sponsorship, provide ticket revenue and raise money from merchandise and catalogue sales. • A few blockbusters per year can make a vital contribution to the costs of running a museum. For independent museums without government support, this can be a matter of survival. (But even powerful state-sponsored institutions with fabulous collections, can be pressed into presenting strings of blockbusters by bullying and philistine paymasters. Dr Alan Borg, the then director of the Victoria and Albert Museum [V&A], was told by Alan Williams MP that: "When you have one of the highest grants-in-aid per head per visitor you have to have a duty to the taxpayer to try and get more people through your doors. The idea is to get people into the museums." In a rude, hectoring interrogation he objected: "Your blockbusters do not bust many blocks, do they?" Again and again Dr Borg was told that he must present more Faberge exhibitions, if that is what people will pay to see.)

- Access

Millions of people attend exhibitions, many of whom would not otherwise have visited the museum. Exhibitions create a buzz around museums, attracting people to a 'one-time only' experience. A museum with a changing programme of exhibitions attracts people to return

to see what is on, even if they would not be attracted to see the permanent collection again and again.

Museums are increasingly expected to reach out to sections of the public deemed to be 'excluded'. • Targeted exhibitions provide opportunity to reach out to these sections of the public. • Dr Borg of the V&A justified the absence of major blockbusters by pointing to the exhibition Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms, which appealed to a particular minority group. Borg's successor, Mark Jones, contends that the V&A "lost its way" when it tried to become an art museum. Today it offers exhibitions of personal bric-a-brac from Kylie Minogue and The Supremes, accompanied by free catwalk shows and music to attract the sort of crowd that is put off by art.

- Scholarship

Exhibitions provide the opportunity to make comparisons that are not possible when works are thousands of miles apart. They can make us see artists in a new light when their work is brought together, reviving flagging reputations (or highlight limitations not hitherto apparent). And they can help clarify the attributions of problematic paintings. Exhibition catalogues have become the mainstay of the art publishing industry. •

The Downside of the Blockbuster

The problem with the blockbuster lies not so much in theory as in practice. There is a law of diminishing returns. For the visitor, the promise is rarely forthcoming.

Overcrowded exhibitions are utterly miserable. Visiting the Tate's Holbein exhibition on a weekday morning over a hundred people were crowded into the first room, half a dozen jostling to see each of the small drawings.

The overcrowding problem is not a trivial example of the busyness of great cities, like a crowded tube train. The experience of seeing a crowded exhibition is not just a little worse than seeing the same exhibition in more serene circumstances;

it is, as Mary Ann Sieghart testified, an altogether different and self-defeating exercise. • It utterly negates the stated purpose of exhibitions, to wit, the ability to make fresh comparisons. • Instead of considering one painting in the context of the next, one has to queue up to see first one and then the other. • One can stand back and view the top of the taller paintings, and then look more closely at the lower parts, but cannot even see the whole from a distance.

Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum has acknowledged that: “contemplation requires stillness”. Yet he said of the Museum’s Michelangelo Drawings exhibition in 2006, “If you love Michelangelo, what you really want to do is stand in front of the work and contemplate it. *That will obviously never be possible in an exhibition of this nature*” (Rupert Smith, “The Museum”, BBC Books, 2007, p. 50 – italics added.) Indeed, Mr MacGregor is now fundraising for an extension so that even more can get in to see such exhibitions. But more space will just mean even more people in front of each exhibit, and an even more trivial experience. Visitors are insulted and cheated with an experience that expects them simply to note what is there and move on swiftly so that the next person can get a glimpse.

Exhibitions are often crass

The implication is that permanent collections are inescapably dull, and curators must create novelty. • They seem not to allow that we might find for ourselves new meaning in old displays, or indeed choose the solace of the familiar over the hype of the new. • Of course exhibitions do not have to be crass, and some are excellent. • But it is not incidental that so many are so crass, appealing to funders and publicists rather than actually adding to our appreciation and understanding. • Great cumulative effort is devoted to displaying and describing the many temporary exhibitions, whereas permanent collections are neglected, the wall texts rarely updated (sometimes referring to paintings no longer on display). •

The exception to this is where permanent collections are themselves treated as temporary exhibitions, as at the Tate Modern. • It is a bad trend; permanent collections themselves are now whimsically shuffled around to make them more exciting. • At the Tate, themed quick-stop tours of unspeakably insulting crassness are sign-posted – tours for the recently dumped or depressed and such.

In 2004 the then Surveyor of the Queen’s Pictures, Christopher Lloyd, bluntly attributed ever increasing demands for international exhibition loans to: “The tendency now is to regard museums and galleries as extensions of the mall, the classroom or an official dating agency. No longer are they run by curators but by accountants, retailers, restaurateurs and education departments.” Christopher Lloyd made clear that his views were his own – the Queen is a big lender of pictures.

Even the claims about the benefits of scholarly exhibitions are questionable. Exhibition catalogues focus on the works included in the exhibition, creating a partial impression of the subject because it systematically excludes works that cannot be lent. And whilst grand retrospectives can show us artists in a new light, they are generally wearying. Seeing dozens, or even hundreds of works by the same artist is deadening, even for the greatest artists.

Exhibitions are a distraction for the curators

Museums employ curators to be responsible for their collections. They must be knowledgeable experts able to research and present art objects to the world. But increasingly they are required to divert their attention to the sausage factory of exhibition creation. Years of planning and preparation are required. Instead of researching and presenting their collections, they are required to horse-trade for loans and attend to the urgent deadlines of the next temporary show rather than attend to their collections.

Conclusions

Lots of people have criticised blockbuster. Weary insiders will recognise the problems we are flagging. But their laments are too often despairing and fatalistic. It appears that we are repeating a familiar tale, but in fact we are defending the museum as something intrinsically thrilling, which is in fact dulled by the manufactured spectacle of the blockbuster.

John Walker of the National Gallery, Washington noted that “Community relations have been given such importance that the distinction between an art centre and an art museum is vanishing. For those who love works of art for their own sake the result is heartbreaking” (“Self-Portrait with Donors”, 1969, p. 284). He continues, “Some museums should exist for the vast audience of cultured and culturally aspiring people, who have rights as well... They should not be denied the pleasure of contemplating works of art, of communing privately with a favourite painting or piece of sculpture... The chance for serenity of contemplation is of consequence. [People] must have an opportunity to reflect on noble works of art without distraction. It is the duty of museums to see that this is possible. Museums do not exist solely for the noise and turmoil of hordes of schoolchildren” (p. 303-4). Some indication of the scale of the invasion of “the Museum Service” by professional “educationalists” can be seen at the National Gallery, London: in 1972 it had a single lecturer; today it has fifteen.

George R. Gouldner at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York claims: “Museums today are all about getting people in through the door. And therefore the museums then have to buy and exhibit lots of what the public want. It’s a strange treadmill, like a bunch of hamsters running in a circle. No one is enriched, so you wonder, What’s the point of it all?” (George R. Goldner in Danny Danziger ‘Museum: Behind the Scenes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’ Viking 2007 p. 79)