

THE MASTER'S NEW GIG

FORMER MET DIRECTOR—AND FIRST-TIME
PROFESSOR—PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO TAKES THE
PODIUM TO EXPLAIN HOW COLLECTORS HAVE
ANOINTED “ART” THROUGH THE AGES

BY ANDREA CRAWFORD

Any person who has ever undertaken a sustained attempt at the pedagogical arts will tell you: There's nothing so hard as teaching your first class. You overprepare material and underanticipate the demands of your students. You exert considerable and unexpected physical and mental effort standing before a class-

room, trying to keep students fully engaged.

One such neophyte sinks into a chair. His two-hour lecture ended some 20 minutes earlier; finally, the last question has been answered and the last student has left the room. Graying, bespectacled, and wearing a tweed jacket over a V-neck sweater and tie, the teacher—despite his newness to the pro-

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RIANS: THE HISTORY OF COLLECTING.



fession—is the very image of a professor of a certain age.

“It’s just exhausting,” says Philippe de Montebello, Fiske Kimball Professor in the History and Culture of Museums, and special adviser to the provost at NYU Abu Dhabi. “I’ve never worked so hard in my life.”

Could this really be?

In 31 years as director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, de Montebello increased the number of annual visitors by more than 30 percent—to 5.2 million people. He also doubled the museum’s physical size, steered the institution out of years of budget deficits, and negotiated an innovative landmark agreement that secured a series of major art loans from the Italian state in exchange for the return of almost two dozen classical artifacts of questionable provenance—including, most famously, the Euphronios krater, a Greek terra cotta bowl once used to mix water and wine. Discussions with the Italians were reportedly so stressful that de Montebello broke out with shingles.

Could teaching graduate students really be more difficult? It seems unlikely. But in deciding to enter a second career as professor at NYU’s Institute of Fine Arts, or IFA, the 73-year-old has chosen no easy path. He is not returning to his original specialty, Netherlandish painting of the 15th and 16th centuries (“My scholarly expertise was rapidly extinguished after I...left my curatorial work,” he says). Nor is he teaching the management of museums, a topic he knows more about than perhaps anyone else alive. Instead, he has chosen to take on an emerging field that many feel has been overlooked by art historians in the United States: the history of collecting—a tale driven by politics, religion, and culture that spans the ages.

Some may ask why it matters what some wealthy magnate bought decades or centuries ago, but collectors are essential to understanding art because they determine what is deemed worthy, particularly in the United States where museums are shaped by private collector-patrons rather than by the state. A booming art market has fueled much of the popular attention on individual collectors, along with high-profile repatriation cases—of disputed classical antiquities as well as artworks confiscated by the Nazis. But the issue also concerns artistic authenticity, reputation and biography, and art as an aesthetic as well as commercial experience. America’s major museums, now well over a century old, have only just begun to look at their histories to understand how they fit into a broader story.

To promote exactly this type of scholarship, Jonathan Brown, IFA’s Carroll and Milton Petrie Professor of Fine Arts, helped the Frick Collection establish the Center for the History of Collecting in America in 2007. “In Europe, it’s a very developed field,” says Brown, whose specialty is 16th- and 17th-century Spanish art. “But in the United States, that hasn’t been the case.” On this side of the Atlantic, he estimates that “there’s 95 percent of it still to be done.” Anne Poulet (IFA ’70), director of the Frick, be-

lieves this is why de Montebello is the perfect man for the job. She explains, “There’s no one teaching it from the particular perspective that he offers”—that of a former museum director of one of the world’s greatest institutions of art, who personally knows most of the major collectors of the late 20th century.

Brown agrees: “Philippe has a breadth of knowledge that very few can match,” adding, “and I’m sure he knows where a lot of skeletons are hidden.”

Each Tuesday morning last fall, some 20 students entered through the double doors of their classroom, the public auditorium at IFA, a former private mansion on East 78th Street and Fifth Avenue. It is the same building where de Montebello was once a PhD student before dropping out in 1963, when the Metropolitan came calling. (He eventually completed his master’s at IFA in 1976.)

Master’s candidates in the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development’s arts administration program, as well as advanced doctoral students at the institute, aspire to be art historians, dealers, writers, museum curators, administrators, and educators. Even in the rarified air of the IFA, they arrive to class burdened by the usual detritus of modern academic life: coffee cups (despite official rules against food and drink in the room), water bottles, backpacks, laptops. Artemis Baltoyanni, from Athens, Greece, carries a skateboard to her front-row seat. Her professor—that man whose very name and patrician bearing is synonymous with cultural elitism—teases her about her creative mode of transportation.

They are here for de Montebello’s inaugural outing, a survey class titled “The Meaning of Museums,” during which he walks his students through the classical antecedents for museums, highlighting Greece and Rome. The presence of libraries predates museums, and he details the inventory at the Royal Library of Alexandria, created in the third century BCE, and the Athenian Treasury at Delphi, built around 500 BCE, where priests guarded the objects, acting, de Montebello notes wryly, as the first curators.

In fact, though, “museum-like behavior” occurred much earlier. Using the third millennium BCE as a starting point—because it marks the birth of great cities, the introduction of writing, and the codification of laws—the professor explains, “Of course there are no museums at this point, but there are accumulations of precious objects, and there are even, in those days, inventories,” which prefigure the important step of cataloguing. An excavation at the ancient Sumerian city of Ur, in modern-day Iraq, found what is considered the oldest museum label: a 19th-century BCE tablet describing an object, then 100 years old, presented, as it read, “for the marvel of the beholder.”

“My view is that the moment you have an aggregation of works of art, the moment that people have even limited access—even if it’s limited people who have access—you have the process of a gaze,” he says. “You have monuments, statuary, pre-

cious objects that are seen, and the moment they are seen, whether by artists or by, say, ordinary people, then they evoke some form of influence either on the artists or on people—*if only*—and turn some people, sometimes, into collectors.”

The journalist Charles McGrath once famously wrote that de Montebello “pronounces *Renaissance* in a way that practically reenacts it.” The former director’s voice and accent are familiar to anyone who has ever used an audio guide at the Met, and his classroom presence is what you would expect from a man well accustomed to giving public lectures. Standing behind the podium, he is erudite, humorous, charismatic, at times surprisingly intimate and conspiratorial. His lectures are laced with opinions on everything from ownership of cultural patrimony—“one of the reasons we have knowledge is precisely because it flowed freely across borders”—to what he thinks about the Louvre’s decision to open a McDonald’s, a point

says. “This is very different.” The course is fundamentally a dialogue with other scholars who are constantly questioning his thinking and demanding that he cite sources. At the beginning of the semester, he’d intended to trace an historical arc—from the Ottonian Renaissance, church treasuries, and the birth of the museum in the Enlightenment—to our modern-day institutions. But by the beginning of November, he was barely out of the 1400s and had not even reached the founding of the first official museum, the Museum Fridericianum, in Kassel, Germany, in 1779. Though he has smaller, issues-based colloquia and seminars planned for following semesters—including one this spring on cultural patrimony—the scope and format of this first course were a bit of a departure for a graduate curriculum where classes tend to be more specialized. It ran the risk of seeming elementary, as at least one student noted. However, Jonathan Brown, de

“UNLIKE THE MET, WHERE YOU HAVE TO BE CAREFUL,” DE MONTEBELLO SAYS, “THERE’S A TOTAL FREEDOM OF SPEECH AT UNIVERSITIES.”

that arises while describing how the ancient library at Alexandria included a place for scholars to eat.

Later, during the same lecture, he feels compelled to make an important—if also tangential—point. “Well, we’ll just set your minds to rest with the issue of the Euphronios krater,” he says, on the heels of a discussion about the high prices of art at auction following the Roman sack of Corinth in 146 BCE. “A lot of you have said to me, ‘Why did you return the Euphronios krater, painted by someone who lived in Attica, to the Italians? You might like to return it to Greece because it is their inventive genius; there’s nothing Roman about it.’ And my answer to this is the enormous difference there is between cultural property and cultural patrimony.” The Greeks made many of their greatest works specifically for export, he explains, and this bowl had been in the ground north of Rome for 2,600 years. “I think so far as the law compelled a return, it was a return to the country where it was found, where it lay so long,” he says.

As exhilarating as de Montebello appears to find teaching, he holds no illusions about its challenges. “In a public lecture, there are lots of flourishes, and they applaud and you walk out,” he

Montebello’s colleague, had another perspective. “It’s a gift from God,” he said, deadpan, and then laughed heartily. “I mean, the idea of spreading your wings wide and including such a vast sweep of time is something that, in the hands of the right person, is a legitimate enterprise.”

De Montebello could easily have filled his days as director emeritus or adviser to numerous institutions in any number of intellectually engaging and personally edifying ways. That he chose to enter the classroom suggests he has a particular mission. “There’s no question I’m hoping that I will inspire some good graduate student to opt for a museum rather than an academic career,” he says. And of those who become academics, he hopes to cause them to think in less abstract and theoretical ways. “What leads one to enter the academic world and the museum world is really a sense that one has a personal mission to enlighten and to help a lot of other people see things as we see them,” he says. “There’s a total freedom of speech at universities, unlike the Met, where you have to be careful that what you say does not embarrass the institution and its trustees. Now that I’m not there anymore, I may be freer to express myself.” ■