



LACMA director Earl A. Powell III.

LACMA art loan sparks controversy

Museum places several works with L.A. law firm

By Hunter Drohojowska

In a move considered controversial in art circles, the L.A. County Museum of Art has decided to place several sculptures and paintings from its permanent collection on loan to a private law firm.

One particularly unorthodox feature of the loan — the first by LACMA since a shift of museum policy late last year — is that a partner in the law firm who negotiated the deal is a past president and ex-chairman of the museum's board of trustees.

The loan involves large paintings by David Hockney and Terry Schoonhoven, along with several sculptures by Auguste Rodin, which will be installed in the lobby of the downtown offices of O'Melveny and Myers, one of the largest law firms in Los Angeles. The installation will remain in place during construction of LACMA's Robert O. Anderson Gallery for 20th-Century Art.

Generally, museums are wary of placing works on loan to private businesses because of the increased possibility of damage and because of the commercial context in which they are seen.

The man at the center of the controversial loan, whose involvement in the deal raises the issue of favoritism, is O'Melveny and Myers senior partner Richard Sherwood, who is still a LACMA trustee.

Henry Hopkins, director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, said the loan "does seem to be unusual," especially since "O'Melveny is so well-represented on their board."

He added that the SFMMA has loaned to private corporations in the past, but "we feel that the collection does not get served as well as it might in circumstances like that, (and) that people don't look at works of art as they do in a museum situation. We certainly don't lend what we consider primary works and we're close to implementing a policy that we will not lend (to private business) at all because we've had damages."

The Santa Barbara Museum of Art's director, Richard West, said its policy is to lend to other museums, but not to private businesses.

LACMA director Earl A. Powell III explained the decision to loan to the law firm. "Dick (Sherwood) and the partnership asked if we'd be interested in doing it and I thought it was a great idea. And the board agreed with it. It would not just be for O'Melveny.

"Hypothetically, if any one of the large downtown operations would like to have some works on loan, we'd certainly go talk to them. The only requirement we have, and it might be self-serving is that you be a donor to the museum. That's \$50,000 and up hopefully up."

Powell continued, "We carefully scrutinized such a loan, but it seemed that it would certainly be more appropriate for the art, and for the Los Angeles public to be able to see the art, than to have us sequester it away in a warehouse somewhere for three years. These are just in the lobby areas. It's not in the offices at all."

The policy shift which opened the doors to the O'Melveny loan came about at a meeting of the County Museum's board of trustees last November.

While Powell maintains that the possibility of such longterm loans is also open to any public or non-profit institutions that might be interested, the museum has only approached the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. LACMA is lending it nine sculptures, including works by Alexander Calder, Anthony Caro, Peter Voukos, David Smith, Donald Judd, and four by Auguste Rodin.

Another question raised by the loan is whether businesses will be inclined to buy works of art, thereby supporting the art community, if they can borrow museum quality pieces for a fee.

Similar loan schemes exist at other leading U.S. museums, but they are far from common. The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, for example, initiated a controversial program of loaning work from the permanent collection to corporate members in the 1970s. Donors of \$2,000 can borrow one work, \$5,000 donors can borrow two, and those giving \$10,000 can borrow five.

Kevin Consey, director of the Newport Harbor Art Museum, said that its policy is not to lend to private businesses, but added that different institutions have varying policies. "Some come down positively in favor of (loans to private business) as logical extensions of their educational mission, while others (say) that it unduly subjects works of art to unnecessary hazards.

"But that's a narrow slice of the issue. The difference would be whether it's a broad loan policy that is widely disclosed and known to everyone vs. a policy that is limited and directed for the benefit of one or two people."

Sherwood was unavailable for comment.