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ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY INPUT
FOR
JOSLYN MUSEUM'S LONG RANGE PLANNING

By

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THE CENTER FOR APPLIED URBAN RESEARCH
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to gain input from the community regarding Joslyn Museum's strengths, weaknesses, goals, and needs, for use in long-range planning.

The population for this study consisted of 55 persons, selected by the Joslyn Museum Long-Range Planning Committee. These persons represented the arts, business, and education communities, as well as city-county officials, members of the Joslyn Women's Association, and past Board of Trustees chairpersons and presidents.

Of the 55 persons, three did not wish to be interviewed and one was not in town during the interview period. In addition, the four museum directors were removed from the list by the Long-Range Planning Committee, and were not called for interviews. The remaining 47 persons were interviewed by asking four broad, open-ended questions focusing on Joslyn's strong points, weak points, suggested goals, and needs (see Appendix). Probes were utilized by interviewers to assure that each person interviewed had the opportunity to respond in regard to the Joslyn permanent collection, programs, finances, capital improvements, and administration/staff.

THE PERMANENT COLLECTION

The permanent collection was mentioned by a substantial number of the people interviewed as being one of Joslyn's strengths. Many works were described as really superb. In general, people felt that Joslyn has a good survey of art with a few weak areas or gaps (e.g., post-impressionism and contemporary works).

The western collection was mentioned by a sizeable number of persons as being an asset to Joslyn; these works, however, need to be researched and interpreted more extensively. This collection was seen by these individuals as an opportunity to gain national recognition for Joslyn. However, not everyone was as enthusiastic about the western collection. A minority opinion held that the western collection should not be housed in the Joslyn building but moved to the Western Heritage Museum.

Most people felt that the museum should not try to be everything to everyone; that it must set its priorities and limit itself to acquisitions in one or two areas. Less consensus occurred regarding what these priorities should be. Although many of the respondents suggested that new acquisitions be made in the contemporary or western American collections, individual tastes varied considerably. Some preferred more traditional western European art to either western American or contemporary art. Some people acknowledged that such diverse individual preferences could not be satisfied and would leave these decisions to the director. Some support was given (primarily from the Joslyn Women's Association and city-county officials) for adding a sculpture garden.

A common criticism from the art community was that Joslyn does not give sufficient support to living artists, particularly local artists. Local artists felt that Joslyn's treatment of them was mere tokenism and that Joslyn generally demonstrated a strong lack of concern. They felt they should have more opportunities to exhibit their works and not be relegated to the basement galleries.

Members of the art community and the city-county officials suggested that Joslyn needs to make purchases of the works of living artists now while prices are lower and not wait until works have become "accepted" by the art world. That is, Joslyn should be a leader, not a follower. The museum would then have a number of high quality contemporary works that would appreciate in value. Such purchases, of course, require very knowledgeable staff members. A few members of the art community expressed concern that Joslyn was in danger of becoming a mausoleum, housing only the works of dead artists.

Some members of the business community and the trustees, however, did not share this view and believed that acquisitions should only be made from the works of acclaimed, accepted artists.

Concern was expressed that the permanent collection had not yet been adequately cataloged or researched. Important goals mentioned by members of the art community and the Joslyn Women's Association included increased scholarly research and publications and the preparation of a catalog and museum guide.

Other suggestions centered around the need for more cooperation and exchanges of individual items and entire exhibits from other museums.

A frequently mentioned need was for acquisition of more traveling exhibits from other museums.

Many respondents mentioned the need for exhibitions located out in the community--e.g., in west Omaha and in outstate Nebraska. The latter suggestion relates to the widespread concern that Joslyn needs to reach out into the community to a greater extent than it has in the past. "Art mobiles" or vans, for example, could take art to small town schools and libraries. Some respondents, however, dissented from this view, feeling that traveling exhibits might be prohibitively expensive. These individuals suggested that instead of transporting Joslyn's art to other communities, more effort could be made to attract outstate Nebraskans to Joslyn.

PROGRAMS

Joslyn's programs were generally praised because of the variety and the number of people they bring into the museum. Popular programs such as family day, Bagels and Bach and the Midwest Biennial were recognized and approved by most of the respondents. Some opposition was expressed to the use of Joslyn for functions that are primarily social and not artistic in purpose.

"Get people into the museum" was a common response. The gift shop and rental/sales gallery were seen as valuable ways to do this. Both were praised for improvements over the past few years but were seen as limited by available space. The rental/sales program and its relationship with local artists got mixed responses. Some felt that it was good, and others felt the decisions as to what would be included were unfair. Generally local artists did not want to be confined to rental/sales.

The restaurant was also praised for its high quality, attracting people into the museum, and lengthening visits. The library was seen as an asset to the community as a whole and artists in particular. Some people, however, expressed concern that it should be made more accessible to scholars and the public.

Many respondents felt Joslyn's responsibility to educate the community to be of primary importance. Specifically, the museum needs to open its facilities to the schools for a variety of programs so that young people will be educated in the arts and will feel comfortable in the museum. Student art shows and competitions were mentioned as possible ways to get the schools more involved.

Several in the art community felt the pre-school program should be re-established while others were more in favor of "family day" type activities. However, respondents realized that the financial situations of the schools and the museum place some limits on the school visitation program. The suggestion was made that Joslyn establish an advisory committee of curriculum supervisors in the schools to talk with the museum director about how the museum could be better utilized. Greater use could be stimulated by having museum resource people come to the schools to present programs.

Respondents affiliated with the universities gave varied reactions. Generally they felt the relationship was satisfactory but would like to see more interaction between university art departments and the museum staff. "College Night" was viewed as a good experience for students. Some individuals at Creighton expressed concern regarding the lack of meaningful cooperation (both in personnel and resources) between Joslyn and the universities. Suggestions included establishment of a reduced

rate for students, better access to the library, and greater cooperation between university faculty and Joslyn staff on lectures and other programs. A suggestion was also made for an internship program for university students, based on needs of the universities.

Several people mentioned that the lecture programs were good and should be expanded, perhaps with emphasis on a particular work or artist. Another suggestion was tours to exhibits in other cities.

While Joslyn's programming was generally praised, more advertising and publicity was generally felt to be necessary. If more people were made aware of the programs through advertising on television, posters, and newspaper articles, more people would become involved in the museum.

ADMINISTRATION

Comments about the administration of Joslyn Museum centered on three interrelated themes: 1) the improved quality of the staff, 2) the composition and structure of the Board of Trustees, and 3) the continuing conflict between the Board of Trustees and the professional administrators of the museum.

Staff. Many respondents referred to the former instability of directors and staff and expressed the belief (and/or hope) that this problem had been resolved and that the high quality staff could be retained. One individual, however, felt that these problems were not over and saw the need for the establishment of personnel policies that would result in greater consistency over the years. This person was concerned that good staff could not be retained or recruited unless they were well rewarded and assured of certain employee rights.

Comments about the staff were generally very favorable. They were seen as knowledgeable, professional, responsive, and friendly. Occasional criticisms of staff at the lowest level--e.g., guards, telephone operators--were heard, however.

Less consensus, however, was evident concerning the most appropriate numbers of staff. More respondents suggested staff size was too large than complained about an inadequate number or felt the optimum size had been reached. Generally, those who felt the museum was overstaffed related this to financial conditions (either current or future), and those who felt it was understaffed referred to the increased programming and activities of the museum.

A few suggestions were made for specific staff needs. Two respondents suggested the rental/sales gallery should be headed by a professional staff person rather than a volunteer (with one implying the need was symbolic, i.e., to show the museum's concern for the local art community), one suggested the need for a development officer to educate and solicit potential contributors, and another suggested the need for a personnel director.

Board of Trustees. A number of the current and past trustees noted a flaw in the structure of the Board of Trustees. They saw the revised bylaws limiting the terms of officers and trustees as a significant weakness with serious consequences. These included contributing to conflict with the professional staff and the subsequent high turnover and impaired image for Joslyn, as well as impeding the task of long-range planning. At least one respondent suggested that forced rotation of the board adversely affected its quality. He argued that finding so many dedicated members each year was too difficult and valuable time was lost as new trustees learned their roles. Longer terms and/or no automatic limit on terms were suggested as solutions.

Other suggestions focused on the composition of the board. Although several respondents suggested a board more representative of the community, others felt excelling at fundraising should be a prerequisite for membership. Some saw a need for business leaders on the board, both for their

expertise and their potential role as financial contributors to the museum, while others thought this furthered an elitist image. The need to recruit and "educate" potential contributors was cited as a cause of the complaint that board members sometimes were not knowledgeable about art (and occasionally not even interested in art or the Joslyn Museum).

Some respondents--both in and out of the local art community--saw a need for greater representation of the art community on the board.

Conflict between trustees and staff. A conflict between the board and the professional staff was evident as this study developed. The director refused to allow his staff to be interviewed by the board or "their representatives." The directors of several other museums refused to be interviewed citing a conflict of responsibilities. One of the respondents suggested the study was an encroachment on the director's responsibilities while another person refused to be interviewed for the same reason.

Several causes for the conflict were suggested by respondents. One stemmed from competing role models and the lack of consensus on the expected role behavior of both the director and the Board of Trustees. For example, one respondent suggested that the board's role was to set policy, and the role of the director and staff was to administer these decisions. Another respondent felt the system should work like the textbook description of the parliamentary system with the director (the prime minister) presenting his program and being allowed to administer as long as he had the confidence of the Board of Trustees (Parliament).

Conflict, according to one respondent, was a consequence of the qualifications of the board members. The board members were described as persons with "clout" who felt their administrative/executive skills could help the administration of the museum. Businessmen also are greatly concerned with finances, and they often clash with those interested in

programming; a pragmatist vs. idealist and businessman vs. "esthete" conflict was noted by several respondents.

Some saw the conflict as cyclical and perhaps inevitable. The need for money leads to a board concerned with finances even at the expense of programming; then, when it has been successful in its fundraising, the pendulum swings to a need for programming and finances are ignored. A board composed largely of businessmen finds ignoring financial considerations difficult, and a staff concerned with programming finds restraining itself because of financial considerations a problem. Board turnover and the personnel themselves were cited as factors contributing to the conflict.

Solutions to the conflict included calls for a board balanced between the art community and businessmen, or between art appreciators and businessmen, or between those interested in finances and those interested in programming, or between "moneyed interests, shakers and doers, and those knowledgeable about art."

The need for dialogue between the board and the staff was noted. One respondent suggested a series of informal luncheons attended by the staff (or at least the director) and board members (not just the officers). Staff reports at board meetings were also seen as a method of educating the board.

The need for consultation--regardless of where responsibility for a decision lies--was also suggested. The need for an environment that would encourage confidence in each other was seen as an essential step in the process of reaching consensus on the roles of the board and the director.

Finances

"They're doing a good job with what they have" was the consensus of the respondents. However, concern was felt that with inflation the current

income level would not be able to maintain the building, collection, staff, and programs. Fundraising was seen as the responsibility of the Board of Trustees. Most respondents felt that the endowment must be increased. Opinions were divided as to whether the money should come from corporations or private individuals. Small corporations were felt not to be adequately involved. They should be made to feel a part of Joslyn. If these corporations benefit from Joslyn, it was agreed, they should be willing to contribute to it.

Several suggestions were offered that endowments or gifts be made to maintain different rooms and galleries or specific works of art, much on the same principle as the zoo's "adopt an animal" project. A great deal of recognition was given to the contributions of InterNorth and its continued support of the museum.

With three exceptions respondents were against the proposed United Art Fund. The need for resources was recognized, but the fears were expressed that loss of control over the running of Joslyn would occur, and strings would be attached to the money.

A similar feeling was expressed about city tax support for the museum. If the zoo gets money, Joslyn should, although this method of funding was thought to be erratic. Also, concern was expressed that receiving money from the city would give away some measure of control.

A few individuals felt that Joslyn was in pretty good shape financially and could continue as it is for several years without feeling any financial pinch. However, concern was expressed that donors did not know where money had gone. The suggestion was made that an annual report was needed.

Another suggestion was for the establishment of a "friends of art" group with each member donating \$1,000 to be used for acquisitions. The

establishment of a development office to help with bequests from private persons and collectors was also supported.

Several people expressed a concern about the current economic situation. They were uncertain what the long term implications would be for the museum. A few people felt that Joslyn was overspending on staff and faced a precarious financial future. One individual also feared that future fund-raising drives would be unable to raise sufficient money. He felt that, if Joslyn overspent now, donors would be reluctant to make additional contributions in future.

CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

Respondents generally agreed that Joslyn Museum's building was one of its strengths. This strength, however, had a number of limitations. One respondent saw it as an architectural gem whose thick walls made physical alterations difficult. Others called it imposing or intimidating. One said its internal spatial atmosphere was too similar to a school building; she suggested vast improvements could be made by a skilled interior decorator. The age of the building as a cause of maintenance problems was noted by several respondents.

Consensus was evident on the need for improvement to the north entrance. A number of respondents were critical of the current entrance which brings museum patrons into the basement and "an austere atmosphere analogous to Napoleon's tomb" where the first sight is of a guard collecting admission fees. They spoke approvingly of new plans for the north entrance. Some yearned for greater use of the east entrance.

Other improvements suggested by several respondents included more and better parking and a sculpture garden.

No consensus was evident on the need for additional space. Although

many respondents saw a need, several said existing space was not now being used fully or efficiently.

The need for more gallery or exhibition rooms was mentioned and also additional space for offices, the library, the sales/rental gallery, the museum shop, and for storage. One respondent called for more classroom space while an artist saw a need for a meeting room for Omaha area artists as well as a gallery dedicated to the display of local talent.

If an addition were made to the building, several respondents thought it should be architecturally harmonious with the current structure. One suggested that a new building be added to the north with the sculpture garden serving as a connector. Another urged that an annex be built elsewhere in the community to symbolize the museum's extension into the community. One respondent suggested that the museum acquire one of the city's historical homes to house its western collections.

The place of capital improvements in the museum's list of priorities ranged widely. Although many referred to the need for improvements at the north entrance, others specifically said no need existed for capital improvements. Still others recognized a need for capital improvements but specifically listed other needs with higher priorities. For example, several said building the collection was more important, one felt programs should have precedence over building, and one urged improvements in "staff and services before bricks and mortar." Several said current building maintenance should have a higher priority than new construction.

Several other comments related to capital improvements should be noted. One respondent urged the need for decision and action in the face of continuing cost escalation. Another said that any proposals for expansion should include maintenance costs as a factor. A capital improvements plan to "avoid disjointed incrementalism" was mentioned by a third.

GENERAL CONCERNS

One recurring concern centered around Joslyn's image problem. Many individuals said that Joslyn was widely perceived as a cold, elitist place, a "country club," where the general public would not be welcome or would not feel comfortable. If Joslyn is interested in attracting a wider public, this would seem to be a major obstacle that must be overcome.

Other suggestions for increasing participation in Joslyn included the extension of visiting hours and elimination of entrance fees. People would visit the museum more frequently if they did not have to pay admission, many respondents felt. This increased usage might result in increased community support for the museum. As some respondents pointed out, people will not support the museum if they do not use it and perceive it as a country club for an elite group.

Many respondents expressed concern that Joslyn's national reputation was not very good. Some of the factors mentioned as contributing to this reputation included the high turnover of directors and staff, disagreements between the board and the directors, a proposed sale of important pieces of the collection to raise funds, and some poor quality exhibitions in the past. Many people did, however, express optimism that Joslyn was now making some progress in improving its reputation. As many respondents pointed out, this will take time and continual effort.

Joslyn's image is also influenced by the types of programs and musical and social events that are housed in the building, regardless of their sponsorship. Some people expressed disapproval of the fact that the museum held events they felt were either inappropriate or of poor quality. Any goals relating to Joslyn's image problem should thus take this into consideration.

Some discussion was offered about a museum's primary functions. "Is it an art museum or a history museum?" was a question that some respondents felt remained unanswered. Respondents were generally in favor of retaining the historical collection, although opinion was divided on whether it should be maintained in the Joslyn building or housed elsewhere. Some individuals, for example, suggested that the historical collection could be moved to the Western Heritage Museum and be exhibited under Joslyn's name. Others saw no problem in the coexistence of the historical and art collections within Joslyn's walls. They felt that the mixture of art and history was a necessary and positive one. Joslyn must serve a diverse public in Omaha; it cannot become too specialized. One person mentioned that children were especially interested in the historical collection and that this was a positive factor drawing them into the museum.

Volunteer workers were generally praised for their contributions of time to the museum. Without these people Joslyn would not be able to function nearly so well. Some concern was felt, however, that training of some volunteers such as the docents, could be improved. The Joslyn Women's Association, in particular, was mentioned by many respondents as a valuable asset. Their contributions to programming and fund-raising were highly praised.

CONCLUSION

Most respondents felt Joslyn's major strengths included the permanent collection (especially the western collection), the building, and the director and other staff. Its music and family-oriented programs were praised as part of Joslyn's function of serving "all of the arts as well as attracting people to the visual arts."

They felt that the museum had generally been less successful in bringing in a diverse selection of Omaha residents. Local artists were

critical of their relationship with the museum, contending that Joslyn had not included them to the extent they would like.

Another concern centered around the need for more conservative management of funds. Business leaders and trustees were particularly worried that over-staffing and extensive programming or capital improvements would severely strain the museum's financial resources.

Suggested goals included concentration (for new acquisitions) primarily in the areas of western and contemporary art, increased research and publication, and restructuring of the Board of Trustees. Suggestions were made for improvements to the north entrance and to the parking situation.

Many respondents also expressed the need for improved community outreach programs, such as traveling exhibitions. Additional people could be brought into the museum, respondents suggested, by eliminating entrance fees and by advertising more extensively. Greater cooperation with junior and senior high schools and universities was also mentioned as a goal.

Joslyn's regional and national reputation is not as high as it could be, respondents felt, but the current director and staff are implementing many needed improvements to help raise this reputation.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you see as Joslyn's strong points?
2. What do you see as Joslyn's weak points?

Probes: Collection
Programs
Administration/Staff
Finances
Capital Improvements

3. What goals would you suggest for the future (specifically over the next five years)?
4. What do you see as Joslyn's needs?
5. Do you have any other concerns or comments about Joslyn?

RESPONDENTS

Business Community:

Harold Andersen
President, Omaha World Herald

Richard L. Coyne
Vice-President, Peter Kiewit & Sons, Inc.

C. M. Harper
Chairman and President, Con Agra Company

Jack Barnhart
President, Barnhart Press

Morris Miller
Vice-Chairman, Retired, Omaha National Bank

Joslyn Women's Association:

Mrs. Ray D. Gaines

Mrs. William Bruns

Mrs. Mike Fuchs

Mrs. Donald Harvey

Mrs. Perry Williams

Mrs. Tom Bernstein

Mrs. George Mazanec

Mrs. Alfred C. Kennedy

Mrs. Robert Veach

Mrs. Ernest Vrana

Past Chairmen and Presidents of Joslyn Board:

Casper Offutt

Drexel J. Sibbernsen, Jr.

Sydney L. Cate

Stanley J. How

Francis T. B. Martin

Past Chairmen and Presidents of Joslyn Board (cont.):

Willis A. Strauss
Milton L. Wolsky
Mrs. Clarence L. Landen, Jr.
Dr. Lawrence R. James
N. P. Dodge

City/County Officials:

Barbara Wright
Mayor's Office

Mike Albert
Douglas County Commissioner

Alden Aust
Former City Planner

Connie Findlay
City Councilwoman

University/School Officials:

Dr. Mary Williamson
College of Fine Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Dr. William F. Cunningham, Jr.
College of Arts and Sciences, Creighton University

Dr. James Czarnecki
Chairman, Art Department, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Fr. Don Doll, S. J.
Chairman, Fine Arts Department, Creighton University

Thomas Schlosser
Chairman, Art Department, College of St. Mary

Dr. Owen A. Knutzen
Superintendent, Omaha Public Schools

Dr. Vaughn Phelps
Superintendent, District 66 Schools

Miss Josephine Ryan
St. Margaret Mary's School

Dr. Don Stroh
Superintendent, Millard Schools

Art Community

Leonard Thiessen

Mrs. Harold Gifford

Fr. Leland E. Lubbers, S. J.

Roger Aikin

Earl Lock

Jack Savage

Nick Chiburis

Allan Tubach

Kathleen Zuchniak