

The New York Times

A Chastised Museum Returns to Life

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Published: April 17, 2011

Just three years ago it looked as if the National Academy Museum and School, founded in 1825, might not make it.



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times
Carmine Branagan, director of the National Academy Museum and School, in its Beaux-Arts mansion on Fifth Avenue.

Years of operating deficits had led to heavy borrowing from its endowment and eventually to the sale of two Hudson River School paintings to cover expenses, an art world sin for which it received a rare censure: sanctions from the Association of Art Museum Directors.

Board members resigned and other art institutions cut off loans to the academy and swore off any collaboration.

But life as a cultural pariah ended in October when the museum directors suspended their sanctions in

recognition of the academy's actions toward better financial planning and management. And now it is preparing to reopen its complex, on Fifth Avenue and 89th Street, in September with a reconstituted board, increased financial oversight and an interior refashioned by a \$3.5 million renovation.

"The doors are reopening on a whole other world there," said Bruce Fowle, president-elect of the academy board and the architect who oversaw the renovations. "We have a whole new financial structure and it's all been handled in a very professional manner."

The academy dug itself into a hole by relying on income from museum admissions and its tuition for its art school without raising much from government sources or private donors, officials said.

The December 2008 sale of the paintings from the collection, a process known as deaccessioning, raised \$13.5 million to help with the deficits. But it was controversial because museums are viewed as public trusts — and given tax-exempt status — since they function as sanctuaries for cultural and historical artifacts.

Much of the money from that sale has been put toward a new \$11.9 million reserve fund, one that the academy can turn to when operating income falls short of covering its \$4.6 million budget.

(over)

“The deaccessioning is in the past and they’re doing what they need to do,” said Brian T. Allen, director of the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Mass., who had been a critic of the paintings sale. “If they can get themselves past the financial issues, they’ll be fine.”

To be sure, the academy has gone to great lengths to regain its good name, adding outsiders to a board previously run by artists and instituting term limits; overhauling its bylaws; implementing a new strategic plan; and hiring a new development team.

“My position is unequivocally that what A.A.M.D. asked us to do is exactly what we should be doing,” said Carmine Branagan, the academy’s director, referring to the museum directors’ association in a recent interview at her office overlooking Central Park. “The leverage needed to initiate the kind of financial stability that has to happen here and should have happened here is what it’s all about.”

The sanctions, which will not be officially lifted until 2015, have nevertheless been painful. The loan boycott meant the academy could mount only minor shows, Ms. Branagan said, and had to cancel a major one last year on the Spanish painter Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida when other museums withdrew their promised works. Potential donors declined to support the academy. “Sanctions — and you’re dead,” she said.

But this year several museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan and the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey, will loan works for one of the museum’s opening exhibitions, “Will Barnet at 100,” a late-career retrospective of one of the academy’s members on the 100th anniversary of his birth. “Given that the Academy has agreed to follow A.A.M.D. guidelines and that the show is an significant one in celebration of Barnet’s 100th birthday, we thought it was important to support the exhibition,” Adam D. Weinberg, the Whitney’s director, said.

Other signs of renewal include a surge in nominations to be a new “academician” — the honorary title given to those American artists and architects who serve as the official membership of the academy. There are now 323 academicians; nominations have doubled from last year.

And contributions from several people affiliated with the school — Geoffrey Wagner in memory of his wife, Colleen Browning Wagner, an academician; Eleanor D. Popper, a former student; and Henry Justin, a current trustee — have helped support the renovation of the academy building, which dates from 1901.

The museum closed in July to accommodate the construction, though the school continued its operations. The museum will reopen for a May 19 gala and then to the public on Sept. 16. With its renovation, designed by Bade Stageberg Cox, the institution has tried to update and streamline its interior with a more informative and welcoming lobby, improved galleries and a larger meeting space. “There’s a lot about the building that’s really great but wasn’t working in terms of putting our best foot forward,” Ms. Branagan said.

At the same time, the academy had to work within the confines of its Beaux-Arts mansion, which originally belonged to Archer Milton Huntington and his wife, the sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington. “We wanted to keep the remembrance of domesticity,” Ms. Branagan said, “to remember the space was originally a home.”

Carved into the lobby ceiling, just inside the Fifth Avenue entrance, will be the 2,300 names of academicians from 1826 to the present, with space for more. In recent years members seemed to have a tenuous connection to the academy; some were completely oblivious to the institution’s decision to sell the Hudson River paintings. Now the academy is working to strengthen those ties, Ms. Branagan said, by initiating more communication with members and involving them in the academy’s decisions and activities.

“I would never have joined if I didn’t believe there was a change in attitude,” said the architect Tod Williams, who, with his wife and professional partner, Billie Tsien, was inducted into the academy last year. “They started to turn around a slow-moving ship. But are they sailing free and clear? A couple more years will let us know.”

Each new member donates a piece of his or her artwork to the academy. This makes the institution’s 7,000-piece collection unusual, Ms. Branagan noted, in that it was built up by artists and architects, not curators. “It gives us the opportunity to show beyond the canon,” she said.

“It’s an important legacy to continue, which is really what makes me excited about doing this job,” she added. “The original mission was to promote American art through instruction and exhibition. That is still a relevant mission.”

Asked whether the academy planned to deaccession any more artwork anytime soon, Ms. Branagan answered with a question: “Are you kidding me?”