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## Collaborative International Exhibitions in the United States: A Call for Ethical Guidelines

### **Current significance**

Over the past several years, an increasing number of museums, in the United States and abroad, work together towards the common pursuit of international exhibitions. Many, if not most, of these collaborative presentations are characterized by a US presence as both host and interpreter of foreign national patrimonies - a trend particularly relevant to today's global community. The leadership of one country in the cultural interpretation of another's artifacts creates great potential for nationalistic and ethnocentric bias. It is my opinion that these international endeavors require a high level of tact and ethical acumen to be considered "successful" in the curatorial sense. After reading Marie Malaro's guidebook, *Museum Governance*, specifically the chapter *Lending for Profit*, I believe her ethical guidelines support my skepticism. In the context of global politics, international collaborative exhibitions affect the reputation of more

than one nation or culture and, as such, have the potential for great geopolitical significance.<sup>1</sup>

Three examples of international collaborations sparked my interest regarding the subject of international exhibitions. The first of these collaborations resulted from the rediscovery of the Bactrian Gold Treasures of Afghanistan. These treasures are believed to represent a nexus of two civilizations: Hellenic culture and the world of the Indus and Siberian steppe.<sup>2</sup> Unearthed from Tillya Tepe, in Northern Afghanistan, the gold pieces are over 2,000 years old. Since they were revealed in 1978, the 20,000 plus items have rarely been on display.<sup>3</sup>

In 1989, the Bactrian Gold was secretly removed from Afghanistan's National Museum in Kabul, to the presidential vault of President Dr. Najibullah. After the Taliban heavily vandalized the museum in 2001, rumors circulated that the treasure had been destroyed. However, in August 2003 it was reported that the renowned Bactrian Hoard had survived the iconoclasm of the Taliban. Thus began the competition between the US and France over who would sponsor a European touring exhibition of the treasures.<sup>4</sup> Such an exhibition would potentially raise money to rebuild the Kabul Museum and, in effect, provide further support to Afghanistan's economy.

A second example, relevant to this topic, is that of the Assyrian Nimrud Gold, found hidden in a bank vault in Baghdad, Iraq. The treasure of Nimrud remained hidden

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<sup>1</sup> Malero, *Museum Governance*, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, 11:110

<sup>2</sup> Nishamura, David, "Bactrian Gold: It's USA vs. France", *Cronaca*, December <http://www.cronaca.com/archives/001799.html>

<sup>3</sup> Nishamura, David, "Bactrian Gold: It's USA vs. France", *Cronaca*, December <http://www.cronaca.com/archives/001606.html>

<sup>4</sup> Nishamura, David, "Bactrian Gold: It's USA vs. France", *Cronaca*, December <http://www.cronaca.com/archives/001799.html>

throughout the rise and fall of Saddam Hussein. Then, after the subsequent looting at the National Museum in Iraq, many feared that the collection had been permanently lost. However, the combined efforts of the museum's directors, a team of US Customs agents, and the Office of the Coalition Provisional Authority, saved the myriad pieces of gold jewelry, stones, and ornaments.

These antiquities are purportedly to travel the globe as a "blockbuster exhibition," financed by Danish-Iraqi collaborative efforts. Ditte Højriis Stoltze, project manager for this proposed exhibition, speculates that the show will visit eight to twelve cities, including Paris, Washington, DC, Berlin and Tokyo. In an article in *The Art Newspaper*, Stoltze stated, "It would function as a fundraiser to preserve the cultural heritage of Iraq." Whether this tour will take place remains to be seen; as of now, it is still in the planning phase and no schedule has been published. But according to one museum spokesperson at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, "there's about a 90% chance the tour will happen."<sup>5</sup>

Another example of a current international exhibition is *Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of Pharaohs*, an exposition of treasures from Egypt's famed boy-pharaoh, which debuted in June 2005 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.<sup>6</sup> "Tut 2," as it has been dubbed, will complete a four-city tour ending in November 2006 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. A "blockbuster" in the truest sense of the word, Tut 2 cost an estimated \$50 million dollars to produce. It is the sequel to the 1976 exhibition entitled "Treasures of Tutankhamun," an attraction often touted as the first of the museum blockbuster era. The exhibition is expected to attract hundreds of thousands of visitors. A complex network of

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<sup>5</sup> Kaufman, Jason Edward, "Danish -Iraqi Agreement for world tour of Assyrian Nimrud Gold", *The Art Newspaper* <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/article.asp?idart=11597>

associates operates this staggering endeavor. It includes: the four participating museums – LACMA; the Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale; the Field Museum in Chicago; and the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia – three corporate partners, all practiced at the art of mass marketing – National Geographic, AEI, and AEG Live (best known for the television sensation, “American Idol”) – and the final element of Tut 2, the Egyptian government, which reportedly charged \$20 million, plus a portion of ticket sales, to send the artifacts to the US for display, money that is slated for the safeguarding and conservation of Egypt’s national treasures.<sup>7</sup>

Tut 2 recently completed a run at LACMA where it attracted swarms of visitors who, along with the professional museum community, and local and national media, gave the show mixed reviews. High-priced and exceedingly theatrical, Tut 2 was economically profitable for Los Angeles and the museum bearing its name. The same will most likely be true for the three remaining cities on Tut 2’s national tour. However, critics debate the ethics surrounding this high level of profit. Others more focused on exhibition content have criticized the displays as being excessively dramatic and too reliant on a single narrative to fully engage visitors. *Los Angeles Times* author, David Pagel, summarized his feelings about the exhibition, writing, “It feels pre-processed, pre-programmed, pre-digested, as if the whole point is to deliver ‘the Tut experience’ as efficiently as possible,

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<sup>6</sup> Beizer, Julia, Breitkopf, Susan, and Litvinov, Amanda, “Marketing the King: Tut 2 and the New Blockbuster,” *Museum News*, November/December 2005, 37

<sup>7</sup> Beizer, Julia, Breitkopf, Susan, and Litvinov, Amanda, “Marketing the King: Tut 2 and the New Blockbuster,” *Museum News*, November/December 2005, p 38

to as many paying customers as can be marched through. But wonder cannot be forced.”<sup>8</sup>

The effect of this large-scale international exhibition on the public’s expectations of museums, as well as on US - Egyptian relations, remains to be seen. The latter issue begs the questions – how will the people of Egypt receive the exposition, and to whom do the objects, and their interpretive histories, truly belong?

While researching these events, I was frequently reminded of the word “hegemony,” so often used in my undergraduate history classes. By definition, hegemony is “leadership by one country,” with paternalism as an implicit shade of meaning. In the cases above, hegemony parades as philanthropy, a noble form. But I am apprehensive about the larger implications of these “sponsored exhibitions.” To clarify, my intention for this paper is not to rebuke those individuals and institutions working to promote national and cultural awareness in Iraq, Afghanistan, the United States, or elsewhere. Rather, this paper examines significant examples of international exhibitions, each indicative of the sponsored exhibition’s mixed potential for good and harm. From these examples I have gleaned key questions that I feel provide the basis for a code of ethics, one that would encourage the display of international exhibitions in an appropriate manner.

Today many ethical codes exist for host institutions, both in the United States and elsewhere, aimed towards responsible care of acquired artifacts as well as loans. These

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<sup>8</sup> Pagel, David, "Audience With the Boy King; Blockbuster-style Packaging Competes With Artifacts at the Latest Tut Exhibition ", June 17, 2005, *The Los Angeles Times*, Part E, p 1

guidelines, although not directly applicable to international lending, were useful touchstones when reading about past shows.

The first of these codes, and perhaps most relevant, is the American Association of Museums' (AAM) *Guidelines for Exhibiting Borrowed Objects*. This succinct document, available both in print and online, provides a framework from which to assess the events of past international exhibitions. Reading this set of guidelines, I better understood how a decrease in ethical standards correlates with a subsequent decrease in exhibition academic standards – something to avoid, so it would seem.

To create this set of guidelines, the AAM assembled a task force that recognized several principles to direct the creation of institutional guidelines and standards for exhibiting borrowed objects in museums. These principles included: adhering to an ethical standard that exceeds legal minimums; acting in a way that is consistent with the museum's mission; adhering to an ideal of transparency; and maintaining control over museum activities.<sup>9</sup>

Drawing from the connotations of these principles, the AAM Board adopted its *Guidelines on Exhibiting Borrowed Objects* on July 13, 2000. These guidelines contained four provisions, the most important of which, in my opinion, is the recommendation that objects on display be “consistent with the intellectual integrity of the exhibition.” Not surprisingly, this directive is decidedly pertinent in the international showcase. Thus, following the AAM example, I have used the notion of principles guiding provisions as a model for this paper.

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<sup>9</sup> American Association of Museums, *Guidelines on Exhibiting Borrowed Objects*, 2000  
[http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics\\_guidelines/borrowob.cfm](http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics_guidelines/borrowob.cfm)

In terms of more international organizations, the International Council on Museums' (ICOM) *Code of Professional Ethics* was also useful as an ethical jumping board. Yet, I found little information on ethical exhibitions across national lines, or in regards to national patrimony. This is not to say that ICOM has not assumed a conscientious international role in today's international museum community; I simply could not find any guiding principles for international lending within the scope of the organization's ethical literature.

What I did find, however, was evidence of an international playing field, or a forum for the exchange of principles on an international level. It, thus, occurred to me that an ethics code for international lending, similar to what I propose in this paper, might best be propagated by an organization such as ICOM, given its international strength and recognition.

For a further understanding of my case studies, I researched two other prominent organizations, the United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the American Association of Museum Directors (AAMD). Both were helpful, though not usefully specific to the scope of this paper. In my opinion, the two organizations were contrastingly unsuitable - UNESCO, on the one hand, is a bit general for such a museum-specific issue, while the AAMD is too specific, and too particular to the United States to have the international focus necessary for such a global topic.

It should be noted that the AAMD recently published a document entitled *Guidelines for Exhibiting Loaned Archaeological Material and Ancient Art*. While this new set of principles is not focused on loaning per se, it is particularly helpful for matters of cultural

heritage pertaining to provenance and object history, since the guidelines encourage due-diligence and transparency as a necessary stage of the loan process.<sup>10</sup>

Taken as a whole, while these four organizations and their associated ethics codes provide shadows of a standard, they do not offer explicit defining guidelines for collaborative international exhibitions. There is little doubt in my mind that these exhibitions have great potential to foster cultural understanding between nations.<sup>11</sup>

However, I also have little doubt that failure to create appropriate guidelines for the cultural interpretation of foreign exhibitions has great potential to influence geopolitical stability. Thus, the positive and negative implications of these exhibitions should be carefully considered.

The potential for good from international exhibitions is vast, especially in the United States, a nation comprised of so many cultures. At their best, global exhibitions promote understanding by creating linkages between distant and differing cultures. In addition, our growing global community benefits as a result of collaboration between museums worldwide. Author Richard Kurin, in his book, *Reflections of a Culture Broker: A View From the Smithsonian*, describes this intricate exchange as “brokering,” or “the (bringing of) audiences and cultures together so that cultural meanings can be translated and even negotiated.<sup>12</sup>” These cooperative, curatorial efforts are most certainly beneficial. They might even serve as mechanisms for peace.

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<sup>10</sup> American Association of Museum Directors, *Guidelines on Loans of Antiquities and Ancient Art*, 2006 [http://www.aamd.org/papers/documents/Loans\\_and\\_PressRelease.pdf](http://www.aamd.org/papers/documents/Loans_and_PressRelease.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Weil, Stephen B., *Beauty and the Beasts: On Museums, Art, the Law, and the Market*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington D.C., 1983.

<sup>12</sup> Kurin, Richard, *A View From the Smithsonian: Reflections of a Culture Broker*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington D.C., 1997, p 21

In certain cases, a further incentive for international collaboration is the prospect of fundraising and possible restoration for under-funded collections in lending nations. The importance of this incentive should not be underestimated, especially for countries in turmoil as a result of war and destruction. It is relevant to note that two of the aforementioned exhibitions would showcase the patrimony of countries experiencing political and economic unrest. These exhibitions have potential to financially benefit these countries.

However, a position of “philanthropic hegemony” - which I define as one nation’s assistance of another, based upon the assumed interpretive incapability of the latter - ought to be carefully avoided. This leads to the greater part of my skepticism regarding international shows; such exhibitions affect the worldwide reputations of all countries involved. In thinking of these prospects, I am quietly reminded of a quote by the poet William Yeats, “Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.”<sup>13</sup> In the context of exhibitions, culture and identity represent the dreams of a nation. They materialize as art and artifact.

The examples that I have selected for this paper offer significant considerations for forming guidelines of international exhibitions. The purpose of this review is to discuss the issues of collections representation, profit seeking and distribution, and academic integrity through an examination of past exhibitions in the United States and abroad. The exhibitions chosen to embody these issues are as follows:

- Walters Gallery proposed (and cancelled) exhibition *Land of Myth and Fire: Art of Ancient and Medieval Georgia*

- Broughton Masterpiece Presentation: *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last*

### *Imperial Family*

- Barnes Collections: Tour of Tokyo
- Walters Gallery exhibition *Gates of Mystery*

### **Walters Gallery**

#### ***Land of Myth and Fire: Art of Ancient and Medieval Georgia***

The exhibition, *Land of Myth and Fire: Art of Ancient and Medieval Georgia*, took two years to plan and was not problematic in its beginnings. Set to open October 26, 1999, the exhibition would have showcased nearly 160 items, including ancient jewelry, ceramics, manuscripts, textiles, icons, and other gold, silver and enamel objects. However, protests arose on April 25, 1999, after the show's official announcement by Georgia's president, Eduard Shevardnadze.<sup>14</sup>

According to the show's exhibition planner, Gregory Guroff, a former US diplomat and president of the Foundation for International Arts and Education (FIAE), controversy surrounding the show was "not about the exhibition, but rather aimed at Shevardnadze and the government." At the time, President Shevardnadze needed public confidence for the imminent presidential election period, and political opposition from such controversy was certain to threaten his presidential career. The Zviadists, supporters of Georgia's former president, the late Zviad Gamsakhurdia, were the most vociferous opponents of

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<sup>13</sup> Yeats, William Butler, "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven", *The Wind Among the Reeds*, 1899

<sup>14</sup> Cash, Stephanie, "Political Protests Halt Georgian Show", October, 1999, *The Art Newspaper*, [http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_dls/m1248/10\\_87/56906428/print/jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m1248/10_87/56906428/print/jhtml)

the exhibition. This appears to have been a factor in Sherardnadze's ultimate retraction of presidential support for the exhibition.<sup>15</sup>

Religious disputes created yet another critical hurdle for the creators of *Land of Myth and Fire*. Many said that the artifacts were the property of the church, and that the state lacked the authority to remove them from their country of origin. The Georgian Orthodox patriarch, Ilia II, was direly opposed to the removal, stating that all objects would lose their holiness if removed from Georgia. Backed by dissenters, Ilia II also claimed that the world would soon be ending, in the year 2000, and that these objects would enable Georgia's salvation during this time.<sup>16</sup>

Adding final fuel to the opposition that, once initiated, led to the postponement and eventual cancellation of the Walters Gallery exhibition, were the protesters' claim that the works were far too fragile to make the trip abroad. Security measures were also scrutinized. Ironically, this argument was not pacified by the contractual agreement that three-quarters of the exhibition proceeds had been allocated to Georgia's cultural institutions and the remaining quarter would fund a US cultural exchange program with Georgia. This information might not have been widespread at the time.

The much-anticipated *Land of Myth and Fire* had great potential to enhance understanding and appreciation for Georgia's religion and culture in the United States. In an interview on August 4, 1999 with the *New York Times*, Gregory Guroff mourned the fact that "Georgia has treasures the world has no idea about." The loss of such an

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<sup>15</sup> Dobrzynski, Judith H., "Protests in Georgia Derail Art Show Headed for U.S." *The New York Times*, August 4, 1999

<sup>16</sup> Cash, Stephanie, "Political Protests Halt Georgian Show", October, 1999, *The Art Newspaper*, [http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_dls/m1248/10\\_87/56906428/print/jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m1248/10_87/56906428/print/jhtml)

opportunity was certainly worth lamenting. The treasure spanned 8,000 years of Georgian cultural history, and would have enriched visitors to the Walters Gallery as well as the Republic of Georgia.

The circumstances of this cancelled exhibition illuminate a number of challenges, most of which appear to have been unavoidable. It should be noted that the Georgian protest of *Land of Myth and Fire* was not an isolated incident; similar protests were raised in the city of Trieste, even though that show was not so directly criticized.<sup>17</sup>

Taken as a whole, the events that led to the eventual cessation of *Land of Myth and Fire* evidence the challenge that national politics bring to international shows. The unavoidable factor of political influence raises an important question – who represents the collections to be exhibited, and who ultimately speaks for the artifacts? The conflicts between competing political entities, as well as church and state are at issue. Amidst this quagmire of conflicting interest, the exhibiting institution faces the dubious task of identifying a collection's representative.

This debacle also leads one wonder how this collaborative effort proceeded so far, only to fail? In my opinion, failure to secure a coherent and enforceable international agreement, and more importantly, failure to define a valid representative of the collection, caused irreparable misunderstandings and loss to the planners of the exhibit. Political and religious entities sabotaged an international cultural exchange, to the detriment of all involved.

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<sup>17</sup> Cash, Stephanie, "Political Protests Halt Georgian Show", October, 1999, *The Art Newspaper*, [http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_dls/m1248/10\\_87/56906428/print/jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m1248/10_87/56906428/print/jhtml)

## **Broughton International, Inc.**

### ***Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Imperial Family***

There is an overarching, guiding construct, known as a code of ethics, designed to assist non-profit museums in representing culture. These ethical guidelines, most aptly delineated by the AAM, were created as a way to secure public trust. In for-profit museum enterprise, motivations are entirely different and beyond the scope of this paper. However, I would like to examine one exhibition design firm, Broughton International, Inc., not only because its exhibitions are unsurpassed, in terms of marketing, attendance, and clout, but also because its exhibition, *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Imperial Family*, involves the historical interpretation of Russian artifacts by primarily United States interests.

When Broughton International, Inc. organized the exhibition *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Imperial Family* in 1998, the corporation was contractually obligated to draw a crowd of at least 400,000 individuals and produce at least one “world-class” exhibit every year, for five years. Coined “Broughton Masterpiece Presentations” by the exhibition curators, these productions are true “blockbuster” exhibitions – flashy one-time events known for drawing huge crowds.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Brown, Caroline Spencer, "Czar Attractions: In Delaware, an Unlikely Rendezvous with Russian Royalty", *The Washington Post*, October 28, 1998

The venue for *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Imperial Family* was a renovated shipbuilding facility in Wilmington, Delaware. When the exhibition finally closed, the 10 million dollar facility recorded ticket sales in excess of 561,000.<sup>19</sup>

According to editorial and visitor reviews, the show was exceedingly stirring, addressing the final tragic days of the Romanov family. Clothing, jewelry, and love letters, culled mainly from Russia's Hermitage Museum, relayed the heartbreaking story of the Russian Revolution through the material culture of Russia's royal family.

Critics challenged the "success" of *Nicholas and Alexandra*, on the basis that the exhibition lacks commonly accepted academic standards. A fundamental principle of the AAM's *Guidelines on Exhibiting Borrowed Objects* requires that curators include objects "consistent with the intellectual integrity of the exhibition."<sup>20</sup> In light of this principle, the curators of the exhibition *Nicholas and Alexandra* might have used more tact in their presentation of the Russian Revolution.

Visitors to the exhibition were ushered from room to room, and flooded with many tragic relics of the Romanov royalty. Little attention appears to have been given to the nuances and history of the revolution. Rather, the tragic execution of the Romanov family was the event of interest, and all objects served to underscore the final displays of the show. These included relics of the family murders in the form of blood stained walls, emotive reading of quotes (in inaccurate accent), and evocative videos of the family playing tennis prior to the Revolution. As if to punctuate this experiential event, guests were then invited to roam the *Nicholas and Alexandra* gift shop. At this final stop, they

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<sup>19</sup> Online Review "Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Imperial Family", *Antiques and the Arts Online*, <http://www.antiquesandthearts.com/archive/nich.htm>

<sup>20</sup> American Association of Museums, *Guidelines on Exhibiting Borrowed Objects*, 2000

could purchase souvenirs of all kinds, ranging from exhibition mugs to *Nicholas and Alexandra* temporary tattoos.<sup>21</sup>

The trend towards “blockbusters” is rife with ethical problems, ranging from economic impact to academic integrity. Indeed, even in the context of collaborative exhibitions, there is much to be learned – perhaps more to be avoided.

“Blockbuster” exhibitions are often criticized for their tendency to promote stereotypes, in order to furnish “events” for the viewing public. This tendency is problematic, especially with regards to foreign patrimony, since the exhibited cultures are oftentimes poorly understood from the outset. In *Nicholas and Alexandra*, the viewing public was not invited to learn, but rather *experience*, the circumstances that befell Russia’s royal family during the Revolution. As a result, fear, tragedy, and bloodshed will characterize Russian culture in the lingering memories of many American guests. To quote Tanya Vilinbakhova, a museum professional from the Russian State Museum in St. Petersburg, “Since 1917, it seems like we have been monsters. We want people to realize we are not monsters; we have a religious history.”<sup>22</sup> In my opinion, the overriding purpose of successful museum exhibitions is to deconstruct stereotypes – this was not the case with *Nicholas and Alexandra*.

To return this section to a discussion of international collaboration, I have doubts that a show of this nature, using United States cultural patrimony, would be considered viable or acceptable by AAM standards. In preparing for a “blockbuster” exhibition of Afghanistan’s patrimony, curators at the National Geographic Society will need to

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[http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics\\_guidelines/borrowob.cfm](http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics_guidelines/borrowob.cfm)

<sup>21</sup> Quotation from conversation with Ildiko P. DeAngelis, April 7, 2004.

consider the stereotypes implicit to their understanding of the Bactrian Treasure. In my opinion, questions should focus on whether the show perpetuates myths, not only about the Afghani people, but also about their faiths and culture, with the potential to misrepresent, and thus to injure.

## **Lending for Profit**

### ***The Barnes Collection***

The Barnes collection is relevant to this paper in that it is one of the first examples of a truly profit-driven international exhibition, one that set precedents for many US museums. The Barnes collection, lent for a one-time exhibition in Tokyo, cost more than \$7 million dollars, paving the way for other museums lending abroad. The Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and Guggenheim Museums are all examples of museums that have followed suit by lending considerable portions of their collections as lucrative business ventures.<sup>23</sup> So far, these cases have involved US collections exported abroad and, thus, are less directly comparable to the topic of this paper. However, these exhibitions represent a specific challenge to international exhibitions. This challenge leads me to wonder if high-priced exhibitions, both to and from the United States, are going to become a more comfortable norm.

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<sup>22</sup> Quotation from Tanya Vilinbakhova, "Icons offer a Rare Glimpse of Russia's Religious Past" in *The Washington Post*, September 3, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Malaro, *Museum Governance*, 11:109

## Walters Gallery

### *Gates of Mystery*

Of the examples discussed in this paper, this last exhibition is most encouraging. First displayed in 1992, five years prior to *Land of Myth and Fire*, the Walter's Gallery exhibition *Gates of Mystery* displayed nearly 100 religious icons, ranging in age from the 13<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> century. In my opinion, this show was exemplary in its academic approach to collaborative international exhibitions. Organized by the non-profit arts organization, InterCultura, the show embraced the religious history of Russia with scholarly integrity and attention to historic detail.<sup>24</sup> It also provided a contrasting approach to exhibitions, when compared to productions like *Nicholas and Alexandra*.

The approach to international exhibitions, taken by InterCultura curators and diplomats, is relevant to creating guidelines for international collaborative exhibitions because the negotiations for a show of the Russian religious icons were approached with an admirable level of delicacy. One distinguishing challenge to this exhibition's curators was that the show would be comprised of religious icons, a factor that created difficulties with many Russian religious figures. According to Sandra Skowron, journalist for the *Washington Post*, the Russian Orthodox Church "reemerged as an important factor in Russian life<sup>25</sup>" after Mikhail Gorbachev relaxed some governmental controls. Members of the Walters Gallery and InterCultura staff gave this factor great consideration. By the

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<sup>24</sup> Skowron, Sandra, "Icons Offer Rare Glimpse of Russia's Religious Past; Baltimore Unlocks 'Gates of Mystery'" *washingtonpost.com*, September 3, 1999, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/74047092.html>

time the Soviet Government endorsed the exhibition, InterCultura had already organized two other shows.<sup>26</sup>

In a quote for the *Washington Post*, Walters Gallery curator, Gary Vikan, said of the collection “Russian icons have a whimsical, lyric quality. The whole body is interwoven into the figures and into a fantasy of color and linear movement.”<sup>27</sup> Yet, despite Gary Vikan’s artistic curatorial approach, the items themselves were not perceived as “art” by their original creators, but as a means by which to better orient the viewer with the divine. To this day, many members of the Russian Orthodox Church perceive these items as icons, not art.

These contradictory perceptions create a unique challenge to the American curator, one that should be considered as a fundamentally ethical issue. Gordon Dee Smith, the founder of InterCultura and liaison to the Soviet government, has described how he approached the Soviet Union about the exhibit and how he intentionally removed the word “holy” from the exhibitions original working title, *Russian Holy Art*.<sup>28</sup> Smith's action raises the question – how does one address differences of interpretation created by cultural divides? This question is particularly relevant to international exhibition curators, given the breadth of cultures that exist worldwide.

During my research, I had the opportunity to speak with Elena Romanova, Senior Programs Officer of the *Foundation for International Arts and Education*, on the

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<sup>25</sup> Skowron, Sandra, "Icons Offer Rare Glimpse of Russia's Religious Past; Baltimore Unlocks 'Gates of Mystery'" *washingtonpost.com*, September 3, 1999, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/74047092.html>

<sup>26</sup> Skowron, Sandra, "Icons Offer Rare Glimpse of Russia's Religious Past; Baltimore Unlocks 'Gates of Mystery'" *washingtonpost.com*, September 3, 1999, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/74047092.html>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

challenges, both logistically and academically, to creating international exhibitions. Ms Romanova provided me numerous examples of challenges, most striking of which were those generated by differences of expectations of what the final exhibition would entail. According to Romanova, creating "different visions of a storyline," of a quality that would be accessible to both the US and foreign public, posed the most profound challenge to the collaborative exhibition curator. In addition, misconceptions about the organization's motives could also lead to problems.<sup>29</sup>

In the end, it is my opinion that the public perception of this show determined its success. From reviews of *Gates of Mystery*, both in visitor attendance as well as academic professionalism, the mission of the museum and the integrity of Russian heritage were upheld. This is not to say that challenges did not exist and it is doubtful that a show like this will take place again, due to pressures from the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>30</sup> However, it is my opinion that with *Gates of Mystery*, the Walters Gallery and InterCultura created a show that exceeded generally accepted principles of ethics and integrity.

## **Conclusion**

The previous examples emphasize my opinion that collaborative international exhibitions are tremendously valuable, yet challenging to successfully create. These

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Elena Romanova, Senior Programs Officer at Foundation for International Education and Research (FIAE), April 26, 2004.

examples are just a few of many. The implications of future exhibitions remain to be seen. Collectively, the questions raised by the following exhibitions should be carefully considered by museum professionals. These questions reinforce my belief that international non-profit exhibition producers will benefit greatly from a generally accepted set of guidelines for collaborative international exhibitions.

I might add that this paper does not take into consideration the various import and export restrictions governing the movement of objects from the United States and other countries. Strictly speaking, this paper is an examination of ethical issues, assuming the need for a high standard of practice for museums and their exhibitions, given their status in the realm of public trust.<sup>31</sup> However, the importance of these restrictions should be taken into consideration when creating guidelines.

The first challenge to consider when creating ethical guidelines, as evidenced by the cancellation of the Walters Gallery show *Land of Myth and Fire: Art of Ancient and Medieval Georgia*, is to determine who represents the collections, legally, as well as in spirit. Again, we must ask the question – is there an enforceable agreement in place to ensure the commitment from lenders?

Secondly, I have examined the commercial motives of profit-driven exhibitions. “Blockbuster” events, like *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Imperial Family*, exemplify this necessity. These large-scale collaborations invite several questions, all based upon the underlying themes – what amount of marketing is appropriate, and to what extent do large exhibitions necessarily promote stereotypes? Given blockbusters' enormity of

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<sup>30</sup> Skowron, Sandra, "Icons Offer Rare Glimpse of Russia's Religious Past; Baltimore Unlocks 'Gates of Mystery'," *washingtonpost.com*, September 3, 1999, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/74047092.html>

audience, these questions are exceedingly relevant, because in larger exhibitions so many more people are influenced.

As shown by the Barnes tour of Tokyo, large fees for exhibitions are now more widely accepted, especially in the context of international lending. These exhibitions are relevant because they raise a red flag of precedent. How comfortable are museums to become with the notion of high-priced lending? This trend, again, suggests the need for guidelines for collaborative international exhibitions. There are ethical issues at stake when collections are loaned for profit.

The last question for consideration, produced by the Walter's Gallery exhibition of Russian religious icons, *Gates of Mystery*, invites questions on the subject of interpretive variability with regards to the curating of international exhibitions. As was the case with the religious icons of *Gates of Mystery*, exhibition curators viewed the Russian religious icons as art, while the Russian Orthodox Church perceived them to be strictly spiritual. I believe that this show was a success, both academically and with its appeal to the general public. However, the exhibition's circumstances represent a challenge for curators, and interpretation of the significance of foreign objects requires intercultural sensitivity and diplomacy.

A recent paper, entitled *Case History: The "King Tut" Exhibition, Foresight and Hindsight*, presented by Frederick Goldstein of the LACMA, and Sophia Siskel of the Chicago Botanic Gardens, provides a firsthand examination of producing Tut 2 at LACMA. The case history recommends that loaning partners establish explicit terms, in the form of contractual agreements, in order to clearly define each party's interests and

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<sup>31</sup> Malaro, *Museum Governance*, 11:110

assumptions with regard to the loan. This contract, however, is only part of a larger formula that should first be more generally defined.<sup>32</sup>

As the term "global community" grows increasingly common, it is safe to assume that international cultural property will be studied, shared, and exhibited among nations. However, to acknowledge this trend without policy is to invite unnecessary geopolitical stress. In learning about the aforementioned exhibitions, my opinion that collaborative international exhibitions are sensitive endeavors has not changed. With more major international exhibitions on the horizon, many with American funds and curators, this topic is particularly relevant to today's museum professionals. In my opinion, it will benefit cultures worldwide to address the questions evoked by the previous examples, to create guidelines by which to conduct collaborative international exhibitions.

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<sup>32</sup> Goldstein, Frederic, "Case History: The "King Tut" Exhibition, Foresight and Hindsight," ALI-ABA Course of Study, Legal Issues in Museum Administration. 2006, p 15.