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A conversation with Philippe de Montebello

by [Hilton Kramer](#)

The director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art talks with TNC

Editor's note: This summer, Hilton Kramer, accompanied by The New Criterion's Executive Editor, David Yezzi, interviewed the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Philippe de Montebello, in his office overlooking Central Park in Manhattan.

THE NEW CRITERION: You are coming up on your thirtieth anniversary as director of the Metropolitan Museum. Clearly, the museum world has changed dramatically during your tenure. What would you say is the most pronounced difference between when you began and now?

PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO: Well, I was appointed in May of 1977, and I would have to say it's a different world, to the point that, knowing everything I know, were I offered the job again I'm not sure I would take it. Let me look at it on two levels: the degree to which it has become bureaucratized (I don't know if there is such a word, but now there is) and legalized, with a paralyzing near-zero risk-tolerance level, and the degree to which financial issues dominate everything we do.

Question number one is not "What is the worth of a project?" but "How much will it cost?" With this attitude comes an increasing amount of bureaucracy and paperwork. So, the job has become hugely administrative, and over the last thirty years I can measure, simply by looking at my calendar, how much less I deal directly with works of art (which is why I'm here) than ever before.

TNC: In what ways were you more concerned with the works themselves?

PD: I can remember the days when I wrote all my own audio guides, when I wrote, or at least substantially reworked, the introductions to catalogues. Now, I read them quickly, and if I see nothing that is egregious, I go ahead and sign off on them. Obviously, I'm involved, because I don't have a chief curator, but it's more at a distance. My favorite moments are frankly when I get curators together, talking with them about acquisitions and looking at works of art. I have to make time on my books to say to my staff, "I'm going to the galleries for twenty minutes." That's when you also notice the labels. Are they correct? The lighting, the color? You're working. It's never ...

TNC: It's never pure pleasure.

PD: After I'm gone, if I come back, it'll be pure pleasure simply to look. A term has been created for what I do: "arts administrator." A dreadful sounding term, but one that is becoming increasingly accurate (*laughs*).

TNC: Your administrative duties have included overseeing the expansion of the museum. The

Metropolitan under your tenure has doubled in size.

PD: Yes, that's correct. It's all expansion within the cube of the building; it's all reworking of interior spaces. I have in fact transformed the restaurant, moved it downstairs, to turn it into galleries for Greek and Roman antiquities. So the expansions were for the installation and better presentation of art, or, as with the Uris Center, for educational programs.

TNC: It seems that when other museums expand, it's about getting more bodies in. It's about box office, to some extent. Renovations are more about the flow of traffic.

PD: And the ability to do revenue-generating activities: to rent out the space, do parties, and so forth. We do that! We have any number of revenue-generating activities, and we do parties, and we do rent out space, but I think we all know that is strictly in order to support the program. There isn't anyone who would say, if we had another billion dollars in the endowment, that we would not review all these ancillary activities, and reduce them substantially.

There's no question in our minds that certain things are about money. Money is what allows us to pay my curators and do excellent exhibitions, so one mustn't be too self-righteous about it. Things cost money. You repaint a wall; it costs money. You re-frame a picture; it costs money. Money has to come from somewhere, and we don't have federal funds. We have to raise it privately, mostly, and from the city.

TNC: To strike an elegant balance in support of the programs—you've been a leader in that.

PD: Thank you. There's no question that the moment you compromise the excellence of the scholarship, you may in the short term win out, but in the long term, boy, do you lose out. With the Byzantine exhibition, people said, "How did you get the loans from St. Catherine's? How did you manage to get so many institutions to lend?" It boils down to the credentials of seriousness that you bring to the table when you request loans, when you want to work with other institutions.

TNC: Other institutions have succumbed to a reliance on blockbusters and traveling exhibitions. It seems that for any number of reasons—perhaps it's part of the climate after September 11—it's harder for works of art to travel. As a result, are museums now coming back to nurturing their permanent collections?

PD: It's not that their permanent collections are not cared for, or that all the attention is paid to special exhibitions. It's just that special exhibitions are so much more visible, so much more part of the marketing.

And that's one issue. Perhaps museums ought to be spending more time marketing their permanent collections. The MFA in Boston and other such institutions—Philadelphia, the Art Institute of Chicago, and so forth—they all have great collections. What has happened is a slight shift in the priorities of the curators.

Curators now, in the entire museum world, would be very hesitant to go back to the days when the collection alone was the focus. You don't get in the press for a wonderful installation of your collection or the very sensitive reframing or re-matting of a drawing.

TNC: But there's a different emphasis at the Metropolitan than at other places. One example was your decision to discontinue separate ticketing for special exhibitions.

PD: We want people to come back frequently to see a show. With certain exhibitions (there are shows that interest me more than others), I find myself going back and back and back, looking and looking at one room or looking at three or four paintings and then walking out. So, I wanted the public to have that option.

TNC: Sounds like the ideal way to look at art.

PD: What summarizes the difference between the museum of yesterday and the museum of today is the trigger that a member of the public would have.

In the 1960s and 1970s, people would get up in the morning and say, “Let’s go and look at some art. I want to look at some pictures. I want to look at some sculpture.” Today, it’s “I want to go to the museum.” It’s a new, all-encompassing “museum experience,” more like, “We’ll have lunch and take in the music on the balcony.” There’s nothing inherently wrong with that, but art is somehow less the primordial trigger.

TNC: I wonder if there isn’t an encouraging lesson that we can take from your tenure, compared to your predecessor Thomas Hoving’s, in which there was clearly a conscious decision to generate “buzz.” He once pointed out that “razzmatazz,” I think he called it, was not your strategy.

Yours is the longest tenure of any director of the Metropolitan; the museum, both curatorially and in terms of exhibition space, is a model. Can we now say that flashier is not better?

PD: Flashier unquestionably cannot be better! A flash in the pan, by definition, is short term. You have to remember the fundamental quality and character of a work of art is that it does not yield its secrets in an instant. That’s what entertainment is about—instant gratification. The message is there, it’s a great big bang, and it’s over. The work of art has to be savored, has to be approached in a completely different way, in a different frame of mind.

My view of the museum is that it gives you an opportunity to revel in the fact that other human beings have surpassed you and are giving you something higher than what you bring to it. Can you imagine how dull a world it would be if everything was at the level that you bring to it?

I believe in hierarchies. I believe in good, better, best, and I believe the museum’s role is precisely to help people make those distinctions. You know, the term “masterpiece” for a time was actually politically incorrect?

TNC: Your op-ed in *The New York Times* on the “Sensation” exhibition in Brooklyn very eloquently returned the focus of the debate to the aesthetic quality of the art.

PD: Everybody thought that in that op-ed I was basically showing my dislike for modern art! I was simply saying, “I have heard about legalities; I have heard about proprieties. Has anyone looked at the exhibition?” That was my only point. I wasn’t making a statement about modern art, and everyone says, “This is proof: Montebello hates modern art.” I was amazed.

TNC: There are particular challenges to collecting modern art. Certainly it’s quite different from collecting ancient art. PD: That’s quite challenging these days, too (*laughs*).

TNC: Right, different challenges, I guess.

PD: Yes. There’s a critical framework in place to approach older art. When you’re looking at very recent art, it’s much more difficult. There are no rules. It’s simply much more intuitive, much more individual. We strongly believe in the continuity of art, that it doesn’t stop at any point in time, so we have Cai Guo-Qiang on the roof, we have Kara Walker, we have Santiago Calatrava, lots of living artists. But we have pretty much made the decision not to buy very much of this generation. There is plenty of time, if someone emerges as a major artist, to buy that artist fifty years from now.

You know, New York’s greatest museum of contemporary art is its hundreds of commercial galleries. Just spend a Saturday walking from gallery to gallery!

TNC: Something the Whitney would do well to remember at Biennial time, I would have thought

(laughter).

You have mentioned that Charles Sterling, with whom you studied at the Institute for Fine Arts at NYU, “taught you how to see.” How so?

PD: Just a word about Charles Sterling, who taught Netherlandish and northern French painting from the fifteenth century, which is what I specialized in. He was a great scholar and academic, but he had been for a long time before he came to the Institute of Fine Arts curator of paintings at the Louvre, so he also dealt with objects directly, not simply in terms of theory.

He had this extraordinary gift of being able to decorticate a work of art through lantern slides at the time, with a great many details. There are people like this who are simply able to communicate, and he was able to take the Ghent Altarpiece and try to make you see the different hands—Hubert and Jan van Eyck. We looked at the Master of Moulin, the portraits of Hugo Van der Goes, and he got you to enter into the picture in a formal way, which was astonishing. Very few people have that gift. He had it, and I think part of it was that he was a curator-academic, and the combination is just ideal.

TNC: Did you learn from him about acquiring, as well?

PD: I used to visit dealers with him on the side, and he would look at works of art on the market. He didn’t have much money, but on a small scale he collected old master drawings and objects. He just loved to look. You have to have passion, you have to have love. Without it, what is the dialogue between the work of art and the viewer? There has to be something more profound than either the application of the theory or simply academic interest.

TNC: Before the IFA, you were at Harvard. What was your experience like there?

PD: Oh, I loved Harvard. I was an undergraduate in art history. Sydney Freedberg was also a very important influence on me—somebody whom we really loved and a wonderful person. He ultimately ended up at the National Gallery.

TNC: His influence was a treasure, just extraordinary.

PD: Sydney loved works of art. It was a whole generation of academics who did not trump the aesthetic quality with all the garbage of agendas that have succeeded.

TNC: And is that still possible in the academy?

PD: Of course, there are always individuals. It’s much diminished, but you can’t condemn the whole field. I know out of experience, simply staffing the institution, that it has become, in certain fields, increasingly difficult to find curators, because they’re trained so very differently today, especially in the area of ancient art.

Curators are being trained in a kind of sociological and anthropological approach to ancient art. Very few are now trained to look at it as part of art history, to look at the objects themselves. There are a few key curators at the Met who, were something to happen to them, I would have a devil of a time replacing them with anything close to the equivalent.

TNC: Obviously, you value your staff a great deal.

PD: Whether it’s an exhibition or an acquisition in fields that are not mine, I’m just constantly learning from the curators. I have to say that it’s a body of people, one smarter, more dedicated, more professional than the next, most of them real connoisseurs, who love what they do, love their works of art. I read about how there are people who never want to hire anyone who they think might be better than themselves. My staff is better than I am, for which I am grateful.

The comparison is with the conductor, though actually the conductor has more influence over what the orchestra does than what I do here. I just make sure that there is a high level of professional dedication on everybody's part. They feel it; they know I respect what they do. They get credit for what they do.

TNC: That is a great change from the days of your predecessor Thomas Hoving.

PD: Well, he would actually say, "Curators get in my way!" The curatorial forum here was created as a reaction to this occasional disdain, which Hoving, a former curator and a good curator, ultimately came to have for the curatorial staff.

TNC: The Greek and Roman galleries are scheduled to be completed in 2007. Those galleries alone are an incredible legacy, but if there was one thing, what would you most like to be remembered for? PD: There is no single event, no single accomplishment that matches the aggregate of a consistent level of excellence. I can cite any number of individual things that to me were wonderful, but it is the accumulation of them, the ability to have been able, time and again, somehow, to repeat and advance.

TNC: Regardless of whether it were possible, is there a single object or picture that you would love to have at the Metropolitan?

PD: Well, I don't know one. Considering the depth of our collection, were it possible, which it probably is not, you'd want Renaissance sculpture. Where is Giberti? Where is Donatello? Where is Verrocchio? That's a whole area where it would be wonderful, obviously, to have great examples, but I think it's highly unlikely.

I think in every field there are still certain artists—take Saenredam. His heavenly paintings of church interiors, we don't own one, only a drawing. But we never found one that was really good enough. You don't want to represent an artist by just ordinary work or representative work. One of the things that the Met stands for is that in most instances it is able to show artists at a very high level.

TNC: What do you most want for the museum, going forward?

PD: There's the fact that the future is not in my hands (*laughs*).

TNC: Is that something that you are thinking about—winding down, the possibility of appointing a successor at some point?

PD: Well, at some point there will be a successor. I should not have a hand in appointing my successor; I don't believe in it, nor do I want to be looking over the person's shoulder.

I don't think this is an institution that needs a complete tune-up—well, maybe a tune-up, but certainly not a change of direction. We should still be a lodestone, and a place where people learn not simply to see that which they already know and simply want a fix in, but to come and have new experiences and broaden their appetites.

The reason we're showing Girodet this summer is not because people are going to come clamoring to see him. Probably 99.9 percent have never heard of him, but it is our responsibility to introduce as many members of our public as possible to an artist that isn't Ingres or David, but who is an important and interesting personality in early Romanticism who painted a few really wonderful pictures. So if it was all about box office, it would be zero, but if fifty, seventy-five thousand, a hundred thousand people, come and see the exhibition, we would fulfill our responsibility to those people who walk out and say, "It's not just Ingres, Delacroix, and David; there is also Girodet. What an interesting artist."

Why do I put on a show of Himalayan armor? Well, go and look at the exhibition. People from the

fifteenth through the seventeenth century applied an amazing amount of artistry to ordinary objects. Saddles, things they sat on. Weapons that killed have the delicacy of snuffboxes. All of these are part of the history of man, the story of man, which is very, very broad. The thing about the Met is its huge breadth—that remains its great strength.

Hilton Kramer is the founding editor of *The New Criterion*, which he started with the late Samuel Lipman in 1982.

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