

The collection of a non-collecting institution: A case study of the Jacob Lawrence Gallery at the University of Washington

KRIS ANDERSON

Abstract

This is a case study of how the Jacob Lawrence Gallery at the University of Washington, a non-collecting institution, became responsible for a collection of some 750 works of all different sizes and media that had accumulated uncataloged and uninventoried over the course of almost 100 years. Numerous decisions had to be made by many parties to address how these objects honor the school's history and the legacy of past faculty and alumni, balance that with the objects' conservation needs and realistic level of resources available, and make the collection available for educational use through integration into the pedagogy of the School's courses. I will the legal hurdles of processing works with no clear provenance, copyright issues, how (as a museum professional) to uphold museum ethics and best-practices in an institution that is not first and foremost a museum and navigating the politics of multiple department interests that could be in conflict to develop a clear and comprehensive collections management policy. All of this was done with no extra financial backing, but with creative cross-campus partnerships with departments such as library science and law.

Introduction

Numerous organizations around the world, from UMAC (University Museums and Collection) and ICOM (International Council of Museums) to the AAM (American Association of Museums), have been consistent advocates for the role of collections in institutions of higher education. They have been leaders in creating taskforces, white papers, and best practices that can be used if ever the value of academic collections is called in to question.

However there exists on campuses around the world, collections from countless disciplines that are not recognized as 'official research collections' and therefore are not under the protective umbrella of the standards created by the aforementioned museum organizations. While they can be obscure collections such as the collection of slide rules in the University of Colorado Mathematics Department, or a collection of hundreds of paintings such as have come into the care of the Jacob Lawrence Gallery at the University of Washington, they are vulnerable to being disposed of, or repurposed, the end result of which is a horrible loss of potential research, and an irreversible decision to devalue and deprioritize the history of the institution itself.

The challenge

Although it was not an original part of the job of gallery director when it was last hired, never the less the director of the Jacob Lawrence Gallery has become the steward of quite a large collection of art works, nearly 1,000, which span over a century. Although that might not seem like a long time as compared to some other global institutions, it is a comprehensive history of arts education at the University of Washington in Seattle. Since the Jacob Lawrence Gallery is positioned on a campus where there are other larger museums, collections were never figured into the strategic plan of the gallery and although the division of art produces countless works of art and scholarship, it is not a collecting institution in its mission. Of course, just because collecting is not part of the mission does not mean that pieces have not been acquired. Whether it is from abandonment or intentional donation and everything in between, for years, without direct supervision, a collection steadily grew.

The collection only came to the attention of the gallery staff two years ago because the main storage space previously holding the work, a leaky basement room under no particular supervision, was being

given to a new division. No one in the building knew what to do with the accumulated work, and so the decision was made to contact the gallery. At that time of contact, the collection had no allies, interest, or exposure. Perhaps you have been handed a similar situation, or you have a colleague facing an orphan collect. Let this server as both a case study and cautionary tale of some of the successes and errors that were experienced in undertaking this project, to help others facing the same hurdle.

Initiating the project

First and foremost there had to be a decision to take action, a conviction that the diverse work could have a multitude of values to a broad range of constituents both in and outside of the school and a conviction that the status quo was not the way to conduct this aspect of our operation.

After the decision to act, the gallery had to come up with a list of reasons and values that working with this collection would provide. Some of the potential values seem obvious, as they are often what are associated with art works, those of aesthetic and artistic value. There was also a broad range of pedagogical values. As an active academy art history and fine art programs would certainly benefit from direct interaction with actual works of art especially a comprehensive collection of the past 100 years. The work also serves as an historical record of the development and success of the school, and lastly, and perhaps most importantly, it serves as a real and tangible way, through programming and exhibition, to honor past faculty and alumni contributions. Certainly there are other ways the values of such a collection could be measured and if faced with a similar situation one should be encouraged to think of as many metrics for value as possible, because every metric found is a different group of advocates that can be encouraged to participate in a project and advocates are key to a project's success.

Soliciting allies

Next, interest needs to be garnered in the project, by letting people know what the collection consisted of and its potential uses in order to secure resources and support; and in order to let people know what the collection consisted of resources needed to be expended in cataloging, photographing and presentation. Thus is the omnipresent museum conundrum, where to get the initial resources to get the resources that we need?

One answer is something that many institutions have turned to in the past and that is volunteers and interns.

The term 'intern' is a difficult one, because interns should be treated as junior colleagues and given substantive responsibilities and trusted to make decisions and execute orders with only moderate supervision. In reality, too often interns are treated as unskilled labor, relegated to tasks such as putting stamps on postcards that do not develop specific career skills. When the Jacob Lawrence Gallery hires interns it is done under the assumption that since they will be doing their work simply for academic credit, the gallery is obligated to make sure that they leave with new and valuable skills for the museum and gallery field, and ideally with a tangible product that can be used for portfolios and job searches.

For this project it was decided that two interns were needed, one that would develop and organize the collection including the collections data, and another whose role would principally be the digitization of the collection. After sitting down and looking at the realistic skill-set needs, the gallery team had to make a difficult political decision and that was to look for interns from outside of the School of Art. The School of Art in which the gallery is housed and which is the owner of all of these art works consists of the divisions of art, art history and design, and each of these groups feels an ownership stake in all of the operations of the gallery. Given the lack of serious internship opportunities for the students of the

school itself, one can receive strong pressures to draw exclusively from within our own pool of students. Although the gallery appreciates the merit of keeping opportunities in house, it is a disservice to oneself and to the student to place them in an internship that is not an ideal fit. Ultimately two students were chosen, one student from the university's museology program and one pursuing a double degree in museology and library science.

Cristina Linclau, the double master's degree student was informed of the desired outcomes and was then given charge and oversight of the day-to-day operations of the project. She took on development of the database, the organization system, labeling, cataloging and condition reporting. The other intern position, which has been held by several students, answered to Cristina Linclau and was principally responsible for moving and capturing digital images of the works to be entered in the database.

Promoting the project

Once there were enough images and cataloged works the gallery was able to peak the interest of one of the regions local arts writers who was intrigued enough to write a feature article about the project in Seattle's City Arts Magazine. The article highlighted the historical potential of the collection and the cataloging project itself and made it clear that the collection is the joint historical legacy of all of the past faculty and students. This was quite a boon for the project and the gallery was able to utilize media exposure to reach out to potential supporters and advocates.

This exposure leads to opportunities to show how the collection could be of value to the greater community. Seattle was the host city for the 40th annual Society of North American Goldsmiths conference and one of the principle venues was the Bellevue Art Museum. The curators of the museum knew that once upon a time the University of Washington offered an art degree in metals, and that there had been a donor who had established an endowment to create a collection of student metal work. But as the metals program had been defunct for years, there was worry that there was no one responsible for the objects, and no one knew who to contact to find out. After seeing the magazine article the museum was pleasantly surprised to find out that not only was the collection in safe hands, but they were also impressed with the speed and accuracy that they were able to not only confirm the safety of the objects, but also how swiftly all necessary high resolution images and label information was provided for an exhibition on Seattle metal arts they were planning.

The common thread between the press article and the exhibition is making sure that the collection is frequently in the public eye. It has been important to not only show that there is a collection but to show that the collection has a broad range of value, just like earlier what the goal was finding stake holders internally at the university.

Legal assessment

There is another large set of concerns in such a project, the question of what to do with the collection is more than just a museum issue, there are strong legal questions about title and copyright that need to be considered. We are fortunate that there is a staff of lawyers on campus that can be accessed for council. One of the lawyers on staff, Clark Shores, is the university's expert on intellectual property law and has been our principle contact for identifying and solving many of the complex issues that go with having a diverse collection of unknown origin. The first question that he had was one of ownership. Who owned this work and was there documentation to support a claim of ownership? If clear ownership was established, were there any conditions or stipulations to the ownership? Lastly, for those that had no clear documentation, how could the university go forward with exhibition, publication or sales?

Clear and undisputable title was only able to be found for about 15%–20% of the collection, and these works could be used at our discretion as the only conditions of the gifts were that any funds from sales go to support students, something that an academic gallery happily endorses. The rest was an orphan collection from a multiplicity of artists over the course of 100 years and our legal council had to make us realize that secure title or publication rights would never be able to be attained to with 100% certainty; rather we needed to think in terms of risk mitigation.

A large debt is owed to the collections department of the Museum of Modern Art in New York for being so forthcoming with their process of dealing with orphan works. After looking at MoMA's policies, the decision was made that the first step was to take artists that could be identified and attempt to send a letter of inquiry to their last known address. Even though some of the artists were long deceased, the purpose of this inquiry was not to yield information, but rather to prove that due diligence had been taken to contact the artist or their representatives with the information on hand, and as expected the process yielded no responses.

The next step was to publish information on the artists and works as a public notice in local newspapers and give people sufficient time to respond. It was decided that two publication of the information with at least 30 days between publications would suffice, again for the purposes of due diligence.

The steps taken are no guarantee that there will not be problems in the future. The title to the works or to the rights to reproduce them in publications, advertisements, or on the web could be challenged. But eventually a decision needs to be made as to what level of comfort is necessary to move forward, because if one waits until there is 100% certainty, they will be waiting forever and the collection would simply be a hindrance and a resource drain. The gallery needed to move forward with capitalizing on the collection, both in terms of financial and intellectual capital.

Tangible results

What is the pay off from two years of hard and mostly volunteer work? The gallery successfully presented the first exhibition that draws exclusively on the works that are in the collection, continuing the process of showing its breadth and depth. This included a limited publication and about 35 works, which although small is something that is building another link in the chain of finding and developing advocates for the collection. In addition, the gallery is in the continuing process of deciding what works we do not want to keep and will begin a process of finding new homes for them, be it a museum or sales, the proceeds of which will be given to student scholarships, reinforcing the educational mission of the school of art.

Summary of steps

First is realizing that despite your best intentions, you have somehow ended up with a collection. Second is to figure out roughly what it is that you already have in your collection and to craft at least a temporary collections management policy so that going forward there is a control to what comes in and what goes out. Third is to set up the infrastructure in terms of space, technology and manpower to be able to catalog the collection. Fourth is to actually do the cataloging. Fifth is to use the collection in as many ways as possible!

And of course while undertaking all of these steps, constantly be bringing the collection and the effort that is being expended to everyone's attention in order to be finding new advocates and allies both inside and outside of the university as they are the ones who will be supporters when the value of work and collections is being questioned.

Contact

Kris Anderson

Director, Jacob Lawrence Gallery

Address: 132 Art Building, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, 98117, USA

Email: [ande1584\(at\)u.washington.edu](mailto:ande1584@u.washington.edu)

