RADICAL CHICK & TAYLOR MADE

by Jay E. Cantor

Accessibility. A modern mantra. It defines systems, institutions, professional situations, personal relationships and more. Accessibility is the word I find most often invoked by museums when they describe programmatic shifts as well as the physical restructuring of their facility. This issue has engendered the expenditure of vast sums of money to make outdated facilities appear modern, and of late, we have seen sparkling new buildings intended to ‘open the doors’ to institutions that, despite a 50-year history of a new audience awareness, can still appear remote and unwelcoming. Architects who may have produced a single thoughtful and acclaimed museum addition have become the masters of the craft of museum expansion and have more or less successfully, added new entranceways and gallery pavilions to numerous well-regarded institutions. These are characterized as increasing accessibility or elite institutions struggle, in the face of diminishing dollars, to enlarge their profile and appeal. While the novelty quickly wears off, and the fanfare dies down, the reality of increased overhead and maintenance issues remain in the wake of the headline. The museum as event is replaced by the recognition that the way the institution addresses its audience is, in the end, the ultimate key to accessibility.

Not surprisingly, the upshot in public awareness, beginning in the 1960s and stimulated by attention-grabbing activities of Tom Hoving at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Carter Brown at the National Gallery of Art, coincided with a host of new federal and state programs and local initiatives that provided both public funds and stimulated strategic positioning for these institutions. It was, in fact, just 50 years ago the National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities were created.

But the history of serious innovation in American art museums began earlier, most notably with two dynamic museum directors who brought significantly different qualities to their institutions and their directorships. A. Everett Austin, known as Chick, at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, and Francis Henry Taylor at the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts re-fashioned their well-established museums and initiated strategies still in place today throughout the American art museum world. This was a time when the mantle of museum management was passing from the grasp of self-perpetuating boards into the hands of trained professionals. Working in smaller and more nimble organizations, these men were able to put ideas in place that were difficult to achieve in more glacial institutions. Ultimately Taylor moved onto a larger playing field when he took over the Metropolitan Museum in 1940 and radically transformed it, but his philosophy had already been tested, lessons learned and ideas worked out in the smaller New England arena. Today, both the Wadsworth Atheneum and the Worcester Art Museum are engaged in the process of re-imagining themselves in a somewhat beleaguered economy and are achieving a significant transformation without new additions.

Chick Austin (1900-1957) can be considered as much an impresario as a conventional museum director. Although he could boast academic credibility, the concept of what a museum director actually is was still in the process of formulation when he arrived at the Wadsworth, at age 27 in 1927. The museum was and is the oldest continuously operating art museum in the country. It originated with the gift of a wealthy local citizen, Daniel Wadsworth, a major patron of contemporary American artists.

The Wadsworth was defined as an Athenaeum, and ultimately served multiple functions—an art gallery, an art school, a library, and societies for natural and local history, in three discrete sections of the Gothic Revival castle, which opened in 1844. The last of these sister organizations left the Wadsworth in 1964, allowing the museum to fully occupy the original building and its...
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Like many museums in America, the Wadsworth had grown largely through the gifts and bequests from local worthies, many of whom had newly arrived in the area of art collecting, as new industrial fortunes replaced those of the older mercantile establishment. Stymied by easier access to European travel, greater leisure and the desire to add cultural amenities to cities largely bereft of public institutions for enlightened leisure, this patron class endowed their local environments with lecture halls, opera houses and concert halls, libraries and museums, and motivated the creation of public parks and monuments, all considered the attributes of an enlightened metropolis. While the motives were largely philanthropic, many of the new cultural organizations readily turned into closed corporations. Art museums tended to mirror the tastes and interests of the patrons who sometimes became the amateur curators of the collections. Art history was a new discipline, and academic training, as well as the professional management of museums and other cultural organizations, were in their infancy. Museums were overseen by superintendents or managers, collections cared for by untrained amateurs (often collectors themselves) possessing comfortable incomes that allowed them to work for meager salaries that characterized the museum field well into the 20th century. The larger museums sometimes turned to Europe, with its deeper tradition of art historical study to find directors and curators.

At the Athenaeum, the founding collection was donated and bequeathed by Wadsworth, and significantly supplemented by the bequests of the widow of Samuel Colt and of J.P. Morgan (a Hartford native), each housed in memorial additions to the original museum building, gave strength and diversity to the collection, and provided Austin with the underpinnings for the museum he oversee during 17 years. Austin had been trained at Harvard University by Paul J. Sachs, whose innovative program in art museum directing, established in 1922, produced virtually all of the American art museum directors who flourished through much of the last half of the 20th century. From this training, Austin brought a grounding in scholarship and connoisseurship, but he was also determined to make the museum experience engaging, interesting and fun. Austin had a deep theatrical streak that regularly found expression in the art he embraced and in the programming of exhibitions and events at the museum, giving life to a hushed and reverential world.

When Austin and his bride, a member of the Goodwin family, who were related to and business partners of J.P. Morgan, built a house in a Hartford neighborhood, it was a mock Palladian villa, set amidst an area of Tudor mansions. The house appeared more a theatrical backdrop than a solid ancestral...
MY VIEW

A. Everett "Chick" Austin Jr., in 1937, the year he assumed the directorship of the Wadsworth Atheneum at age 27. Photo courtesy Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

international-style museum building, whose theater was regularly employed for staged productions, concerts, ballets and films, which Austin had begun showing in 1929.

Soon thereafter, he staged the first museum exhibition of surrealism and neo-romanticism. Artists as wide-ranging as Dali, Miró, Calder, Mondrian, Joseph Cornell, Max Ernst, and Cézanne were acquired by Austin for Hartford before any other American museum. And at the urging of Lincoln Kirstein, the Wadsworth sponsored the immigration to America of modern ballet master George Balanchine. Museum activities in Worcester paled by comparison with Austin's theatrical enterprises, although it too was energized by a new young director, Francis Henry Taylor (1903-1957), who came from a well-heeled Philadelphia family. Taylor's art history training consisted of a year at the Sorbonne studying medieval art under Henri Focillon, and a short stint in graduate school at Princeton before he was chosen to be a curator of medieval art by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1927.

Despite a rather comfortable background, on taking the reins at Worcester in 1933, Taylor immediately understood the role of the museum was to be "an institution of active public service, not simply a repository of art." While he didn't share Austin's enthusiasm for modern art, he acceded to energize his institution with programs and exhibitions that could be understood and thus enlighten the visitor. The result for the Worcester Art Museum, which had been founded in 1896 with the bequest of Stephen Salisbury III and had grown haltingly over the decades, was a new burst of energy and, yes, engagement and accessibility.

Its collections had grown without the singular impetus of significant bequests from well-positioned collectors, but industrial wealth helped to underpin the museum's evolution as a jewel box of selectively chosen works. Turning an elite institution into a popular retreat during the early years of the Depression took energy and ingenuity. Like Austin, Taylor turned to the popular medium of film to bring the public in, showing travelogues, documentaries and foreign films that were otherwise out of reach.

With a tradition of popular education and school programs for the region, Worcester was already facing in a good direction. The teaching mission of the museum continued as a major focus, and exhibitions were actually brought into the schools as a prelude to museum visits. Taylor looked boldly outward, even securing a grant from the Carnegie Corporation to create a program of art education for public and private schools across New England.

Teaching at a broader level also was a central focus of his collecting, which he did selectively covering wide-ranging periods and cultures. The galleries were complemented by departmental study rooms, and books were made available in the galleries for those with deeper interest.

To supplement its collections, thematic and historical special exhibitions were organized with loans from other museums, not simply to glorify Worcester's own holdings but to attract and inform a novice audience. Taylor expanded the reach of his ideas and innovations and his enthusiasm for a popular embrace of the rarefied museum world through articles in national magazines. (He even very early on wrote television, first widely seen by the public at the World's Fair of 1933, and its possible usefulness for museums and art education).

None of these seem surprising today, but in the 1930s, they were an astounding novelty. With these lessons learned and by now commonplace, what can the Wadsworth and Worcester do to enhance their scholarly position and their popular appeal?

Both cities have faced significant challenges in the last half century, as the flight of industry, the shrinking of capital and the disintegration of inner cities accompanied by population decline have all meant difficulty in both defining and attracting audience. Although the Wadsworth's collection numbers around 30,000 objects versus 38,000 at Worcester, their endowments and annual budgets are similar.

The Wadsworth has the benefit of a solid acquisitions endowment, which has enabled several recent significant purchases filling out their established collections' strength. Located in the state capital, it has the special advantage of governmental support, most recently manifested in the state's contribution of $25 million of the $33 million required for the necessary renovations just recently completed under the watchful eye of current director Susan Talbott. Although this was necessitated by a generation of deferred maintenance on its five buildings constructed over 125 years, with this renovation, the museum has re-dedicated itself to the elegant presentation of its wide-ranging collection. The suite of galleries has been restored to its historical grandeur, allowing larger objects to be displayed. Splendid decorative arts have been incorporated in the paintings galleries, and the sequence through the museum has been improved, thereby providing the visitor with a more engaging experience.

The display of the modern collections is simplified by an ongoing commitment to exhibiting contemporary art. In 1975, following Austin's lead, then-director James Elkins inaugurated a 19TH-CENTURY gallery with the first museum exhibitions for Ellsworth Kelly. More than 50 now-established contemporary artists can boast
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Worcester, a city more dependent on manufacturing, has experienced greater difficulty in economic recovery, but the museum, following in the imaginative footsteps of Francis Henry Taylor, has the visitor in its crosshairs. Exhibitions are considered first for the public and only then for peers. The director, Matthias Waschek, has been in place for a few years and has also confronted a building and additions that date back over 100 years. Along with his architects WHY, he has conceived of a treatment described as archaic puncture. Focusing on pressure points that become animating forces for the rest of the building and the institution at large, they have revised organic relationships in the building. New display strategies and lighting, hanging and juxtapositions, and more casual seating than the standard and unyielding wooden bench encourage the sense of retreat and belonging. Re-opening the front door and adding an imaginatively designed access ramp readily announces the museum's interest in accommodation. Waschek, with an eye toward openness and enhanced community relations, states the "priority is that of access—in the physical, aesthetic, intellectual and social senses."

The loss of industry benefitted the museum when it received the collection of the Higgins Armory Museum, assembled in the early 20th century by a prominent iron manufacturer. Not only is such material appealing to a younger audience, but the museum found innovative ways to display it, connecting its youthful audience through the inclusion of a figure of that modern's Design, Biennale in the display. It has encouraged a deeper understanding of this material and a contemporary connection by presenting an ancillary photography exhibition. After a Citrus (organized by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting) underscoring the presence of guns and violence to modern society. While some voices are silenced, the museum recognizes its responsibility to link with the present. In answer to its critics, one might suggest paintings of the Crucifixion and other subjects that focus on violence and war have been a constant theme engaging artists from the Middle Ages onward.

Installations such as Re-Mastered, A New Look at Old Masters and a gallery devoted to understanding conservation and changes in works of art have been enhanced with video presentations and supportive text cards. Waschek attempts to "slow the visitors down and encourage them to enjoy as many works of art as possible—to encourage comparative and self-guided viewing, without the need to "know."" Intuitive learning replaces note instruction.

The museum pursues its agenda as a cultural nexus for the community through creative programming and lively partnerships that include other cultural institutions and the 12 colleges and universities in town. Worcester's view extends beyond the local, reaching out to a regional audience as well as being a national resource.

Hartford resident, Mark Twain, on first visiting that city in 1868, commented: "Of all the beautiful towns it has been my fortune to see, this is the chief." Years later, Twain noted in a talk: "[Hartford] is more beautiful than any other city excepting Worcester." While he may have believed that, he was addressing a group of visitors from Worcester. Twain acknowledged his audience and understood how to capture their attention. In that regard, the Wadsworth Atheneum and the Worcester Art Museum are truly following in the great humorist's footsteps.