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FROM *BATHERS* TO BEACH TOWELS

Museums are raising much-needed revenue by expanding their retailing operations as never before. But is their merchandise pushing the boundaries of propriety and blurring the line between art and kitsch? **BY GAIL GREGG**

Television viewers who tuned in to QVC one evening last summer may have been surprised not to find the usual run of sweaters, cubic zirconia jewelry, and other staples of the direct-sales cable channel. Instead, hostess Judy Crowell and staff members of the Philadelphia Museum of Art treated viewers to a two-hour “tour” of the blockbuster Cézanne exhibition and offered armchair shoppers a range of products cut and pasted from images in the show—a \$136 framed reproduction that would “hang spectacularly in any room of your house” or a still-life-imprinted scarf so “versatile” that it could be worn as a belt.

For added effect, Cézanne’s great-grandson Philippe Paul Cézanne reminisced about his famous relative, though he had never known him. Curators spoke briefly about the artist, and viewers even got an occasional glimpse of an actual painting. But center stage was dominated by the red plastic apple-banded watches, the gold-plated jug pins, and the \$18.99 “mini-portfolios” manufactured especially for the broadcast.

While Philadelphia was the first museum to invite QVC to showcase products created for a specific exhibition, Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the Winterthur Museum in Delaware, and Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, have also used the channel to sell the thousands of products based on works in their collections. Starting with small stands selling books and postcards, museum merchandising operations have ballooned over the past two decades to include vast street-level retail shops, mail-order and wholesaling ventures, satellite stores in this country and abroad—and such mass-marketing opportunities as the QVC “Museum Tours.” Museum retailers even have their own trade organization, the Museum Store Association, based in Denver, Colorado.

As the folks in Philadelphia tell it, their QVC tour was less a

crass commercial venture than a way of introducing Cézanne to millions of Americans who might otherwise not see his work. “I think that Cézanne and our museum are attracting new audiences,” says Stuart Gerstein, director of wholesale and retail operations at the Philadelphia Museum. “The retail operations give these people something they can relate to and that they can take home.” It’s an argument that nonprofit institutions across the country use as they describe their burgeoning for-profit merchandising systems. They maintain that these ventures are a means of breaking down the stereotype of museums as “elitist” institutions; a way of financing publishing activities that advance scholarship but rarely break even; and of getting tasteful objects into the hands of ordinary Americans—long a mission of many cultural institutions.

Of course, there’s another reason: big bucks. Even as museums have been expanding or renovating at an unprecedented rate, contributions from two key sources—government and corporations—have been declining, forcing them to turn to new revenue sources to plug the gaps. Along with money from dining facilities and other “auxiliary” activities such as membership and special programs, merchandising operations are adding millions of dollars to their coffers each year.

“Museums have had to be very creative to be able to maintain their operating budgets and to serve the public in a quality way,” says Mimi Gaudieri, executive director of the Association of Art Museum Directors.

But the museums’ affiliation with QVC, as well as some of their other marketing strategies, has thrown into relief as never before long-standing concerns about the relationship between art and commerce, and between the values of the museum and those of the marketplace. Some people are voicing concern that in their eagerness to exploit this lucrative niche, museums are pushing the boundaries of propriety, even undercutting their trusteeship and educational missions by blurring the line between fine art and kitsch.



Museum merchandising is a lucrative niche that involves mail-order operations, satellite stores, and now the QVC "Museum Tours." Here, staff and technicians preparing and shooting a QVC broadcast at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and some of the items featured.



Marcia Tucker, director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, asks, "Is being turned into a T-shirt or shopping bag an appropriate use for a historical work of art? It runs counter to the artist's intent."

MERCHANDISING'S GROWING APPEAL CAN BE TRACKED IN A single institution: the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1976 product sales generated about \$8.5 million, roughly 40 percent of its total earned income of \$25 million. A decade later, that figure was \$38 million, or 40 percent of \$94 million realized in earned income. By 1995 that figure had jumped again as the museum grossed nearly \$90 million from its merchandising activities, now about 45 percent of its total gross income of \$192 million.

Like so much else at the modern Met, the upward spiral in merchandising began under Thomas P. F. Hoving, director from 1967 to 1977. He moved the lobby gift stand to a more accommodating 800-square-foot space at the back of the Great Hall. Hoving also introduced satellite shops in selected galleries around the museum.

In the early 1980s, under the directorship of Philippe de Montebello, Hoving's successor, the shop more than doubled in size. By capturing a gigantic unused heating shaft as part of

its floorplan, the museum dramatically extended the shop, adding second and third selling floors. A 1991 expansion into what had been an adjacent staff cafeteria brought the store's total square footage to 16,000.

Of course, that's only part of the story. Not only does the shop now sell some 20,000 different items, including books, ties, sculpture, jewelry, original prints, rugs, and toys, but there are also an additional ten "remote desks" around the museum selling products relating to the permanent collection as well as sales areas at the end of special exhibitions.

In December 1987 the Met opened its first off-site shop in a Stamford, Connecticut, shopping mall and now operates a total of 15 stores in such cities as Pasadena, Atlanta, Denver, and Houston, and another 22 overseas. The museum's huge mail-order operation reaches into millions of homes around the country. And last October the Met swallowed any lingering concerns about commercialism and became the subject of one of QVC's monthly "Museum Tours."

The Met may be the granddaddy of all museum merchandising operations, but it has spawned many imitators. The Museum of Modern Art in New York does not have gift shops within its galleries, having located its bookshop near the ground-floor entrance, with a separate Design Store across the street. But the relatively modest size of these two outlets belies the reality of the Modern's merchandising operations. A wholesale business contributed 12 percent to the museum's total 1995 merchandising revenues of \$20.5 million. Mail-order sales brought in 25 percent of that total.

At the Smithsonian, which consists of 16 separate museums and the National Zoo, about half of the \$60 million in sales for the 1995-96 fiscal year came from its mail-order business; the Smithsonian Institution Press added another \$18 million to

museum revenues during that same period. Two years ago, the Smithsonian opened its first satellite shop at the Baltimore-Washington Airport. And when National Airport reopens in July after extensive renovation, the Smithsonian will be there too.

Most museums decline to reveal the income realized from wholesale operations. But they have become regular fixtures at trade shows, both here and abroad, where buyers come to stock their gift and paper-goods stores with new merchandise. Stephanie Levinson, director of the Museum of Modern Art's wholesale department, says she takes her merchandise to all the major shows, including the annual museum show scheduled for next month in Chicago. Her customers tend to be mom-and-pop stationery stores and department stores; other museums account for 25 percent of her business.

In France, where the government still provides generous funding for cultural institutions, the Louvre installed a shopping mall in the basement of its new I. M. Pei-designed makeover, where visitors can patronize The Gap, Virgin Records, Lalique—even a Met branch store. “They used to accuse us of being too commercial,” remembers William Luers, president of the Met, sardonically. Even the Vatican has entered this bustling museum marketplace. It has begun marketing books, ties, and jewelry based on the work of Renaissance masters in its collections through a network of Catholic schools in the United States.

You don't even have to be affiliated with a museum anymore to sell art-related objects. The Museum Company was cofounded in 1989 by William Edwards, who had been deputy director for auxiliary activities at the Museum of Modern Art. It operates 76 stores around the country and licenses another 9 in Asia; 1995 sales totaled about \$1 million per store. Edwards worries that the Museum Company has earned some resentment from museums who believe it is encroaching on their territory—a charge he denies: By selling “museum-y” products and products licensed from museums, “we've allowed them to make their museums better known and to generate revenue they would never have been able to generate otherwise,” he says.

But the stakes are clearly high. Edwards maintains that the Museum Company was chased away from a prime Chicago shopping-center site when the Art Institute of Chicago, which brings in \$18.4 million a year from its merchandising operation, decided it wanted the location. Edwards believes that a museum trustee urged the mall developer to reject the contract. The Art Institute would not confirm or deny the allegation, saying only that “it's possible that the Museum Company was interested in the same site” at Oakbrook Shopping Center, where the Art Institute opened its first “remote” shop in 1991.

AS MUSEUMS' MERCHANDISING HAS EXPANDED, THEIR RETAILING approaches have flourished. Unlike the Met, which produces only items linked to its collection or a special exhibition, the Museum of Modern Art works with contemporary designers to develop original products such as its line of Christmas cards. The same is true of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which runs a \$6-million-a-year retail operation. Moreover, the museum shrewdly situated the entrance to its 2,000-square-foot store directly on the street, so shoppers could enter it independently. “It's become something of a destination outside of the museum,” says retail and wholesale director Irma Zigas.



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

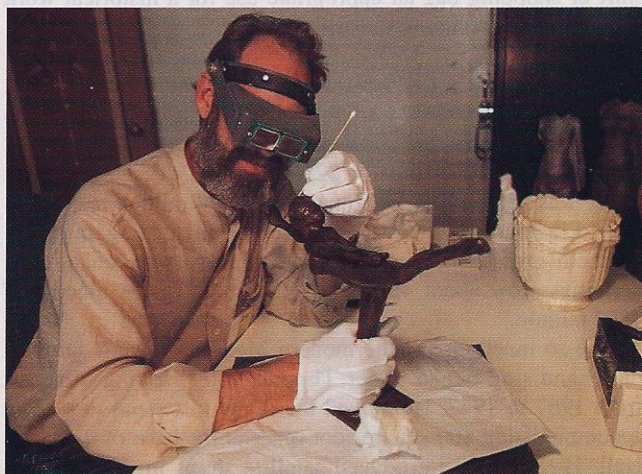
And for its “Mexican Modernism” show last fall, Miami's new Museum of Contemporary Art sold original, indigenous Mexican artwork in the museum store. According to chief curator Bonnie Clearwater, the Mexican bazaar was so successful it nearly sold out on opening night.

Winterthur has found its primary merchandising opportunities in yet another area: licensing. Like the Met, it has a collection that lends itself to reproduction. According to Catherine Maxwell, general manager of the museum's licensed-products division, more than 40 companies pay royalties to reproduce carefully selected and monitored originals.

Watching all this is the Internal Revenue Service. To qualify for an income-tax exemption, institutions must prove an “educational” link between the products they sell and their collections, one reason, perhaps, that the Met is careful to note that it plows its profits—“about 10 percent” of revenue or \$9 million, says John T. Curran, the museum's vice-president for merchandising activities—into its education budget. It is also why mail-order catalogues state that the products are “inspired” by an object in the museum. But while some museums include everything from curatorial time to janitorial supplies in the cost of a product, others only take into account direct expenses, making it hard to compare profit figures among museums.

THE CÉZANNE SHOW GROSSED OVER \$7 MILLION FROM GIFT-SHOP sales and QVC products, revenues the Philadelphia Museum applied to the cost of mounting the huge retrospective. But the Cézanne shop, positioned at the end of the show, startled visitors with its brash mix of educational material—catalogues, books, a video biography, and a CD-ROM—and highly commercial products such as skull belt-buckles, Day-Glo “Cézanne” baseballs, shower curtains, beach towels printed with the artist's *Bathers*, and dessert plates. “It turned the man's entire life-work into a tease to get people to spend money in the shop,” said one offended artist, who asked not to be identified.

When an artist is dead, there is little to prevent a museum from indulging its wildest commercial fantasies. Cézanne's family no longer holds the copyright to his images—though it does to his name. But Lawrence Cutler, a Manhattan attorney



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Ron Streets, master reproduction artist for the Met, working on a replica of one of Degas's ballerina sculptures. Top Interior of the Met's shop in Stamford, Connecticut. Such satellite stores are now commonplace.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT A Cézanne puzzle in a wine bottle; a CD-ROM set for children that includes two disks and a Cézanne doll; a Day-Glo baseball imprinted with the artist's signature, all sold during last year's Cézanne retrospective.

COURTESY PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART (3)

and art dealer who represents the Cézanne family's licensing interests, says it still exercises its "droit moral," a European concept that allows an artist or his estate to protect his reputation by ensuring that his images aren't distorted, desecrated, or parodied. In the case of the Philadelphia exhibition, according to Cutler, the family chose not to comment on the products, partly "out of respect" for the hard work that went into mounting the show. But Cutler says that great-grandson Philippe Paul Cézanne, who is developing his own line of Cézanne fragrances and pens, was offended by the Day-Glo baseball, declining an invitation to throw one out at the Philadelphia All-Star Game last July 4th. (This was done instead by Sandra Horrocks, of the Philadelphia Museum's public-relations office.)

Living artists have a little more clout. Copyright law gives them control over their work for their lifetime, and to their heirs for 50 years after the artist's death. According to Kara Orr, a product developer at the Museum of Modern Art, Jasper Johns approved only a limited number of items, primarily printed reproductions, to be sold during his recent retrospective. And a few months prior to the show, Johns insisted that the museum pull a jigsaw puzzle of his 1954-55 *Flag* from its shelves that it had produced without his permission.

At many museums, products like the Cézanne baseball could not have been developed. The Met, for instance, has strict guidelines prohibiting "wrapping a painting of Monet around a mug" or other such uses of an image, according to Luers. "We stick to the high end," he says. "A lot of other museums are going downstream, because that's where the money is."

The Met has its own reproduction facilities with a master mold-maker, Ron Streets, who sculpts replicas that can't be directly cast from an object. His boss, Dick Stevens, is charged with developing new glass, ceramic, metal, and sculpture items for the product line twice a year. Stephens works with curators to identify potential products; Streets and the curators

perfect the prototypes that finally go to the manufacturers. "They can be pretty demanding," Streets says of the curators. He once remodeled the nose on a pair of Assyrian Winged Guardian bookends 18 times before the curator signed off.

But John Koegel, a New York attorney who represents artists and artists' estates, is suspicious about how much power museum curatorial staffs really wield over product development. "All you have to do is go to one of those trade shows to see what kind of schlock is out there," says Koegel. "[Museum executives] view the shop as income for the museum. It does not have one fraction of one percent to do with the artist's work."

MUSEUMS HAVE DISCOVERED THE POTS OF GOLD THAT LONG had lain unopened in their backyards—and they're exploiting them with an uncuratorial abandon. "One sees a sort of desperation to put anything out there," observes Brad Kelleher, who developed the Met's retail operations under Hoving and who continues to work at the museum as a consultant. "Some of the things that are developed have a market—but it's a market that should be on the sidewalk, not in the museum."

Confront many museum executives on this subject and they will cry "elitism." One anonymous museum president said, "You [people] want the museums to be like they used to be—empty, except for a few people who already know about art and want to contemplate the work in silence." Philadelphia's Gerstein agrees: "There is a very small group of people who feel negative about the [Cézanne] merchandise. In general they're elitists who don't want art out there for the public."

But the New Museum's Tucker thinks there's more to the issue than that. "It is important to be as sensitive to the artist of the past as to the contemporary artist, not to misrepresent the past, not to turn the past to purely commercial ends." ■

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