

THE MET'S SACKLER ENCLAVE

Public boon or private preserve?

The attorney general's investigation into a storage area
at the Metropolitan Museum of Art
renews the debate over
private privilege vs. public interest

by LEE ROSENBAUM

The New York State Attorney General's office has launched an investigation into a storage area at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—the Sackler enclave—to determine whether its functions constitute an improper use of the museum's space and resources. Since 1966, the 600-square-foot enclave has been used to house part of the immense Chinese art collection of psychiatrist/publisher Arthur Sackler—a collection described by Wen Fong, head of the museum's Far Eastern art department, as “the largest private collection of ancient Far Eastern material in the world.” The Met's own collection of such material, according to Fong, is very weak. Interviews with Met officials indicate that the enclave owes its existence, in large part, to the Met's hope of eventually receiving as a gift from Sackler some or all of the objects in the enclave. These would be installed in the museum's new Sackler Wing, housing the Temple of Dendur, which opens later this month.

Many of the most important objects in Sackler's collection are currently stored in the enclave—pieces which the Met hopes eventually to include in an exhibition or permanent installation of highlights from his collection. Among the objects, according to Fong, are archaic bronzes dating from about 1500 B.C. to the time of Christ, jades from the same period and from the 8th to 18th centuries A.D., ceramics from about 1500 B.C. to 800 A.D. and large ritual vessels, weapons and mirrors from the archaic period. The objects now housed in the enclave (including many small jade pieces) are said to number between 3,000 and 5,000 and are worth several million dollars.

The attorney general's inquiry was launched as a result of information uncovered by Sol Chaneles, chairman of the Department of Criminal Justice, University College, Rutgers University, who was working on assignment from *ARTnews*. Neither the Met nor the attorney general's office would provide much information on

the issues raised by the investigation, which is still pending at this writing.

The museum's top officials—Philippe de Montebello, director; William Macomber, president; and Douglas Dillon, chairman—all referred inquiries about the enclave to Penelope Bardel, assistant secretary and associate counsel of the Met, who said that “it's not appropriate for people being investigated to talk about the subject of the investigation.” Nevertheless, comments by Met and enclave staff members interviewed by *ARTnews* indicate that the main issue raised by the investigation is whether a museum can properly devote

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of his
multimillion dollar
art collection.**

space to an individual's private collection and staff (and pay for certain basic operating expenses of that space, such as the cost of heat and electricity) without betraying its public purpose.

According to Bardel, the Sackler enclave was established during the administration of former Met director James Rorimer because of the museum's need to accommodate Sackler's many oriental art objects on loan to the museum. She added that Sackler and Rorimer had “a close personal relationship.” Interviews with Met officials also indicate that they have acceded to this unusual arrangement (and are worried about attempts to disrupt it) because they hope that Sackler will eventually give the museum some or all of his collection. One Met offi-

cial, who requested anonymity, suggested that the attorney general's investigation might paradoxically help the museum by impelling Sackler to make up his mind about the ultimate disposition of his collection. Conceding that the enclave is “an exceptional situation” because it is run by Sackler's staff rather than the Met, the official suggested that “perhaps the outside interest will help to straighten it out without doing damage to our hope of keeping a hold on the material. We would be in sad shape if we lost it.”

Bardel maintains that the enclave “is not a space for the private use of a private individual. We examine, borrow, exhibit and occasionally get gifts from the collection.” But its operations, while housed and partially supported by the Met, are run by Sackler's personal curator, Lois Katz (formerly associate curator at the Brooklyn Museum), who is paid by Sackler and is responsible to him rather than to the Met's officials. Katz told *ARTnews* that the objects in the collection are “all at the disposal of the Met,” but although some of them are officially on loan to the museum, others are strictly Sackler's own property. To gain access to objects in the enclave, scholars and others must obtain permission from Sackler's staff rather than the Met's staff; to exhibit objects, the Met's staff must first obtain Sackler's permission. While it appears, from all accounts, that Sackler and his staff have always cooperated with the Met's staff and outside scholars, the attorney general's office is questioning whether the Met can properly store objects which are neither gifts nor loans to the museum, and which are subject to conditions and procedures that do not pertain to other objects in storage.

Sackler pays for most of the enclave's expenses: in addition to paying the salaries of its staff (Katz and her secretary), he gives financial support for the care of the collection and various office expenses, such as phone bills. It could not be determined how much money he has given. He pays no rent for the space and gets certain free benefits, such as utilities and the security of the Met's building. He also gets an intangible benefit:

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the prestige which the Met's name may confer on the objects he houses there. However, Katz pointed out that while Sackler receives these benefits from the Met, the museum also benefits from its association with Sackler through his donations of art and money. "I assume that we more than pay our way," she said, alluding to these donations. As for enhancing the prestige of Sackler's collection through its association with the Met, she indicated that this would not be exploited by Sackler for his personal financial benefit. "Dr. Sackler," she said, "does not sell works of art."

In addition to paying Katz's salary, Sackler, through the Sackler Foundation, pays the Met salary of Paul Singer, a "research fellow-consultant" in the museum's Far Eastern art department. Singer was appointed to the staff in 1972 after Sackler offered, in a letter to Wen Fong, to "undertake a subvention to support the participation of a scholar to help in the preparation of a catalogue for the exhibition" of Sackler-owned works, which was to be called "Masterpieces of Ancient Chinese Art from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections." Singer, whose selection for the job, according to the terms of the letter, was subject to Sackler's approval, is a physician, Chinese art expert and collector, as well as a friend of Sackler.

According to Wen Fong, Singer's credentials as an expert in oriental art are impressive. An exhibition of "Relics of Ancient China from the Collection of Dr. Paul Singer" was mounted at Asia House in New York in 1965, with a catalogue by Max Loehr, the distinguished professor emeritus of oriental art at Harvard. Singer himself guest-curated two shows at the China Institute in New York: "Early Chinese Gold and Silver" in 1971 and "Early Chinese Miniatures" in 1977. His collection now includes some 2,700 objects.

In an interview Singer said that he has long since completed the job for which the Met hired him—production of the manuscript for the Sackler catalogue—and he conceded that although he is still on the Met's staff he now performs few functions there. The publication of the catalogue and the mounting of the exhibition have been delayed indefinitely, he said, because Sackler continues to buy more works for his collection and feels that these should be included in the show and catalogue (which already covers more than 950 objects). Another reason for the delay, he said, is Sackler's indecision about the fate of his collection. The Met, according to Singer, would like the material from the show to be "on permanent loan or given to them in perpetuity. Sackler is not ready to decide on this, and I'm caught in the middle." He added that Sackler would like the exhibition to travel to other museums around the world rather than remain on permanent display at the Met.

Sackler, when contacted by *ARTnews*, refused to make any on-the-record comments about the enclave or his relationship

with the Met. His distaste for publicity was described in a 1975 article in the *Tulsa (Okla.) World*, which quoted him as saying that he has "one of those things about the importance of privacy." Because of this, according to the article, "Dr. Sackler's gifts to society are, at his insistence, done without any fanfare. He likes it that way and further insists upon it." Written on the occasion of an art opening in Tulsa attended by Sackler, the article described his "as-

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tonishment when he realized that he was in the midst of an interview," and quoted him as saying, "Good heavens, I hope the New York and London papers don't read the *Tulsa World*."

According to Singer, Sackler, 65, is a psychiatrist interested in the biological causes of mental illness and is also a medical publisher and author of a medical column. *Who's Who in America* lists him as board chairman, Medical Press, Inc.; president, Physicians News Service and Medical Radio and TV Institute; international publisher, Medical Tribune Newspapers; former member of the advisory council of Columbia University's art history and archeology department; chairman of the World Health Organization's international task force on world health manpower; and co-founder of the Sackler School of Medicine in Tel Aviv. He also endowed Sackler galleries at the Met and the Princeton University Museum. His art activities, according to Wen Fong, include loans and exhibitions at Princeton (where Fong is professor of art and archeology), Columbia and the Fogg Museum at Harvard. In 1973 at Princeton, Fong organized an exhibition, "Studies in Connoisseurship: Chinese Paintings from the Arthur M. Sackler Collection in New York and Princeton," still touring the country, which includes works from Sackler's private collection as well as works purchased for the collections of the Met and Princeton with money donated by Sackler. The catalogue for the show, as well as costs of mounting it at the Met, were paid by Sackler, according to Fong.

Sackler was also associated with the Museum of the American Indian in New York, where his wife was formerly a trustee, and where he stored a portion of his pre-Columbian art collection in a room set

aside for that purpose. In this context he was named as a defendant in a 1975 suit by the New York State Attorney General's office, which charged the museum's director and trustees of "violation of fiduciary responsibilities" in allowing "surreptitious and wasteful exchange transactions" of objects from the museum's collection. The only defendants in the suit who were not museum officials were Sackler and Dick Cavett, the television personality. Cavett, according to the attorney general's complaint, received "unique and irreplaceable" objects from the museum in transactions which were allegedly "unauthorized, improvident and illegal." (He has since returned the objects.)

As for Sackler, the attorney general alleged that "the Director [of the museum] has testified that a certain portion of the Museum's basement is used for storage of artifacts allegedly owned by Arthur and/or Marietta Sackler. The artifacts, according to the Director, are to serve as security for a debt owed to the Museum by Dr. Sackler. It is essential that these items are not removed from the Museum until title to them can be determined." The attorney general's complaint did not specify the amount of the alleged debt, but indicated that the museum had no record of receiving payments from Sackler for objects obtained by him from the museum. Sackler denied any wrongdoing in these matters, and the suit is still pending.

Among Sackler's benefactions to the Met is a promised \$3.5-million gift (to be paid over a 20-year period) from him and his two brothers, Raymond and Mortimer Sackler, for construction of the Met's new Sackler Wing, which houses the Temple of Dendur. The temple, one of the Egyptian monuments that would have been flooded in the lake created by the Aswan High Dam, was a gift from Egypt to the United States in recognition of our country's help in saving these monuments. Opening September 27, the new wing includes office and storage space for the Far Eastern art department, a Center for Far Eastern Studies and exhibition space which will at first be used for the Tutankhamun show and other temporary exhibitions, but which, according to Fong, will eventually become permanent gallery space for the Far Eastern department. If the Met had its wish, according to Fong, this space would be devoted to a permanent exhibition of works from Sackler's collection. But this depends on a favorable decision from Sackler, who has already expressed concern that the Met's space is not big enough for his encyclopedic holdings. According to Singer, Sackler has indicated interest in establishing a "Sackler Museum" for his collection, possibly in connection with the Smithsonian Institution (in the manner of Joseph Hirshhorn) or as a new addition to the Fogg Museum in Cambridge, Mass. He is also, according to Singer, thinking of giving some of his collection to Israel. If any of these ideas become more than dreams, the Met may never reap the benefits which it anticipated in nurturing Sackler and his enclave for the last 12 years. ■