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 highpoints 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 Chanels, 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 Bartel, 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 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 Bartel, the Sackler enclave was established during the administration of former Met director James Rominer because of the museum’s need to accommodate Sackler’s many oriental art objects on loan to the museum. She added that Sackler and Rominer 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 official, who requested anonymity, suggested that the attorney general’s investigation might paradoxically help the museum by compelling 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.”

Bartel 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.
Can a museum devote space to an individual’s private collection and staff without betraying its public purpose?

In 1975, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) received a significant donation from the estate of Dr. Arthur Sackler, a pharmaceutical company founder. This donation included a vast collection of Chinese and Korean art, which became the basis for the Sackler Wing of the museum. However, the museum’s decision to house this collection in a separate wing sparked controversy and raised questions about the nature of museum ethics and the role of private collections.

Arthur Sackler was a prominent figure in the pharmaceutical industry and was known for his philanthropic efforts. His donation to the Met was celebrated for its cultural significance, but it also raised questions about the museum’s role and its obligations.

Art historian and museum director John Walsh, in an article for ARTnews, raised concerns about the implications of this decision. He highlighted the potential for museums to become more focused on private collections, which could detract from their traditional mission of representing a broad, public interest.

The article also discussed the ethical considerations involved in housing private collections, noting that while Sackler’s collection was valuable and unique, it also represented a private view of world art history. The article questioned whether the museum’s mission was evolving to accommodate private interests at the expense of its public mission.

The controversy surrounding the Sackler Wing highlighted the complexities of museum governance and the challenges faced by institutions in balancing their public and private roles.

---

*The article was published in ARTnews, September 1978.*