CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

CHANGE IN THE AMERICAN ART MUSEUM: 
THE (AN) ART HISTORIAN’S VOICE

I was asked to participate in this challenging program largely as a result of a conversation with John Walsh, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum and president of the AAMD in 1989–90, in which I described some of the recent directions of my own scholarship, as well as concerns that I felt had contributed to my having been named to the Search Committee for a new director of the Harvard University Art Museums. The question I was asked to address was: What does the current breed of art historian want from the art museum, and how does that intersect with some of the other issues before the museum today? In other words, how do recent and continuing changes in the discipline of the history of art translate into challenges for the museum in an age of ethnic, cultural, and theoretical diversity?

I will not attempt to speak for the entire field of art historians, but rather for myself—a scholar of the art of the ancient Near East, an area perhaps less central to the discipline than some. Still, the ancient Near East can claim not only the first “art collector” documented in history (in the person of an Elamite ruler, who carried off to his capital in Susa large numbers of Mesopotamian monuments, including the famous Law Code of Hammurabi now in the Louvre); but also the first “museum director” in history (a Babylonian king, who, with his daughter as chief curator, purposively gathered and displayed works of the ancients).

While I imagine that the targets of concern I flag here are shared across many subfields in the history of art, some will be more of an issue within certain fields than in others. It is certainly easier to isolate

areas of concern than it is to come up with a series of specific propositions for change in the art museum; but in most instances, responsiveness to those concerns will necessitate change—both in policy and in practice.

I would begin by stressing that a number of the oppositional stereotypes permeating art-related fields, such as “museum curators versus academics” and “connoisseurs versus social historians,” are applied in reductive, simplistic, and in the end counterproductive ways. One of the more difficult public talks I have had to prepare in my professional life was on “The Nimrud Ivories” at Harvard University in the spring of 1983. I imagined Sidney Freedberg on one side of the room (the right, of course) and T. J. Clark on the other, arch-paradigms of the object-oriented connoisseur and the context-oriented social historian. Given my perceived gap between the two, the problem was how to hold both with my predominantly archaeological material. I pulled a copy of Freedberg’s Italian painting catalogue, *Circa 1600*, and Clark’s Courbet book, *Image of the People*, finding in fact that there was a considerable degree of social and historical context in the former and an equally considerable degree of careful visual analysis in the latter. It was indeed secondary consumers in the field who had polarized the two, and we were all the poorer therefor. Different legitimate scholarly problems will call forth different approaches and degrees of focus on the object and/or its context. I am persuaded that we do damage by perpetuating false dichotomies and then assuming the alliance of the museum with the “connoisseur,” to the exclusion of the “historian.” And yet, to some degree there are fundamental differences between the museum and the academy. More often than not, it is the history that is left out of the art history in the museum exhibition space, with its focus on the object. I will return to that as a major issue below.

This is clearly a period when the very premises upon which the great art museums were built and continue to function are in question. I cite only one manifestation of the dilemma: a recent issue of *Art International* (vol. 10 [Spring 1990]), in which an article entitled “Art Is Everywhere Except in Museums” is followed by one titled “Museums Have Never Been More Central to Culture.” It is clearly a fruitful time to raise issues of concern to the art historian and to work toward common goals. In pursuit of my charge, then, to isolate areas of concern that pose challenges to the art museum of the 1990s, I will focus on three main issues: (1) acquisition policies; (2) exhibitions—choice and design; and (3) relationship to targeted audiences.