

THEY'RE CRASS, CROWDED AND COSTLY -- BUT HOW BETTER TO EXPOSE GREAT WORKS TO SO MANY?

By Thomas Hoving

I am an art elitist. I hate the crowds that come with blockbuster exhibitions, the inflated admission prices and those things you stick in your ear for the platitudinous canned tour.

But Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight was way off when he recently slammed art exhibition "blockbusters" (an old movie term to describe crowds that go around the block.) He called the King Tut blockbuster exhibition currently on display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art "smarmy."

As the former director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, I have been called the inventor of the art BB, and I guess I am. And I think to determine whether blockbusters are injurious to public health -- "pop-culture consumerism . . . trotted out as artistic populism," as Knight puts it -- or whether they are, in fact, highly beneficial to public education, a quickie history of the beast might help.

My first BB was launched in 1968 when Florence sent the Met dozens of beautiful medieval and Renaissance frescoes that had been removed from the walls after the disastrous flood of 1966. For this exhibit, we got our first corporate sponsor, Olivetti, which agreed to pay for the entire show. We took out ads in local newspapers for the first time in history -- "You'll never see the likes of them again," said one.

There was a near-riot in attendance the day after someone at a TV network hit the wrong feed button during the Super Bowl and our public service ad mistakenly aired. That drew an extra 20,000 people to the show, we estimated, bringing total attendance to 100,000.

It was only then that I fully realized that one of the prime missions of any great American art museum is to bring grand and unique works to our country -- works that would be difficult or impossible for people to see even if they traveled abroad -- and to make sure they were seen by the largest number of people possible. And to do that right, I realized, it was vital that we market those shows in the most vigorous and professional way.

We enhanced the idea of the blockbuster in the giant exhibitions during the Metropolitan's centennial in 1970 by arranging scholarly seminars for experts who came to the exhibit. The seminars were later published and the visiting experts told us that scholarship was incomparably boosted by blockbusters as a result. Seminars are standard operations today.

The last of the centennial shows was supposed to be made up of loans from the world's finest museums -- modest things such as the "Mona Lisa" and Rembrandt's "Night Watch." But it never happened, because the insurance was not affordable.

I was fuming to my staff about how I wished the United States would follow the lead of Britain, whose art indemnity law required that the government pick up the cost of the insurance, when a new member of my staff remarked that the U.S. State Department did indemnify certain private businesses for up to 90 percent of the value. Our initial inquiries led directly to passage of the Arts and Artifacts Indemnity Act of 1975, which now indemnifies foreign art shows up to \$500 million in value. Without this, Tut would never have hit these shores.

Once indemnified, we were able to mount the spectacular Scythian Gold show from Russia, and for the first time we developed a fine product line, including some stunning jewelry. We dared to make solid gold replicas of pieces in the exhibition, with a price tag of \$3,500, and were astonished to find that the expensive items sold better than the tchotchkes.

Then came Tut 1976, dreamed up by President Nixon to show that we Americans had bested the Soviets in Egypt. I was asked to organize the extravaganza. What few people know is that the first show was designed to raise money to help Egypt fix up the decrepit Egyptian Museum. Because several museums on the tour were not planning to charge admission, my pitch to the Egyptians was that we publish a grand catalog and make a fabulous product line of replicas and jewelry from which Egypt would receive all the profits for the run of the show. (Egypt made about \$7 million, but that money has vanished, at least according to Zahi Hawass, Egypt's chief of antiquities, who said recently that "Egypt got nothing.")

And 8 million people came to the show.

Yes, it's true that these shows can be a little crass. And of course none of us likes commercialization. And, yes, it would certainly be nice if we could all sit around in our villas and look at the world's greatest art on our own walls.

But the reality is that these blockbuster exhibits have brought real, rare and beautiful works of art to millions who otherwise wouldn't have seen them, at a cost they can afford and in a way that is both respectful and savvy. If that comes at a cost of a few trinkets and slightly higher ticket prices and a little crowding, so what?

To those who think that \$30 is too expensive to see incomparable works of precious ancient art, think of how much it would cost to take your family to Cairo for a long weekend.

THOMAS HOVING former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is the author of "Tutankhamun: The Untold Story." He wrote this article for the Los Angeles Times.

http://www.mercurynews.com/mlid/mercurynews/news/editorial/12099543.htm?template=c... 2/9/2006