

AMM/MAM Conference
Director's Breakfast Keynote Presentation
July 28, 2016
Ford W. Bell, DVM

I am very grateful for the invitation to be with you today. I have to admit that it feels very good to be able to participate in a museum conference once again, after a hiatus of more than a year. When you invite someone like me, of course, you run the risk of hearing something you've already heard, especially if I were to dust off an old speech for the occasion. But I won't do that.

As you all know well, museums depend on the generosity of donors – foundations, corporations and individuals – and this community, the Twin Cities, has an incredible record of philanthropic support for arts and culture, as is evidenced by our two world-class art museums, this one and the Walker Art Center, just up the road a ways. We also have an outstanding university art museum, the Weisman Art Museum. Minnesota boasts the largest state historical society in the country, which I hope you will see while you're here, either the Minnesota History Museum in Saint Paul or its offshoot, the innovative Mill City Museum here in Minneapolis. And, we have an outstanding science and technology museum, the Science Museum of Minnesota, two excellent zoos, and a spectacular Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, situated on 1,200 acres, just outside of Minneapolis.

This institution, Mia, was fortunate to benefit from the generous support of Bruce Dayton, a member of the family that founded Target. Bruce and his wife, Ruth, made significant additions to Mia's already impressive China collection. Bruce was a trustee of Mia for an astounding 73 years, until his death last November. No individual has had a greater impact on this museum than Bruce Dayton.

In the 1940's, the Dayton family decided that their business, then Dayton's Department Store, would give 5% of pre-tax profits to charitable causes in the community. To this day, the successor company, Target, continues to donate 5% of its pre-tax profits to charity. That commitment spurred many other companies in the Twin Cities to make similar

commitments, allowing this community to develop outstanding cultural, educational, social service and medical institutions. As you walk around this museum, which I certainly hope you have a chance to do, you will see everywhere the impact that generous, far-sighted and committed donors and trustees have had on this great museum.

But there are always challenges in fundraising, even here, in our Northern nirvana. I have been peripherally involved with the building of our new University of Minnesota natural history museum here in the Twin Cities, the museum that is named for my grandfather. The lead fundraiser for the effort has been kind enough to give me periodic reports on her fundraising progress, no small undertaking, especially as the museum is currently under construction. In our conversations, she has related to me her approaches to corporate foundations here in the Twin Cities, at least a couple of which indicated that any grant would come out of the foundation's "arts and culture" category, one that generally offers smaller grant opportunities than the educational grants category. When she pressed to be considered in their educational giving program, she was assured that, no, museums are arts and culture, not education.

Really? Actually, I'm not surprised, because I have run across this dichotomy before in my career: education is on this side of the line, arts and culture is on that side of the line, and never the twain shall meet. But the separation of arts and culture from education is irrational and artificial.

Okay, so museums are indeed arts and culture. But what is arts and culture? Why do we value arts and culture? What do arts and culture do for us in the high speed, high tech, high spending 21st century?

Let's start with Barbara Prey, an artist and member of the National Council on the Arts. She quotes Steve Jobs, who said, back in 2010, while introducing the iPad, "It's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough. It's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields the results that make our hearts sing." She also notes Albert Einstein's affinity for the arts, pointing out that, and I quote, "Throughout history, our greatest inventors and scientists have merged scientific

knowledge and discovery with artistic creativity. For example Albert Einstein studied piano and violin as a child and, when he was an adult, music helped him think things through.” Einstein understood that the creative impulse draws on many different parts of the brain to help us create imaginative solutions to complex problems, and also, by the way, to create great art. Einstein, a violinist throughout his life, also said, and I quote, “I’m enough of an artist to draw freely on my imagination, which I think is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.” What Einstein is saying is that the creative mind does not segregate creativity: it integrates it.

When I was in Washington, a member of Congress said to me, “Museums are great, arts and culture is great, but we just have so many other priorities.” Of course, that is a ridiculous statement. We have no greater priority than the ability to develop the creative, inquisitive, multidimensional minds that will help our country compete, and succeed, in the 21st century.

Here’s a different aspect to our challenges in the museum field. I have been struggling with my blood pressure since I saw the New York Times commentary, on July 24, by Ben Davis, art critic for artNet News. The title of the column was actually, *How Donors Hurt Museums*. That sounded serious, so I waded into it immediately to learn more about this unexpected threat. The opening sentence of the piece said it all, “The recent announcement of a wrenching round of layoffs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York sent a *shiver* (emphasis added) through the museum world.”

I just want to conduct a little non-scientific poll here: How many of you “shivered” when you heard that news? Anybody quake? Did anybody feel the need to seek medical care?

Mr. Davis goes on to say that AAMD has reported that American museums spend \$55 dollars for every \$8 that visitors spend. “So running a museum isn’t a great business, despite the crowds.” Wow. That’s profound. Did any of you have a clue that museums aren’t great businesses? Isn’t that why we call them non-profits?

The title of the New York Times article, and the comment in Mr. Davis' opening sentence – about that shiver through the museum world – reduced the many to the few. Few art museums in our country can actually be included in the statistic that he quoted about \$5 billion being spent on museum expansions from 2007 to 2014. That \$5 billion represents expenditures by a tiny fragment of the museum field, or even of the art museum field. It reinforces the impression that museums are awash in money, when most museums clearly are not and it reinforces the idea that museums equate to expensive, fancy buildings and that is somehow all we think about.

What Mr. Davis should have been emphasizing is that museums change lives; buildings don't. Some of you have probably heard me talk about one of my favorite museum experiences, out of the 512 museums that I visited during my tenure as AAM president. That visit was to the Walter Anderson Museum in Ocean Springs, MS, a tiny museum in a tiny town, named for its favorite son, a very accomplished and unique painter, whose work is in major art museums. A lot of his art was based on the natural world, and he absorbed himself in it. One time, when a hurricane was approaching, he reasoned that hurricanes were part of nature, and for that reason he should experience one. So he rowed himself three miles out into the Gulf, to a small island where he liked to paint, and he lashed himself to a tree, facing the hurricane. He experienced it, and somehow survived to paint again. The modest museum, which is AAM-accredited, is connected to the Ocean Springs Community Center. The mural that Anderson created on three walls of that space, depicting the early exploration of the Gulf Coast, and its indigenous flora and fauna, is an absolute masterpiece, restored and protected thanks to a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. So the museum, and its art, is literally at the center of the community. It is an educational resource, a community center, and a point of pride. Mr. Davis' commentary, makes it seem like the museum is the building, when the reality is that the museum is the community, and the building is secondary.

The worst part of the article is that he is, in the minds of his readers, defining the entire art museum universe, and maybe the entire museum universe. In fairness to Mr. Davis, he does call for an increase in public funding for the arts in order to, as he says, "correct the biases of the rich." That's not a particularly high-minded call for increased funding for arts

and culture. Are any of you struggling in your jobs with the biases of the rich? How about, we need more funding so that we can continue to find new and innovative ways to engage and educate our visitors, and to better serve our communities. Do you think that commentary would get published on the editorial page of the New York Times?

If a few museums choose to build or expand or remodel to suit the whims and ego needs of their billionaire donors, that's their problem. It isn't *our* problem. Our problem is helping to raise awareness of the essential societal importance of museums, A to Z, art museums to zoos, day in and day out, in communities large and small. The news in the museum field shouldn't be that a few museums overbuild and then can't meet their budgets and have to cut staff; the news should be that every day, in billion dollar buildings and in rented spaces in strip malls, museums are doing their jobs. Of course, scandal and disaster is what the news media is looking for; it isn't looking for uplifting news.

We need to do something different. We are a field that introduces third graders and college students and seniors with memory loss to the greatest artistic achievements of humankind, from the earliest cave paintings, more than 40,000 years old, to the kinds of stunning contemporary art works that are on view only a mile or so from here, at the Walker Art Center. We are a field that helps train the scientists and medical professionals of the future, while engaging everyone, scientist or not, with the wonders of scientific discovery in the 21st century. We are a field that preserves and restores and interprets and exhibits both the uplifting and the appalling in our journey on this planet...think of the Holocaust Museum in DC and the World War II Museum in New Orleans. We are the field that exhibits and documents the catastrophic loss of biodiversity on our planet today, while at the same time celebrating the wonders and beauty and complexity of our natural world. We are the field that excites and engages children with the joy of independent exploration and discovery – of succeeding, of failing, of trying again. And we are the field that allows you to look a doomed species in the eye, an encounter that inevitably leads to self-examination about what that loss means for our planet and for humankind and for our future.

And the publicity we get, is about a few museums running up a \$5 billion tab over the course of seven years. That gets in the New York Times. I know...I have to get over it.

Gail Silberglied, our director of Government Relations at AAM, has done a great job building Museums Advocacy Day, since she launched the first one in 2009, really an amazing job. But attendance at Advocacy Day still hovers around 300. Actually it was 250 this year. If we had 2,000 people making Congressional visits every year, at Advocacy Day, with a substantial portion of those being trustees, we would be heard. We would effect change. But since we're not getting 2,000 people to Museums Advocacy Day, we need to do something different. All politics is local, right? So maybe we need the state associations and the regional associations to work together on local and state advocacy, supported by AAM, and AAMD and ASTC, and all the other "A's". That is, to develop key messages and impact statements for mayors and city councils, for county commissioners and, above all, for state legislators. We need to go to state legislators' offices, we need to sit down with mayors, and show them the impact that museums are having on literacy, on scientific literacy, on developing creative minds. And, of course, that outreach *must* engage museum board members and trustees. We have left museum trustees out of the equation, and it has to change. Go out and do it.

All of this leads to one thing. We need to control the messaging about museums. We need to control the messaging so that people understand that museums change lives, and that museums create a more educated, engaged populace. We need to control the messaging so that we aren't defined by the egos of billionaires and their love of "starchitects." We need to be defined by you, you who work every day to strengthen your communities and to educate and excite people of all ages; you, who do research and expand the horizons of human knowledge; you, who reach out to underserved communities and help to change lives, and futures.

This can all happen if we work as a field, one field, committed to the proposition that museums are essential to our future. We have to speak with one voice on issues that matter to us as a field, like support for IMLS. We have to set aside provincial interests. One of our strengths is that we have a number of organizations dedicated to different disciplines

in the museum field. It is also one of our weaknesses. People don't understand us, in part, because we bury the lead, we embrace the discipline over the field. We can effect important change, but not as individual disciplines. And the measure of that is the number that sticks in my brain - \$31 million, the largest single amount of money for museums in the federal budget. We can do better...we can achieve great things. Help lead us there.

Thanks for having me today. Thanks for all you do on behalf of the museum field and your communities.