

Long Beach Museum of Art

Dear *Press Telegram* Editor,

Headlines are purposely written to draw attention, but rarely tell the story. Unfortunately, many readers never get past the headline and in the case of “Audit: LBMA lost 144 artworks,” the reputation of a fine institution is impugned with an inaccurate headline. Perhaps a better headline regarding the audit of the Museum’s art collection would have read “*Museum discovers works of art missing after exhaustive inventory-- the first in twenty years.*”

The article did include the important fact that 121 of the missing works of art have not been seen for *at least 20 years--* before systems were in place to appropriately catalog and account for the City’s collection. There are some serious omissions in the article, however. When it mentioned that “a major problem in the Museum’s history was that it loaned out many of its works and then didn’t get them back,” it could have continued, stating that in the 1950s the Museum had a loan program that invited local residents to borrow works and display them in their homes. It is probably safe to assume that some works from the collection continue to hang above sofas in the living rooms of our neighbors. Unfortunately, sufficient documentation from the time of that ill-advised program does not exist, making it impossible for us to know with any certainty which works may have been involved and where they ended up.

If I had written the article I also would not have included the misleading statement that “... there are some missing works by big names, including Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee and Charles Eames, and those appearing significant. The Picasso piece, ‘Goat Head on Table,’ was the 33rd drawing in a series of 50 the museum acquired in 1969. It was stolen a year later.” To set the record straight, the Picasso work is a print, not a drawing and the items attributed to Paul Klee and Charles Eames were *photographic reproductions* of their respective works that were used for educational purposes. In no way, shape or form were the “Klee” and the “Eames” purported to be, nor were they ever, works of art. This reveals one of the challenges encountered throughout this process: at some point in the history of the Museum, those objects and other non-art items were added to the inventory of artworks and there they remained. If they were discarded or lost it appeared that a work of art from the collection was missing.

The article could also have mentioned that documentation on a number of works, “unobserved” in the most recent audit, indicates a “last known location”-- *on loan to City offices*. These works may not have been in the possession of the Museum for decades. Current Museum staff and City staff continue to search City offices and department locations for works of art and it is likely that works will be discovered. In fact, in the last several weeks, many works have been discovered in City offices, closets and other locations and returned to the Museum for safe-keeping.

The article could also have informed readers that since 1989 the Museum has funded a full-time position for the sole purpose of managing the Museum’s collections to the standards set by the American Association of Museums, of which LBMA is a proud member. The article could have mentioned how the Museum has struggled for *decades* to provide secure, climate controlled storage for works of art not on view or on loan to other institutions and that the struggle is the result of financial and space constraints. It would be helpful for the public to know and understand how difficult it is to raise funds to pay for storage (storage is much less fundable than educational programming or exhibitions) and that our physical storage limitations are frequently the reason a gift of art or furniture must be declined. Works of art not stored in the Museum’s on-site vault are stored at a reputable, professional off-site art storage warehouse in Los Angeles.

(continued)

Long Beach Museum of Art

The Museum is currently working with City staff in the hopes of finding a suitable, local location to develop a secure, climate-controlled space for additional storage. Funding for this project, however, remains an issue.

The article could have mentioned that the two works of art by Alexej Jawlensky (for which the City received an insurance settlement in 2002) that went missing after they were displayed in Paris are listed with the international *Art Loss Register* making it almost impossible for them to change hands or be sold and the hope is that they will someday be returned to Long Beach.

I would like to assure the citizens of Long Beach that the missing works of art are of great concern to me, the Museum's Board of Trustees, all Museum staff members, and City staff. We take our roles as caretakers very seriously and we continue to work diligently to ensure that lapses that occurred in the past never occur again. The audit revealed things that we were horrified to discover, but it also caused us to redouble our efforts. The City and the Museum have developed strict protocols and systems to address the care and safety of works of art, and we are passionate about setting the highest possible standards of care and documentation.

I invite all citizens of Long Beach to visit the Long Beach Museum of Art—*your* museum—and personally experience all that the Museum has to offer. Perhaps the next headline will read, "The Long Beach Museum of Art, pride of the city for almost 60 years." That's the real story.

Sincerely,



Ronald C. Nelson
Executive Director
Long Beach Museum of Art