

The Chrysler Museum in 2009



THE CHRYSLER MUSEUM IN 2009

The Chrysler Museum contains artistic items that “any museum in the world would kill for.”

– Art critic John Russell in The New York Times

John Russell was engaging in hyperbole (perhaps) when he averred that other museums would kill to have some of the items in the collections of the Chrysler Museum of Art. What is abundantly clear is that the Chrysler’s collections are unparalleled in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The museum constitutes a cultural jewel whose activities attract almost 130,000 guests annually. Its many and varied programs provide ample demonstration that a major art museum acts as a magnet for a city, attracting corporations that value cultural amenities, residents that wish to return to the excitement of a revitalized downtown core, and national and international attention that fuels tourism.

The Chrysler’s collections fall into six major areas: (1) American painting and sculpture, including works from American impressionists such as Mary Cassatt and Childe Hassam; (2) European painting and sculpture, including works by French impressionists such as Degas and Renoir; (3) contemporary art; (4) decorative arts; (5) a world-renowned glass collection; and (6) a highly regarded photography collection that includes venerable daguerreotypes as well as remarkable modern photographs.

Our focus here is upon the current status, health and prospects of the Chrysler Museum. This is a subject of particular interest because changing economic conditions have battered the ability of many nonprofit organizations to sustain their activities. Also, there is interest in whether the sometimes-controversial personnel reductions and decisions over the past few years have affected the quality and character of the institution’s operations. Fortunately, as the succeeding analysis will argue, the Chrysler’s wonderful resources continue to offer superb artistic experiences to the Hampton Roads region that are unmatched among many comparable metropolitan areas.

Some Early History

Like many museums founded in the early 20th century, the forerunner of the Chrysler was organized by small arts consortia interested in both the museum’s social and aesthetic potential. Hence, in its early years, it included installations devoted to local history and the region’s fauna. However, its recent history – as a museum dedicated to the comprehensive collection amassed by a single major donor – is unique.

What began through the efforts of the Irene Leache Art Association, which exhibited its members’ work alongside a miscellaneous collection of artifacts in the Norfolk Public Library on Freemason Street starting in 1914, became the foundation of the Norfolk Museum of Arts and Sciences. In 1928, Florence Sloane, whose mansion on the Lafayette River would become the Hermitage Foundation, offered to head a committee to find an appropriate building. When the city donated a site on the Hague, contributions began to flow, ranging from pennies collected by schoolchildren to donations from the wealthy.



In 1938, a federal grant helped build an imposing Renaissance Revival structure with adequate room for growth. But for decades, the galleries continued to resemble a traditional chamber of curiosities, a *Kunstkammer*, exhibiting along with artworks, stuffed screech owls, Confederate relics and examples of Southern furniture in idiosyncratic assemblages. Prior to the Civil Rights era, Jim Crow laws kept many in the city from visiting the museum, and even after the social climate changed, William Parker, a powerful lawyer on its board, declared it a "private club," a statement flying in the face of national, state and municipal laws. Walter P. Chrysler Jr.'s arrival in 1971 would change the museum's name, its contents and its staff, but the turmoil would never completely disappear.

Son of the builder of the eponymous automotive empire as well as the premier Art Deco skyscraper in New York City, Chrysler had long been searching for a venue to house his personal eclectic collection. In 1958, he attempted to settle it in the freewheeling artists' colony of Provincetown, Mass., purchasing a large deconsecrated church, which locals came to refer to as "St. Walter's" or "First Church of Chrysler." The atmosphere lent an appropriate sanctuarial air to his rapidly expanding cache of Baroque paintings, but the church building was too

small to fulfill its new owner's ambitions, leaving Chrysler determined to find a larger venue, preferably an equally ambitious, if likewise provincial, museum.

Not many such professional institutions were willing to take his offer seriously, given his list of requirements, which included his authoritative (some still deem it authoritarian) directorship, for he planned to be on-site and fully involved. Many potential locations demurred because of the controversial nature of some pieces in the collection, whose provenance seemed to be plucked from thin air rather than from traditional records of ownership, a perception that had long bedeviled Chrysler. His penchant for obsessive acquisitions that occasionally led to dubious purchases gave him a reputation as an indiscriminating accumulator. And yet, his desire to broker a deal served to make him quite prescient. He acquired French Art Nouveau furniture and glass, 19th-century French Academic paintings, and early works by mid-20th-century Americans when prices reflected the lack of interest in these now-important areas. But this desire for bargains could also mean hasty studio visits during which slightly damaged contemporary work could be had for a good price. The Chrysler still displays one of Frank Stella's hard-edge Protractor paintings, though it is rumored to have had a large hole in it on purchase. Stories of Chrysler's regular arrivals at the museum bearing paper grocery bags stuffed with additions to the glass galleries have circulated for years, becoming part of the "lore" that Rick Salzburg, now helming the Roanoke Arts Festival, so loved when he worked in public relations at the museum.

Walter Chrysler was obviously bringing a considerable – and often great – collection to Norfolk, but one freighted with controversial attributions to match its often-combative owner. After protracted encounters, the city finally capitulated to his demands and reached an agreement that satisfied many in local government. His wife, Jean Outland Chrysler, a Norfolk native, was happy to return to her hometown, and indulged her own desire to collect books, merging them with the old museum's holdings to create the exceptional library it now houses.

So began the life of Walter Chrysler Jr.'s museum and the tangled tale of the auto manufacturer's scion's success in his wife's hometown, a procession of events detailed in Peggy Earle's 2008 account, "Legacy: Walter Chrysler Jr. and the Untold Story of Norfolk's Chrysler Museum of Art." Unfortunately, the book, heavily (some might say "carefully") edited by William Hennessey, the museum's current director, leaves the struggles, personalities and vicissitudes of this man's life to our imagination, or to future chronicles. But many aspects of the collector's psyche are well known: Chrysler had a "take-no-prisoners" kind of mentality when it came to his new staff, the collection that was already in place and the city's culturati. He had developed a distrust of professionals in the art world, summarily firing all such members of the museum's staff en bloc.

In their stead, Chrysler imported friends from New York to play at curatorial work, notably the critic Mario Amaya, whose milieu included the soon-to-be scandalous photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and other denizens of Warhol's Factory scene. Amaya, who was in fact well educated and definitely an insider, in turn hired a new staff consisting of youthful curators-in-training like Brooks Johnson, who was able to build one of the best photography collections in the country despite Chrysler's occasional indifference to the medium. Meanwhile, Chrysler had scientific artifacts accumulated by the old museum thrown into dumpsters, and he sometimes fired personnel with abandon.

In the years between 1971 and his death in 1989, the museum's trustees valiantly contended with their new "board president," a title Chrysler preferred to any other, whose agreement with the city gave the municipality power to appoint 15 of the 28 board members, some of whom were content to let him have his way. According to Hennessey, this agreement continues to determine the nature of the board, and while the city heeds the museum's recommendations for its appointees, the municipality by necessity considers criteria other than aesthetics when it makes its decisions. Currently, the board includes in its mix corporate members alongside local art patrons and collectors.

More Recent Developments

Throughout the early years, the museum's most pressing need was to attain national certification, a problem that Chrysler himself refused to acknowledge in his hiring practices or in his sometimes inflated provenance decisions. The museum needed a resolute professional voice as director, strong enough to overrule the tough collector. Those characteristics were finally found in David Steadman, the director from 1980-89, who mollified Chrysler, and propelled both staff and facilities to accreditation with the American Museum Association, even while mounting an unprecedented capital campaign that enlarged and revitalized the original building.

In addition, Steadman attended to the kind of exhibition programming that would not interfere with Chrysler's own interests, bringing in another young curator, Tom Sokolowski, to continue a series of contemporary shows begun by Tom Styron, his predecessor. The urbane Sokolowski became one of the museum's most popular curators, with sold-out lectures detailing his cutting-edge choices. After his departure, he moved up in the museum world hierarchy, now holding the position of director of the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh.

Recent years have been less kind to the curatorial department. Beginning in 2003, the museum began to "downsize" across departments. Lynn Marsden-Atlass, then curator of the American collection and now director of the Arthur Ross Gallery at the University of Pennsylvania, and several other members of the staff were terminated.

About the same time, some Chrysler Museum members were perplexed by the institution's Ferrari exhibition, which involved dismantling part of an exterior wall to position automobiles in the gallery. The expenses surrounding this show, which failed to attract large numbers of visitors, were thought by some to be connected to the decision to reduce the staff. Most recently, glass curator Gary Baker and 28-year museum veteran and photography curator Brooks Johnson have left the staff. These downsizings of museum cadres and the internal reshuffling of duties caught the attention of the regional press. The Virginian-Pilot's Teresa Annas, for example, carefully described the non-transparent circumstances surrounding Johnson's departure on Aug. 30, 2008.



Prior to these departures, it would have been fair to characterize the lengthy tenure of much of Chrysler's curatorial staff as somewhat unusual. Many directors and curators play a professional game quite similar to Lewis Carroll's tea party in "Alice in Wonderland." They switch their positions in a sequence of moves, a "clean-cup-move-down (or up)" pattern that infuses each subsequent new institution with new energy and, often, new money. Even in the current recessionary period, as of this spring there were approximately 40 open positions nationwide for directors, though far fewer were demanding curatorial expertise. Lengthy employee tenure can be stabilizing to institutions and nurture strong relationships with supporters, or it can act as an anchor that stifles needed change. Which of these two interpretations is the more accurate concerning recent personnel changes at the Chrysler has been a matter of dispute.

The museum has had six directors since 1971 and many people associated with the Chrysler regard David Steadman's tenure in the 1980s as a high point in the institution's history. His achievements – establishing a professional credentialed staff and nationally approved procedures, along with an ambitious and successful capital campaign to raise funds for the facility's expansion – resulted in full accreditation by the American Association of Museums. The conversion of the open courtyard into the airy, glass-ceilinged Huber Court gave visitors a spectacular introduction to the galleries surrounding it. Second-floor visitors could overlook the space from the original windows, an architectural feature that preserves the spatial history of the building, while lending additional charm to the gallery experience.

Huber Court quickly became the heart of the museum and a notable venue for space rentals. Steadman was following a national trend, as these commodious public spaces are revenue boosters that attract large parties and weddings. New York's Metropolitan Museum placed its Temple of Dendur, a sizable Egyptian structure complete with 19th-century graffiti, off-center in a court obviously designed for such opportunities. Many a Hampton Roads couple has pledged undying devotion under the Huber's immense skylight, and other special events, dinners, parties and support-group activities continue to enjoy its spacious ambience, with rental fees adding to the museum's budget.

Yet, despite such heady successes, Steadman failed his third challenge: to convince the mortally ill Walter Chrysler to sign a new inclusive will that deeded his entire collection to the museum, as well as the additional support of a healthy endowment. Stubborn to the last, Chrysler waited for his favorite attorney, who was also hospitalized, to bring the document to him. The collector died in 1989, just hours before this could happen, thus depriving the museum of many of the objects on loan, including a number of superb Tiffany lamps, all of which had to be auctioned to pay estate taxes owed by

a hitherto unknown heir, a nephew, who sent many prized works to Sotheby's block. One of the most valuable works, a large moody landscape by the founder of French Realism, Theodore Géricault, best known for his "Raft of the Medusa," now belongs to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Steadman left the museum soon after the grand opening of its new facilities, and the top position has changed hands several times since, once quite forcefully when financial irregularities were discovered. If most of the directors were undistinguished, then they were strongly supported by excellent curators on the staff. A particularly successful team, Nick and Trinkett Clark, energized the American and contemporary areas. But even then traditions were abandoned, as the distaff Clark offered living artists a double-edged sword: Reluctant to continue hosting the biennial juried Irene Leache Memorial exhibitions, which required considerable time and effort, she mounted the last such show in 1998, but then compensated with opening the Parameters Gallery, showcasing emerging American artists, a series which helped the museum boost its contemporary collection.

During that time, the museum added several significant works from these one-person exhibitions, notably Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's "Trade (Gifts for Trading with White People)" of 1993. In the mid-'90s, the Clarks left first for the High Museum in Atlanta, and then for a northeastern museum devoted to children's book illustrators; their positions have since failed to attract long-term curators. The holders of these positions have come and gone quickly in the last 10 years. Besides the huge exhibition of works in storage, the primary in-house exhibitions since Hennessey's arrival in 1998 have been mounted around the photography collection. This steady and often exciting series of shows was balanced by one-person exhibitions such as those given to Bob Lerner and Ernest Withers. Their shows were the first to examine and evaluate their careers in the documentary field, and offered historical assessments of the medium's vast impact.

When William Hennessey arrived in 1998 from the University of Michigan's art museum, he appropriately began to examine the Chrysler's priorities – a lengthy list that included the potential expansion of the library's space and a number of necessary gallery reconfigurations. With this in mind, he initiated an ambitious capital campaign, using the omnibus installation of works chosen from storage

by the three curators as a convincing argument. The public and board responded positively to this superb exhibition, and the campaign raised or obtained commitments for an impressive \$35 million to support a variety of proposed alterations in space and programming. By all odds, the capital campaign was an important positive move forward for Hennessey and the museum.



Changes in Economic Fortunes and Related Adjustments

The past decade has seen a narrowing of the Chrysler's possibilities, primarily because of conditions of economic stagnancy and recession. It must be said that Hennessey and the board of trustees have been confronted with difficult choices at every turn. Indeed, while not all agree, the most persuasive explanation of events at the Chrysler over the past decade could be its challenge of having to deal with constant or declining revenues in certain years. As Table 1 below indicates, in the 2005-06 and 2007-08 fiscal years, the museum's total revenues were stagnant. Also, between June 30, 2008, and April 30, 2009, the value of the Chrysler's endowment declined from approximately \$45 million to approximately \$37 million (about 22 percent). It seems likely that this will negatively influence the institution's future budgets.

TABLE 1		
THE CHRYSLER: THE FINANCIAL STORY		
Year	Revenues	Percent Change
2004-2005	\$5,774,229	—
2005-2006	\$5,748,725	- 00.44%
2006-2007	\$6,551,229	+13.96%
2007-2008	\$6,603,395	+00.80%
2008-2009	\$7,184,569	+08.80%
2004-2005 to 2008-2009 = +24.42% total increase, or a +5.62% annual compound rate of increase		
Source: Chrysler Museum of Art		

Even so, over the past four fiscal year budget cycles, the Chrysler's revenues have increased at the rate of 5.62 percent per year, compounded. This demonstrates that its fiscal problems have not been permanent. Hence, some of the significant changes in personnel and programs that have occurred appear to have been the result of choices made by the board and the director rather than solely a function of financial stress.

The new millennium has not been good for arts institutions in general and the ongoing recession has cut deeply into most museums' plans. February 2009 was particularly cruel, with The New York Times reporting almost daily on closings and cutbacks, including layoffs of 10 percent of the workforce at the Indianapolis Museum after its endowment lost \$100 million in the last quarter of 2008. The long-suffering Detroit Institute of the Arts announced a 20 percent staff reduction and canceled plans for two major exhibitions on the Baroque and the mid-century trio of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Jim Dine, citing the expense for shipping and insurance. The Philadelphia Museum of Art announced pay cuts for staff along with staff reductions. The High Museum of Art in Atlanta was planning to cut its staff by 7 percent, with pay cuts for those remaining. And in Las Vegas, once a boom town for contemporary art, the Sun reported the Feb. 28, 2009, closure of the 13-year-old Las Vegas Art Museum, with its board president lamenting to The New York Times, "We've tried everything to keep it afloat. It's just a challenging time." Part of the financial challenge lies in diminishing endowment money tied to the markets; usually 4 percent to 5 percent of these funds are available for use, but when the market lost up to 50 percent of its value, these funds were reduced drastically.

Our region's flagship museum is not immune to these economic problems. Although the Obama and Kaine administrations say they strongly support the arts in general, and indications of increasing federal support for the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities are contained within the stimulus package, it is not clear at the time of this writing that one-time-only federal grant money will reach the Chrysler, which has had trouble keeping its development officers in place; in six years, there have been six such employees. Brownie Hamilton, an award-winning grants writer and director of the Hamilton Group in Williamsburg, was contracted to prepare grants for the museum a total of eight

times. Her last success was an unusual one: \$112,500 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services for operational support, which is used in part to speed the final stages in the digital transfer of the collection to the Chrysler's Web site. Normally, such operational grants are given to smaller arts organizations, but it was clear that, without a grant, this lengthy and essential task would have to be put on hold. In the current economic crisis, grants may be the only way that museums can continue to perform near peak efficiency, but the competition for these finite funding sources will be more intense than ever.

The Chrysler's 2008-09 budget, totaling \$7,184,561, reflects declines in governmental funding (particularly from the Commonwealth), along with significant reductions in the value of the museum's endowment portfolios. In this light, the 2005 State of the Region study of the economic health of art galleries and museums in southeastern Virginia was prophetic, since the current situation differs by mere degrees from that of four years ago.

In the 1990s, when the Chrysler had committed allies in Richmond in Speaker of the House Thomas Moss and President Pro Tempore of the Senate Stanley Walker, the Commonwealth allocated \$1 million a year to the museum's coffers. This sum may seem substantial, but must be weighed against the state's former allocation of \$10 million to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond. After Moss and Walker left state government, no one with political heft took up the torch for the Chrysler, and Commonwealth funding diminished to \$750,000 per year, then fell to amounts that would essentially match the internal budget allocation of \$41,900 for 2008-09 shared by the curatorial and conservation departments. Peggy Baggett, executive director for the Virginia Commission for the Arts, does not have much hope for an increase in state monies, having recently overheard conversations between members of the state legislature questioning whether arts-related positions are "real jobs."

As a consequence, for several years, the Chrysler has been combining tasks for its curators. It has eliminated positions and cut its hours. The curatorial position in American art, vacated in 2003 when Lynn Marston-Atlass jumped to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, remains unfilled at this writing six years



later, and it has been joined in limbo by two other top positions, in photography and decorative arts. The latter position had become a threesome combined with glass and the historic houses (the Moses Myers House and the Willoughby-Baylor House, which the museum administers); a recent hire replaced only the glass curator, quite possibly with an eye to fulfilling the requirements of the museum's pivotal role in the second region-wide exhibition of contemporary glass that opened in April 2009. All positions are frozen as of this writing.

One recent initiative stimulated by the capital campaign has provoked disappointment, if not controversy. Several years ago, the nearby Wachovia Bank building at the corner of Duke and Grace streets was purchased as a potential site for the Jean Outland Chrysler Library, though members of the Friends of the Chrysler Library advised that two things argued against this move: the branch bank's small size and inadequate structural support for the weight of the books. Even so, in early 2008, the board approved the use of \$25,000 for a full

architectural study. By April 2008, the completed renderings were ready, and plans were made to host an invitation-only soirée in the building to attract potential donors. The Friends of the Chrysler Library allocated \$5,000 from its endowment for invitations to the event. The architect's elaborate renderings were displayed for those who crowded this fundraiser cum celebration, but the experience appears to have backfired, because one prominent board member bluntly informed the architect that the building was far too small to contain the library's 80,000 books and countless files, much less allow necessary expansion.

At the February 2009 meeting of the Friends of the Library, Hennessey presented an update in which he agreed that the Wachovia building had proven too small to house the current collection. He also explained that an expansion of the museum into the current parking lot, which seemed the most feasible solution, would call for the city's financial support, a doubtful prospect given the current economy. As a consequence, the library project was at a standstill. This meant that the \$30,000 expended to examine the library possibility would not lead to a firm project.

Hennessey subsequently discussed with the Friends of the Library their organization's future. Suggesting that the Friends' social nature taxed the staff's time and that the organization did not raise significant funds, he offered that it might operate more effectively as a financial support group than as a conventional friends group. In any case, fees for membership in the group would rise in order to finance the hiring of a summer intern for the library.

The bank building's footprint may yet have a function, as its demolition would provide additional parking if current library space were to be extended into the lot adjacent to the museum. Then again, the building might not disappear at all, but instead change its purpose to accommodate the contents of a decrepit storage facility in Portsmouth long owned by the Chrysler. For the present, however, plans for the bank's future and the Jean Outland Chrysler Library appear to be on hold.

The most consistently successful area of the Chrysler Museum remains its photography collection. People "connect with the medium," says its ex-curator, Brooks Johnson. Johnson not only put the museum's collection securely within the nation's top 10, but his inclusive appreciation of documentary trends also led him to

showcase the works of African Americans with regularity. Always well funded, the photo collection has several dedicated endowments – for exhibitions, collections, publications and discretionary spending (used for travel and networking) – all of which have kept that area the most vital in the museum.

Johnson was a proficient fundraiser, though increasing demands that the curators themselves raise money began to take him away from his curatorial duties, which were arguably more demanding than those of others at the museum. In his almost 30 years at the Chrysler, Johnson attracted major donors like Robert and Joyce Menschel, New Yorkers who have been on the boards of the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum and who have seeded the collection at the Chrysler.

An early show, "Appeal to This Age: Civil Rights and the African-American Community," which was destined to raise money by offering works on display for sale, helped to enlarge the museum's holdings in an under-appreciated area. This expressed a generational sea change in the region's sociopolitical awareness, and Johnson would continue to devote considerable energy to this segment of photographic history. His efforts led to the establishment of the Civil Rights Photo Collection and to further exhibitions of African American photographers. In 2000, a MetLife Foundation grant for \$150,000 helped fund the first museum show ever devoted to Memphis documentarian Ernest C. Withers, who had chronicled civil rights battles in the Deep South since the 1950s.

Photographic subject matter has often been the flash point for controversy in modern museums. But it is undeniable that the Chrysler's collection, paired with Johnson's breadth in exhibitions (which included the first retrospective and scholarly catalog detailing the accomplishments of Civil War photographer Alexander Gardner), propelled the Chrysler to national status in the field.

Johnson provided the text for more than 15 scholarly catalogs for original exhibitions, a task traditionally left to the curators, who would also create didactic materials connected to the exhibitions: gallery brochures, labels and newsletter essays meant for monthly distribution to the membership. In addition, curators once took a large part in training docents to interpret works throughout the museum. In the last decade, these responsibilities have increasingly rested with the education department.

The Chrysler's realignments reflect an accelerating trend among museums nationally, many of which are adjusting to challenges brought by new and larger audiences, viewers who often have more education and art-historical sophistication. Even while museum budgets are stagnant or falling, gallery visitations and memberships are growing in many American museums. Museums frequently train docents to enlighten adult groups touring the galleries and special exhibitions, and have initiated programs for the schools that have been utilizing the collection for decades.

Scott Howe is now the director of education and public programs. With a small staff and a refurbished classroom for classes, the museum is able to offer programming to the region's schools. Howe also supervises the Jean Outland Chrysler Library and has editorial responsibility for all the information contained in the labels, programs and literature offered to the Chrysler's visitors.

LEADERSHIP

Whether public or private, for profit or nonprofit, any organization is heavily dependent upon the leadership of its chief executive officer. Leaders are capable of inspiring, motivating and moving organizations and constituents forward to new heights. They can proffer exciting agendas, unify otherwise disparate constituents, raise money, attract donors and change the atmosphere. Witness Presidents Reagan and Obama. Whether one voted for one or both of them, one must agree that they were (are) charismatic leaders who knew (know) how to pursue their agendas.

Hence, we turn to assessing the role of William Hennessey, who has served as the president and director of the Chrysler Museum since 1998. **Given the adverse fiscal winds that the museum has encountered in recent years, it is a credit to Hennessey and others that it has continued to function as an attractive cultural resource for the region. In 2007, more than 128,000 visitors entered the Chrysler and it received more than \$600,000 in gifts and almost**

\$870,000 in memberships. Both collections and facilities have been upgraded in recent years. It is apparent that the Hampton Roads community continues to believe in the museum and its purposes.

Hennessey has found ways to continue most of the Chrysler's most vital programs and to economize in areas that he and the board have deemed less critical. He has persuaded the city of Norfolk to augment its financial support for the museum, no mean feat in these trying economic times. As a result, there is no sense in the general public that the quality and prominence of the Chrysler Museum have declined. Those more closely connected to it are aware that the institution is not able to do as much as before. They also know that significant personnel changes have been made as one means to deal with imposing financial constraints. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the Chrysler continues to be regarded by admirers near and far as one of Hampton Roads' crown jewels.



It also should be noted that Hennessey has endeavored to see that the Chrysler Museum no longer is an enclave designed for what an early trustee, "Judge" Parker, deemed an institution "just as private ... as the German Club." The museum once was a very different, segregated organization that sponsored the city's annual crop of (white) debutantes. Today, with Hennessey at the helm, it attempts to serve the larger community, reflecting the growth of tolerance typified by the entire country in all aspects of public life. In this regard, it is notable that the one group that does not perceive itself to be threatened with marginalization is the Friends of African-American Art. The youngest of the "friends" groups, it most recently has funded visits by the surviving quilters of Gee's Bend, Ala., in connection with the museum's installation of a popular show of large-scale utilitarian fiber art (still placed in the category of craft on the traditional hierarchic scale of importance). This project was entrusted to Gary Baker, whose airy installation – with free-hanging quilts complementing the more traditional wall-based presentation (the method chosen by the Whitney Museum in New York, which exhibited the show prior to the Chrysler) – was truly an inspired one, and the Alabama artists gave the Norfolk museum the highest marks of any of this landmark exhibition's many venues. Several years later, aficionados still continue to talk about the quality displayed at the Gee's Bend Quilt show, while exhibitions devoted to artists like John Singer Sargent are seldom, if ever, mentioned.

Even so, those familiar with the Chrysler Museum do not always speak with one voice about Hennessey's leadership. All things considered, this is not surprising given the economic stresses the museum has faced and the significant number of personnel changes that have occurred. The misgivings of some about personnel actions and procedures at the Chrysler impress others as constituting (to switch metaphorical universes) "inside baseball" – i.e., relevant only to the direct participants and largely not of interest to anyone else. "All organizations have some of these things going on," commented a major donor, "and the Chrysler isn't all that different." Further, while many donors and employees would like to see greater transparency where personnel changes are concerned, another donor queried, "What other major organizations in the region publicize their internal personnel changes?"



Summing It Up

Alas, as one art museum director has put it, “It’s all about money.” Hennessey struggles with a budget that slightly exceeds \$7 million annually, while comparable peer institutions have budgets ranging from \$12 million to \$15 million each. The Chrysler receives most of its operating budget from the city of Norfolk, which deserves kudos for its continued support. Norfolk contributed \$2,988,443 for the 2008-09 budget, a 5 percent increase over 2007 and considerably more than in 2006, when the museum received \$2,481,100.

Staff salaries and exhibition expenses are justifiably the largest outlays in any museum’s budget. At the Chrysler, salaries, payroll taxes and benefits together amounted to \$3,677,658 for 2007-08; the 2008-09 budget shows a cost of \$3,959,084, an increase of \$281,426 from the previous year, indicating that the financial savings from the loss of the senior curatorial position in photography and other staffers has been reinvested in other positions and in maintaining staff fringe benefits.

The direct costs for exhibition expenses for 2009 came to \$767,250, a spike from 2008, when this important outreach category was \$473,683. The current increase is likely due to the expenses incurred by two shows: a Norman Rockwell exhibition and the region-wide Art of Glass show. If the economy remains lackluster, then the Chrysler, like many museums in the country, will reduce its requests for traveling exhibitions. Instead, the curatorial staff may mount a number of in-house exhibitions drawn from the collection in storage, perhaps augmented by loans from other institutions. The Chrysler’s walls sometimes display a notice indicating that a particular work, such as Gauguin’s masterly “Loss of Innocence,” is on loan to another museum for a span of months. This is commendable and stands in contrast to other major national museums that have severely restricted loans to other museums. It also opens the door for the Chrysler to receive loans from other institutions.

With only two curators now on staff, the Chrysler has been hard-pressed to mount in-house shows, though the new glass curator is busy with the largest component of a second regional marathon of exhibitions devoted to the

medium, bringing in pieces owned by the collection to balance those traveling to the site. Several traveling exhibitions have filled the gap, notably a substantial exhibition of John Singer Sargent’s portraits and landscapes, a modestly successful show that did not quite offset a number of highly touted, though disappointingly thin, presentations of Impressionist and Soviet paintings. In 2008, the region’s scholarly community was delighted by a fine exhibition of Rembrandt’s etchings as well as a show devoted to the pioneering English photographer, Peter Henry Emerson, forerunner of the international Pictorialist movement. An intensive loan exhibition of many of illustrator Norman Rockwell’s prolific works, timed for the holiday season of 2008-09, proved attractive to many who otherwise might not have entered the museum.

Over the past decade, the Chrysler Museum of Art has been the region’s art powerhouse, a repository of acclaimed masterworks in all genres and periods that has become an educational and aesthetic hub on the Atlantic Coast.

The Chrysler and its director, William Hennessey, have been vexed by declining state support, tight budgets and deteriorating economic conditions. These adverse circumstances necessarily have resulted in personnel and programmatic reductions. It will suffice for us to note that this is not an easy time to lead and direct even an artistic gem such as the Chrysler.

On June 30, 2009, the Chrysler announced that six additional employees (four full-time, two part-time) were being terminated in order to save money. Director William Hennessey stated, “This is about finances and strategy, not individuals.”
(The Virginian-Pilot, July 1, 2009)

