

A PROPOSAL TO ERADICATE INSTITUTIONAL RACISM AT THE BOSTON MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Submitted to:

Perry T. Rathbone, Director
Museum of Fine Arts
c/c Board of Directors
1/15/70

Submitted by:

Dana C. Chandler, Jr.
Black Artist, Boston
+ Member, MFA
Reply requested: 1/31/70

INTRODUCTION

Through all the history of America, white museums have ignored, avoided and denied their obligation to portray the contributions of the black man to American history, be it cultural, scientific or aesthetic.

We find this museum no different, though of late it has seen fit to placate the black community of Boston with a minimal program designed to show that it is doing “something” to change it’s racist image.

Let us examine what it has done. It is currently “fostering” the development of a “black museum” in Roxbury to be located in the National Center of Afro-American Artists on Elm Hill Avenue. This noble gesture has been “endowed” with a budget of \$30,000, and designated as a “temporary” program to be ended when the museum gets on its feet! That’s not enough funds to buy a decent painting, let alone a worthy salary for it’s Director! Yet this money is to get a Museum started?

But that’s not the point. The point is that this obvious attempt to placate the black community, to “buy it off,” “silence it,” is less than minimal, less than superficial at best! It is only justice that we should get our own museum, if only that we might give our art and artists the proper kinds of recognition and critical evaluation long overdue.

But that is not enough! We should get at least three large rooms and a proper curatorial staff, researchers included – with an adequate budget for the necessary work to be done – in the Museum of Fine Arts itself.

This, then, is what I propose:

1. The current black museum, headed by Mr. Edmond B. Gaither, be continued with a budget commensurate with his technical expertise and immense knowledge of black art.
2. Three rooms and a vault in the Museum of Fine Arts for storage for future acquisitions, plus a proper staff for both the Museum of Fine Arts Division and the Roxbury Division.

3. An endowment fund be set up commensurate to the immense task of creating a museum of the caliber necessary to house our neglected 400-year history.
4. The control of the black museum in all of it's dealings, be it administrative or aesthetic, be in the hands of the community.
5. The direction of the Museum Fine Arts Division be in the hands of a community board to be chosen by the National Center of Afro-American Artists.
6. The Museum of Fine Arts will, under supervision of black people, allocate proper and adequate funds to this endeavor.

Please realize that current funding is ludicrous and insulting, and not at all indicative of any serious attempt of the Museum of Fine Arts to erase a 400-year-old slight...and in it's own history, a century of (deliberately?) negating the history of blacks in Boston.

We can't believe that this is simple ignorance or unconscious racism – but we'll soon know.

A budget is attached for your perusal. It is minimal at best, but adequate to begin with.

BUDGET FOR BLACK MUSEUM, 122 ELM HILL AVENUE, AND MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS DIVISION, HUNTINGTON AVENUE

Staff	
1 Director - (Black museum and Museum of Fine Arts Division)	\$ 25,000
1 Assistant Director	15,000
3 Curator aides @ \$10,000 per year	30,000
2 Secretaries @ \$6,000 per year	12,000
Renovation, Supplies, etc., for both Divisions (Included: Art School, Staff, Art Supplies)	1,000,000
Minimal funds for first-year program	1,000,000
Endowment funds for black museum	5,000,000
Subsequent funding for Museum of Fine Arts Division (yearly)	100,000
TOTAL	\$ 7,182,000

We are aware that this will take some time to accomplish, but not until that time will the museum be relevant to our community. So let's get started.

Realize that these funds will provide monies necessary for research, publications, educational courses, national and international travel, acquisitions, slide collections, scholarships for promising black students, research grants, commissions, press and publicity, and proper facilities for exhibition purposes.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF BOOKS ON BLACK ART

(One of the black museum's greatest contributions will be an accurate, up-to-date compilation of existing material on black artists and their works, as well as some really sound critical evaluation of the aesthetic conditions and directions in black art.)

1. Black Artists on Art – Lewis/Waddy – Ward Ritchie Press, Dist.
2. American Negro Art – Cedric Dover – New York Graphic Society
3. Images of Dignity (Charles White) – Ward Ritchie Press, Dist.
4. The Negro in Art – Alain Locke (1941)
5. Modern Negro Art – James Porter (1943)

Incidentally, we already have the black critics in the arts for this job.

{MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, Boston Massachusetts 02115}
{Office of the Director}

January 27, 1970

Mr. Dana Chandler
40 Mountain Avenue
Dorchester, Massachusetts

Dear Mr. Chandler:

My colleagues and I have now had an opportunity to consider your proposals and to try to relate them to the realities of the Museum's finances and the Museum's current program.

You have, I am told, a copy of the Museum's most recent Annual Report which contains a financial statement. To this let me append a few facts about the Museum's financial situation that you may not be aware of.

In 1928 after 58 years of being open to the public seven days a week, the Museum commenced to be closed on Mondays. This is generally assumed to be a convenience to the staff for changing exhibitions and the like. Such, however, is not at all the case. The Trustees were obliged to close the Museum one day a week for financial reasons only. But the Museum remained free. In July 1966, after being free to all since 1918, the Trustees were obliged to impose an admission charge of 50¢ for adults. In January 1969 it was reluctantly voted to raise the admission to 75¢; and by July 1 of that year the Trustees were faced with a decision to close the Museum another day a week, close part of the Museum every day, or raise the admission to \$1.00. Reluctantly, they chose the latter course as much criticism had been expressed of the trial partial closings earlier in the year. The Trustees would like to lower the admission fee or eliminate it entirely. There is no hope of this until we can greatly increase our income or greatly lower our expenses.

As it is, in spite of low wages and salaries, the Museum operates at a very serious annual deficit.

Why not spend less money on works of art? is a question often asked. The simple fact of the matter is that over the years the Museum has been given or bequeathed money which by law is restricted to the purchase of works of art, and in most cases to certain kinds of art, such as Asiatic art, Old Master prints, Early Italian paintings, coins, tapestries, early musical instruments, and so forth. The Museum, therefore, is not legally free to pursue all the programs that you propose, and to use its funds as you suggest.

However, I want to assure you that the Museum is most sympathetic to the black artist minority and the matter of the black audience in a Museum where there is little work by the black artist. I am grateful to you for bringing the problem so emphatically to my attention.

As you know, the Trustees have committed the Museum to working with Miss Elma Lewis and her Afro-American Arts Center. We subscribe to her philosophy and that of our curatorial aide, Barry Gaither, and we believe in rendering them every assistance we can – artistic, technical, financial. We believe in expanding and accelerating this program. We feel bound to consider their advice in the matter of integrating black activities as such with the current program of the Museum of Fine Arts in the Museum

building. For example, it is tentatively planned to have a showing of Barry Gaither's 5 Black Artists show at the Museum following the exhibition at the Afro-American Art Center.

As I said to you, I do not consider the present budget for this program to be adequate. It is our intention to do all we can to increase it. But meantime, it would be well to remember two things. Barry Gaither has the use of Museum facilities and the assistance of Museum personnel, and the money to finance the operation at the Afro-American Center has to be raised by the Museum.

I was especially impressed by your conviction that great satisfaction and pride, not to say inspiration, would be derived by our black citizens, artists and laymen alike from works by black artists in the permanent collections of the Museum. It is a matter of regret that the Museum does not possess more at the present time. You have our word that this situation will be changed with all possible haste, yet holding to the one criterion which governs collecting in all fields of the Museum – artistic quality. Little distinction would attach to museum acquisitions of works by black artists unless this basic rule is observed. This is an exciting prospect with the acquisition of works by distinguished black artists already in view. Barry Gaither is very knowledgeable in this field, and I should depend on his guidance to bring us into touch with the work of younger black artists.

You may not be aware that one of the policies I initiated twelve years ago was the permanent display in changing exhibitions of "primitive" art selected from the vast collections of the Peabody Museum at Harvard. A superb show of African tribal art was on view for three years until it was replaced by one of the art of Oceania. Then two years ago, our Centennial fund-raising required more office space, so the program was temporarily suspended. It will begin again as soon as our building construction permits.

I should also like to recommend to the Board of Trustees the foundation either of an ad hoc committee or a steering committee to act in an advisory capacity on future museum programs and policies regarding black art and black artists. In this respect, I am especially conscious of the role of our Museum School, both student body and faculty. Two young black artists' exhibitions have been planned for spring display in the gallery of the School. If it should be considered a constructive measure and suitable to a more general audience than our own students, we will do our best to show these exhibitions in the Museum.

I do not doubt that there are numerous ways in which the black community may become more deeply involved with the Museum and its varied program. One such program is a concert for Roxbury and Dorchester children scheduled for an early date this spring. Like others, it is aimed at bringing more black children into the Museum and exposing them to beauty and the highest quality of artistic exhibition, visual and musical. We are developing a training program for all aspirants who will work hand in glove with Museum technicians in as many departments as possible so that these newcomers to the Museum world may find gratifying pursuits both here and elsewhere.

In developing this accelerated program now, we hope we can rely on you and your colleagues, Messrs. Gray, Pires and Scott to guide us with your advice. In doing these things, we feel obliged, of course, in no way to compete with or in any way subtract from the effectiveness of Miss Lewis and her Afro-American Art Center. I myself hope that as soon as the extra burdens of our Centennial are removed, I shall be able to assist her in her fund-raising.

As I said during our interview, I am obliged to refer matters relating to policy to the Trustees for their consideration and approval. The matters referred to above I shall place upon the agenda for the next meetings of the Executive Committee and the Full Board in mid-March.

Miss Lewis' visit with me 1 1/2 years ago led at once to a warm and cordial relationship and the beginning of what we believe to be the beginning of a constructive community black-white enterprise. I am confident that your visit will be equally fruitful.

I should be very grateful for a reply from you a week before our Executive Committee meeting on March 11th.

With best regards,

Sincerely yours,
Perry T. Rathbone
Director

PTR/t

cc: Mr. Richard Gray
Mr. Vasco V. Pires
Mr. Benjamin F. Scott

{CC: Mr. Seybolt}
{rec'd 2/11/70}
{D. Rickman has seen.}

Mr. Perry Rathbone, Director
Museum of Fine Arts
465 Huntington Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts

Dear Mr. Rathbone:

After some discussion with my brother artists and a good deal of re-evaluation, I have decided to exhibit with the Black Artists show to be held in the Museum of Fine Arts.

However, my views on the space have not changed, nor has my intentions with regard to seeing my proposal through to its fruition. I still would like to see the space changed to your major galleries, and I still see the proposal as being essentially unanswered. The other artists I spoke to in regard to the space have similar feelings.

As to my views on the show itself, it is still my opinion that the reason for its existence in the Museum at all is one of pacification and a beginning kind of recognition of your institutional racism. However, it is a beginning; and as this show will be one of infinite value to both the Black and the White community, I will, therefore, do everything in my power to make it a thoroughly successful one.

Yours in Black (Art) Power,
Dana C. Chandler, Jr.
Black Artist

March 2, 1970

[stamped to indicate receipt: Mar 4 10 54 AM '70]

Perry T. Rathbone, Director
Boston Museum of Fine Arts
465 Huntington Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts

Dear Mr. Rathbone:

You stated in your letter to me in late January that you would be meeting with your board at their regularly scheduled date in March.

I therefore request that I be present at that Board of Trustees meeting to present in my way the proposal I gave to you ("A Proposal to Eradicate Institutional Racism at the MFA") on January 15th.

I desire that there be no question as to our position on this matter; no room for mis-interpretation.

I expect that Mssrs. Scott, Perez, and Gray, as well as one or two other community personnel, (a Black United Front representative and a Black Student Federation representative) will accompany me.

It is our wish that it be clear that our position has not changed concerning what we think the priorities of the museum should be. I expect that another meeting will take place between Boston Black Artist and the personel putting together the show in late May, as we too feel that all parties concerned should be involved with the creation of a tremendously successful show, especially since this should be a milestone for both the Black community (and it's museum) and the MFA. I would appreciate an immediate reply, if you would be so kind.

Yours in Black (Art) Power,
Dana Chandler, Jr., Black Artist

March 6, 1970

Mr. Dana Chandler, Jr.
The City of Boston
Model City Administration
Bartlett Building
2401 Washington Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02119

Dear Mr. Chandler:

Thank you for your letter of March 2nd. The Trustees of the Museum meet on March 19th. I have conveyed your request to the President, Mr. George Seybolt, and he would be pleased to have you and your associates come to the meeting as guests that day and to present again the proposal made in your statement.

Mr. Seybolt is now working out a timetable for the agenda. As soon as he has been able to do so, he will tell you more precisely the hour when we can receive you.

Plans are processing for our Black Artist exhibition in May.

Yours sincerely,

Perry T. Rathbone
Director

PTR/t

{MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, Boston Massachusetts 02115}
{Office of the President}

March 6, 1970

Mr. Dana Chandler, Jr.
The City of Boston
Model City Administration
Bartlett Building
2401 Washington Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02119

Dear Mr. Chandler:

As Mr. Rathbone has advised you, the Board of Trustees of the Museum will be quite willing to sit down with you as you requested in your letter of March 2nd.

I would suggest that you come, with whomever you wish to bring but it would be helpful if the group could be kept to a half dozen, to the Museum on Thursday, March 19th. We will be in a position to meet with you at 3:00 p.m., and I suggest that you go to either the entrances and have the guard call Mrs. McVickar so that we may arrange to admit your party without any charge.

I'm sure Mr. Rathbone has discussed the Museum and your desires and programs at length, as he has reported to us the progress of your discussions.

Sincerely yours,
George C. Seybolt

GCS:jeb

Results of MFA Trustee Meeting 3/19/70.

1. Create a library of own on Black Art - Extensive slide library.
 1. Museum
 2. [National] Center
2. Barry Gaither - Organize a continuing ~~exhibition~~ shows of Black Art.
- 2A. Barry will make aesthetic determinations for shows.
3. Build a collection (retrospective) of work of Black Artists.
 - Paintings, Drawing
 - Prints, Sculpture
4. some money - just what to be determined later.
 - AA + BB galleries

{Black Community}
{CC: Cu[...]uig
Vena
Seybolt}

June 4, 1971

Mr. Dana Chandler, Jr.
791 Tremont Street
Roxbury, Massachusetts 02118

Dear Dana:

Before leaving on an extended trip, I wanted to give you both an answer to your letter of earlier this spring and a progress report on our relationship with the black art community. Much of this information was reported on at the special meeting of the Museum's Board of Trustees which was held in April at the National Center.

As I look back over the past year, I am encouraged, and the Trustees are encouraged, by our progress and the growing number of activities in which the Museum is both directly and indirectly involved. I am pleased by the support the Museum staff and individual trustees have been able to give Barry in various organizational and procedural matters -- acquisitions, exhibitions, publications, documentation, public relations, education and fund raising.

The progress is symbolized by the number of exhibitions that Barry has been able to mount at the Center; our current Recent Acquisitions exhibition of black artists 1870–1970; the forthcoming Charles White exhibition, which we hope to circulate nationally; the arrival in the fall of a curator of contemporary art to work with all relevant departments in the Museum; and finally, by no means of least importance, in the very tight and trying fiscal year that lies ahead, Barry's budget is the only one in the Museum that has not been noticeably reduced. Indeed, it has been slightly increased.

Sincerely yours,
Perry T. Rathbone
Director

PTR/sa