Note from the Editor

Back in 1979, a friend gave me a ticket to the first blockbuster King Tut exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The crowds hampered thought and observation, as one can imagine. Anyway, in those days my politics were severe, which meant that crowds of people gushing over a pharaoh's gold propelled me into an affectation of apathy. I do remember being intrigued by a set of game tiles, I think for *senet*. I guess I stood looking too long, because a young boy behind me said to his mother, "That man won't move." And the mother answered, "Well, push him aside." I remember enjoying that immensely: What an appropriate thing to say to your ten-year-old in an art museum.

In December 2009, the incredible man responsible for that exhibit, former Metropolitan director Thomas Hoving, died. To describe him, the *New York Times* used phrases like "charismatic showman," "brash self-mythologizing," and "explosive energy." "One thing he never claimed to be was modest," and he was notorious for "letting few things, least of all shame, stand in his way" of acquiring objects that had left their home countries under less-than-pristine circumstances. Hoving was also clearly brilliant and dedicated to the civic idealism often espoused by this country's urban cultural institutions, the "dreams of a democratic culture" examined by Tim Lacy in his October 2008 article on the Great Books movement. Recalling that Francis Henry Taylor, the Met's mid-twentieth-century director who also used theatrics to attract people, proclaimed the museum "the midwife of democracy," Hoving added, "And damn it, it is." All of the above qualities are on display in Hoving's appropriately titled memoir, *Making the Mummies Dance* (1993).

With a brazen combination of marketing, dazzle, wonder, prestige, and edification, modern directors transformed big-city museums from solemn, potentially lonely places into crowded, indispensible institutions. The Metropolitan's first director archaeologist Luigi (or Louis) P. di Cesnola, a Union colonel who won the Medal of Honor, focused most on building up the museum's collections. He had a reputation as an adventurer and a poor administrator more comfortable with the financiers and industrialists who underwrote the museum than with the public whose cultural level the museum was devoted to elevating. In his justly controversial book, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (1988), Lawrence Levine dismisses Cesnola as a social-controlling stuffed shirt who insisted in haughty terms on decorum. There were no mothers urging boys to push away college students when Cesnola was around. Nor laborers who had "been digging in a filthy sewer or working among grease and oil," nor people "blowing their nose with their fingers," nor "whistling, singing, and calling aloud to people from one gallery to another." Probably none of these things mixes well with learning about and appreciating art, let alone protecting it. But museum curators and directors have learned that an

engaging atmosphere and a dash of entertainment carry people further in the direction of cultivation.

Cesnola does not appear in Robert May's thorough, vivid article on the prolonged campaign by American artists on behalf of tariff exemptions for imported art, but the future of the Metropolitan and similar institutions hovers over the question, as do J. P. Morgan and other wealthy patrons whose collections the Metropolitan anticipated inheriting. Congressmen appreciated the paradoxes raised by the free-art campaign. Art fit the conventional definition of an infant industry meriting protection, so why did virtually every consequential artist support free imports from established production centers? Why should outrageously rich people pay no taxes on these items of conspicuous consumption, when the prices paid by constituents for necessities and small luxuries included import duries in order to finance the government and, in theory, to encourage economic development? Why indeed? It may seem self-evident to readers of this journal that art and artists are special, but that assumption itself reveals a great deal about educated people's notions of a worthwhile urban life in the Gilded Age and in the early twenty-first century. We may disapprove of Hoving's excesses, but how many people reading this journal seriously question his goal?

While May draws attention to an ongoing assumption among educated Americans, Les Benedict's revised Distinguished Historian address draws attention to a discontinuity. Who other than Tea Partiers and the Federalist Society have concerned themselves with the *constitutionality* of the large domestic issues of 2008–10: stimulus packages, bank bailouts, and healthcare plans? Benedict emphasizes that in the late 1800s, participants in policy debates believed that they had to pronounce on matters of constitutionality–that this was not an abstruse issue best left to the courts. The implication is that perhaps supporters of federal initiatives should not leave these matters to formalists and rabble-rousers, but should engage them head on.

Mitch Kachun's article on the sad story of Jim Parker, the African American waiter who tried to stop Leon Czolgosz's assassination of William McKinley, illustrates how much fictionalizing went into the so-called reconciliation of white America at the expense of black citizens. Czolgosz, too, was an alienated and mentally disturbed American-born citizen, and his fictionalization into a foreigner counted among the comforting conceits that allowed people to absorb the terrible event. Because of the multiple levels on which Kachun's article raises the matter of American citizenship, we will soon offer teaching materials that build upon this essay at www.jgape.org, an example of the enhanced online presence discussed in recent months.

Alan Lessoff