

STUART W. GENTLING

9 April 1981

Dr. Ted Pillsbury, Director
Kimbell Art Museum
Fort Worth, Texas

Dear Sir;

Please allow me to introduce myself. As my letterhead implies, my name is Stuart Gentling. I am an artist and a longtime resident of Fort Worth. I was graduated from Tulane University with a B.A. in English and History. I studied at the University of Texas School of Law for one year, and following that, I studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Though I hold no formal degree in fine art, I have a good working knowledge of art history aided by a very fine personnel library. My main fields of interest are American art of the the 19th and 20th centuries, European art of the 16th through the 20th centuries, Japanese art from the 16th through the 18th centuries, and the indigenous arts of the New World prior to European contact. I am a collector mainly of Japanese and Pre-colombian art. I have lectured at the Fort Worth Art Museum on career problems of young artists; The Dallas Museum of the Fine Arts on the Buckingham Vermeer; I have lectured twice at the Kimbell Museum on drawings from the Fitz-William collection and on symbolism in Pre-colombian art with reference to the Kimbell collection. I am a member of the Board of Directors of the Fort Worth Art Museum, and I have served on several other art boards for the city over the years. I am thirty-eight years old.

Forgive this lengthy introduction, but I wished you to know that what I am about to say comes from a citizen of Fort Worth who has spent a great deal of his time deeply committed to the promotion and betterment of the art life of my city.

Last week, after returning from a business trip, I naturally dropped by the Kimbell to see the new installation. What greeted my eyes was most disturbing. I confess that my emotions would only permit me to view the

installation quickly, and I then returned to my home to unpack and to ponder what I had just seen. Since that time I have allowed my emotions to cool and have returned to the Kimbell several times to analyse and evaluate.

If you may permit me to frankly air my observations, I must say that you or your staff have considerably altered the fundamental harmony which formerly existed and which must exist between the building and the collection. The Kimbell Museum is quite unique, because both the building and the collection were created with each other in mind and by the same body of people. The effect of this change, I am forced to say, does not live up to the high standards set by the former Director, the Architect, and the staff of the Museum, and it throws the entire collection out of kilter.

I think I know whereof I speak. I knew Richard Brown very well, and though I did not know Louis Kahn well, I did have the great pleasure of being alone in his company for an entire afternoon discussing architecture in general but the Kimbell Museum in particular. I am very well informed as to the original intent of both Brown and Kahn as to exactly ^uhow the Museum, both building and collection should function.

Now allow me to be specific. I will list some but not all of the major problems created by the current installation.

I) The panels, especially in the main cycloid of the south wing, have been so glaringly intruded in toward the center of the cycloid so as to break the natural flow of vision and space. The effect is not dramatic, as was perhaps intended, but discordant and offensive. Furthermore, because you have appeared to prefer natural ^{light} in most of the rooms and not the combination of natural and artificial lighting originally intended by the architect, the effect is too icy and will continue to get more so as our Texas sun climbs to its zenith.

Panels have been badly placed in other areas as well, especially in the shutting of the immediate side galleries from the only artificially-lit central cycloid. The effect is to make uncomfortable cubbyholes of some of these areas, and those particular panels create a problem that would have made Kahn turn over in his grave. The panels significantly block the view across the building from the east end to the west. They break the flow of vision and destroy the sense of the building as a whole. Roman interiors particularly of the Hadrianic Period will give you a hint as to how Kahn meant for the eye to flow from one end of the building to the other, accented but not hindered by panels. Panels in this building are necessary and useful. Both Kahn and Brown wished to use them to create mystery, not visual discord.

(2) By removing so many rugs you have created a major problem, not just with sight, but with sound. The building echoes, and it echoes badly. This interferes with concentration and makes the building sound like a warehouse. The control of sound is so very important to an art museum that I find it difficult to understand why you have not considered it. Richard Brown understood quite well that those rugs and the furniture on them which once made the museum such a comfortable place were not there just for their beautiful effect.

(3) This may seem to be a minor point, but it is not. Your use of labels at several strategic places is awkward, especially for those handicapped viewers in wheelchairs. Some of these areas have all the labels placed together at some distance from the objects they describe. This can be annoying to the single viewer and a genuine inconvenience in a crowd.

(4) I am afraid that I must say that the effect of the overall display and hanging is not very successful. Fine pieces of sculpture and ceramics throughout the building are badly grouped and very, very badly lit. The dramatic effect usually associated with the Kimbell's collection of fine African sculpture is unquestionably ruined by the current display. Your two great Maya incised vases are so hard to see because of the unsympathetic lighting that they have all but lost their magical poetry and power. These are but two examples, and I can assure you that there are several more.

As far as the pictures are concerned, they are hung much too close to each other. In many places they push and intrude upon each other and interfere with the natural integrity of each work. There is also a sense of regimentation which dilutes the impact of the truly important pieces. The show is over-hung thus creating that stale effect so often observed in many large eastern art museums. That is not what the Kimbell is about. I might add that the pictures are in several areas hung too high. This creates an impression that is aloof, somewhat imperious. It makes it difficult for children and people in wheelchairs to view the works, and it creates unnecessary reflection problems in the new lighting situation. In regards to the lighting I might mention that there is a possibility that the Frans Hals is hung too close to the atrium. You obviously do not yet know our Texas light. By summer that picture could well be damaged, if the glass is not protective glass.

5) Again in reference to the African art display, or more appropriately, to the area in which it is displayed. I know for a fact that Louis Kahn meant for this area to be open and clear to provide an area of rest between the two galleries. There ought to be a place^{of} visual rest for the public, and the presence of so many sculpture stands makes it a virtual obstacle course for visitors moving from one wing to the other. Besides, as I have already said, the light and the annoying reflections make proper viewing all but impossible. It is better to store the works for another day than to display them badly.

Dr. Pillsbury, these views are not shared by myself alone but by many others whose opinions I value greatly. There is a general feeling of dissatisfaction about the "new" look, but many of these people do not care to venture their opinions. I certainly have nothing to gain by doing so myself. Yet I cannot keep quiet when I see an important building and a collection whose birth I witnessed altered in such a way as to damage the effect of both. The Kimbell collection is not a great one as great

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museum collections go, but it has many truly great things in it. Many of the best objects are great not because they represent the best of a period or master, but because they stand outside of the commonly accepted style. They are exceptional, unique and not necessarily representative. If the filling in of gaps for the simple sake of doing so, and the placing of those objects in chronological sequence seems to be what you have in mind, then your future acquisitions will rarely be objects of superior and exceptional quality. Not even the Kimbell budget could accomplish that. I note your recent purchase of the Stubbs, a decent but rather second rate painting by a very fine painter whose work I have longed to see in the Kimbell collection. Your choice of the David is most puzzling. Again we have a very great painter but this time a truly bad picture, the work of his declining years. Again, this is not what I have always thought the Kimbell was about. If the Kimbell Museum is to stand tall among the small museums of the world, it must be unique and exceptional. This apparent attempt to create some sort of survey of art history out of the collection is to force the museum into competition with institutions which possess greater resources and which already have long established collections. The Kimbell best succeeds when it is truly a connoisseur's museum, when it offers exceptional works in a setting of exceptional taste. The needless overhanging of the galleries fails to recognize one basic fact. One truly special work of art can require from the most erudite observer hours, years of study and enjoyment. A viewer simply cannot maintain a high level of interest when confronted by too many objects at once.

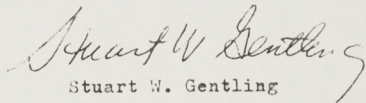
I know that I may have offended you by my directness and candor. For that I am sorry. I am speaking out, because I love the Kimbell Museum. As I have said, I have watched it grow from the ground up. I have known most of the people involved, and I have watched them create a small museum of a truly unique character and quality, a jewel in Fort Worth's crown. The Kimbell Museum has maintained this unique quality through a

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a delicate balance, a harmony of building and collection. This harmony has been substantially altered by the current installations, and I greatly hope that you and your staff will have the wisdom and the good taste to re-establish it.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Stuart W. Gentling". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a long, sweeping tail on the final "g".

Stuart W. Gentling

P.S. As a matter of courtesy I am mailing a copy of this letter to Mrs. Fortson, and if you wish to talk with me about my observations, I may be reached at the following number, 738 4427.