

Brooklyn Museum May Have to Pay Hundreds of Thousands to Store Fake Art

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PROSPECT HEIGHTS — The Brooklyn Museum may have to spend more than a quarter-million dollars annually to mothball forgeries and artwork that cannot be exhibited — all because of a generous donor's restrictions and the museum's desire to stay in good standing with its peers.

The museum received a windfall of art in 1932, when New York City resident and philanthropist Col. Michael Friedsam bequeathed to it 926 pieces.

At the time of his death in 1931, Friedsam had amassed an enviable collection of Renaissance paintings, jewelry and furniture, as well as Roman and Qing Dynasty pottery. Included in the bequest were oil paintings by Spanish Renaissance genius El Greco, American landscape artist George Inness, and Dutch and Flemish masters. Or so Friedsam thought.



PHOTO CREDIT: Gift of the executors of the estate of Colonel Michael Friedsam

In the decades since the gift, the museum's expertise in authenticating art has grown, and further reviews of the collection have revealed that 229 pieces are either fakes, replicas, misattributed to a prominent artist or in too poor condition to exhibit.

That's painted the museum into a corner.

Friedsam's gift required the museum to obtain the approval of a surviving executor of his estate before selling off - or deaccessioning - any of the collection. But the last surviving executor died 50 years ago.

In December 2010 the museum filed a petition in Manhattan Surrogate Court, asking a judge for permission to deaccession the 229 pieces.

In the filing, the museum explained that at the time of the bequest, it was eager to fill its wings with artwork. But now space has become a precious commodity — and those 229 pieces are expensive to store.

The filing itemizes some of the fake pieces, including "Elderly Gentleman," an oil painting originally believed to be by Domenikos Theotokopoulos, the artist known as El Greco. Further reviews revealed that the piece was a modern copy painted over a genuinely old painting.

Another painting in the collection was a landscape by George Inness that museum scholars determined to be a deliberate forgery.

The unusable pieces also include Roman glass objects that do not have excavation histories, as well as Renaissance furniture deemed inauthentic.



The museum said in the filing that if it can't sell the paintings, the institution will have to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to store them in order to remain accredited with the Association of American Museums. Members of the association must follow strict guidelines for art conservation.

Long-term storage of the pieces would force the museum to pay \$403,000 to outfit a 1,300-square-foot off-site warehouse and to transport the art to the location, according to the petition. It would also have to spend \$286,000 a year to rent the space and hire caretakers.

"The financial burden of these works undermines the museum's ability to maintain its central role as a dynamic, innovative, and welcoming centre for learning through the visual arts, rather than an expensive storage facility," the petition says.

Complicating the situation is the museum's finances. In an affidavit to the filing, Brooklyn Museum director Dr. Arnold Lehman said the 2008 financial crisis walloped the institution. From 2007 to 2009, the museum's endowment dropped by 30 percent, while corporate and individual patrons drastically reduced their donations and the city scaled back funding.

"The losses incurred during the financial crisis will continue to affect the museum's operating budget for years to come," Lehman noted.

So far, the museum hasn't gotten the court's approval.

While the petition had the support of the New York Attorney General's office, in December 2011 Judge Nora Anderson declined to adjudicate the petition request, noting Friedsam's will had an alternative bequest.

If the entire collection could not be retained as a whole, Friedsam's will indicated that the works should go to his brother-in-law and two friends. Anderson ruled that efforts should be made to find their successors and that a court-appointed attorney should represent their interests.

Brooklyn Museum spokeswoman Sally Williams told DNAinfo.com New York that the museum is taking steps to follow Anderson's decision.

She explained that in the Friedsam collection, "most of the works are quite wonderful," but as scholarship advanced, curators have identified non-museum-quality pieces. She declined to say whether those works were a financial burden.

"I can't speak to if it's a burden or not," she said. "We have a huge collection. We are always fine-tuning."