



A NATIONAL AFFAIR

As Andrew Mellon's venerable National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., wraps up its fiftieth-anniversary year, longtime museum director J. Carter Brown is also the focus of some of the capital's juiciest gossip.

by John Sedgwick

STAFFERS CALL IT "THE GALLERY," never "the National." But this is the sort of cozy understatement that comes naturally to the old WASP crowd that still sets the tone at the museum. Secretly, everyone is only too pleased that theirs is the *National Gallery of Art*, its major league implications festooned

with a flag-waving patriotism that has proved such a tremendous draw for donations over the years. And as it celebrates its fiftieth anniversary, the National Gallery is living up to its five-star billing. Not only are there its artistic holdings and the turnout at its splashy galas but also society's almost indecent

curiosity about the private life of the museum's blue-blooded impresario, J. Carter Brown. About that, more later.

It was the National Gallery's founder, the billionaire financier and collector Andrew Mellon (1855–1937), from the Pittsburgh banking family, who selected the name, pointedly eschewing the self-aggrandizing example of his one-time business partner Henry Clay Frick, who founded The Frick Collection in New York City in 1935. Although Mellon is now invariably hailed for his nearly Buddha-like modesty, at the time he was not unaware of the problems a Mellon Gallery would encounter (some old-timers, however, do call it that). Why would other collectors give their art to such a place? The wisdom of his decision is apparent today. Brown didn't ask Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III, for example, to give her Thomas Cole landscape, *Sunrise in the Catskills*, to the museum merely as a fiftieth-birthday present. No, her gift, and the many like it, was "for the nation." (Of course, the nation had made such giving more appealing by creating a one-year tax incentive for 1991 by which donors would be allowed to deduct the full appraised value of a piece of art rather than just the purchase price.)

And as the black-tie excitement of the anniversary year finally dies down and the tremendous haul of paintings is logged in (at least 160 donors contributed more than fifteen hundred works of art), it seems less remarkable that the National Gallery is fifty than that it is *only* fifty.

Unlike its longtime rival, New York City's encyclopedic Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery has always specialized in painting and sculpture of the Western tradition. "And," says John Wilmerding, a former deputy director of the Gallery who now teaches art history at Princeton, "it wants only the very best work of the greatest artists." A tall order for a museum coming into the game so late, but the Gallery has succeeded to an astonishing extent. In fact, the only criticism of the collection concerns its limited and uneven selection of contemporary works. It holds the only Leonardo da Vinci painting in this hemisphere, the psychologically sensitive *Ginevra de' Benci*. There are only about thirty-five Vermeers in the world, and the Gallery owns three pelucid portraits—*The Girl with the Red*

Hat, A Lady Writing, and Woman Holding a Balance. It also has Jan van Eyck's late-medieval painting *The Annunciation*, which another museum director has said may well be the most illustrious masterpiece in the nation, and Pablo Picasso's superb Rose Period *Family of Saltimbanques*.

Despite its vast size, the Gallery is still to a remarkable degree a house museum, reflecting the

eighty-four, having given away more than \$1 billion to charitable organizations, has outdone them all. "Paul Mellon must have a kindness gene that other people don't have," says Robert Bowen, Brown's special assistant, who once placed an inspirational photograph of Mellon over his desk, next to one of Catherine Deneuve.

Paul Mellon once gave a

Gallery. The painting, a prized possession, has been hanging in their own drawing room.

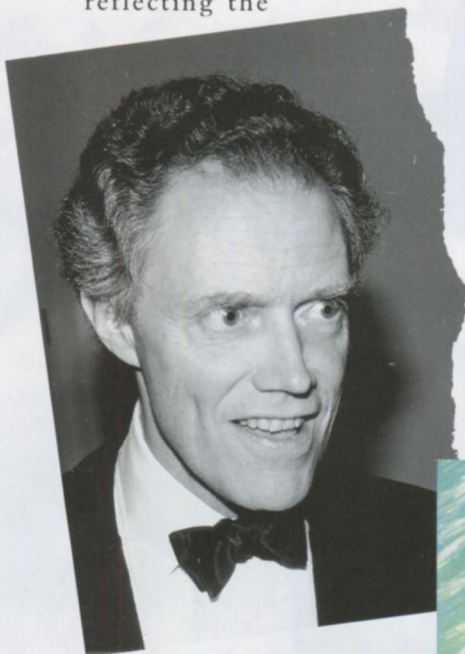
IF THE MELLONS ARE THE LANDLORDS of their house museum, J. Carter Brown is the tenant-at-will of the spacious director's office on the top floor of the East Building. A somewhat mysterious figure, Brown, who is fifty-seven,

can be delightfully engaging as he flashes a boyish grin over some wry witticism he's made, but he can also be almost disturbingly withdrawn. His soft voice occasionally drops away to inaudibility, and he sometimes closes his eyes as if to tune out the world altogether. "I'm a visual type," he explains, "and so the data that I get in through my eyes are always

grabbing a lot of my consciousness. When I am trying to *encode* rather than *decode*, it helps my concentration to close my eyes." He dryly adds, "Unfortunately, it has become a journalistic convention always to mention it."

Brown took over the National Gallery in 1969, at thirty-four. Although there is inevitably some grumbling about the control that Brown, after nearly twenty-three years in the job, exerts over so many aspects of the museum—from the typeface of the painting labels to the subjects for exhibition—the staff remains awestruck by his tremendous attributes as a scholar, advocate, administrator, and visionary. Perhaps too much so. One staffer says there is a game played called Carter Says. You play it by appending the words "Carter says" to anything you would like done and then watching it happen. Recently, he again proved his worth when the Gallery acquired the much-coveted Woodner collection of drawings, which includes priceless works by Benvenuto Cellini and Giorgio Vasari.

J. CARTER BROWN IS TAKING HEAT FOR HIS FRIENDSHIP WITH WIDOWED PAMELA C. HARRIMAN, WHO HAS BEEN A GENEROUS BENEFACTOR OF THE MUSEUM.



W. Averell Harriman's widow, Pamela, recently donated van Gogh's *Roses* (1890, oil on canvas, 28" x 35½")—with an estimated value of \$50 million—to the National Gallery.

tastes, interests, and personalities of the Mellons. Andrew Mellon conceived the idea, funded the original building, and stocked it with his own extraordinary collection of 132 old masters—a \$60 million gift that then stood as the largest single donation of an individual to any government in history. His generosity took his children by surprise, however. His daughter Ailsa was "very, very upset," according to her brother, Paul, that a Joshua Reynolds portrait of a young girl that had hung in her bedroom went to the museum instead of to her. Despite this, Ailsa contributed more than \$30 million to the cause, both directly and through various trusts she controlled. In 1967, it was her \$5 million that enabled the museum to acquire the Leonardo from Prince Franz Josef II of Liechtenstein—at the time, the greatest sum ever paid for a painting of its size.

And Paul, Andrew's only son, now

commencement address to the Foxcroft School, near his home in Middleburg, Virginia, in which he argued that "what this country needs is a good five-cent reverie." Art has produced his own reveries, but they have cost him more than a nickel. With his sister, he has contributed more than \$60 million toward the \$100 million East Building and has furnished the museum with almost a thousand works of art from his private collection. Typically, in honor of the fiftieth anniversary, Paul and his wife, Bunny, have promised Paul Cézanne's masterpiece *Boy in a Red Waistcoat* to the

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: MARK REINSTEIN/UNIPHOTO; UPI/BETTSMANN; JOSE A. MADRUGO, COURTESY NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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Part of his success has lain in the surefootedness he has shown negotiating the political land mines that have blown up many another Washington museum director. Although publicly he has decried Jesse Helms-style government interference with the arts, he remarked to me that it is not without historical precedent. "In the fifties, congressmen called modern art 'scrambled eggs,'" he said, adding that similar antagonism lies behind today's "not very pretty" record of the government's relationship with the arts.

Recently, the Corcoran Gallery of Art endured the firestorm over the homoerotic Mapplethorpe photographs; the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art sparked a local frenzy over some labels in an American West show that implied cowboys were imperialist, and the director, Elizabeth Broun, rejected a proposed Sol LeWitt installation involving a nude female figure for an exhibition only to be forced by public outcry to include it. The closest Brown has ever come to a controversy was in 1987, when the National Gallery put on a show of Andrew Wyeth's *Helga* drawings and paintings (in which the nude subject was not the artist's wife and was possibly his mistress)—which is to say, not very close.

In his personal life, Brown has not been quite so adroit. He has prided himself on presenting a facade as polished as the marble of the Gallery itself, but that has made the cracks all the more alluring to Washington society. Brown's first marriage in 1971 to Constance (Connie) Mellon Byers, Paul Mellon's second cousin, lasted only two years. In 1976, he married the former wife of Nicky Drexel of the Philadelphia banking family, Pamela Braga, the fox-hunting daughter of a wealthy Cuban. Their wedding was like an affair of state: it took place in the Henry VII Chapel of Westminster Abbey and was followed by a honeymoon in China. Pamela, unlike Connie, found a role for herself running the Gallery's social events, which she did, by all accounts, with great taste and style.

But despite Pamela's efforts to fit into her husband's life, the marriage was never happy, according to friends. "Carter is very controlling," says one. "Everything doesn't just have to be exactly right, it has to *look* exactly right too." And it did until a few years ago,

when Brown started standing alone in National Gallery receiving lines. Pamela, it developed, had begun seeing a Middleburg horseman considerably older than she. Brown himself discusses none of this with the staff or the press and takes on a pained look when the subject of his marriage is raised. When I ask if he is yet formally divorced, his "no" is nearly inaudible. "But divorce is in the works?" I ask. "It looks that way." I tell him I'm sorry. "So am I," he replies wearily.

For legal reasons, the Browns and their two children, John Carter Brown IV and Elissa, continued to live together in their elegant house on Dumbarton Street in Georgetown while the terms of the separation were worked out. One family friend was told by Pamela that the couple were haggling over money.

As if all this weren't piquant enough, Brown has frequently been seen in the company of Pamela C. Harriman, the seventy-one-year-old widow of former New York governor W. Averell Harriman and, lately, a major fund-raiser for the Democratic party. Harriman, who is fourteen years older than Brown, disclaims any romantic liaison: "Just because we go to a lot of the same social gatherings doesn't mean anything more than a long-term friendship."

Others suspect there may be more to it. The English-born Pamela, née Digby, described by Truman Capote as "a geisha girl who made every man happy," first married Winston Churchill's son Randolph and, despite two subsequent marriages, retains Churchill as a middle name. She has been linked to some of the world's most eligible bachelors, including Elie de Rothschild, Gianni Agnelli, Stavros Niarchos, and Edward R. Murrow. "We spent a lot of time on yachts together," Capote told his biographer, Gerald Clarke. "Anybody becomes a confidant on a yacht cruise, and I think I've lived through every screw she ever had in her life. Believe me, that's an *Arabian Nights* tale of a thousand and twelve!"

In a romantic coup that was comparable to the Woodward killing for social drama, Pamela won producer Leland Hayward away from his wife, Slim Keith, who had taken him from actress Margaret Sullavan. Their liaison split the ladies who lunch into pro-Pamela and pro-Slim factions. Keith was understandably bitter (Continued on page 116)

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settled when, in another of the quirks that have ruled Shand's life, he happened upon two British friends, Anne and Belinda Wright, at the Sonepur fair. They wanted an elephant for their safari camp in the state of Madhya Pradesh in central India. "It was an incredible stroke of fortune, because I knew they would look after her," says Shand. "Now she lives like a queen."

WITH CLIO'S BLESSING—AS WELL AS her time and energy—Shand has plunged into the most surprising role of his life: crusader. His passion for saving the Indian elephant will have some cynics wondering how well a former playboy can play God. Old friends who hear the edge of urgency in the aging bad boy's voice have a lot more faith. "He feels really deeply about the Indian elephant, and I believe he will go to any lengths to save it," says McCullin.

"Mark is seeing things in a more valuable and realistic way," McCullin adds. "He can still drive me round the bend, but there's less of doing it just for a good time. He's almost got rid of the naughty schoolboy side to him." Mark Shand is too busy playing teacher. □

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(Signed) Carole Ference, Publisher

about the turn of events and cabled Capote after Hayward's marriage to Pamela, "I wonder if she tied a ribbon on it." Several biographies of Harriman are in the works, but her own autobiographical rejoinder is to come: Random House has reportedly paid a breathtaking \$1.8 million for the rights.

"There are certain women," Capote once wrote with Pamela in mind, "... who, though perhaps not born rich, are born to be rich. . . . These persons are artists of an odd variety; money, in astronomical amounts, is their instrument." And Harriman has certainly used hers, creating sumptuous quarters for herself in Georgetown, Middleburg, Sun Valley, and Barbados and providing special comforts for the men of her life. Brown, for one, has enjoyed the pampering, no matter how much it might violate his frugal Yankee principles. "She just makes them feel wonderful," says one former member of her staff. "She is very attractive, and she is very soft and sweet. When you are with her, you don't think about how you have to go home and clean your house."

One member of their social circle says, "It's a marriage of convenience. He gives her an escort, and she gives him entrée to possible donors he might want to cultivate for the National Gallery." One donor has been Pamela Harriman herself. As a fiftieth-birthday gift to the National Gallery, she gave the \$50 million van Gogh *Roses* from her late husband's collection. "I've gotten a lot of credit for doing that," she admits, "but I don't think it's deserved. My husband had already given the Gallery quite a number of Impressionist paintings. When he gave me the van Gogh *Roses*, he said he hoped I would leave it there, too, because naturally one wants one's collection kept together. The fiftieth anniversary seemed a good moment to indicate my gift, that's all. It was really very, very simple."

THERE IS A STORY, ONE THAT HE DISCOUNTS, that Brown had planned to run the National Gallery ever since he first set eyes on the building at age twelve. True or not, it is hard to imagine how he might have prepared himself for the job any better. To start with, he is descended from the Browns of Providence, one of the illustrious Five First Families that have virtually divided Rhode Island up among themselves. He was raised in the

Brown ancestral home in the College Hill section of Providence, not far from Brown University. The house is sufficiently well-appointed that in 1989, a Chippendale block-and-shell pattern secretary from it sold at Christie's for \$12.1 million, then the highest price ever paid for furniture in the United States.

Brown is the son of John Nicholas Brown, once dubbed by the press the World's Richest Baby, and the former Anne Kinsolving, whose father was rector of Old St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Baltimore. Both were unusually cultivated. His father read Latin and Greek, pursued archaeology as well as architecture, and collected modern art. His mother played concert violin, organized chamber music concerts, and in one of the oddities that reflected her character, developed a passion for toy soldiers. "I was lucky to have parents who were so interested in culture and the visual arts," he says now, "and I got a lot of it through osmosis."

Young Carter studied both the clarinet and the piano and learned French from his governess. He was sent to school at Groton, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's cold-shower-before-breakfast Massachusetts alma mater, from which he graduated first in his class at age sixteen. "Groton did not foster my aesthetic interests," he says delicately, "but it certainly couldn't expunge them." He furthered his education with a year in England at the Stowe School, which was located in the former country house of the duke of Buckingham and inspired Brown some thirty years later to organize the National Gallery's "Treasure Houses of Britain" show. Then he went to Harvard, bringing a Matisse drawing and a Cézanne watercolor of his father's to brighten his bedroom. "At Harvard, I finally found birds of a feather and professors who shared my interests, things that made me feel less incongruent." He managed the glee club and, on the advice of Francis Henry Taylor, retired director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, studied European history and literature rather than art, with which he was already well acquainted.

After graduating *summa cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa, he enrolled in the Harvard Business School, a move that he still credits as a key to his success. "It was two wonderful years to find out

what makes the business world tick," he volunteers. "There are prejudices on both sides of the chasm between business and the arts. Artists think that CEOs are a bunch of philistines who will never understand, and businessmen think that artist types are totally out of touch with reality. There is a need to build bridges between them, and I think I can do that."

Upon graduation, he went to the villa I Tatti in Florence to study with Bernard Berenson, the esteemed art critic, whose acquaintance he had made on a Harvard Glee Club European tour. Although "B. B." had successfully tutored Kenneth Clark and John Pope-Hennessy, Brown found the old man too bossy and departed after only a few months for Paris to attend an Ecole du Louvre course for museum professionals. "Berenson was hopping mad when I left," Brown once recalled. Afterward he roved the European galleries, then returned to New York University's Institute of Fine Arts, where he passed his comprehensive art-history exams his first day there, leaving him free to audit whatever courses he liked. John Walker, then the director of the National Gallery, plucked him from the institute. Brown had been thinking of developing a "small cultural center" that would, essentially, do for a local community what his parents had done for the family at home—staging concerts, holding poetry readings, and exhibiting art. Walker asked him how he'd like to do that for the entire country. Brown had known Walker all his life; the two families had summer houses on Fishers Island, off the eastern tip of Long Island. "I should have said, 'That's a totally ridiculous idea,'" Brown jokes now. But, of course, he didn't. Walker installed Brown in an adjoining office and set about grooming his successor.

That was 1961. The institution that the twenty-six-year-old Brown was set to inherit was only twenty years old, and like the lanky Brown, it still had some filling out to do. Although the museum had opened its doors in 1941, it had actually started life two decades before, when Andrew Mellon began his service as the secretary of the treasury, which would continue through three Republican ad-

ministrations. In Washington, Mellon set himself up in a magnificent apartment off Dupont Circle. He was distressed to discover that the only art collection in the city suitable for a visit from his European friends was his own. Like the National Gallery's ultimate collection, Mellon's pictures were all from the Western tradition. He had started buying tepid landscapes of the Barbizon school before the turn of the century, but by the time he arrived in Washington in 1921, he had moved on to large portraits by Gainsborough, Frans Hals, Filippino Lippi, and Raphael. He acquired so many that his bachelor apartment must have seemed densely populated by European dignitaries. Noble portraits and soothing landscapes were his specialty, and he had two other telling quirks: he was not interested in nudes, nor in depictions of the suffering of martyrs.

It is possible that Mellon had turned to art for solace after the breakup of his family. He had been married for a time to Nora Mary McMullen, a willowy Englishwoman whose father, a prosperous brewer, had settled his family in a castle in Hertfordshire. The two met on an ocean liner in 1898. Nora was barely twenty, Mellon, forty-three. She spurned his advances but reconsidered a year later, and they married in England. Looking out at Mellon's sooty Pittsburgh residence from the carriage window, the bride asked, "We don't get off here, do we? You don't live here?"

After bearing Ailsa and Paul, Nora settled into a gloom that wouldn't lift. Mellon always thought of his years with Nora as unqualified bliss, but she recalled the Pittsburgh house "as very dark; the halls were very dark, the walls were very dark and outside, Pittsburgh itself was very dark." The couple divorced in 1909 and, despite a bitter custody fight, remained affectionate. Nora remarried, to Harry A. Lee, a sometime antiques dealer, but the marriage lasted only five years, and when it was over she took back the Mellon name. Andrew rewarded her with a trust fund and gave her several country houses, including the four-hundred-acre thoroughbred stable Rokeby Farms near Middleburg that Paul would inherit. Eventually Andrew and Nora Mellon would be buried side by side in the small family plot in Virginia.

In the early twenties, alone in Wash-

ington, Mellon took an active part in the city beautification program of Michigan senator James McMillan, following the original design precepts of the French engineer Pierre L'Enfant. Mellon arranged to tear down a cluster of souvenir shops and tattoo parlors and build the Federal Triangle of twelve official buildings in their place. The triangle's point closest to the Capitol he left vacant; it would become the location of the National Gallery.

Following the 1929 stock market crash, President Hoover sent Mellon to England as his ambassador to the Court of St. James's, a post he held until 1933. Mellon had promised himself to attend strictly to embassy business and not buy any art, but he had to make an exception when the art dealers Knoedler & Company sent word that the young Soviet government, in its eagerness for hard currency, was willing to make available the czar's collection from the Hermitage in Leningrad. In competition with industrialist Armand Hammer and oil billionaire Calouste Gulbenkian for the best pieces, Mellon ended up spending \$6.6 million for twenty-one masterpieces, including Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi*, Raphael's *Alba Madonna* (for which he paid \$1.1 million, then a world record for a painting), four Van Dycks, and five Rembrandts.

In 1936, Mellon sent a note to President Roosevelt, who was entering his second term that year, announcing the plan that he had been developing for some time to establish a national art gallery. With his usual thoroughness, he let the president know he had also selected an architect, John Russell Pope, and a location on the Mall—the one he had been eyeing since his days working on the Federal Triangle. He also cannily suggested that although the museum might operate under the aegis of the Smithsonian Institution, it should be governed by its own board of trustees, an unusual arrangement that has assured its freedom from governmental interference ever since.

More impressive still, the letter did not mention the tax case the Roosevelt administration was then waging against Mellon, accusing him of defrauding the government of \$2 million, for which it was assessing an additional penalty of \$1 million. It has sometimes been claimed that Mellon's offer of the National Gallery constituted a kind of bribe to get the

IRS off his case. If so (and there is no evidence for it), a \$60 million offer to resolve a \$3 million dispute would have been a quite uncharacteristic overpayment on Mellon's part. One might better ask why Mellon went through with his gift after the Roosevelt administration treated him so shabbily. Mellon's own explanation was typically simple. "Every man," he once said, "wants to connect his life with something that he thinks of as eternal."

Roosevelt accepted Mellon's gift in the spirit in which it was offered, and Congress passed legislation approving his propositions for the Gallery. Mellon died five months later, on August 26, 1937, at the age of eighty-two. John Russell Pope died the next day but not before completing the design for the National Gallery, with its proud rotunda and forest of columns. In order to finish it, he had refused to undergo an operation for cancer.

David Finley, Mellon's right hand at the Treasury, was named the Gallery's first director, and it fell to him to fill up its vast empty spaces. He didn't collect paintings the way Mellon had. He collected collectors. First came the five-and-dime-store tycoon Samuel Kress, who had amassed a prodigious collection of old masters, the individual pieces of which he charmingly referred to as "items." Then Finley won from Joseph Widener the vast collection of his father, Peter A. B. Widener. A onetime Philadelphia butcher, Peter Widener had invested the profits from his Civil War contract selling mutton to the Union Army so shrewdly that he was able to retire to a Georgian mansion that he stocked with old masters.

The three collections—Mellon's, Kress's, and Widener's—instantly established the Gallery, and they proved, just as Mellon had hoped, to be a lure for other great ones. Lessing J. Rosenwald, the retired chairman of Sears, Roebuck, pledged his extensive collection of prints and drawings, which ultimately totaled 22,000 items, including a great deal of William Blake. And Chester Dale—an eager stockbroker of whom Salvador Dalí once complained, "He catches my arm, and the next day it's blue, so violent is his touch"—loaned

his extraordinary collection of Impressionist and twentieth-century art. Dale was always threatening to take his pictures back, but when he died in 1962, his final will made a permanent gift of his collection. Then-director Walker wrote in his memoirs, "I have slept better ever since."

ALL ART MUSEUMS, OF COURSE, HAVE something of the quality of the royal palaces they replaced, but today the elegance of the National Gallery is all the more striking because of the democratic implications of its governmental affiliation. To be sure, Brown has certainly not ignored the public. In this political town, he judges his success in large part by his vote totals. He refuses to concede that he has adopted any kind of lowest common denominator principle just for the sake of packing them in. Still, since he took over in 1969, he has increased attendance from barely one million a year to between five and seven million in 1990. Possibly for this reason, Brown has always secured his budget from Congress, even through the worst of the Reagan budget-cutting years.

Socially, there is no lowest common denominator. Nowhere is the Gallery's elite orientation more evident than in the lavish banquets it throws to celebrate its openings, second in prestige only to White House dinners. "You start with a certain tone right with the invitations," says Robert Bowen, noting that all the Gallery's invitations come from its trustees, four of whom are the secretary of state, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, the secretary of the treasury, and the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution.

The toniest National Gallery events are the Andrew Mellon dinners, which call for white tie and decorations, but all the events have a certain something. At the openings, special-events doyenne Genevra Higinson tries to capture the spirit of the art on display. For the "Matisse in Nice" exhibit in 1986, the dinner was served on "Matisse blue" tablecloths; for a show of George Bellows's boxing pictures, the dessert was Knockout Mousse.

Social butterflies are not the only ones to be drawn to the Gallery: rich corporations are possibly even more powerfully enticed and confer upon the Gallery a kind of blue-chip aura even as the Gal-

lery gives them an artsy glow. To them, the primary appeal is, as the old real estate joke goes, location, location, location—"two football fields away from the Capitol" is how one corporate executive puts it. The Gallery provides a convenient setting for the kind of informal lobbying that is, ultimately, the most effective kind. "It's the government equation that makes the whole thing work," the sponsor explains. "One hopes that congressmen and members of the Cabinet will attend in this friendly, off-camera environment and develop the kind of friendships that can be followed up later on."

Brown has not been shy about making these corporations pay for value received by enlisting them as sponsors to a degree unequaled in the art world. Mabel Brandon, director of corporate programming for the Ford Motor Company, which gave \$1 million to the "Treasure Houses of Britain" show (1985-86), notes that while other institutions don't know if a company is "interested in Italy or Ouagadougou," the National Gallery invariably does. "Carter Brown actually reads annual reports," she says with amazement. The corporations are allowed to help shape the guest list, send out a letter in the press kit on corporate stationery, and give a toast at the opening dinner. They are not permitted to place the company logo on the exhibition banner, though. "The Gallery is very stuffy about that," said one sponsor. "It's sort of a bore."

MOST OF THE GALAS TAKE PLACE IN the East Building, which Brown added in 1978. Mellon had presciently secured an adjoining lot, and even before Brown was made director he had been given the task of thinking about what might be done with it. Brown consulted colleagues and came to the conclusion that what was needed most was an art library on the model of I Tatti—a center where scholars could gather for art research. The museum also required additional office space, to free up more of the West Building for the display of art and provide a flexible exhibition area for modern art.

Brown shares some of his father's architectural aspirations, and he threw himself into the creation of the East Building when he assumed command of the Gallery. When I. M. Pei was selected as the architect, Brown led him

around Europe to his favorite house museums to show him the intimacy he sought. The result, with its soaring atrium, pocket-size gallery space, and razor-sharp angles, may not have been everything Brown was hoping for. The curator Walter Hopps, for example, has compared the East Building to an airport terminal. But Brown himself calls such criticisms a "bum rap," a favorite retort, and likens the wing to "the central square of a little Mediterranean town," a place that is welcoming, comfortable, and easy to get oriented in.

The East Building also gave Brown a stage on which he could finally present the great traveling exhibitions—he hates the term *blockbusters*—that the Metropolitan Museum of Art had pioneered in the 1960s. He began with "The Splendors of Dresden" in 1978, which documented five centuries of collecting from Saxony and was the product of two years of delicate negotiations with both the U.S. State Department and the East German government. The State Department told him to hold off, lest the East Germans try to gain something from the American government in return (regularly an issue because of the National Gallery's federal backing). That gave Brown's competitor, Thomas Hoving, his entrée, and he latched onto Brown's idea and began negotiating for the show on behalf of the Met. He did not take it well when Brown asked him to desist. "Tom was obviously going to try to tough it out and check us into the boards," Brown once recalled. "It seemed sort of irrational." The matter had to be resolved by an emergency meeting of the leading trustees, and Brown asked his friend David Rockefeller to mediate. At Rockefeller's summer house in Maine, the two museums agreed to what became known as the Treaty of Seal Harbor: the show would open in Washington and wind up its tour at the Met four months later.

Other spectacular shows followed in rapid succession. One of the high points was certainly the Gallery's "Treasure Houses of Britain," involving eight hundred objects on loan from 226 individuals and for which Brown somehow persuaded the Prince and Princess of Wales to act as official sponsors. Brown enlisted Gaillard Ravenel and Mark Leithauser, his exhibition specialists, to

re-create Tudor, Jacobean, Palladian, and neoclassical rooms in remarkable detail. The result was a tremendous hit with the public, although the press was able to contain its enthusiasm for a show that played so lovingly on America's latent royalism. *Time* magazine's Robert Hughes referred to it as "Brideshead Redecorated."

Although the days of the traveling exhibit are rumored to be numbered—because of soaring insurance costs, among other things—Brown himself has lost none of his appetite for them. Ravenel rather grandly says that Brown is to the exhibition what Sergei Diaghilev was to ballet. He loves everything about them, one might say—the scale, the popularity, the complexity, the risk, the sheer glorious excess. Ravenel recalls a conversation with Brown about the Rodin show (1981–82), and Brown's enthusiasm for the extras. "I asked him, 'Should we have wall labels?' and he said, 'Sure!' And I said, 'How about brochures?' and he said, 'Sure!' 'Separate brochures for each section?' 'Sure!' 'Acoustiguide?' 'Sure!' 'Catalog?' 'Sure!' " And so it went.

Now the National Gallery is presenting yet another extravaganza, "Circa 1492"—a look at the world at the time of Christopher Columbus, which will run through January 12. Brown had wanted to do something similar for the year 1776. "But it turned out that 1776 just wasn't one of the great vintages," he says. So the Gallery decided on 1492. That proved to be a better year, what with the Renaissance in Europe, the indigenous cultures in both North and South America, and the extraordinary splendors in the Far East. "China was probably a more advanced civilization than anything else at this period," says Brown. "It is going to be a mind bender for people to come up bang against that."

As he approaches sixty, his enthusiasm is palpable. Has Brown ever thought of moving on to other jobs? Would any other be quite so satisfying? "I serve at the pleasure of the board," he says, answering the basic question about his future for the umpteenth time. "It's up to them how long I stay." But then he flashes the trademark grin that tells what his words never do: as he sits at his desk on the seventh floor of the National Gallery, J. Carter Brown is on top of the world. □

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