

## GAMBLING on ART in VEGAS

While I was working at Sotheby's in 1999 "Curtain, Jug and Fruit Bowl" (1894) by Paul Cézanne was sold to an anonymous bidder for \$60 million. Although no one disputed the painting's status as an important work (the head of the Sotheby's Modern and Impressionist department described it as a "perfect painting") the price it took was beyond imagination. The sale was heralded with a full page spread of the painting's image in the New York Times the next day. It was the largest amount paid for a Cézanne to date. I certainly was curious-- what would compel anyone to buy a painting for an amount that could easily pay off a small country's debt? Surely, no museum besides the Getty, could allocate such resources. For months there was much speculation about who bought the painting. To the surprise of many, it turned up at the Bellagio Hotel on *the Strip* in Las Vegas, Nevada. In the end, the sale and final destination of the painting had become more famous than the artwork itself. It was a spectacle worthy of "Sin City".

The city of Fear, Loathing and Liberace does not exude traditional museum culture. Las Vegas has reinvented itself over and over since the 1950's. If anything, the commercial aspect of Las Vegas hinges on responding to and creating new trends in gambling, tourism and entertainment. Although the most recent incarnation of Las Vegas as home to haute culture marks a strange collision of worlds, it has brought important works of fine art to some unlikely audiences. In the late 1990's there arose in Las Vegas a community of artists and critics that acted as an antidote to the insular art scene of New York and Europe. The casino museums tend to expose the prejudices and divisions between the elitists structures of the art world and the "levelling" reality of the Las Vegas strip. Even though many critics have voiced fears that this movement toward art as entertainment will render art innocuous, the "entertainment factor" has instead been picked up on by museums themselves. But does the casino-museum truly signal a new advancement of art and its education, or are the casino museums simply a new means of creating revenue-- lasting only as long as the latest Las Vegas trend?

As the economy has changed, the fate of the casino-museums is up in the air.. What is to come may be reflective of America at the turn of the last century: when the wealthy fashioned their own memorials from European works of art collected not only to establish

their own status but also to educate and "uplift" the masses. Fine art possesses the power to confer status and cultural heritage. Residing for a time on the Las Vegas strip may be an unlikely twist in the life of a magnificent work of art, but it doesn't render it less intriguing or meaningful.

### **Art in the Entertainment Capital**

The Bellagio hotel was created by Steve Wynn- hotel developer and personality from Miami Beach and Atlantic City- as a 1.5 billion dollar foray into taste. There are no flashing lights or faux paintings: the lighting is subdued, the marble is real. There is no all you can eat buffet, but you may choose from a variety of five star restaurants. The Bellagio signalled a turn in the Las Vegas landscape towards "taste". Is this new Vegas a sign of progress, or merely a reflection of what Vegas has always done-extreme building in pursuit of revenue, i.e., exchange new bottles for old wine? Dozens of casinos owned and operated by Native Americans throughout California, Colorado, Oregon, Idaho, and New Mexico have drawn from a large reservoir of low-rollers. The Bellagio represents the first attempt at luring educated, affluent people to Las Vegas who, although not inveterate gamblers, would be interested in haute culture.

While Vegas had reached a smutty apogee in the 70's, in the late 80's it cleaned up with a disinfectant family theme (sporting the worlds highest roller coaster and a bevy of water parks) and by the end of the century Las Vegas developers were looking to create an oasis of cultural tourism to rival Europe and impress some of the educated dotcommers. Whereas The Bellagio was the first entrant in Las Vegas's version of haute culture, soon the Bellagio's epic Etruscan villa facade was soon joined on the infamous Strip with recreations of the canals of Venice, the Upper East Side of New York City, and the Eiffel Tower.

The jewel in the Bellagio's crown was its famed art collection. Worth over 200 million dollars, it was amassed at a time when the economy was reaching a frenzy-- October 1998. Considered one of the finest collections of art in the world, the Bellagio Collection included paintings by artists such as Monet, Degas, Cézanne, Renoir and Picasso. It was touted by the Bellagio as" an invitation for you to experience a different kind of Las Vegas." To the high art world-- it was a bit of a shock to think that Picasso's La Reve was in an air conditioned gallery in an outpost on the edge of the Mojave Desert.

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In the wake of all the high end development the Bellagio had sparked, several high end hotels followed its example, a wealth of other museums sprang on the Strip. The Venetian hotel brought us both The Guggenheim Las Vegas and the Hermitage Guggenheim. The accommodations in these casino- museums are amazing: large modern galleries designed by Rem Koolhaas are equipped with the latest developments in audio and interactive educational technologies- enough to make a director of any public arts institution salivate. The Guggenheim Las Vegas housed "the Art of the Motorcycle" sponsored by BMW. The exhibit was a flashy homage to German bike design. The Guggenheim Hermitage exhibit in the Venetian hotel offers a survey of Western painting, drawing from works belonging to the Guggenheim collection in New York, the Hermitage in St. Petersburg and Kunsthistorisches in Vienna. The exhibit, entitled "Art through the Ages" traces six centuries of painting from the Renaissance to early modern art. Included in the museum are Van Eyck, Mantegna, Velazquez, Titian, Picasso, de Kooning, Van Gogh- the heavies. There is a good effort made in labelling and available literature to explain why each of the paintings exemplify the masterwork of a certain period. It is exciting, but it is not overwhelming to anyone who doesn't want to be "bummed out" by evidence of scholarship. Ofcourse, all of the museums are within steps of the slots. So, if you get bored, you can get relief at the roulette wheel while sipping a free rum and coke.

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When the casino museums were first announced, artworld was ready to dish out criticism. It was easy, with so much fodder: the globalisation of the art complex, the masses, the spectacle. As with courtly Europe where someone's status was derived less from their accomplishments than from what they did not have to do-- , as noted by writer Carol Duncan, the idea of rarity has always been the ideal in Western Art . One German art critic wrote "The Bellagio resort and casino houses an art collection that includes paintings from El Greco to Picasso, promoted in the same way as Frank Sinatra or the Beach Boys". Although not as blatantly commercialized as what the critic would have us believe, there is a kernel of truth to what he is saying. The area between art and pure entertainment, on whatever level, is so fluid that it is difficult to locate in places like Las Vegas. The cultivating of a "sensitivity" to art is something that supposedly differentiates people. Pierre Bourdieu's work of the 1960's shows the power of the art institution to confer status and cultural belonging. But he does not make great mention of the art institution having substantive content beyond sociological or political description.

It is that content which has taken a new life in Las Vegas. It is ruffling to any one in the high art world that quality should be appreciated on a mass scale.

The velvet rope in the museum physically separates you the visitor from the work, but it also serves as a reminder of the revered difference between that object and the rest of world's other more mundane objects. Although there is a the fear that La Reve being hung within feet of an IMAX and a blackjack table signifies a dumbing down of art, the presence of these pieces in Las Vegas also coincides with the development of an important art community in the desert town. In the past ten years Las Vegas has figuratively and literally become an antidote to the more established elitism of much of 90's art. This community has had the odd job of liasing as representatives of "high culture" in Las Vegas. Art critics such as post modern theoretician Dave Hickey and Art Historian Libby Hoffman have moved to Las Vegas, bringing with them a gaggle of artists, including David Reed, Jim Isermann, and Jim Shaw, to teach at or attend UNLV. This is not to say these refuge seekers do not have their own pretensions, but they do signal an honesty about the landscape of American consumerism and perhaps a response to the rather narrow conversation going on in New York galleries. Hickey posits that, because of its lack of socially sanctioned forms of status, Las Vegas is a lens from which we can look at Democracy itself.

### **The Entertainment Factor**

*Is Las Vegas, capital of the western entertainment industry, also set to become the capital of art? At this historic moment, art is losing the visionary power to which it used to lay claim; art in general is drawing closer to the forms of the entertainment industry (from lifestyle to game shows) - and even in this respect its efforts are lagging behind. So, in a paradoxical turn of events, Las Vegas is also becoming the capital of the future cultural industry. The construction of the museums 'Guggenheim Las Vegas' and 'Hermitage Guggenheim' by Rem Koolhaas can be seen as the latest radical phase in this development: the inclusion of art in the entertainment complex, meaning that art is obviously ready for integration into the entertainment industry.*

Günther Holler-Schuste

Despite what Holler-Schuste says, maybe they're not as ready as some would have believed. When the IT boost to the economy waned, so did the exuberance for the casino-museum. The Las Vegas Guggenheim's "permanent" motor cycle exhibit has closed its doors, and the fate of the Hermitage is up in the air. But isn't the hyper pace

of erosion and reinventing a defining aspect of Las Vegas? Certainly the reality of the art market has changed as well, on the heels of scandals from tax evasion by important gallerists to the federal indictment of Sotheby's for price fixing. Will the fine art galleries on the Las Vegas strip continue to be managed as entertainment- revenue material, or will the nebulous prospects of financial returns make the custodianship of these works an act of civic generosity, of the influencing taste and citizenry? Maintaining art works is expensive period, and although most are still in existence, the casino-museums have responded to the economic downturn in a variety of ways- from closing, to the creation of entertainment oriented temporary exhibitions and the amassing and exhibiting of personal collections reminiscent of American art collectors 100 years ago.

The Bellagio collection which opened in October 1998 was closed on May 28, 2000. The Bellagio was a precursor to the boom and bust of the museums on the strip, but the change in its collection may be a harbinger of things to come. Most of its artworks were liquidated when Steve Wynn sold the casino. Considering how long it traditionally takes collectors to build their collections, the Bellagio's collection was amassed and depleted in the turn of a slot machine. The Collection's space has been renamed The Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art. Located on the first floor of the casino. No longer maintaining a permanent collection (which bore a great expense and did not engender repeat visitors) it now has a rotating schedule of exhibits. The revised exhibition program makes a glaring connection between art and entertainment. One might see it as a gallery version of lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. As one employee of the Bellagio gallery noted: "people want to see Van Gogh", they want to see what they recognize. They want entertainment.

Last year one of the most popular exhibits at the new Bellagio Gallery was Steve Martin's Private Collection. Another favorite was Andy Warhol's portraits, with an audio "tour" by Liza Minelli. The visitors looking at the art were glued to their headphones, trying to make connections between the paintings with what Liza had to say about the portraits of people she knew and her days at Studio 54. Some might argue, however, that this "entertainment" factor that is directing the new Bellagio has been increasingly informing museum practice. In searching for increasing their revenue, audience and community involvement, art museums across the country such as the SFMOMA, the Whitney, the Guggenheim and the Brooklyn Museum of Art opening exhibits on popular films, fashion and holding dance parties.

## **Cultivating the Aesthete**

After the dissolution of Bellagio Collection, Steve Wynn kept his own artworks and vowed to display them at his new location. I went to see their "new location". It is another outpost-- across from Neiman Marcus but also down the street from the Frontier and the more "forgotten casinos". Back from the street and removed from a casino environment, the Wynn Collection is attached to nouveau hacienda like building on land that will become the new Wynn Resorts (which will, at 2 billion dollars, be the most costly hotel to date). You can feel something is brewing, and that Steve Wynn, casino visionary, is about to instigate change on the strip. Outside the Wynn Collection you are surrounded by 20 something's, sipping on dollar margaritas and shuffling from their seedy motel to the mall across the street or to the Luxor down the road. Stepping inside, it is apparent that there is an effort to distinguish the Wynn Collection from the other museum-casino hybrids and everything else on the strip for that matter. It has an almost "missionary of taste" ambience. The Wynn Collection lobby attempts an atmosphere of understatement, there isn't a slot machine around. In fact, it feels like a private home in Santa Barbara. I wondered if Wynn himself had just given up on the mass appeal of the Bellagio and sought his own vision. You get the sense of being "cultivated"- a little art before a pensive game of golf. It is there you can find 10 masterpieces by Picasso, Cézanne, Manet, Monet, Matisse, Van Gogh, Modigliani and Gauguin, and a portrait of Steve Wynn by Andy Warhol.

Inside you are "spared" any extensive literature on what you are looking at, however you can hear a 30 minute audio tour by Mr. Wynn himself, extolling the virtues of the paintings and, perhaps, his own taste. The intimate crimson room harkens a Parisian Salon. (There is little reference to the curator of the collection, Libby Lumpkin). The Wynn Collection contrives to be an atmosphere of reflection. It is you and the masterpieces.

There is something very turn of the twentieth century about the whole experience: the focus on European art form, the ideas of art being able to "uplift" the masses. (In my case, it was uplifting me, a well heeled middle aged woman and a couple of dread locked kids in town for the Phish concerts.), J. Pierpont Morgan, the man who imposed order on the nation's railroad barons, would come to be a trustee of the Met and to

encourage class solidarity through the public display of art. He shared in the turn of the century idea that the American's should house and inherit the European, art and privileged spaces. For the powerful American at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, private collections donated or displayed to the public also acted as a cultural trust -- cementing one's discerning "taste" and passing on ancestral identities of royalty and aristocracy to present day elites. Much in the way public art museums were intended to create visitors as ideal, cultured citizens, Steve Wynn's Las Vegas collection is attempting to create an idea visitor. And perhaps there is an intention of also affecting the local culture, as Nevada residents are admitted for free.

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Las Vegas has become a way to look at the future practices and problems of art. If the anti intellectualism of the Andy Warhol exhibit at the Bellagio shows the Las Vegas art tourist what they want to see, the Guggenheim gives the art tourist and gambler a run down of Western Art History, the Wynn Collection identifies what the Las Vegas art tourist- and perhaps Las Vegas citizen should become, then we should look at some of the critics of the developments in Las Vegas. Yes, there is materialism and emphasis on entertainment in these casino-museums, but there is also a very American populist idea of art for the masses, and a prevalent idea that art can symbolise "where one is headed". What is more elitist -the garish casino or the some of the art at the latest Documenta festival in Germany (where, in one instance, the viewer is required to read a 2 page typed document by the artist to understand the accompanying art piece)?

There is something wonderful in Hickey's observation about the past lack of markers of status in Las Vegas. But who knows what will happen, if anything, as Steve Wynn pushes his dream of sophistication. Megalomania, commodification, class-- these themes are almost inescapable in the art world- whether you are a collector or performance artist. We relate so much of art to status, wealth and to ownership-- and more recently to the elitism of understanding. But I don't know if that is necessarily wrong. If the attachment of art to entertainment and commodity has encouraged, on some level, a market for local artists in Las Vegas, it can not be deemed such a horrible development. It seems to me that in general, art is tied to commodity, but it can not be

*reduced* to it.. Even if people are looking at an early Warhol self portrait as Liza Minelli extrapolates on disco, they are still *looking*.

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"If you want to talk about the art in there, just asked me-- I spent 6 hours a day with those paintings for nearly a year", the security guard called out to me, as I walked through the lobby of the Wynn Collection. His name was Walter. He told me how much those paintings meant to him, and how he now knew how to appreciate art . I asked him why. " There is just so much crap now. Mr. Wynn's stuff is the best. I even bought my own Monet, just like in the collection. Yeah, I got a little Monet from a website out of Wisconsin. It came with a frame and everything. I have my Monet up in my living room" He said. He knew it was a replica, but he had loved *looking* at the piece, he wanted one of his own.

I asked if the art museum-casino development has had any affect on the artists or art buying in Las Vegas. I wondered if the visible support of art would instigate locals to buy local art. He ebulliently said yes, that now there had developed a bunch of local art fairs throughout residential Las Vegas. He had bought from local artists recently. His coworker, a casino musician, told me since working security he began , as he put it, "dabbling into art"-- taking a drawing class and tying flies for fly fishing shop. Las Vegas, like America, is about reinvention.

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So, maybe we should not be so disturbed when the Las Vegas tourism website rather simplistically declares: "Spending an afternoon exploring the **Las Vegas art** scene is fun and rewarding. **Art** really is good for the soul."

After a while I finally find myself in front of the Cézanne I had wondered about for so long -it's cathartic. The elements that Cézanne has combined, the deliberate brush strokes, decisive color, worked over forms and the improbable balance he creates with the objects on the table-- I can see why the work is coveted. I had imagined the painting being presented on an altar. It was instead a part of a perfectly balanced collection: maintaining quiet company with 10 other masterpieces.