

Paul Cézanne's good influence

BY ELIZABETH OGUSS
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Earlier this year, it looked as though 2009 might end with the trustees and management at the Montclair Art Museum wondering how to keep the lights on.

In a time of economic turmoil, the museum took a risk and staged the largest and most expensive exhibit in its history. In the dark of December, the lights are on. And blazing.

"It's been staggering," said Lora Urbanelli, MAM's executive director. "It exceeded our wildest expectations."

Curated in collaboration with the Baltimore Museum of Art, "Cézanne and American Modernism" is a hit.

Since the exhibit opened on Sept. 13, extra security guards have been hired to manage the crowds, who have come from 900 different ZIP Codes. A membership table in the vestibule, staffed six days a week by a core group of 45 volunteers, has signed up legions of new members.

The museum bookshop had its most successful day ever on "Black Friday," Nov. 27, and promptly topped it a week later.

And this week, for the first time since mid-March when Urbanelli cut their work-week to four days, full-time museum staffers came to work on a Monday. As Michael Gillespie, director of communications, said last Friday, "The mood is much different now!"

CÉZANNE

The exhibit began 10 years ago as the dream of longtime trustee Adrian Shelby.

Shelby's association with Paul Cézanne has been long and happy. Years ago, Shelby and her husband became friends with the

owners of what had been Cézanne's home in Aix-en-Provence, France. They were invited to stay.

"As I became infused with Cézanne culture," Shelby said, "I began to think about Montclair."

Shelby thought the museum ought to do a show that highlighted its presence in the art world. Wherever she went, she saw echoes of MAM. Its name was known, but where were the crowds?

"If I were in Washington, D.C., at the National Gallery, I would find something every time from our collection," she told *The Times*. "Museum of Fine Arts, Paris... the rest of the world knew about us. I thought maybe if we could somehow have a related show with Cézanne as the headliner, then we would get people to come out and they would know who we are."

Shelby said it was a "long struggle" to bring the show into being. As the time drew near, the road grew rockier.

GRIM PICTURE

Nine months before the opening, Urbanelli said, organizers were weighing which of the artworks they could do without. Paintings, prints, photographs, and other works from more than 50 lenders were to be shipped on tractor-trailers from Atlanta, Phoenix, Boston, Dallas, Santa Fe, Minneapolis, and Lincoln, Neb., among other places.

"We looked at the farthest trip," Urbanelli said, "[and asked] 'What would we lose if we cut that trip out?'"

Last-minute support from Bank of America put an end to that agony.

"It was pretty clear in January that even staff layoffs wouldn't be enough," Urbanelli said, and in March, she lopped Monday off

the week.

Even so, the board decided to open the galleries on Tuesdays, when they are traditionally closed, and not to charge extra for the special exhibit.

"Those risks paid off," Urbanelli said. "Cézanne gave us a gift on so many levels. It was a tremendous success in a year that was going to be gloomy."

"It helped our coffers, it brought [all sorts of] groups, people from all over," Shelby said.

Including attendance at classes and special programs, nearly 28,000 people have come to MAM since September.

Membership has increased by 15 percent.

Gallery attendance numbers zoomed past the previous high set by the 2007 "Superheroes" show, and in half the time.

Many of the nearly 15,000 visitors to MAM's galleries came because of Cézanne's wide appeal, but the museum's marketing committee made sure that news of the show got to certain people who would be able to bring even more eyes to the galleries.

Patricia Selden, a trustee and chair of the marketing committee, led an initiative to reach out to "key opinion leaders," people with a platform or audience who could get the word out.

Selden described a visit to the museum by members of the Art Table, a national organization for women in all aspects of the arts; membership is by application. The Art Table group was given a tour and a reception. Art Table members from New York were pleased and surprised by their trip to MAM, Selden said.

"I received notes afterward," she said, "[saying] 'We're going to have to cross the river more often.'"

The point for Selden and Shelby was

not just to have a hit show, but also to keep those people coming back, to MAM and to Montclair.

RIPPLE EFFECT

Happily, the Cézanne show has also brought good news to many beyond the museum's grounds.

Isabelle Lesniak, proprietor of O Soleil on South Fullerton Avenue, which sells French clothing, jewelry, and home furnishings, said many of her customers in recent months told her they were in town for the Cézanne show.

"It's great to have this world-class exhibit in Montclair," Lesniak said.

"It raises Montclair's profile. It attracted people from all around New Jersey."

Jim Peskin, executive director of the Montclair Arts Council, told *The Times* in an e-mail, "We see hundreds of visitors coming to our site to look for restaurants and shopping."

MAC instituted its Destination Montclair Web site last spring. The Cézanne show has been featured prominently on the site, and MAM has returned the favor.

MAM, MAC, and Discover JerseyArts, the statewide arts group, jointly ran an online contest. The prize was a "getaway for two" in Montclair that included a tour of MAM, a visit to Bangz Salon & Spa, a gift certificate for O Soleil, tickets to MAM's gala, an overnight at the Marriott in West Orange, and brunch at Toast.

"I wanted to win it!" Gillespie said, laughing.

He said many Montclair residents entered the contest. (A Red Bank resident won.) Peskin said the contest "dramatically increased the size of both our e-mail lists. Ours almost doubled.

"When the MAC e-mail list grows it helps everyone in the Montclair arts community, because we use the e-mail to promote Montclair Arts events."

Shelby agrees. "Montclair is better because people came here and then would go to dinner or look at shops or hang out. They finally knew it was an exciting place to be," she said.

FUTURE LANDSCAPE

Shelby said, "With great nerve, I said to our director to tell the board we're never going back! That doesn't mean that every year we're going to have the equivalent, but we have a very large collection," Shelby said. "We have so many major works of art that can be paired with the greats of other places."

Urbanelli said Cézanne's popularity doesn't mean the show was light in weight. "He's a household name but we gave something more. We hear it's a meaty exhibition," she said. "As a director, I'm not kidding myself that it's not important to bring in masses of people.

"If we can bring in — maybe not this kind of crowd — but if we can bring in crowds with exhibitions that have appeal and deep intellectual appeal..."

A show of Georgia O'Keeffe's work being organized for 2012 should fill the bill. With its focus on O'Keeffe's Native American influences, it will fit MAM's mission of showing Native American art.

Next up for MAM is "*A Force for Change: African American Art and the Julius Rosenwald Fund*," which opens in January. It will explore the legacy of the Julius Rosenwald Fund, which awarded stipends to hundreds of African-American artists, writers, and scholars in the 1920s through 1940s.

But before then, there's still time to catch the Cézanne.

It ends on Sunday, Jan. 3, 2010, and just this once, the museum will be open on New Year's Day.

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