

Chastened, Folk Art Museum Puts Down Healthier Roots

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Edward Blanchard, president of the American Folk Art Museum, and Anne-Imelda Radice, its executive director, are overseeing a turnaround that has included balancing the budget.

The [American Folk Art Museum's](#) attendance is projected to be 80,000 this fiscal year, up from 66,000. Important donors are giving again. And for the first time in its history, this summer the museum will send a work from its collection to the [Venice Biennale](#).

Not the stuff of headlines for an institution like the Metropolitan Museum of Art or even the Frick Collection.

But not bad for a museum that was a few steps from extinction in 2011. In fact, the folk art museum's greatest success, its supporters say, may be its decision to shed, for now at least, the outsize ambitions that steered it toward trouble in the first place.

"We're all cautious now about taking too big steps before we're ready for it," said [Audrey Heckler](#), a folk art collector who is one of the newer members of the museum's 13-member board. "I really think we got our act together."

The museum almost [went out of business](#) two years ago because of financial problems resulting largely from its decision to build a flagship building on West 53rd Street in Midtown Manhattan, alongside the Museum of Modern Art. It borrowed \$32 million to construct the building, which was [designed by the architects Billie Tsien and Tod Williams](#) and opened in 2001; it then struggled to pay off the construction bonds that had been issued through the city's [Trust for Cultural Resources](#), a public benefit corporation that helps institutions finance capital projects.

In 2009 the museum defaulted on its debt payments, the first institution borrowing through the trust ever to do so.

“Clearly we made an error of judgment in spending that much money on that building,” said Edward Blanchard, who became the museum’s president in 2011. “I give the board at that time a lot of credit for having great ambitions and for seeking to do something that was not ordinary. I think that’s admirable.”

“Where we made a mistake — and I’m as guilty as anyone — we misjudged the cost embedded in the building, and we misjudged our ability to support the building.”

Cornered, the museum sold its new building to the Modern that summer. It even considered giving away its collection.

But the institution persevered, encouraged by a number of people in the art world who championed its survival.

“It could be argued that we need a museum of folk art the way we need a museum of modern art, to shine a very strong, undiluted light on a very important achievement,” Roberta Smith [wrote](#) in The New York Times in September 2011. “That undiluted light will be hard to muster in the near future without a building, but the collection exists, and the goal of keeping it together and eventually finding it a new home of its own should be widely embraced.”

The museum ultimately consolidated operations into its other, considerably smaller site, at Lincoln Square at West 66th Street, and slashed its budget to about \$3.5 million from about \$10 million in 2009. The museum’s executive director, [Anne-Imelda Radice](#), six months into the job, says her strategy is not to compete with the Mets and MoMAs of the world, but to make the institution a niche destination with a clear specialty.

“In a way, you become the mother ship of that particular subject,” she said. “We can be the leader. We’re the place you check out first.”

Ms. Radice is not the sort of turnaround wizard likely to attract all that much attention. She previously served as director of the [Institute of Museum and Library Services](#), a federal agency that supports libraries and museums. And she has the conservative, soft-spoken mien you might expect from a librarian.

But given that the museum weathered its share of doomsday headlines a couple of years ago, Ms. Radice seems content to operate under the radar right now, with a focus on restoring stability to the institution and making it the country’s top destination for viewing traditional folk art and outsider art.

“I’m a person who’s in the present and looks into the future,” she said in an interview. “We are starting at a point without debt, with a great collection, with world-class curators and with increasing donations, and that’s what I have to work with every day.”

Of late, the museum has been putting its energy into collaborations with other institutions, like its [current show](#) of William Matthew Prior’s oil paintings, organized by the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y., and on view through May 26, and traveling exhibitions like a quilt show that closed recently at the [Boca Raton Museum of Art](#) in Florida.

A collaboration with the South Street Seaport Museum on the exhibition [“Compass: Folk Art in Four Directions,”](#) which explored themes of sea life and closed downtown on Sunday, was critically well received.

Museum officials said they were also excited that a 1950s architectural model in the collection — “The Encyclopedic Palace of the World,” by the self-taught artist Marino Auriti, which imagines a building that would contain “all worldly knowledge” — has inspired the theme of this year’s Venice Biennale and will travel there.

The museum is also trying to rent out its space more often for events and to keep expenses low, even as its exhibition program aims high. “If we have a great idea, I’ll go out there and raise the money for it,” Ms. Radice said.

While annual attendance is expected to reach 80,000 for the fiscal year ending on June 30, that is a considerable drop from the 160,000 the museum was attracting when it had two locations (and from its goal of 255,000 before the new building opened). Museum leaders say they hope to increase that number in coming years, but in a measured way that avoids deficits. This year the museum’s budget is balanced, officials said.

“I’m pretty confident that we won’t undertake any financial obligations we can’t meet,” Mr. Blanchard said. “It feels new to us because we’ve been through a crucible. We’ve had to start, in some ways, again.”

In seeking to rebuild its base, the museum has also added four new board members over the last two years. And it is working to re-engage the donors it lost along the way, like the Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Fund, which recently reinstated its support with a \$25,000 gift.

“They’re starting to come back,” Mr. Blanchard said, “because they’re realizing we’re here to stay.”

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