

The following paper was written as an analysis and critique of the American Art Museum Directors' *Code of Ethics* and its use as a tool for ensuring honesty and integrity in the museum profession. One of the questions was over whether the *Code of Ethics* was really about ethics or standards and the difference between the two.

Ethics and Standards of Practice for Museums

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Ethics, according to *Webster's New World Dictionary*¹, include standards of conduct and morals, lending legitimacy to the American Art Museum Directors' (AAMD) *Code of Ethics*² and codes like it. To purists, a more distinct division between "ethics" and "standards of practice" or "conduct" exists. They believe that ethics represent only the qualitative and unenforceable beliefs and morals within an individual. Standards of conduct, on the other hand, are considered to be the quantitative methods or outward behavior by which those beliefs and values can be measured and enforced by decree. According to the purist interpretation, the AAMD's *Code of Ethics* is scarcely an ethical code at all, but standards of practice with some ethical values thrown in to explain those standards.

A purely ethical code could only amount to a classification of the beliefs generally shared by a group of people rather than a system of regulation as the AAMD is trying to achieve. Groups do not actually possess a collective conscience or ethical belief so much as a gestalt of individual consciences, making such a code impossible in the truest sense. No individual can possibly act out of another's ethical or moral sense but may act only from a personal ethic or a desire to win team approval for doing the "right thing."

¹ Victoria Neufeldt, ed. *Webster's New World Dictionary of American English*, 3rd ed., s.v. "ethics." Simon & Schuster, New York, 1991.

² Association of Art Museum Directors. *Code of Ethics*, reprinted in *Museum News: Journal of American Association of Museums* 52, no. 8, (May 1974): 22.

If the AAMD's *Code of Ethics* had been purely ethical, it might have looked ridiculously short like this:

The position of a Museum Director is one of trust. It is dependent upon his professional integrity and requires impartiality and a sense of public responsibility, especially in the area of museum acquisitions. It should be unprofessional for a museum director to use his influence or position in the art market for personal gain.

In short, the code would have expressed the desired internal values of the director and why it was professionally important to have them. In this case, the area of acquisitions is being addressed and, presumably, a director's honesty and sense of responsibility should dissuade the unprofessional wielding of influence and position for personal benefit. The last sentence just inches over the line into standards of conduct. It might have been left out altogether unless a sense of urgency deemed it necessary to define a gray area.

The code, as written, breaks off radically from pure ethics as it defines the many ways a director's behavior could be construed as a compromise of self or of the institution. The director is to avoid any appearance of wrongdoing by communicating the contents of the *Code of Ethics* to the staff in hopes that they, too, will comply. The AAMD also decided they needed to tell the director how to behave in the event of a conflict of interest with the governing board. Art directors are not to involve themselves in commercial trafficking or recommend purchases of art in any area in which they have a financial stake. In fact, they should not do anything that might appear to be giving or receiving favors from sellers or purchasers of art.

In spite of the fact that nine-tenths of the AAMD's *Code of Ethics* are devoted to standards of practice, it is not an illegitimate tool for the ethically minded. The quantitative measure of standards may actually reinforce ethical reasoning by making known the effects of certain behaviors in a way the director may never have considered. For an ethical person, the standards

are a welcome yardstick by which to measure the effects of a decision on others. For the unethical, perhaps neither standards nor sanctions are enough to make them behave ethically. In that case, the standards of practice as described in the *Code of Ethics* become a tool by which to know such persons and to serve the public by not allowing these into positions of responsibility.