

TO: Helen Regan, Dean of the Faculty

FROM: Chris Steiner, Director of Museum Studies

RE: The Nut Museum

DATE: 5/24/02

As you may recall from our discussion at Wendy Lash's the other evening, I put in a proposal with the Connecticut Probate Court to preserve, archive, and exhibit the contents of the Nut Museum in Old Lyme. Well, I found out today from the Judge and State Conservator that the court has decided to "award" the collection to Connecticut College's Museum Studies Program for research and exhibition. I attach a copy of my proposal to the Probate Court and State Conservator.

Background

The Nut Museum was established in 1970 by Elizabeth Tashjian in her mansion on Ferry Road in Old Lyme. For over three decades she welcomed visitors into her museum, and quickly developed into a "celebrity." She made several appearances on the *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, as well as with David Letterman, Jay Leno, Howie Mandel, Rosie O'Donnell, etc. The Nut Museum was featured in over a dozen books on "odd" museums across America, and was the subject of numerous articles in such publications as the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *Vanity Fair*.

Visitors to the Nut Museum would see Elizabeth's collection of nuts, nutcrackers, and artifacts fashioned out of nuts. As a visual artist, trained in the Art Students League of New York, Elizabeth painted numerous works depicting (mostly) nuts, she sculpted works out of tin, constructed masks on the theme of nuts, and created needlepoint rugs with nut motifs. Much of this art would be classified as "folk art" or "outsider art." She also composed songs about nuts (some of which are registered with ASCAP, like "The March of the Nuts"), and she would sing these for museum visitors, as well as on her television appearances.

In many ways, one might think of Elizabeth Tashjian as a performance artist. She would recount to visitors, for example, that Man had evolved from nuts rather than apes—and would show them as "proof" a 35-pound coco-de-mer in the likeness of the female anatomy. She would then wait to see the visitor's reaction. She played with the double meaning of the word "nuts," and relished the idea that she herself was perceived as slightly nuts. "If Man evolved from nuts rather than apes," she would say, "then we are all nuts, really!"

Current situation

About one month ago, Elizabeth (age 89) was found unconscious on her bedroom floor. She was rushed to Middlesex Hospital, where she remains in stable condition. Because she had been unable to pay her taxes for several years, the State of Connecticut took ownership of her home and belongings. Her house is currently on the market (and will probably be sold within the next few weeks), and the contents of the “museum” (her papers, nuts, and her original art) will now be donated to Connecticut College thanks to my fortuitous intervention and successful plea.

I am planning to rent a 10x10 climate-controlled storage facility in Groton (\$115/month) with some of the remaining Museum Studies budget for this FY. In the next 2-3 weeks I will pack and remove all the contents of the museum to this facility. In the fall, I will begin to archive, catalogue, and study the collection with Museum Studies students. I plan to apply for state (and perhaps even federal NEH) funding in order to recreate the exhibits of the Nut Museum at a local institution (Lyman Allyn, maybe?), and I will also try to have the exhibit travel to various Folk Art museums across the country. Ultimately, a permanent home for the collection will have to be found. It could be stored in the Wetmore Gallery of Cummings, but it would make more sense to have it in a museum (such as the Lyman Allyn). In the meantime, however, I have taken the decision to simply preserve the collection until its fate can be properly decided. The alternative would have involved breaking up the collection for sale to antique dealers, and also sadly putting much of it in a dumpster.

Questions

- Do you need to know anything more about this Museum Studies project?
- Should I be in contact with Aaron Bayer regarding any legal considerations of this “donation”?
- Would the College like to publicize this (*after* it becomes official, sometime in the next few weeks)? I would imagine there could be a good story here for *The Day*, and even something of national interest given the Nut Museum’s reputation.