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Maureen Bray on Leaving the Corner Office at the Art Dealers Association of America

The job goes way beyond organizing an annual New York fair.

By Brian Boucher



The Art Show 2023. Courtesy Art Dealers Association of America.

The head of an organization that has served U.S. art dealers through some very challenging years is leaving her post. Maureen Bray, executive director of the New York-based Art Dealers Association of America, will depart this fall, after six years. Bray brought an in-depth knowledge of art dealers' needs to the corner office based on 20 years of experience: before joining ADAA in 2018, she worked in director positions at New York galleries C and M Arts, Sean Kelly, and David Nolan.

Founded in 1962, ADAA is a nonprofit that works to promote high professional standards among its 200-plus members, who have specialties ranging from the Renaissance to the present and reside in

nearly 40 U.S. cities. Membership is by invitation, and ranges from small galleries with just a handful of employees to blue-chippers such as Marian Goodman, Hauser and Wirth, and David Zwirner.

Its annual fair, the Art Show, has taken place at New York's Park Avenue Armory for 36 years. (The 2024 edition runs October 29 to November 2.) Ticket revenue goes to the Henry Street Settlement (HSS), the downtown New York social services nonprofit; Bray's six editions have raised some \$7 million for the organization.

Bray has been busy. She has regularly shuttled to Washington, D.C., and Albany, New York, to meet with state and federal officials to educate them about issues in the field—for example, helping to steer the discussion on anti-money laundering legislation that was in progress when she took up the post.



Maureen Bray. Photo: Mike Vitelli. Courtesy Art Dealers Association of America.

She launched a program of online seminars for dealers, educating them on subjects like [cybersecurity](#), employment law, sales taxes, and the Covid-era Paycheck Protection Program. All of this significantly ramped up the organization's offerings in terms of business expertise and legal and legislative education. She also introduced the first-ever sustainability roadmap for the Art Show, which cut waste by one-quarter between the 2021 and 2022 editions.

The ADAA has also made moves to support nonprofits during Bray's term. Its 60th-anniversary grants are one-time \$10,000 awards to U.S. nonprofits chosen by a vote among the membership; the initial grantees included Creative Growth in Oakland, California, and Project Row Houses in Houston. Bray also expanded a relief fund established after Hurricane Sandy in 2012 that gave grants to member and non-member galleries as well as nonprofits.

We talked with Bray on her way out the door about pre- and post-Covid realities, diversity efforts in the field, and what makes the Art Show special.



The 2023 Art Show. Courtesy Art Dealers Association of America.

When you started in 2018, what were the greatest challenges your organization and your members faced?

As far as the organization, it needed to identify what members needed to flourish as business owners and make sure all members had access to those resources. We gathered legal experts, compliance experts, tax experts, marketing experts, and social media experts to develop programming and to create a safe place to ask questions. My hope was that ADAA could be a tool for its members.

I think the biggest challenges for the industry were the pressures on mid-size galleries. What was starting then and is now in full bloom is a change in the collector base. We had to embrace a pivot to a younger collector base, to understand how they collect, how they approach galleries, and how they approach working with artists. The idea of patronage was starting to change. There were a lot more galleries than there used to be. There was less foot traffic. That's partly because of the advent of fairs, partly due to the increase in galleries, and partly due to the limited amount of time collectors had. The challenge was: How do you meet collectors where they are?



The 2023 Art Show. Courtesy Art Dealers Association of America.

You oversaw this organization during arguably the toughest moment for the industry in recent memory, when galleries were shuttered during the pandemic and in the uncertain months after they reopened. How did you support your members through that crisis, and how do you think the art dealing industry fared?

By then, we had established a relationship with our public policy advisors and started to work on legislative issues with people on Capitol Hill. We had access to public policy advisors as the government started thinking about the Paycheck Protection Program and other measures to help business owners. We had access to a lot of that expertise, which helped us get information to our members. So, when they launched PPP, we organized webinars. Then we helped them find out how to apply for forgiveness of those loans. We were sending out information to members as soon as we got it so they had some agency in a moment in which no one felt they had control.

Galleries didn't at that time have the online presence they have now. So the question was, How do they maintain a connection with their collector base when the physical locations are closed? We worked with ArtLogic to create online viewing rooms for galleries, free of charge.

Then we started to watch more closely and be engaged with folks in Albany. Various businesses were opening in different ways at different times, so we worked with Albany to talk about where galleries fit into that process. We answered questions like, Is this a museum or a retail outlet? Then, when the federal program stepped in to help, the question was, How do we get the information to members as soon as possible so they can see a light at the end of the tunnel?



Courtesy Art Dealers Association of America.

I keep wondering, what have all these meetings been like? Does the flag-lapel-pin set even know what to do with art dealers?

We've been very fortunate. We built really terrific relationships in the House and the Senate and the Treasury Department, where we offered ourselves as a resource to understand how galleries work, what the structure of the transactions are, how relationships with artists work, the differences between auction houses and galleries and museums. We also talked about the challenges facing dealers as small businesses. I have been incredibly impressed by how receptive they all have been to hearing about the industry, how engaged and willing to learn more about us. It's been a highlight of my time here.

You launched an industry-wide survey of member and non-member galleries that found that 70 percent of galleries reported declining revenue in 2020 and the resulting downturn, but that federal assistance helped the vast majority to avoid layoffs and furloughs, and that online sales and programs helped keep them afloat. What else did you find out?

In the early days, those numbers were pretty bleak when it came to projected losses of income and revenue. I tease myself a little, because we were naive enough to ask questions like, How many more fairs do you think you'll do in 2020? We had no idea in April that there would be no more!

More interesting was when, about a year later, we asked how those numbers changed looking back on the last year. We found anecdotally that there was a significant drop in revenue but there was also a significant drop in expenses, so the net margins weren't as bleak as what had been predicted. Crucially, collectors never lost their loyalty. They wanted to support the galleries and the artists. That was really meaningful, that those relationships were still strong.

And yet, on the other hand, a few years later, Artnet News's own Annie Armstrong recently published a pretty discouraging necrology of art dealers that have closed in the last year in New York alone, one of the capitals of the industry, no less, from relative newcomers JTT and Helena Anrather to stalwarts like Marlborough and Cheim and Read. What do you take from that?

In any given year, there are galleries opening and closing. That's the natural ebb and flow of the business cycle. We're also in a moment where we're seeing a generational shift in gallery ownership. Some that have been established may choose not to continue or to have a succession plan in place. For the smaller galleries that are closing down, I don't see a trend per se beyond the natural ebb and flow.

I would point to our increase in membership in the last seven years. If you look at the roster of founding members, some are no longer in business, particularly the single-owner, independent businesses. It's not unusual. I'm not ready to predict that we're on the eve of something more nefarious.



A visitor to the 2023 Art Show. Courtesy Art Dealers Association of America.

Your members range from businesses with just a handful of employees to globe-spanning empires. Has it been challenging to offer them programs and support that work for all of them?

Regardless of the size of the gallery, they are up against some of the same issues, like employer compliance and sanctions compliance. They have a lot of the same challenges in keeping their business moving smoothly. So, while the head of a smaller gallery might be watching one of our webinars, the head of a department in a larger gallery might be the one watching the same webinar.

One of the toughest nuts to crack in the industry has been the challenge of fostering greater diversity among workers. Tell me about ADAA's program with the Henry Street Settlement.

We're developing a workforce development program for the fine art gallery world specifically. HSS are vanguards in the workforce development world, and in fact the CEO, David Garza, began his career there leading the organization's Workforce Development Center. HSS will provide wraparound services and training for people interested in gallery jobs, our members will provide paid internships, and HSS will provide continuing support. Once we have that in place, we aim to replicate it in other cities in which we have a density of members.

I haven't asked many questions about your beloved fair, so let me end with one. Our age has been defined by the growth and expansion of art businesses, such that "grow or go" has become a mantra not only for tiny art galleries but also the biggest of global art fairs. Let's break some news here! Has there been discussion of launching ADAA Art Shows in other cities?

The Art Show is a really unique, special jewel of a fair. It holds its intimate scale very dearly, and my guess is that it will continue to do that. One of the nearest and dearest things about it is its relationship to the Henry Street Settlement; they are almost unique in the way they work together. So, there's a lot of things that make it unique and connected to New York.

That's not to say there's no possibility of programming in other cities. We've tested the waters, for example with a Bay Area gallery walk. I can't speak for the organization after I leave, but I imagine there will be more opportunities to do programming like that.