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Museums Take Fundraising to the Altar

By **Marisa Rindone**

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Courtesy the Detroit Institute of Arts

The Detroit Institute of Arts held its first wedding reception this summer.

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Amid the many pressures couples face in planning an unforgettable wedding, here's one that simply can't fall by the wayside: Making sure the flowers complement that original [Diego Rivera](#) fresco.

Such is the kind of dilemma confronting the affianced who plan to promise forever in the courtyard of the **Detroit Institute of Arts**, which held its first wedding ceremony this summer.

With the nation's economy still struggling to recover and donations generally down at cultural institutions, many art museums are cashing in on the inherent beauty of what lies within their walls. Couples looking for a memorable venue in which to hold their nuptials can present a lucrative alternative to conventional fundraising.

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Says [Elliot Broom](#), vice president of operations for the Detroit museum, "The economy is for sure one of the contributing factors in looking to take on more and more outside social events."

He adds that in planning the museum's restoration and reopening in the fall of 2007, its board began searching for new ways to keep the operation running and well funded. "When the DIA put together its new mission of reopening in November of '07, the decision was made to entertain for the first time ever wedding receptions."

[Debra Hemeon](#), deputy director of Massachusetts's [Cape Cod Museum of Art](#), has a similar story. "The decision to have weddings and receptions here was economic — but not in response to the current situation," she says. In 2004, while brainstorming about potential fundraisers, the board of trustees had an idea for introducing the museum to those hadn't visited before: Get them on the guest list for some couple's big day.

"The museum's board of trustees thought it would be a good fundraising activity," says Hemeon — and could attract some long-term donors as well.

Which isn't to say that museum weddings are all smiles and bouquets and lofty checks written in support of the arts: Wouldn't institutions need to increase the insurance coverage on their valuables before letting in celebratory crowds? Surprisingly, that's not where the money goes. "It's not a matter of insurance," says Detroit's Broom. "Where it affects the museum operations is the number of staff that you have to have on."

More bodies mean more potential accidents, he explains. "We have to have more security officers on, not because we're fearful for the safety of the art [in terms of] theft but because there are so many people around, we have to have more eyes making sure that people remain a safe distance away."

"Ninety-nine percent of the population would never seek to damage a piece of art," he continues. But they will seek to toast the happy couple as they mill around the reception. "What could happen is, if someone is drinking a glass of red wine and they're bumped, that wine could accidentally end up on a work of art." Which, of course, would "be beyond a nightmare," he adds.

"Safety of the artwork is the major concern," agrees the Cape Cod Museum's Hemeon, adding that one of the benefits of income generated from weddings is the ability to pay two extra employees during the event's hours. Rentals at the museum run \$2,500 for in-season Saturdays, \$2,000 for all other times.

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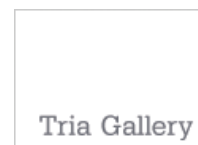
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Other museums don't believe they can take the risk. "Museum policy does not allow us to host wedding receptions, primarily out of a desire to ensure the safety of the collections," says [Elisabeth Flynn](#) of the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#), whose Web site includes a specific note informing inquirers about the policy. "But the museum does receive frequent calls about wedding receptions, which led to that notice on our Web site."

The curiosity calls are something the Detroit museum deals with on a daily basis. "We've had a ton of interest," Broom admits. "The conversion, however, is much less. I will be honest in saying that the reason that our conversion rate into actual wedding receptions is so low is that it isn't cheap. The room rental rate alone for our two largest and two grandest spaces" — including the famed Rivera Court — "is about \$25,000."

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