

Biblical Art Museum Is Closing

By RANDY KENNEDY

Since it opened in 2005 in a modest space at 61st Street and Broadway, the Museum of Biblical Art has been the little museum that could, the home of many highly focused, critically lauded shows that looked at Western art through the lens of the Bible and its legacy in Christian and Jewish tradition. Over the last two months, the museum has been drawing the largest crowds in its history for a curatorial coup, a show of sculpture by Donatello from the Duomo museum in Florence, pieces never before seen in the United States.

But the museum will end its existence on that high note, after a long struggle to raise enough money to keep itself going, its officials said Tuesday. At the close of the Donatello show on June 14, the museum will lay off its staff of 14 and wind down operations because of what Richard P. Townsend, its director, said were insurmountable financial hurdles in moving from its space, at 1865 Broadway, recently sold by the museum's original patron, the American Bible Society.

"When the sale of the building was announced, that really brought everything to a head and started the clock ticking," said Mr. Townsend, who was hired to

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lead the **museum** in 2013 and has been trying to build philanthropic support for it. "In the end, it just wasn't enough time. I can't tell you the various angles, the different angles, that we explored this from."

The **museum** began its life in 1997 under its founding director, Ena Heller, as a gallery inside the headquarters of the American Bible Society, a nondenominational ministry group, founded in 1816, that has distributed billions of Bibles. The **museum** sought, as its website made clear, to "argue from a secular perspective that the Bible is a culturally foundational text, which has greatly influenced artists historically and continues to inspire the creation of countless important works of art today." But there was sometimes confusion among the public and in the world of benefactors about the mission of the **museum**, which became independent of the Bible Society in 2005 but continued to receive operating support and space from it.

As a former publicist for the

Insurmountable fund-raising hurdles in a need to relocate.

museum said about it at its founding, "Just having the world 'Bible' in the name says to many people that we're a conservative, right-wing group, and that could not be further from the case."

Mr. Townsend said the museum had been on a course over several years of reducing the operating support it received from the Bible Society and replacing that with money it raised itself. But in looking at possible Manhattan sites for a new home, it concluded that it would need \$1.5 million to \$5 million more per year to cover rent, over its average annual operating budget of \$2.5 million to \$3.5 million. And depending on the kind of space it found, it might also have to raise millions more for capital renovation costs.

"It was just too much," he said, adding that the **museum** had also explored partnerships with universities and other institutions, to no avail. "I saw the options narrowing over the past two or so months." The **museum**, in its programming, advertising and social-media presence, has been working hard "to move out of the shadow of the American Bible Society, but I think that try as we might there was brand confusion," he said. "And I don't think that was really anybody's fault."

The Donatello exhibition, which Ken Johnson in The New York Times called "a terrific valedictory" ahead of the museum's planned move to a new space, has drawn 20,000 visitors since opening in February, Mr. Townsend said, sharply increasing the **museum's** visibility and making the closing all the more painful.

Brian S. O'Neil, the **museum's** chairman emeritus and one of its earliest champions, said he felt worst for the staff, "who worked so hard under such difficult circumstances for many years." But in the end, he said, the **museum** fell into a fund-raising gap too wide to overcome, between secular art patrons, some of whom felt the **museum** was too restricted in its **biblical** focus, and religious givers, who felt the museum was not focused enough on the Bible as a religious text.

"I think we had a simplistic view: Good exhibitions will equal successful fund-raising," Mr. O'Neil said, "but it just doesn't always work out that way."