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‘An empty tomb’: Former Corcoran staffers hold ‘funeral’ for museum

Linda Crocker Simmons, curator emerita of the Corcoran Gallery of Art and a member of the Save the Corcoran advisory board, takes the podium at a memorial service Saturday for the museum, which is closing.

The hearse carried only a wreath, because technically, the dearly departed was still alive — albeit barely, considering the vegetative, life-supported state the Corcoran Gallery of Art has been in since August. When the institution’s takeover by the National Gallery of Art and George Washington University was approved last month, the spirit had already left the body. So on Saturday, the day before the museum was scheduled to close for renovations, from which it will later emerge as part of the National Gallery of Art, former staff members gathered there to mourn.

Former director Michael Botwinick, in a statement read to the bereaved by Carolyn Campbell, the museum’s former public relations chief, put it bluntly: “We are left with a gorgeous building, but it is now no longer the Corcoran, but a cenotaph, a memorial to something that is not there, an empty tomb.”

But everyone mourns differently. According to curator emerita Linda Crocker Simmons, the opportunity to walk through the gallery on its second-to-last day was a chance for closure. “It’s like saying goodbye to old friends,” she said.

Simmons and other former staff members organized the memorial service, which began on the museum’s steps with the presentation of a white floral wreath with a ribbon that read “Rest in Peace Corcoran Gallery of Art.” Despite the 80-degree heat, many of the guests wore Victorian funeral costumes. Volunteers shrouded the entryway’s lion sculptures in black veils, reminiscent of a famous work within: Giuseppe Croff’s “The Veiled Nun.”

The names began with founder William Wilson Corcoran, and so did the tears.

Dana Kennedy with Advent funeral services prepares to take the memorial wreath to the gravesite of William Wilson Corcoran at Oak Hill Cemetery in Georgetown.

Simmons choked up several times throughout a reading of the names of artists, educators, curators, students and staff members who have made the gallery and college what they were over almost 150 years. The 50 or so people in the group paid their respects as they walked through the rooms of the Corcoran's collection.

The list went on. *Frank Stella. Sam Gilliam. Rockne Krebs.*

"It's just a cultural disaster," said Eugene C. Daymude, who flew in from New Orleans to attend the memorial. "This would have never happened in Europe."

"It's like seeing a ghost," said Robin Phillips, who, along with friend Randy Roffman, counted herself a part of the Corcoran's once-lively social scene. "It feels haunted already."

Gene Davis. Richard Diebenkorn. Albert Paley — "The last exhibition the Corcoran will host," Simmons noted.

As she stood before the grand staircase, tears streamed down Shelby Cobb's cheeks. From 1975 to 1980, Cobb was the associate registrar. She flew from Atlanta for the weekend.

Corcoran supporters placed a wreath on the outside steps of the 17th Street entrance to the museum.

“The registrar’s job is to look after the artwork — its comings and goings up on the walls, and loans — and it’s like my children are being scattered,” she said, referring to the National Gallery’s coming acquisition of many — but not all — of the works in the Corcoran’s collection.

“It was heartbreaking,” said the late artist’s husband, F. Steven Kijek, clutching a catalogue of his wife’s work. “I was very proud that her name was mentioned.” Cleary’s art is in the Corcoran’s collection, and Kijek said he wasn’t sure where it would end up. He said it was difficult to walk through the gallery for the last time before it changes forever.

“It’s like the sun’s not coming out tomorrow,” he said. *Jesse Martin.* “He was on the security staff,” Simmons said.

Standing on the landing above the gallery’s atrium, alumna Eileen Lyons said the memorial, much like a real wake, was bittersweet. “This is where all the senior shows were,” she said. “I have a lot of happy memories here.”

A small group of Corcoran students trailed behind the group. “A lot of people in our dorms were going to come, but I think they woke up too late,” said Maeve Beal, a freshman.

The hearse pulled up to the front of the building just before 3 p.m., and a trailing sedan delivered Simmons, Cobb and former longtime docent Judith Schomer to the Oak Hill Cemetery. Led by a bagpiper, mourners reconvened at the Corcoran family mausoleum. The wreath, placed at his grave, “will remain there to tragically inform Mr. Corcoran that one of his benefactions is no more,” Simmons said.

For many of the mourners, it would be their final goodbye to the institution — but not to their favorite works of art, wherever they end up.

“There are many old friends in that art collection that I’d hate never to see again,” Simmons said.