

Hoving's boasts of his life both reward and repulse

MAKING THE MUMMIES DANCE

Inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art

By Thomas Hoving. Simon & Schuster.

447 pp. Illustrated. \$25.

By Nicholas Fox Weber

In 1978, I had occasion to accompany artist Josef Albers, then 85, for a day at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where Thomas Hoving was director. Albers, living in Connecticut, had recently been the subject of the first one-man retrospective the Met had ever given to a living artist, except for a presentation of Churchill's paintings.

Albers had lunch that day in a special dining room reserved for the upper echelon of the Met's staff. His host was Henry Geldzahler, who had curated the exhibition. In the middle of the meal, the octogenarian suddenly slumped forward, his face in his hands. I was alarmed and quickly asked if he was all right. Albers grinned from behind his hands and assured me that he was fine. "It's only because that Hoving has just come into the room. And if he sees me, he'll come over to make a fuss and give himself credit for my show. He wants all the praise."

Hoving's book about his years at the Met, "Making the Mummies Dance," brought this memory back with full force, as it did another strong association with the tenure of this flamboyant museum impresario. A Columbia student in the late 1960s, I would regularly take the No. 4 bus eastbound across 110th Street and then down Fifth Avenue to the Met. In 1969, something different occurred on those journeys. Scores of African-Americans began to get on in Harlem and get off at the museum. The reason was Hoving's show, "Harlem on My Mind." It drew an

audience that had never been in the museum before.

Both Hoving's obnoxiousness and his accomplishments permeate the pages of his memoir. Rarely has a writer gone to more effort to sing his own praises. But for all Hoving's bragging, there remains the sense that he really did do something, that he had imagination and energy and a new sense of the public a museum might serve.

Hoving blows his own horn from beginning to end of this book. To underline the significance of his position, he tells us that the museum is "the richest in history. . . . The Met has it all." How he justifies this statement, in light of the holdings of the Louvre and other museums, is unclear. He makes no bones about his ambition as museum director: "I realized that I wanted to be accepted into the prestige and power of the Metropolitan far more than I really cared about the institution or its needs." Ascending to his new position, he declares himself as feeling "triumphant and unbeatable."

Maybe Hoving did all he claims at the Met, or at least half of it, but throughout his book the boasting is even more stupefying than the achievement. After crediting himself with single-handedly landing Robert Lehman's magnificent collection, he declares, "What a moment in the history of the museum - and I had done it! This would make everything Romimer [his predecessor] had done seem insignificant." Under Hoving's stewardship, nothing less than "the most sweeping revolution in the history of art museums had taken place."

One of the ways Hoving emphasizes his own superiority is by putting down other people. He has no hesitancy about making harsh and

deprecating remarks about trustees, curators who served under him or city officials. At one point, he describes himself as being without friends; once "Making the Mummies Dance" has made the rounds, he will hardly be without enemies.

Is it a disregard for consequences, or a love of being outrageous, that motivates the man? There is a deliberate callousness and a high degree of tastelessness about a public servant and married man (his periodic references to his wife make her sound loyal and long-suffering) telling the world that in traveling for his institution, he always "stayed in grand suites at the best hotels, dined at great restaurants, drank a lot, and got entangled in a number of affairs with all sorts of women I met on the way - museum staff members and pricey call girls."

Yet in part because of his arrogance and candor, Hoving's book is engrossing, and provides fascinating cultural history. We learn from "Making the Mummies Dance" that, at least under his leadership, running a large museum meant engaging in hypocritical sham, falsifying friendship and using every device imaginable to entice the very rich, self-aggrandizing, coarse and vulgar to give or bequeath their collections to the public.

We get entertaining glimpses inside the world of power, such as the vignettes about cruising in Europe on Charles Wrightsman's yacht as royalty and prestigious visitors periodically come on board. There is a fascinating description of a meeting in Vienna with Kurt Waldheim, then Austria's minister of foreign affairs, when Hoving was seeking loans for his "Masterpieces of Fifty Centuries" exhibition. Waldheim would not budge on the question of providing

had been repeatedly feted, at the Met's expense, at one fancy restaurant after another, and finally only succumbed after he had received an invitation to the gala opening dinner, with the Met picking up the cost of the trip.

The most irresistible description is of a trip Hoving made to the Soviet Union with Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis as they worked on the Russian costume exhibition being organized for the Met by Diana Vreeland, and on its accompanying book. Onassis was desperate for articles worn by members of the czar's family, a request the Russians repeatedly denied. But eventually, in Paulouisk, the imperial palace near Leningrad, Onassis caught a glimpse of some magnificent royal garments, which the Russian museum director then urged her to try on. Five minutes later, Jacqueline Onassis appeared in Alexandra's white silk ball gown. The piece was never lent to the Met, but Hoving's description of the former first lady clad as a girlish czarina is memorable.

Indeed, Hoving has an eye for beauty. When he describes artworks, he is passionate and knowledgeable, and it is a pleasure to experience the masterpieces through his eyes. He acquired a number of treasures for his museum, and in so doing served us all. He also mounted remarkable blockbuster exhibitions and initiated a monumental, if flawed, program of building expansion. He changed, for better and for worse, the role of art museums. He was audacious, which makes "Making the Mummies Dance" both fascinating and painful to read.

Nicholas Fox Weber is the author of "Patron Saints: Five Rebels Who Opened America to a New Art, 1912."