"Art collecting is all about greedy social-climbers and parvenus," wrote Thomas Hoving, after he stepped down as director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And museum administration is all about the art of separating collectors from their treasures.

Michael Gross, a contributing editor at Travel and Leisure magazine, agrees. With a vengeance. The overt hostility of the Met to his project, no doubt, confirmed his assumption that behind every donor lies a sin or a crime. He supplies a gripping, glib and gossipy deconstruction of the curators, directors, donors and trustees who dominated the Met since its founding in 1870.

Gross' Met does the right thing infrequently, and then only under duress. Suppressing its antipathy to the masses in the 20th century, he indicates, the museum did open its doors on Sundays. But the Met still shames visitors into paying a $20 admission fee, even though the official policy allows anyone to enter with a contribution of as little as a penny.

In resisting demands that the Met return objects "stolen" from Italy, director Philippe Montebello was arrogant, imperious — and on the wrong side of history, Gross writes (without adequately exploring this complicated issue). When he yielded, he was "defensive and peevish."

In "Rogues' Gallery," the Met just can't win. Gross indicts the museum for its "public be damned" attitude and for being slow to embrace modern art. He then blames Montebello for playing to the crowds with a Costume Institute exhibit of superhero fashions — and selling pink and green T-shirts with the word "Pow" in a cartoon bubble. Gross acknowledges that the Met must cultivate new art in order to survive.

But, he claims, rather vaguely, "it needs to have a conversation with what's current, not give it a solo."

Convinced that "proximity to treasure breeds certain forms of cruelty," Gross seems willing to endorse — or at least, to recycle — just about every allegation about the extravagance, envy, egotism and mean-spiritedness of the Met's benefactors.

Most savage of all is Gross' portrait of Jane Mannheimer Engelhard and her daughter Annette, the wife of designer Oscar de la Renta. As Jane grew fat, "her bad habits — drinking and popping pills — multiplying," Gross writes, Annette took her place on the Met's board of trustees, insinuated herself into the affection of the ancient Brooke Astor (so that she could be named her guardian), and engineered "the fashion takeover" of the museum. Exhibiting little of her mother's affinity for art, Gross suggests, she ran the Met to settle scores and score points in New York society.

ROGUES' GALLERY

"The Secret History of the Moguls and the Money that Made the Metropolitan Museum"
Michael Gross
Broadway Books, $29.95

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Associate Images:
Visitors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art enjoy Renoir's "The Daughters of Catulle Mendes", recently in New York. Mary Altaffer/Associated Press file