Johnson enjoying new MFA job

By Mike McNamee

The Boston Globe said on Sept. 19 that he was the guy you would least expect to get the job.

Howard Johnson, former president of MIT and current chairman of the Corporation, had just been named president of the trustees of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The manager - Dean of Sloan School after directing Management Research at the University of Chicago - who reorganized the administration of the nation's leading scientific school as its president, was being named to direct one of the oldest art museums in the nation - and one of the most troubled. It didn't seem quite right.

A few days later the Globe recounted in a long Sunday story which discussed Johnson's interests in the arts and in technology. The idea that art doesn't mix with engineering, science and management was still making its unsusited presence felt, as the Globe reporter tried to prove that, wrongly or another, Johnson was a man with one foot in each camp. The story wasn't too successful at making its point.

Johnson, however, doesn't see anything unusual about a man with his background holding down such a spot in the arts world, and not because his parents took him to museums and had art in the Chicago house where he grew up. Johnson has always maintained that there is no battle between arts and technology, and that the two fields can be even more interesting when they lend their talents to each other. The growth of arts activity at the Institute started under his administration - a reflection of his belief.

Even more important, Johnson doesn't see any conflict between his two jobs as chairman of the MIT Corporation - which involves overseeing the administration, acting as holder-in-trust of the assets and properties of MIT, and raising money for the Institute - and as president of the MFA trustees - which involves identical duties. In fact, Johnson says he's glad to have the second job now - he feels "challenged" by the MFA spot.

There's a lot to challenge him. The museum is coming off one of the toughest periods of its history, rocked by financial problems including a tripled deficit, and staff dissenion which culminated in the firing of ex-Director Merrill Ruettger in June. The museum is still operating under an interim director, with no sign of a permanent replacement in sight. Expensive renovations, including the $10 million installation of climate-control machinery needed to preserve the museum's art treasures, are under consideration. Johnson's role as head of the trustees is "no honorary position these days," he says.

Johnson sees his first priority as making the necessary decisions to get things rolling in the museum. Unconcerning his efforts on the search for a permanent director, he is also examining the field of potential donors to find whatever funds are available to build the museum's endowment and undertake renovations. Grants from the National Endowment for the Arts are being sought for some restoration projects.

Even more important, however, is maintaining what he sees as "an era of good feeling" between the staff, fund-raisers, and trustees. There's a sense of getting it all together at the museum right now, sort of a collective sigh of relief that those past problems are behind us and we know what we're doing," he said. "But we can't rest on that - you always have to follow up, to produce the good feeling alive." Keeping that good feeling and the feeling of progress is one important factor in another image-building step which Johnson feels is important - returning the museum to its former position of esteem in the eyes of the professional world. "One art director recently called the MFA 'a Sleeping Beauty' - everybody knows that it's a great museum, but there are still many questions in the wake of its earlier troubles," he said. "Within the walls there's a better sense of the place; it feels more vigorous and alive than it did in its troubled period. But that perception takes a while to communicate to the rest of the professional museum world, and many people are watching us with some interest.

Beyond the immediate needs for better direction, Johnson is concentrating on his fields of greatest strength - management and fund-raising. The museum's development program is undergoing study to make fund-raising more effective, and Johnson is exploring unusual sources of philanthropic funding - including the federal government.

"We're receiving some small amounts of money now from the National Endowment for the Arts, but there are broad areas of research and schooling that could benefit from federal funding," Johnson explained. "Research on restoration of paintings for example, is critical. I'm considering joint programs with the several universities in the area under government funding. The problem is that universities in the area under government funding to research that utilizes each institution's greatest strengths scientific studies at MIT, art history at Harvard, history at Wellesley, and so forth - and lends the museum's strengths to them.

Federal funding "should never be a major part of the budget - no more than 10 to 20 percent," Johnson said, and should not be used for acquisition - "not as long as the tax law favors donating art works to museums; all you'd do is put a floor level under art prices." (The age of acquisition as museum's major activity is over anyway, Johnson said.) But the federal interest in preserving museums is great, Johnson said, and local resources often aren't up to the task.

In the first three months on the job, Johnson said, no one had confused his two roles as chief trustee and fund-raisers for MIT and MFA. "Which hat I'm wearing is usually clear." Despite his view of the lack of an art-to-technology push, he finds himself often moving in a different circle for each job. Expanding his coatrack to hold one more "hat" hasn't cramped the style of manager Johnson any more than it hurt arts-interested Johnson. He likes his job.