

National Arts Club Undergoes Massive Spring Cleaning

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With long-time NAC prez Aldon James on "vacation," board members are carting junk out from rooms and assessing its art.



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By Amy Zimmer

DNAinfo News Editor

GRAMERCY PARK — The esteemed National Arts Club is undergoing a massive spring cleaning and art appraisal after its controversial president O. Aldon James, who spent 25 years at its helm, temporarily stepped down for what board members called a "well earned vacation."

Diane Bernhard, the board's first vice president who is filling in for James, said members have cleaned out enough detritus from the once-elegant rooms at 15 Gramercy Park South that they've had to bring in dumpsters to dispose of it all.

"It's spring and we're cleaning the mansion," said Bernhard. "Members and board members and staff have pulled together and worked like a dream team. We have moved mountains — literally."

Board members have also tasked National Arts Club member and former president of the Art Appraisers Association Alex Rosenberg with taking stock of the club's massive inventory of artwork in storage and on display.

Rosenberg and his team of appraisers have been combing through everything, recording, photographing and evaluating anything worth more than \$1,500, he said.

"We are trying to find out what's actually here and how much we should value it for and can we insure it," he said. "The collection is so vast, it's going to take up quite a bit of time," he said. "I set a deadline: by the end of May we should have some overview. By then we should know the 100 most important pieces."

"I would say [the club has] the best collection in the city of art from the first two decades of the 20th century," he added, indicating one frame made by former club member and famed architect Stanford White estimated to cost \$50,000 or more.

The massive overhaul effort comes months after DNAinfo reported James and his twin brother, John, had been hoarding antiques, papers, arts and other junk they'd buy on flea market sprees in several of the club's rooms. Critics had accused the brothers of doing a poor job of safeguarding their massive art collection, including storing some of the artwork in the mouldering basement. Aldon James denied that charge in an angry missive to members.



A dumpster on 19th Street behind the National Arts Club was overflowing with bags of garbage on a recent day. (DNAinfo)

The brothers were accused of using their apartments in the club, which are part of a 40-unit residential space adjacent to the National Arts Club, to hoard massive amounts of the junk. They were also accused of secretly commandeering other club spaces, according to staffers who added that the doors to those other rooms were bolstered with triple locks, in some cases.

James paid \$1,143 per month for his apartment, while his brother paid only \$356 a month — and Bernhard paid \$7,600 for hers, according to recent tax filings.

Club workers haven't seen the James brothers hanging around lately.

While James may have been responsible for expanding the club's membership exponentially, he was also accused of running the venerable institution's finances into the ground— attracting the attention of the Manhattan District Attorney's office and New York's Attorney General, both of which are [investigating the club](#).

Board member Cherry Provost said she has spent "day after day" from 10 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. sifting through the mountains of paperwork and sorting them into four piles. One is for the Attorney General; one for the archives; another for current business; and a pile to be read by another pair of eyes, she said.

"The going into overdrive is beyond belief," Provost, who chairs the club's literary committee, which has given awards to such famous writers as David McCullough, Joyce Carol Oates and Don DeLillo.

"There were canyons of paper everywhere," she said of Aldon James' office. "You could not even walk in here." Every single paper has to be read and categorized, she said.

Board members have been working in a room overlooking the park with a fireplace and stately chandelier that became off-limits for meetings and other groups that had once rented it out when it became "the bird room" for self-proclaimed "Bird Man of Gramercy Park" Aldon James.

James, an avid bird collector, got into hot water last month after dozens of [finches](#) like the kind he admitted buying just days before were found dead around Gramercy Park. The ASPCA and Department of Environmental Conservation launched an investigation into the source of the dead birds.

"This is a room where four or five years ago I had meetings for the literary committee," Provost said. "Then the birds took over and it became an auxiliary office for Aldon James. It wasn't reserved or rented for anything."

All of the birds have been cleared out of the building, although one returned this week.

A Quaker parrot named Martina returned with Miguel Serrano, a long time employee who Aldon James fired in December and was rehired after the board gave James a vacation.

"I guarantee this is going to be the right direction for the club and that it's going to be better than ever," Serrano said. "There's transparency now, not only for the people that run it but for the employees, too. There were a lot of people keeping this place running."