



ADMINISTRATION

A Not-So-Hidden Passion

The Memorial Art Gallery's new director looks to expand a cultural and creative footprint.

Interview by Kathleen McGarvey

Jonathan Binstock, the new Mary W. and Donald R. Clark Director of the Memorial Art Gallery, says that expanding the ranks of gallery-goers and drawing on the creative lives of Rochesterians are among his top goals. Binstock succeeds Grant Holcomb, who led the gallery for almost 29 years. Before his arrival in Rochester as the seventh director in the more than 100-year history of the gallery, Binstock was a senior vice president and senior advisor in

CONNECTIONS: Jonathan Binstock, new director of the MAG, says that forging relationships with community members who aren't regular gallery-goers is part of his plan for the institution—as is learning from them what they want from the MAG.

modern and contemporary art for Citi Private Bank's Art Advisory & Finance group. He also has more than a decade of curatorial work in major American museums, including the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. He holds a doctorate in art history from the University of Michigan.

How do you see your role as director of the gallery?

Essentially what we have here is a very solid museum, with a strong following, that enjoys a tremendous amount of love and goodwill from a very supportive community. My role? Imagine a satellite circling the earth—my role is to turn on the turbo boosters and elevate the satellite to a new level, so that there's a bigger audience, a

bigger budget, and a bigger profile for a museum that enjoys even more love and support.

All is well and good at the MAG. The question is, what's it going to be in five to 10 years? That's my job: to move the museum to a new level.

What is that new level?

Five to 10 years from now, I want to see MAG at the center of the conversation for creativity in the region. And I want to see MAG as a national model for how a regional museum can expand the cultural footprint of a city.

We've launched a new program called "Hidden Passions: Inspiring Conversations about Hyphenated Lives." It began in March, and we bring in people from the community who are passionately creative

and innovative and give them a forum in which to share that passion and creativity. There are a lot of people who do one thing during the day, and something entirely different in the evenings and on weekends. That's what the program is about. We have a private investigator who's also a *cuatro* guitar maker, for example, and an industrial designer who's also a bonsai tree sculptor. This is an opportunity for the public to share their visions for a creative world with us and with each other.

What are some of the opportunities and the challenges MAG faces?

The opportunities are there for a regional museum to be integral to the cultural life of a community, and to be relevant to that community—and when I say community, I mean everyone who lives there. Rochester is a great place to live for a variety of reasons. The MAG is one of those reasons. So how do we expand that?

One of our great challenges is one that almost every museum faces: getting people's attention in a world that's full of distractions. Part of this challenge involves how to think about the gap between technologically mediated experience and the authentic experience of time, space, and the material world as an opportunity rather than a limitation.

How does new technology figure in your current and future plans?

Artists are making art that often involves new technology and new media. Those artworks can live on the web, and also in the space of a gallery. Museums that want to show contemporary art are obligated to evolve their exhibition capabilities—their ability to manage and display works of art made up of new media.

On another front there are many museums that use new media and technology in the galleries as educational tools and exhibition interfaces. The Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York City just reopened with an incredibly complex, exciting, and cutting-edge new media educational interface. All of these possibilities are rich with potential, but there is yet another way to approach technology in the

museum context. I think people are looking for reasons to put down their smartphones and tablets. They're hungry for experiences that illuminated screens can't provide. I love the idea of people sharing their visits to our museum through social media—I myself am a big Instagrammer—but I don't think we should assume that they need or want to experience the museum primarily through the lens of a digital display.

We're creating a new committee dedicated to imagining the future and enhancing the museum's relevance to broader audiences. There are lots of things for people to do on the weekends—watch football, go to the movies, go to another museum, see a performance, go shopping. The question is, how do we help people see the pleasure and value of what we have and do here at the museum? We started with a roundtable discussion to reach out to members of the millennial generation, and we're going to have another. The new committee will be a forum for debating the relevance of a new program idea, a new event idea, a new exhibition idea, and so on—and imagine new ways of connecting people to what's going on at the museum.

You've talked about reaching broad audiences. How effectively are you doing that?

We're not reaching a broad swath of the community as well as we would like. That's what we're working on. We have a great population of supporters and audience members. We bring in over 9,000 public and private school students a year. We have over 900 volunteers who donate almost 39,000 hours of their time a year—it's one of the highest rates of volunteer participation in the country.

We have a membership of more than 4,600 individual and corporate supporters, which is also one of the highest per capita memberships in the country. We have the M&T Bank Clothesline Festival, which brings in 25,000 people over a weekend. The list goes on. But we also realize that our audience is primarily an aging demographic, and we have to think about who our audience will be in 10, 20, or 30 years' time. So we're reaching out to the University, and to young professionals and millennials, and inviting them to add their voices here on the inside rather than just creating programs for them that we think they will appreciate. The truth is, we really don't know what the right program is, and we want their help. That's what "Hidden Passions" is about. It's about bringing people onto the stage who are part of the

community but with whom we don't connect as well as we would like to—and giving them an opportunity to share with us what is really important to them.

How does this new job relate to those you've previously held?

A classic trajectory for a museum director is to come up through the curatorial ranks, and I certainly have that background. I think about exhibitions, arts education, and building our permanent collection. My work at Citibank gave me exposure to the world of private collectors, and to how massive corporations work, how they drive performance, and how they measure success. As a museum director and CEO, I also am obligated to make sure the museum is functioning well in all of its business functions, including fundraising, marketing, and revenue, and in the culture of the place.

What I have always enjoyed but didn't get to do as much at Citibank—but did a lot of in my curatorial jobs—is building community and playing a public role in the cultural conversation. Rochester is a fantastic opportunity for me to really have an impact and to do something that potentially changes how art is viewed in this town.

And how is it viewed?

It's a very strong place for culture. There's a lot of sympathy for the arts here, from theater to music to dance to visual arts. It's very rich in that regard.

What has most surprised you at the gallery since you arrived?

I'm less surprised than impressed—impressed by how dedicated people are to this museum and its success. We just celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Gallery Council, which is an incredible network of people loyal and giving of their time and money to the institution. We have a staff that works mightily out of love to advance the mission of this place, and we have patrons who give generously and professionals who give in-kind support. I've been very moved by this outpouring of goodwill.

What do you love about art and art museums?

I love the fact that what I do for work and what I do for pleasure are exactly the same things. I'm all about art. When I travel or go on vacation to a city, that's what I look for. I'm very fortunate to be able to spend my workdays thinking about art and how to move an art museum forward. I guess it's for this reason that I don't have a hidden passion. My work is my passion. 