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"If you take anything away ... nothing at all remains" – Hans Josephsohn

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An oral history by friends, peers, and lovers

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MAX HOLLEIN photographed by GEORGE ETHEREDGE for BLAU International

HALL MEETS HOLLEIN

ANDY HALL *in conversation with* MAX HOLLEIN

Following a stint at the Guggenheim in the 1990s, MAX HOLLEIN quickly rose to direct two of Germany's most prestigious institutions, the Städel Museum and the Schirn Kunsthalle. Now, he steers the great ship of the Met. At a pivotal time for museums, Hollein talks about diversifying the New York institution—and about what is to be done with controversial public statues

ANDY HALL: Have you found that there is a difference between being a museum director in America and being one in Germany?

—— MAX HOLLEIN: In the American system, museums are private foundations governed by boards of trustees. It's very different to the European model, where funding is governed by public authorities. More philosophically, American institutions rely on the idea that the museum is an entirely civic establishment, owned by and responsible to the local community that supports it. It operates as a sort of "home away from home" for you, for everyone—it's your institution and should represent your values. In Europe, you don't have that feeling, given that institutions have often originated out of an aristocratic or clerical collection. In the United States, people take ownership of, and responsibility for, the institution.

So, in the context of the Met, do people in New York feel more possessive of that institution than the people in Frankfurt were of the Städel or the Schirn?

—— Frankfurt is an anomaly in the European museum system. The Städel is the oldest and most important private cultural foundation in Germany. So, in a certain way, it represented a blueprint for American museums. But if you compare American museums to the institutions in Munich, Dresden, or Berlin, I think there's a significant difference.

Because, in America, funding comes largely from private benefactors.

—Yes, with all of the implications as well. You're seeing it now during this crisis. American institutions have to be very responsive to fiscal realities or financial pressures, and results are being felt immediately—there's no government bailout. That's why you have seen American institutions announcing layoffs fairly swiftly, while you have not heard much about that in Europe, where deficits will have to be compensated through increased public funding. American institutions also have a different level of leadership. A board of an American institution, usually comprised of business leaders, entrepreneurs, and major collectors, has a clear mandate: on the one hand, to make sure that the institution is well run, but, on the other hand, to set ambitious goals for further development. There's much less of that in Europe. I'm not saying European institutions are not ambitious. But, more often than not, the mandate of a European museum's board, consisting mainly of representatives from public funding sources, is to make sure that the museum stays within its budget. There is less of an impulse to continuously develop.

One of the biggest differences in running the Met versus running similar institutions in Europe is how ambitious and generously funded we are as a collecting institution. You wouldn't find the level of collecting, of ambition, and of gifts that we have at the Met at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, at the Uffizi, the Hermitage, or even at the Louvre or the British Museum.

It sounds like you prefer the American model to the European model.

—If you're in a city where you have a broad donor base, the American model is quite powerful. But if you're in a smaller environment and dependent on one or two donors, the American model can be challenging.

“Not every statue is a work of art that deserves to be preserved: are they works of art, or are they just objects that serve a particular agenda, which could be to promote oppression?”

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL
Untitled (Studio), 2014
Acrylic on PVC panels, 212 × 303 cm

Presumably you have to deal with a lot of conflicting interests: the board, the City of New York, your audience, artists, critics, all with different goals and objectives. It must be quite a challenge reconciling all their interests.

—It's what makes being part of a museum so interesting—because you have such a complex variety of stakeholders. A museum is a very powerful platform within a community, and maybe for the Met the whole world is its community. Managing the programming is one of the most challenging but also most inspiring things to do. As for the donors, the majority of them certainly have a particular agenda, but I see this as a positive. We need passionate people. The task of the director is to create the right mix out of all of these agendas, and to develop the right overall programmatic and collection strategy.

So, shifting gears, what should be done with all these public sculptures of problematic historical figures?

—Not every statue is a work of art that deserves to be preserved. So, in that sense, there's a fairly clear answer.

Coming from Germany, which has a very developed concept of memorial culture, I think it's important to recognize what these objects are. Are they works of art, or are they just objects that serve a particular agenda, which could be to promote oppression or be a provocation of sorts?

The majority of artworks have an agenda, and, more often than not, they also serve certain propagandistic purposes. If you walk through our galleries at the Met, the sculptures and paintings have a specific goal or were commissioned for a purpose—for example, promoting Luther and Protestant beliefs.

It is important to see artworks and public sculptures not solely for their aesthetic merit, but for the way they make a context understandable. So, we have to make sure—for people in- and also outside museums—that the context can be fully understood and clearly responded to. There are some sculptures that certainly can be placed in an artistic museum context but still be loaded with an agenda. We are able to decode that and bring that alive in a meaningful way. Then there are other public sculptures that are not artworks and might not be appropriate, might not actually have a right to be eternally present.

So, if there's a sculpture that is a work of art but it's of a contentious person, it's okay to put that in a museum where it's contextualized. But it shouldn't be something in a public square where the suggestion is that it should be revered.

—I think that's the distinction. One also has to reflect on the intention, especially with public sculpture, which sometimes gets forgotten. So, we have to resurface the purpose and determine whether it's still even appropriate in regard to the placement.

In light of Black Lives Matter and a new awareness of colonial history, will you be making changes to the way works are presented at the Met?

—We've already been on that path for some years. We'll certainly continue with full force, now more than ever. You have to not only evaluate which works are most relevant in our galleries, but also what kind of context you want to provide for them. I'm talking about our labels, texts, chat panels, audio tours—whatever we do to frame these works and create either new connections, new understandings, or new correlations to decode works. That's an ongoing process, and it's certainly received much more urgency and attention because of Black Lives Matter.

One of the challenges that we have is that the collection, like the Met and how it came into existence, is a mirror of society, of philanthropy, of taste; it's a mirror of American history and of who wrote that history. So if you go through the American Wing, you will certainly see a very high percentage of white artists. You will see a high percentage of artworks promoting a certain story of America, the story of the white settler reaching Manifest Destiny.

Will that change?

—We're doing it in two ways. On the one hand, we have made sure to include Native American art in the American Wing. But we also want to make sure that the art is more readable. If you look at a certain painting from the Hudson River School, say by Frederic Edwin Church—it's a major work of American art history, but it reflects the values of the time.

So, you make it more readable and more transparent, but you have to contextualize it.

—And show the agenda behind it.

Extending that thought, what are the biggest gaps in the Met's collection, and, going forward, can we expect to a see a change of focus in respect to acquisitions?

—First of all, the Met's collection is enormous. We have 1.5 million objects. We collect globally, from the ancient world to now, and not only paintings, sculptures, and works on paper, but also arms and armor, musical instruments, costumes, textiles, et cetera. We already prioritize certain underrepresented areas and artists or artworks representing a different narrative, expanding our canon. This certainly includes an emphasis on artworks by Indigenous or Black artists. But I think that, in the bigger scheme of things, it is not so much only about what we collect; even more important is what we are surfacing and prioritizing in our galleries. It is important that Wangechi Mutu's extraordinary sculptures were on the facade of the Met, showing a powerful presence, as it is that Kent Monkman's monumental

“We’re surfacing and emphasizing these other perspectives—not only in regard to 20th and 21st-century art, but across our institution. Can we rebalance the collection? Can we make sure that it doesn’t look so white and male?”

JACK WHITTEN
Lucy, 2011
Mixed media, 159 × 26 × 46 cm

Left: WANGECHI MUTU
The Seated, 2019
Bronze, 201 × 81 × 107 cm

new paintings, which suggest a different kind of history of painting and of America, were prominently placed in the Great Hall. So what we collect is important, but so is what we present.

So, a better question would’ve been to ask about what you exhibit. Might I infer then that we’ll perhaps see a different balance to the mix of exhibitions in the future?

——Well, I think the Met has done fairly well in the last few years. Starting with the Kerry James Marshall show at the Met Breuer, we’ve also featured Jack Whitten’s work in a solo show and acquired and then presented works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. We recently displayed the work of a group of African American portrait photographers from the 1940s and 50s—part of another important acquisition. There was also the newly commissioned intervention in the Cantor Roof Garden by Héctor Zamora and the exhibition of Jacob Lawrence’s landmark *American Struggle* series, delayed by our closure, went on view when we reopened. But we’ll certainly have a whole set of programs in the next three years that will emphasize these areas.

It’s not only about contemporary art or art of the 20th century. An exhibition that we’re currently preparing, for example, is about Africa and Byzantium, about the role of Africa in Byzantine art. We are also putting forward other perspectives. For example, one show that we’re working on is about the Old Master painter Juan de Pareja, who was Velázquez’s enslaved assistant. So we’re trying to make sure that we’re surfacing and emphasizing these stories—not only in regard to 20th and 21st-century art, but across our institution and certainly in the areas where it’s more challenging. Can we rebalance the collection? Can we make sure that it doesn’t look so white and male?

When you reflect on what’s at the Met, do you have any favorite works?

——One particular work that I keep gravitating toward is a painting by Georges de La Tour in our European Old Master galleries, *The Fortune Teller*. It’s almost like a stage set, a theater piece; it’s so rich in psychology and human deceit, and it has an eternal quality that speaks to our times. But there are many other things that I gravitate toward. One idiosyncratic area that I immediately got involved in when I arrived was our collection of period rooms, which encapsulate a certain time. The Met has over 40 of them sprinkled all around the building. It starts with an ancient room from Pompeii. Our most recent is a Frank Lloyd Wright interior. I posed the question, “What would be a period room of today, and why shouldn’t that also be part of our collection?” So, last year, we started working on that, and we’ll soon announce details of the new period room, set to open next year.

Some people think the Met shouldn’t be trying to collect contemporary work.

——It’s one of the bigger questions that keeps coming up. I have to say, the Met collected contemporary art from the very beginning. Some of its founding trustees were artists. Frederic Edwin Church was a founding trustee, as was John Frederick Kensett. It’s really important to understand that the Met is the one big encyclopedic museum in the world that covers the whole human timespan and fully integrates contemporary art as part of its overall presentation. So that’s really significant for our institutional DNA. It’s clear that, for the Met, contemporary art has to be seen, on the one hand, in the context of an encyclopedic museum that’s there for the world, and, on the other hand, in the context of a museum located here in New York, where there are a couple of other institutions that have an excellent, superior standing in regard to modern and contemporary art.

The art market used to look to museums for approbation. Nowadays, it's almost the reverse. Is that a change for the better?

——I would say two things. Firstly, museums have been priced out of the high end of the modern and contemporary art market for quite some time. But, secondly, that opens up a new set of opportunities for museums. Knowing how you collect, I think we're looking for the same thing you are looking for: not unrecognized artists, but artists who are important for art history, who have a very original voice, and who are, for one reason or another, rather overlooked. I think this is where we, as a museum, can be similarly creative and very engaged.

The Covid-19 crisis is obviously having a profound effect on everybody, not least museums. When Covid-19 is finally behind us, how will museums in general, and the Met in particular, have changed?

——Currently we are very focused on how to weather the storm and how to be as protective as possible of our staff. The Met's number of visitors—which, before closure, was 7.4 million—will certainly drop, probably to something like 4.5 million, and it will also become much more local. The majority of visitors to the Met—about 70 percent—were tourists. This has major revenue implications, as the majority of it was coming from out-of-towners.

Longer-term, you will see a set of changes that are also opportunities. One is that during our closure everybody learned how to engage digitally. We have a very robust offering with our digital platforms. Everybody now knows how to receive this information. So, within four months, an audience grew that is very hungry for digital content, and will continue to be involved with the institution in this way. A physical visit to the institution is now, more than ever, only one part of a deep engagement with it. That's a huge advantage. It allows us to have a much deeper and more global conversation, and we'll be an even more educational institution than before.

UNKNOWN
Feline Bottle, 8th–10th century
Ceramic, 20 × 7 × 11 cm

"There is always discussion going on about the market. But I think collecting at the Met is really rooted in expertise and a certain level of connoisseurship that comes with it. That's an important way to move forward"

I should also note that during our closure, curators were still working, scrutinizing and reconceptualizing our collection. You will see a lot more programming that creates new, imaginative ways of how to service our collection. There is a shift away from asking what else we need to really considering what we already have and how we best service that.

Lastly, we have all learned to be much more collaborative. That's also true for collaborations between institutions. Coming out of this, you will see a significantly increased number of collaborations between institutions, some for financial and others for creative reasons. I think that's a plus.

We've all discovered that the way we were running our affairs was not the most efficient.

——Absolutely. The whole business of symposia, colloquia, and large-scale panel discussions will completely change for the better. Before, if we wanted to have a symposium, it took us half a year to organize, and it was costly to fly people in from all over the world. Now that's not an issue, so you get the best quality virtual discourse in a way that you wouldn't have been able to do physically. You can bring everybody to the table, which makes for a much more global discourse, on a scholarly level—one that's more inclusive, featuring more voices from distant places than before.

That makes me quite optimistic about the outlook for museums as such, because at the end of the day, people do want a physical experience.

——I fully agree—just the idea of being in a space with an object. That's important because an artist also conceives the work that way. It really is a physical interaction, and the community idea of being in a museum

GEORGES DE LA TOUR
The Fortune Teller, c. 1630s
Oil on canvas, 102 × 124 cm

KENT MONKMAN, *Resurgence of the People*, 2019
Acrylic on canvas, 335 × 671 cm

together, looking at works together, is an important part of that. The single-viewer experience of us looking at images on a screen is by no means what the museum as a forum is about.

It is truly interactive in the full meaning of the word. So, Max, how do you feel about the plethora of privately owned museums that have sprung up in the past 20-odd years?

—To a certain extent, there is the private initiative of someone at the origin of every museum. The number of new private institutions shows a strong commitment to art. That's good for museums in general, and it's good for us. A lot of private institutions take a more experimental approach about how to show work and how to contextualize it, putting it in an interesting setting that I find invigorating. So I see that as a positive. But not all of them will survive.

We'd better check back in 20 years' time.

—Exactly. It's not only about how you set it up, but about how original the concept is—so that it can be an incubator for something really big. The concept for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum was very original. Out of it came something powerful and interesting. But then there are other examples of private museums that didn't flourish: at some point, there was a lack of funding, or the collection was not that important, or the underlying idea wasn't strong enough. So I ask, are they idiosyncratic enough? Are they twisted enough so that they can actually generate something new that we don't already have covered? Anything that emulates the public museums of 40 years ago is bound to fail.

Thinking back over your career, what are some of the most memorable exhibitions you recall seeing?

—They are numerous, but I could cite a few to start. One I saw here, as a student, at the Met. I came to New York to see the show on Petrus Christus, and I was just blown away by it. Seeing those masterpieces brought together was a really defining experience. It completely cemented my strong desire to complete an art history degree.

In the contemporary field, there are many, many shows that were very powerful. I would mention, since this is also a passion we share, that the Baselitz show at the Royal Academy that Norman Rosenthal curated was such a perfect exhibition of an outstanding artist and also in the spaces of the Royal Academy—

They're perfect, classical gallery spaces.

—Right, it's engraved in my memory. And then the Documenta that Okwui Enwezor curated—I think it was so transformative, not only for how we think about art, but also for what art we should see—and need to see—and for how much wider we need to expand our horizon. I think it was one of the big seismographic exhibitions that still resonates today.

You have curated many exhibitions yourself. Which of those are you most proud of?

—It's probably a show that nobody remembers. By accident, I became the commissioner for the American Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2000. I was still working at the Guggenheim at that time. The American Pavilion doesn't get any funding from the US government, so whoever had an idea and said "I can raise the money" became the commissioner. My idea was to bring two architects, Greg Lynn and Hani Rashid, with their students from UCLA and Columbia, to the pavilion, and let them work there. They were digital artists, and I wanted to show the new way of how architects work in their paperless, computer-driven studios. I was very young, 29, I think, and I didn't understand the complexity of bringing 60 students to Venice, of living at the pavilion, of having no money to fund it in the beginning, and of bringing all this technical equipment there. It was a really wild project, and we had to pull it off within six months. It was a very daring move in hindsight, completely crazy.

Do you yourself collect?

—My wife, Nina, and I collect. But it's more like a diary: it's either artists who we know or who we have a certain relationship with. But we only buy at auction, so that there's no conflict. We collect artists from the 1960s onward, a lot of them more off the beaten path—some of them known, some of them not so much. Then, because it's a private passion of mine, I collect some Neue Sachlichkeit, again artists more on the second level, not the most prominent.

It's been a really great conversation. Is there anything I should've asked you? Anything you'd like to add?

—One of the reasons why I'm so excited about the Met is that there is an enormous number of curators—I mean enormous—all of whom are extremely specialized, with deep knowledge and expertise in their fields. That means we can collect in ways and in areas that open up new perspectives, connotations, and contexts. There is always discussion going on about the market and what the market does. But I think collecting at the Met is really rooted in expertise and a certain level of connoisseurship that comes with it. That's a very powerful tool, and an important way to move forward.

Max, thank you. I wish you all the very best, and I'm sure the Met's greatest days are still in the future. So, power to you!

—It's an institution in permanent evolution, and I think we are on the next great path forward.