

Glenn D. Lowry's Foreign Policy Association Award Acceptance Speech**Thursday April 2, 2015**

Thank you so much for your generous comments and for this award. I am honored to accept it on behalf of my colleagues and the trustees of The Museum of Modern Art who work tirelessly to bring art and people together. What I hope to do briefly tonight is share with you some thoughts about how several of our programs fit into the larger context of international relations. In doing so I want to suggest that The Museum of Modern Art, through its collections and exhibitions, research initiatives and public programs, on-site and online audiences, participates in a robust international engagement that enables conversations to occur between and among people from around the world.

The timing of this much appreciated award follows closely on the opening of *Scenes for a New Heritage: Contemporary Art from the Collection*, and *Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955–1980*, two exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art that underscore the role that we, and other museums, play in fostering an appreciation and understanding of art in a global context. *Scenes for a New Heritage* features many recently acquired works of art from Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere. The story they tell is about the complicated dialogues, confrontations, and relationships among contemporary artists from many parts of the world, as they seek to question the many social, political, and cultural forces that are shaping our world.

Latin America in Construction surveys the way architects, urban planners, educators, and politicians, among others from Chile to Mexico, went about building their social and intellectual infrastructure from the mid-1950s until 1980, a critical period that saw an explosion in population, rapid economic growth, political upheavals, and an intensified sense of national identity throughout the region. The exhibition argues that the projects in the show are not dependent on European or North American influences, but are daring and original in their own right and must be considered as integral to any understanding of modern architecture. The exhibition recognizes and celebrates the fact that, regardless of how we as Americans may view Latin America, it is—and has been—a powerhouse in its own right for a long time.

Both exhibitions raise the question of the difference between influence—the impact of one way of thinking on another—and interest—the questioning of new ideas without becoming dependent on them—and teach us something about how to think and engage with the unfamiliar, a critical issue when encountering new ideas, especially when they come from outside our sphere of knowledge or familiarity. Who writes history, and from what point of view, has always shaped the way in

which we understand our own and other cultures, and that is why the curatorial team for Scenes for a New Heritage included curators with French, Japanese American, Swiss, and Croatian backgrounds, and Latin America in Construction was co-organized by an American, an Argentine, and a Brazilian. Their different—and at times even competing—perspectives and understandings were integral to the way both of those projects were able to frame a fresh set of ideas and concerns.

I come to the importance of this issue through the prism of my own education. I thought I was going to be a medical doctor when I went to college, only to discover that what I really wanted was to immerse myself in the history of art. I discovered this because I took a course on Islamic and Indian art that made me rethink everything I knew. Before that course I had no idea about the richness and complexity of Indian or Islamic art, and that bothered me a great deal. How was it possible, I thought, to be a relatively well-educated American and not know about these other traditions and the vibrant cultures they represented? It is a question that still troubles me because the answer often lies in a combination of ignorance and exposure, and that is why art museums, and their ability to provide spaces of encounter, are so important to the intellectual infrastructure of our cities and our nation.

In a world riven by conflict and strife, where intolerance and violence are increasingly the norm, where civil discourse often seems impossible there are relatively few places where we can see and learn about other peoples and cultures, where debate is welcomed, and where shared values and ideas can be formed. Museums, and especially museums of modern art, offer the ability to engage with new and different voices, with daring and challenging ideas, and with the unexpected and transforming, as artists are often the most sensitive and insightful, and purposefully unguarded, members of our society.

The founders of The Museum of Modern Art understood this when they set out, almost 90 years ago, to create a place where New Yorkers and, by extension, Americans, could learn about what Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the Museum's first director, termed the most progressive art of our time.

In the late 1920s this meant, for Barr, primarily European art by artists like Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Georges Seurat, not to mention Matisse and Picasso, and to a lesser degree the muralist tradition of Mexico—art that was being ignored by most American museums at that time.

Today, this means the work of artists from around world. And what makes this endeavor so important is that, in providing a forum for these artists be seen in relationship to the work of

American artists, The Museum of Modern Art enables different and often competing perspectives to engage with each other.

This is one of the reasons that the Museum created an International Council in 1953, to insure that there would be a mix of voices associated with the Museum and also to help contemporary American artists to become better known outside the United States. At the time of the Council's founding, in the middle of the Cold War, this was seen as an especially important activity. The 223 current members of the council come from 25 countries; most are avid collectors and all are associated with museums in their hometowns, so that collectively we form a network of contacts that can enable a wide variety of discussions and activities to occur.

For similar reasons we created, several years ago, CMAP, or Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives in a Global Age, a research program designed to connect the museum with critical issues and competing definitions of what's meaningful elsewhere in the world. To date, over 170 scholars, critics, artists, and curators who are experts from their regions, living in the United States and abroad, have met at The Museum of Modern Art on a regular basis with our own research team. Their work has led to nearly 500 acquisitions that have given new texture and shape to our collections. This research has also informed many exhibitions, one of which is Latin America in Construction, as well as numerous publications, a potential long-term partnership with a sister institution in Poland, and a website.

An outgrowth of working with curatorial colleagues from CMAP was that we learned that there was a real desire on their part for an enhanced study of institutional practices, planning, and marketing, and so last year we launched a pilot program to bring eight curators from elsewhere in the world for a two-week intensive program at the Museum with our staff and the staff of other museums in New York.

I often think of our research programs like CMAP, our exhibitions and public programs, and our digital initiatives as hubs connecting us to the world. Every year, on average, we circulate around 14 exhibitions, about half of which travel abroad to Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Through social media we connect with over 4.5 million people from more than 179 countries, and our website has over 14.1 million users from 185 countries. And our online courses are used by people from over 123 countries. Finally, around 50 percent of our visitors come from abroad. All of this means that we are fundamentally woven into a broad range of international relations.

And that brings me to the final point I want to make tonight about museums and art. In the late-18th and 19th centuries, museums were often thought of as instruments of classification that aided in the dissemination of knowledge. The 20th century saw that idea expand in a number of ways, including the idea, pioneered by The Museum of Modern Art, that the museum was a

laboratory to which the public was invited, in the words of our founding director. This vision of the museum linked the notion of the experimental with that of the public, thus making it clear that the museum required not only works of art, but an audience for its experiments. A more current idea of the museum is as a crucible, or a place where different experiences and encounters with art, and other people, can interact in order to produce something new and unexpected. Here the public is not invited as a guest or spectator, but is present as an active agent or participant in the creation of experiences that derive from direct encounters with the museum's works of art, the issues and ideas of its curators, and the responses and reactions of other people at the museum who connect with each other either directly or via social media. Seen this way the museum—both on-site and online—becomes a conversational space in which art and people are engaged in a dynamic relationship. And this brings us back to the global nature of the institution.

To paraphrase a colleague at The Museum of Modern Art, if museums are about the interpretation of meaning and the understanding of creative urgency, then museums of modern art in the 21st century must seek to expand beyond their own physical and intellectual borders. We must pause to learn from experts—artists, curators and scholars—across the globe so we can better comprehend the many histories of modernism and the way in which they have shaped our understanding of the world. In doing so, we can grasp our own past better as we work toward developing a more inclusive future.

Thank you very much.