

# New chief sees Art Museum in stronger leadership role

By JAMES AUER  
Journal art critic

IT HAD BEEN one of the biggest and busiest days in all of Russell Bowman's 39 years.

His desk in the original, Saarinen-designed section of the War Memorial Center was littered with pink call-back slips, many of them containing congratulatory messages.

His calendar, seldom empty in recent months, was jammed with late-breaking, but seemingly unavoidable, appointments.

In an hour he was due to change into formal dress for a black-tie evening reception honoring a local industrialist.

But the freshly appointed director of the Milwaukee Art Museum found time at 4:10 on a harried Tuesday afternoon to lean back in his chair and field questions about his outlook for the years ahead.

"One alternately feels enthusiastic about the possibilities and a little awed by it all," purred the boyish, Chicago-trained art historian who beat out a field of some 150 applicants to succeed Gerald Nordland as artistic director of the state's largest showcase for the visual arts.

"I've spent five years here," he went on in carefully modulated phrases characteristic of his Virginia boyhood.

"I'm pleased with what's been done, and pleased to see what will happen. It's clear the museum will seize its role as a generalist art museum with emphasis on the 19th and 20th centuries. We will always try to do exciting and provocative contemporary shows, and also a balance of other kinds of material."

No radical changes are in prospect regarding exhibition policies — primarily because Bowman himself bore principal responsibility for setting up the museum's 1986 and 1987 schedules as chief curator and acting artistic director.

Among the attractions definitely on tap for 1986 are a citywide survey of the fiber arts (being mounted in association with the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee's University Art Museum); a broad-ranging selection of rare jewelry and other exotic wearables from an Eastern collection; paintings by the increasingly celebrated California artist Wayne Thiebaud; images of the bullfight by Goya and Picasso, and an architectural exhibition devoted to Frank Lloyd Wright's pioneering work for the Johnson Wax Co. of Racine.

Then, in 1987, the museum will mount its first major exhibition of Old Masters in recent years — a delectable selection of 17th-century Dutch paintings from the Bredius Museum in the Hague.

The upcoming jewelry show, called "Objects of Adornment," is a particular deviation from policy, Bowman observed, because it contains precious gems and gold and silver articles from the early Middle Ages to the present.

Thus, it's likely to draw a new, and possibly broader, audience to the big, lakefront facility that has been known in the past primarily as an advocate of modernist art — even though it has, in recent years, enriched the mixture with a substantial infusion of more traditional elements, from Gothic and Renaissance Europe to the present.

"We like to see ourselves as the artistic flagship for the state," Bowman declared with undisguised enthusiasm, "and now we have to make good on that potential."

"We're trying to produce the very best exhibitions possible, those with scholarly appeal and quality and those that have aspects that are interesting from an extra-artistic standpoint. I think people will respond to the highest quality. We want to bring the very best things to Milwaukee."

Seizing upon an opportunity to plug a current attraction, he noted parenthetically that the art museum's present show, "Mark Rothko: Works on Paper," has impeccable art-world credentials.

It opened at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and came to the art museum (where it remains

through Jan. 19) directly from a run at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

"I think the best exhibitions will finally attract the broadest audience," he declared.

"Our goal is a balanced offering of the very best quality we can achieve, but with broad audience appeal."

One indication that the art museum is already well on the way toward achieving that aim is the fact that attendance so far in 1985 is 131,758, an increase of 10% over 1984 and a 42% increase over 1982.

Similarly, museum membership is up by 1,100, for a total of almost 7,000 card-carrying loyalists.

Achieving continued growth, in terms of exhibition, quality and community outreach, is going to put "the greatest demand on our resources that we've ever had," he admitted.

With just 33 full-time employees, plus 15 to 20 part-time workers, the Milwaukee Art Museum has one of the smallest professional staffs of any American institution of its kind. (By contrast, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts employs more than 400 people.)

Still, the Milwaukee Art Museum's exhibition budget for 1986 is modestly higher than last year — in the neighborhood of \$300,000, out of a total budget of \$1.8 million. And this figure represents a substantial, if not dramatic, increase over five years ago.

Based on these statistics, Bowman suggested, "this is one of the most efficiently run institutions in the country."

Unlike several local cultural institutions, which are running potentially devastating deficits, the art museum is solidly in the black. Last year it exceeded its \$950,000 operating-fund goal by \$5,000, and in its current campaign it hopes to raise \$1,030,000 in private and corporate contributions.

A long-term drive to establish an endowment fund for the museum, which presently has limited funds earmarked for acquisitions, is also under way.

In the months to come, Bowman hopes to make it "clearer" that the art museum is "an integral part of the city's performing life."

The performing arts "have a good deal to do with the economic stability of the city," and this is true, too, of the art museum, which has a sizeable annual attendance plus a record of annual increases.

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One of his major goals for the next few years, Bowman disclosed, is the further development of the permanent collection.

"We have grown in areas of old master prints and photographs, and also put resources into the American decorative arts. A final area being enlarged is contemporary art. We feel that in all those areas we have the potential for making major acquisitions within the limitations of our available dollars."

A major stumbling block is the fact that ever-increasing values are being placed on desirable objects in most categories of the fine arts. Consequently, he said, "in many areas we must fill holes with interesting rather than great examples."

Still, "great" objects remain available in prints and drawings and the decorative arts, and Bowman plans to move aggressively in those categories.

Under his direction, the museum will also have "a more rigorous program of collection management — using the resources we have to our best ability."

Yet another concern is the pending reinstallation of the permanent collection.

In recent years, galleries housing European Old Master paintings and sculptures and the Bradley Collection have been rearranged for greater clarity and historical continuity.

Soon to come is a reinstallation of the museum's American collection, from the 17th century to the present.

Also in the offing is a popularly written guidebook to the collections — part of the museum's determination to dedicate more of its resources to books and publications.

The guidebook will be made available to visitors in 1988, as a means of marking the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Layton Gallery of Art — and, hence, the art museum's centennial year.

In addition, Bowman places high priority on enlargement of the art museum's educational programs ("classes have increased something like 300% in the last few years"), and on an expansion on informational materials available in the galleries.

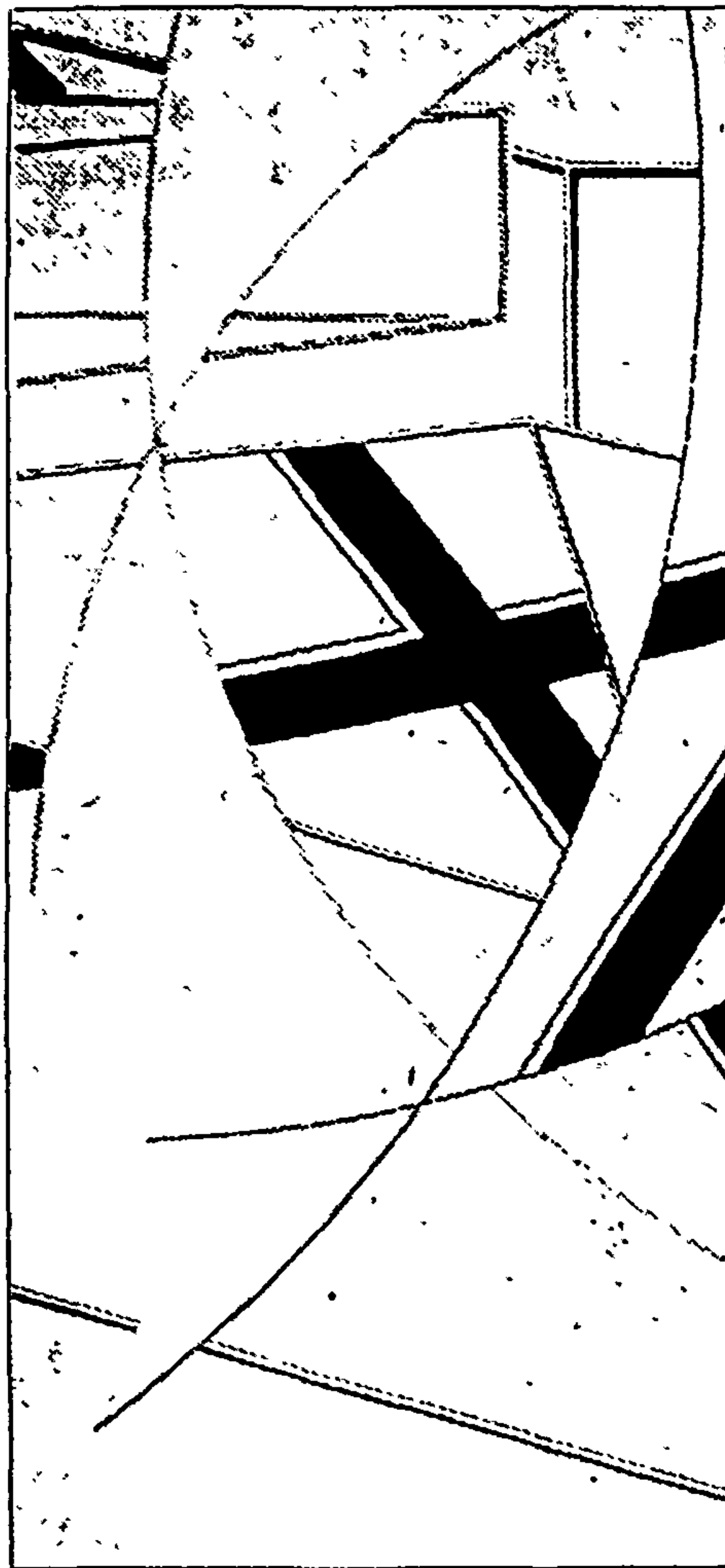
"I am hopeful that when we reinstall the collection, we will have material telling why it looked the way it did, and why it is important to us today."

And, finally, Bowman — who joined the museum staff as chief curator in 1980 — must now concern himself with finding a replacement for himself in his former role.

"We are looking for a curator whose background and interests will provide a balance to mine — someone with expertise in the 18th century and earlier," he indicated.

Ideally, Bowman ventured, his new assistant should know what the art market offers in his particular areas of expertise and, additionally, should have the ability to mount the kinds of exhibitions the museum wants to do.

As for himself, Bowman reported that both he and his wife, Barbara,



Russell Bowman, newly appointed Art Museum, posed in front of an art by Al Held. The 1977 painting was Foundation for Contemporary Art,

were delighted by the opportunity to remain in Milwaukee, where they have bought — and are currently refurbishing — a historic, 19th-century row house.

"I've really come to feel at home here. I'm proud of the museum, I'm proud to live here and I'm grateful to have the chance to function as director. It's nice to feel I can stay here for a while."

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