



Anne-Marie Russell



Anticipation is building for the opening of the Sarasota Museum of Art/SMOA. Signs of the renovation of the former Sarasota High School building are visible on U.S. 41. Ringling College has hired an experienced and well-respected art curator and historian as Executive Director. Anne-Marie is the former Executive Director and Chief Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Tucson, and is charged with planning art experiences throughout the entire site including 10,000 square feet of interior gallery space, educational and interpretative programs, sculpture garden, retail store, two cafés, classroom and studio space, and outreach activities.



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School building are visible on U.S. 41 south of downtown Sarasota. In May, the Ringling College of Art and Design, of which SMOA is a division of, hired an experienced and well-respected art curator and historian as Executive Director.

Anne-Marie Russell, former Executive Director and Chief Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Tucson, is charged with planning art experiences throughout the entire site including 10,000 square feet of interior gallery space, educational and interpretative programs, sculpture garden, ethically-sourced retail store, two cafés, classroom and studio space, and outreach activities. In addition, she also has the responsibility of supporting communications, membership, development, and grants.

Anne-Marie, an authority on Native American art, Oceanic art, and African art, says, "I'm not an artist. I'm in management. Museum directors facilitate engagement between art, artists, and the community. Art permeates all aspects of life, but not everyone understands how art has shaped humanity and humanity has shaped art. Art is the fullest expression of the human experience with its deepest fears and human conditions. Art helps us learn about ourselves—past and future. With the younger generations so engaged with art reproductions, museums are important to engage people with real art."

Her experience is varied. "I was the Executive Director of MOCA for 13 years. Prior to that I spent 10 years at Christie's Auction House in New York where I designed and taught in a Master's degree program in modern and contemporary art with a focus on connoisseurship, the art market, and history of collections. It was a great advantage to teach object-based art history rather than using slides. I was doing research about institutions of contemporary art and learned about the SMOA project. It's a rare occurrence that a new museum of this scale is being planned. SMOA will focus on late modern and contemporary art, but will also include the history of earlier traditions. The relationship with Ringling College appealed to me because it opens up many opportunities in design, architecture, product design, film and video. Ringing students need resources to inspire them through access to works of art along with their Ringling experiences."

Rocco Landesman, a long-time Broadway theatre producer and former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, says this about the new SMOA director: "Anne-Marie is a friend, an inspiration and an irresistible force. If her leadership in her new post is as dynamic as it was in Tucson, Sarasota has scored a coup. Expect new ground to be broken, new audiences developed and new experiences offered for museum-goers."

Anne-Marie says that SMOA will be a place where the public discusses art and other issues—where esoteric knowledge is made available and made relevant to individual lives based on the curiosity and interest of the community. She says that a museum devoted to new art tends to be livelier and places of community engagement. People will be surprised since they will experience interactive art, not only passively looking at works of art. A goal with the SMOA physical site is to honor the building that was home to thousands of students who

revere the building where they experienced high school and all its traditions. Anne-Marie feels a responsibility to steward the heritage of the site by capturing stories and the collective community memory. This is not her first museum move into a historical building as she moved MOCA into a former fire station while preserving and respecting the former life of the building.

Make no mistake, Anne-Marie is bright, articulate, and knowledgeable about art and museum management. She sounds like a cultural anthropologist one minute, a professor the next minute, a professionally-trained chef the next minute, and a researcher the next minute. She takes what she calls an "ethnographic approach" accompanied by a commitment to research that guides her evidence-based decision-making. However, she knows she has to balance and filter her intuition with rigorous research. And it's a challenge to manage expectations and patience for the new museum with a "can't wait to open" feeling every day. Her advice: take a breath; pause and reflect. Despite this feeling of urgency, Anne-Marie maintains qualities of curiosity, passion, and optimism.

Anne-Marie earned a Bachelor's degree in Anthropology from the University of Colorado and a Master's degree in Art History from the University of Arizona. Her past experiences include writing, documentary filmmaking, and professional cooking school at La Varenne in Paris followed by a stint as a cook on a boat sailing in Greece. Her background in cultural anthropology, filmmaking, and professional cooking taught her skills that she employs every day—research, pre-production, production, and follow up.

She was also an adjunct instructor at the University of Arizona for five years. When asked what motivates her, she replies, "We can do better as global citizens. Art and the new ideas it embodies inspires me. The possibility of what we can do motivates me. There is still work to do. We are here to learn as much as we can and to share as much as we can. I am the conduit for sharing knowledge. I want to work in concert not competition with other organizations."

Anne-Marie was born in the Chicago area and raised in upstate New York by an attorney father who did pro bono work for the underserved community and was also an executive at Xerox. Her mother was a registered nurse who pioneered corporate nursing. She has one brother. She married Mike "Jack" Hein, a 25-year government employee who served as the Tucson City Manager and Pima County Director of Emergency Management, almost two years ago. Her nine-year daughter Ursula spent the fall 2015 school term with her architect father in an Italian school with Mike's daughter as her nanny.

Anne-Marie frequently states that SMOA will have various educational programs for families and children such as ones her daughter attended in Tucson. She wants SMOA to be dynamic fun place where kids will grow up just as her daughter has grown up in museums where she worked. She and Mike bike downtown from their home near Ringling College, windsurf, paddle board, and kayak. And she has a fondness for estate sales.

A short conversation with Anne-Marie instills a sense of excitement and expectation. It appears that Ringling College, the SMOA Board, and Sarasota has indeed scored a coup. 🍷

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