

The New York Times

A Museum Broadens Its Identity

Claudia Gould on Her First Year as Director of Jewish Museum

by Allan Kozinn
February 12, 2013



“Collection Tableaux” in the Offit Gallery at the Jewish Museum. Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Directors of large institutions often spend their first year on the job mapping out their plans while their predecessors’ last projects hold the spotlight. Claudia Gould, the Jewish Museum’s new director, has had another task as well: juggling other people’s expectations and fears about her intentions for the museum, an unwanted distraction as she prepares to revitalize an institution that even its supporters admit has become staid.

Coming to the museum after a dozen years as director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, following five at the helm of Artists Space, the SoHo organization devoted to the work of emerging artists, Ms. Gould, 56, was seen by some in the art world as likely to transform the museum into a haven for modern works, as it was briefly in the 1960s when it presented young Pop Art and Minimalist pioneers.

That prospect worried those who regard the museum’s Judaica collection as its principal focus, and who were wondering whether Ms. Gould – raised in an interfaith home, with a Jewish father and a Roman Catholic mother – had the background to deal with these materials.

In an interview – her first extended discussion of her job since she took over in November 2011 – Ms. Gould described her upbringing as “culturally Jewish,” but added that many aspects of Judaism were new to her. She did not know until she took the job, for example, that because Judaism is matrilineal from a religious perspective, she is not considered Jewish at all.

For Robert A. Pruzan, the museum’s chairman, that appeared to be a nonissue.

“Claudia’s spirituality and thoughtfulness about the interplay of culture and religion, and the role of religion in one’s life and community, was very appealing to those of us on the search committee,” Mr. Pruzan said. “We discussed her background, but in the end, the decision was that this was the right leader for the museum. And in a world of intermarriage and other trends, being able to communicate with a broad community was important to us.”

From Ms. Gould’s point of view, coming to the subject fresh is a plus.

“I never intended that this would become a contemporary-art museum,” she said. “And why would I want to? What’s interesting for me is that this is really different, and not my world. If I was going to leave that great job – and I know how great it was – I was going to come to a place that was superchallenging. I would never have taken this job if I were just going to do the same thing I did in Philadelphia.”

Not that she intends to put her art-world experience behind her.

“One board member said to me, ‘How do you feel about leaving contemporary art?’” she recalled. “And I said, ‘I’m not leaving contemporary art. I’m not leaving anything. I’m adding on.’ Sometimes when you give perimeters to things, other things open up.”

With a \$17 million annual budget and a reputation for attracting new financing – in Philadelphia, she took the budget to more than \$3 million from \$1 million – Ms. Gould has plenty of ideas. She would like to offer more free public programming and has engaged Jens Hoffmann, formerly the director of the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, to oversee (among other things) what she calls “holistic” interdisciplinary programs and public discussions related to exhibitions.

She also hopes to update the museum’s technological infrastructure. And she plans to revamp or replace “Culture and Continuity: The Jewish Journey,” which was installed in 1993 as a permanent exhibition showing the sweep of Jewish history and has scarcely changed since.

The Jewish Museum’s director, Claudia Gould, says one goal is to change the presentation of the permanent collection.

“What’s amazing about that show,” she said, “is that it democratizes art and culture in a way no one else was thinking about 25 years ago. There is no hierarchy between a Kiddush cup and a painting by George Grosz, and I love that. But the prescribed tour is confusing. You get lost in it. It’s also very dated.”

“We have 26,000 objects here,” she added, “and the exhibition includes only 800 of them. We have a lot more to show.”

How and when the permanent exhibition will change is an open question: Ms. Gould said the board had signed on, but that talks had just begun; Mr. Pruzan deflected the question entirely.

But Ms. Gould is not waiting to dig into the museum's storerooms. Barbara Bloom's "As it were ... So to speak," an installation opening on March 15, is one way she plans to bridge her world and the museum's: by asking artists to organize exhibitions of the museum's holdings.

Ms. Bloom, inspired by Talmudic discourse in which rabbis discuss points of law over several centuries, plans to fill the museum's second-floor rooms with objects of different eras. A board game based on the 19th-century court-martial of Alfred Dreyfus, the French Army officer convicted of treason (and later exonerated) in a trial tainted by anti-Semitism, is given a pair of ancient Roman dice. Sacred and secular also mix: a selection of hand-shaped Torah pointers stands in for the strings of a piano.

"Some board members were afraid – 'What is she going to do?' 'How do you know it's going to be good?'" Ms. Gould recalled. "But if you follow an artist's career – if you follow their work, and you believe in them – you just know that it will be good. We're going to be showing our collection, and our collection is historical. But a contemporary perspective is always going to be there."

The passion for artists that led Ms. Gould to commission Ms. Bloom's Judaica installation will have more purely artistic outlets as well. The museum has long had single- or multiple-artist shows, often devoted to Jewish social, political and historical topics, with responses to the Holocaust as an occasional theme.

In September Ms. Gould presented the Israeli artist Izhar Patkin's "Messiah's glAss," a mixed-media exhibition with a political edge: the pieces highlighted Mr. Patkin's worry that what he regards as a Messianic form of Zionism is displacing the secularism that has long prevailed in Israel.

"Did Claudia have a problem with it?" Mr. Patkin mused. "No, she is very supportive of anything for an artist. Some museum directors want to make a point, and choose the art or the artist who will do that for them. Claudia chooses the artists she likes for a broad set of reasons, and lets them say what they have to say."

Ms. Gould, who describes herself as "not political," said she was hoping to ensure that the museum avoids becoming an inward-looking organization that appeals only to Jewish visitors. What she has been unable to answer is what it means to be a Jewish museum in 2013, given the religious and cultural diversity of Jewish life now.

"There is no answer," she said. "It's endless and ongoing and, hopefully, ever-changing. What I hope is to make a multifaceted institution that offers very different perspectives and different points of view – not a single point of view, not my point of view, not just the curators' points of view, but also artists' perspectives and the points of view of people we don't necessarily agree with. That's our job, as a museum."