

MoMA Director Glenn D. Lowry

On Defining Modern and Re-defining Success

Glenn Lowry, Director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), tells us how he got to the corner office, and shares his hard-earned insights on having a career and a family in this post-9/11, post-postmodern world.

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Since 1995, Glenn D. Lowry has been the Director of the Museum of Modern Art, arguably (barely) the most influential museum of modern art in the world. Glenn D. Lowry is a big deal. Within seconds of meeting him, we understand why: you can just see the efficiency of this man, it's as clear and as bright as his orange socks.

We meet the famed Lowry in the lobby of the MoMA's administrative building on 53rd St. His stride is purposeful and confident, his suit impeccable. If he wasn't so damn affable, we'd be dreadfully intimidated by the man. Once settled in his office — predictably and flawlessly modern — it doesn't surprise us that Lowry answers our questions so articulately. He does, after all, have a Ph.D. in Art History from Harvard University and is paid big bucks to think strategically about "art" (quotation marks intended). His is a world of big questions: like, what does "modern" mean? Our questions are a cakewalk in comparison. What does surprise us is how honest and reflective Lowry is about the tough choices he's made throughout his career: from having to fire employees to missing important moments in his children's lives.

Lowry attributes his career success to "serendipity." He suspects he was the only person who applied for the job as Director of the College of William and Mary's Muscarelle Museum, where in his first job out of graduate school he learned to "run a museum off the grid, so all the mistakes were invisible." He got the job as senior curator of Islamic art at the Smithsonian because he thought he was too unqualified to actually be in the running: "I wasn't interested in the job and I wasn't thinking about it, so I was very relaxed." Supposedly, he got the job as Director of the Art Gallery of Ontario because they wanted someone who would bring a "kind of American savoir-faire to the museum" and he was the only American who applied.

Of course, we don't buy this humble "serendipity" mumbo-jumbo for a minute. The fact is that Glenn D. Lowry is a man who has worked hard to get to where he is. He made sacrifices. He took risks. He got married at 19 because "it just felt right." He accomplished. He demands a lot from his employees. Best of all for us, he has some fantastic insights on having a career and a family and a life in this post-9/11, post-postmodern world.

What was your major in college?

Art History. Actually, I got there by utter mistake. I went to college thinking I wanted to be a doctor and enrolled in pre-med. At the end of my freshman semester I realized I didn't want to be part of 400 other people who looked just like me, all of whom were doing the same thing. I had kind of a melt down. Then I talked to my faculty advisor who said, "Well stop being stupid. You're at a liberal arts college. The whole purpose of being here is to take courses in fields you've never studied, that you've never even heard about. Just start taking courses in — and he started ripping it off: History, Religion, Philosophy, Art History. It had never occurred to me actually that I could do that.

So in my second semester I just made a very complicated grid for myself that looked at fields I'd never studied. I overlaid that with course times, because I decided that I didn't want to have classes on Monday or Friday. So that left Tuesday/Thursday courses. And I had a hard time waking up, so that left afternoon courses. If you do a grid like that you eliminate an awful lot of courses!

Were there any left?!

Turns out, art history was very good for Tuesday/Thursday afternoon classes. So I just literally had a grid and by the time I got through the grid there was a course on Indian and Islamic art that met on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. It was perfect. I had no idea what Indian and Islamic art meant or looked like. I walked in to that class, and — I still remember vividly — the first slide went up on the screen, and I went "Bingo! I know what I'm doing with the rest of my life." It was just like that.

So you're the liberal arts poster child.

Well, it's actually all about serendipity, I think. The willingness to let chance give definition to your life.

Would you tell us what the work environment is like at MoMA over-all?

Intense. I mean, I think of ourselves as a kind of laboratory for ideas about art. The people who tend to work here are hyper-dedicated. It doesn't matter whether they're working as curators, as conservators, as educators, as accountants, as clerks in the store. They tend to be people who are really motivated, really dedicated, really believe in this place. And I think we operate at a very intense level, with very high expectations about achievement about what we can actually accomplish. The model for me has always been a university model — a place where intellectuals and

minds can actually meet and converse and talk to each other.

What does it take to be an ideal MoMA employee? What do you look for?

It's always a combination of factors. Passion. Someone who is just deeply committed to what they're doing, that feels that this is the only thing they could do. Intelligence, obviously. Sensitivity to art because that's what this place is all about. Well-adjusted. When you work in an environment where there's a lot of pressure, and there's a tremendous amount of pressure here — we work in an environment where we're under our own pressure of high expectations, we're under tremendous public scrutiny, we're under the pressure of our trustees who expect us to perform well — you're looking for people who are well adjusted and well-balanced, who are going to respond to that pressure in a positive way not a negative way. But mostly what I look for, especially in the curatorial staff, is passion. Someone who can argue with me and the other curators about what they believe, even if I disagree with them — in fact, especially if I disagree with them. I'm looking for someone who is strong enough in their own sense of self that they will defend what they believe in. Because at the end of the day, those are the decisions that are going to matter, when somebody says, "this counts";

Though your senior staff is composed of three men and three women, you mentioned that there are still a lot of men in the senior positions at Museums. That seems to be a trend in the art world, whereas a lot of art history majors are women. Why do you think that is?

I don't know that I have a theory for that, in all honesty. And I was thinking, when I was at Harvard, my class was pretty much divided between men and women. I think that a lot of women, again I'm looking at my generation, made certain decisions about sticking with the academic route, going into teaching, rather than directing. Partly that might have been that they were just better at it than the guys, so they were getting better jobs. Partly, it might have been because they wanted to have families and careers, and it's an awful lot easier to negotiate that with an academic schedule than a museum schedule, which can be relentless. And I think that partly it's a continued prejudice within the culture, which says when it comes down to some of the more senior positions that men are likely to be better at it than women. It's utter nonsense, by the way — You hope that people who are making decisions are utterly blind to that. But that doesn't mean that it isn't still somewhere in the culture.

Now on to some personal questions. What were the benefits and challenges of having kids, considering your career progression?

We have three kids. The first was born when I was 27. The challenges were dealing with three fabulous, interesting young people when I didn't have any time. I look back on it and realize that had it not been for Susan [Lowry's wife], who really gave up a career for a long period of time in order to be with the kids, it would have been a terrible mess. You always look at these things in retrospect. I thought I was putting in a lot of time and energy with our kids, and I probably should have put in a lot more. But you get pulled in a lot of different directions, and you think that this is more important than that. And then you suddenly discover that they're 18 years old and it would have been more interesting to be at a football game five years ago.

What are your expectations and hopes for your children in terms of balancing working and living in the future? And do you see the current work environment and work culture in this country as being different or similar to what you faced? You know, it's interesting. I think clearly it's gotten very difficult for kids. Especially if you come from a certain kind of background, call it solid middle class. When I was growing up, the Second World War was not a distant memory, it was something that my parents had lived through. I was born in 1954, so not even 10 years after the war. I grew up in the '60s. This country was nowhere nearly as affluent, and the divide between the wealthy and the middle class, and the middle class and the poor, was nowhere near as exaggerated. There was the galvanizing crucible of the Vietnam War that really located you in a spectrum. There were certain kinds of exogenous forces that were really almost structural in the way we grew up.

My children were lucky enough to grow up at a time when there were no wars that certainly threatened their lives. They grew up in an extremely affluent environment. Not wealthy, but affluent. I remember when we moved from our first house — actually I remember when we moved from an apartment to our first house, and then from our first house to our second house. And in each of those instances it was materially a move forward on my parents' part. My children grew up in perfectly nice houses from the get-go. Not because we were wealthy, but because the culture by the time my children had arrived distributed enough wealth across a broad enough spectrum that life was pretty easy.

So the sense of urgency that I had about having to complete college, gaining some practical experience and then getting to work at being something, is not I think as clear cut with my kids. And I think the divide in this country at the moment in terms of wealth has made it really difficult to make choices. If you grew up and were lucky enough to go to Middlebury or Williams or Brown, or any of the 50 or 100 outstanding colleges in this country where you're surrounded by very talented, very capable young men and women, and you look around and you realize that the people who are going to go into investment banking, venture capital, hedge funds, are all going to end up in a decade as multi-millionaires, and those that go into teaching high school or journalism or art history are going to be lucky if they can eek out a miserable living, it starts to really impact what your choices are. Especially if you grew up in an environment where you didn't have to think about what it meant to live in a nice place, because that's just where your parents lived.

I think there are just some fundamental fissures in our culture that are deeply problematic. They have to do with an inability to have distributed enough wealth across a spectrum, so that the divide between the ultra wealthy and the middle class – forget the divide between the middle class and the poor, which is an equally problematic one – is not as severe as it is. And so I think we're moving all in the wrong directions here.

And so also looking at your position now, do you see younger people working at MoMa working differently? Do they act differently in their career than older people that work for you? Do you see a work culture reflected in a shift there? I think there is a shift. It's maybe a subtle shift. But my generation was really a late 60s generation. We had all sorts of altruistic values, and cared about changing the world in sort of social, cultural, and intellectual ways. It was naïve and in the end we probably had almost no impact, but we believed that those were important values. I think your generation is much more concerned with [social values and NGO work] than say, kids who graduated 10 or 15 years ago.

Why do you think that is?

It could be that the trauma of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the post-9/11 environment makes you realize that we're living in a bubble. For those who are lucky enough to have matured in the bubble, why wouldn't you feel that the bubble is the world? For your generation, the bubble had burst. And you can see the cracks and the fissures and the recognition that something else has to be put in place.

In a field like this, do you think that work life balance – having a successful career and a successful family life – is realistic?

I think it's realistic. I mean, I think it's always realistic. Having a successful professional life and having a successful family life is really about being centered and balanced. And recognizing that no matter how hard you have to work and no matter how time consuming it is, you've got to create space, the psychic space and the time, in order to have a rewarding emotional life. If that emotional life involves children and a partner, then you just have to say, that's what I'm doing. There are lots of people who are single, who don't have that for any number of reasons, so they make another set of choices. But once you've made the choice to have a family and a partner, then you just have to do it. It takes two. You have to be with a partner who is also willing to organize themselves. But yes, I think you can. I think it's very tough. I think it's especially, it's brutally tough, on young women who inevitably bear the brunt of it for obvious physiological reasons. I think it's brutally tough, but it's doable.

As an employer, what do you think is the employers' role in helping workers with family responsibilities achieve that balance?

Well, I think that you try to create a work environment that is supportive, that is conducive, and that is tolerant of individual needs. In the art world, that's easier to do than, say, in the corporate world that has rules and regulations, and is driven by profit, and time is money. If someone is a curator and they take six months off to deal with having a child, and I don't care if it's a male or a female, they're going to be thinking about art too. So it's not time lost, it's just time spent differently. So we can be more tolerant of difference.

Do you allow people here to work from home?

Yes, it depends on what they do and so on. My issue is that the work gets done; I don't really care where it gets done. So there are lots of people who write at home. I understand that, I can't write here. I put in nine or 10 hours at my desk, but when I have to write something that's at night or on the weekends or I have to take the day off and write at home. So I don't care. In other words, because we're intellectually driven you really don't worry too much about where the ideas occur.

Finally, what kind of advice would you give to young people today who are looking to have a career in the art world?

You know, I don't think I would say anything differently than I would have 25 years ago. These are jobs or positions, fields, disciplines that you just have to pursue because that's what you feel you want to do with your life. And you pursue them in an almost reckless way: you stop worrying about money, you stop worrying about advancement, you stop worrying about career. You just go after what you deeply believe in. And you hope that if your passion and your commitment and your drive are sufficient, things will happen. There is always going to be unpredictability. You have to have an open mind and a willingness to follow chance so that you don't get locked into thinking that the only place you can practice your discipline is the town you grew up in, or New York City, or Boston.

Be willing to take chances, and go around the world, travel. Follow your muse, in a sense. I think that's really the defining characteristic: it's a sense of passionate commitment. If you're ambivalent it probably means that it's going to be very difficult. That may be true for any field, but I think it's especially true in a field where the rewards are essentially psychic. If you go into law, or medicine, or any of the more regularized professions, even if you're unhappy with your work it's going to produce a quality of life and certain benefits that might be compensatory. If you go into the arts, you're going into it for a kind of psychic and emotional kick. Because the rest is not going to be compensatory, by and large (though I hope that changes). So you have to really want that psychic kick, you have to really believe that that's what's driving you. Well, it's actually all about serendipity, I think. The willingness to let chance give definition to your life.

We leave Lowry's office more impressed and slightly – just slightly – less intimidated. Lowry managed to pin-point a rather unique challenge that our generation faces: the challenge of choosing to do what you love, even if you know that doing so will not allow you to have the kind of monetary success you, your family, or your peers expect you to have. And, let's face it, the size of your paycheck (or your spouse's) is largely how we define success these days. Perhaps it's time for our generation to re-define what "success" means, taking into consideration factors like personal fulfillment, the amount of time you spend with your family and friends, your commitment (not donation) to your community, and civic participation. Perhaps, as well, it's time we all give serendipity a shot.