

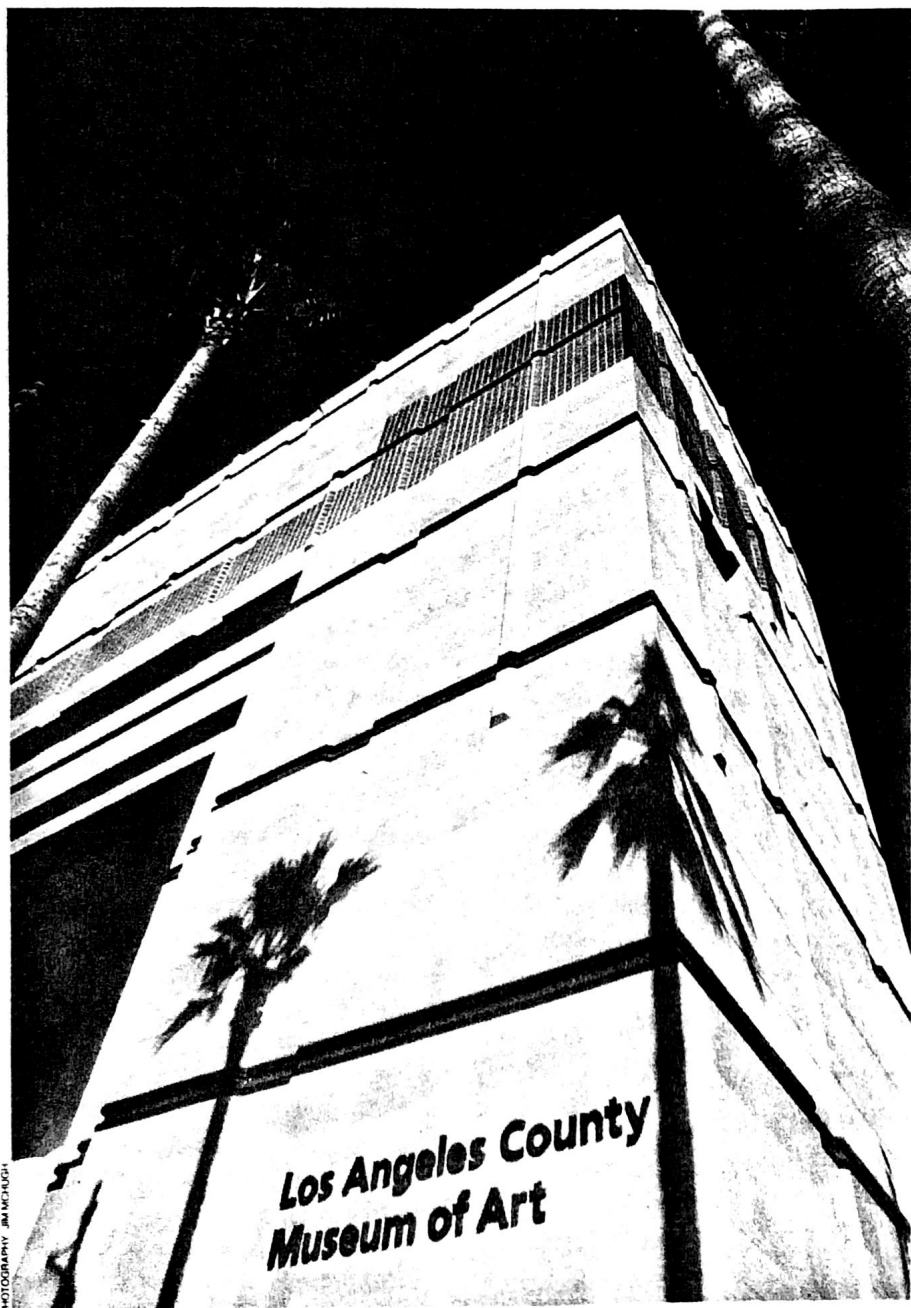
LACMA REVISITED

Museum Director Earl "Rusty" Powell III Navigates Fin-de-Siècle Los Angeles

By Hunter Drohojowska

EARL A. POWELL III was in the right place at the right time—Los Angeles, 1980. He became director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) when it was a sleepy insti-

tution in a city that had never held much respect for culture. Over the last decade, however, the city and its attitude have matured. And Powell helped bring about that change.



Powell, a florid, athletic man of forty-five who goes by the nickname Rusty, was executive curator at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., when he accepted what people called "the L.A. challenge." With his East Coast establishment standards and his Williams/Harvard education in art history (he wrote his Ph.D. thesis on the nineteenth-century American painter Thomas Cole), he did not seem the sort to adjust easily to the Los Angeles lifestyle.

Powell winnowed the valuable aspects of his background and gingerly grafted them onto his experience in the West. From the beginning, he concentrated on building the museum's collections with an eye for quality in areas that were still relatively open and affordable. And he jettisoned preconceptions and bureau-

"What you collect is an issue of quality," says Earl A. ("Rusty") Powell III, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Over the past ten years he has expanded the museum's collections in many areas, including Asian and pre-Columbian. ABOVE RIGHT: Powell stands in the Pavilion for Japanese Art, designed by the late Bruce Goff. ABOVE LEFT: The museum's front entrance.

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Creating a new, multifaceted image, the Robert O. Anderson Building, completed by Norman Pfeiffer of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer in 1986, houses the museum's collection of modern and contemporary art. Since Powell has directed LACMA, new and renovated space has amounted to over 275,000 square feet, and approximately 26,000 objects have been added to the collections.

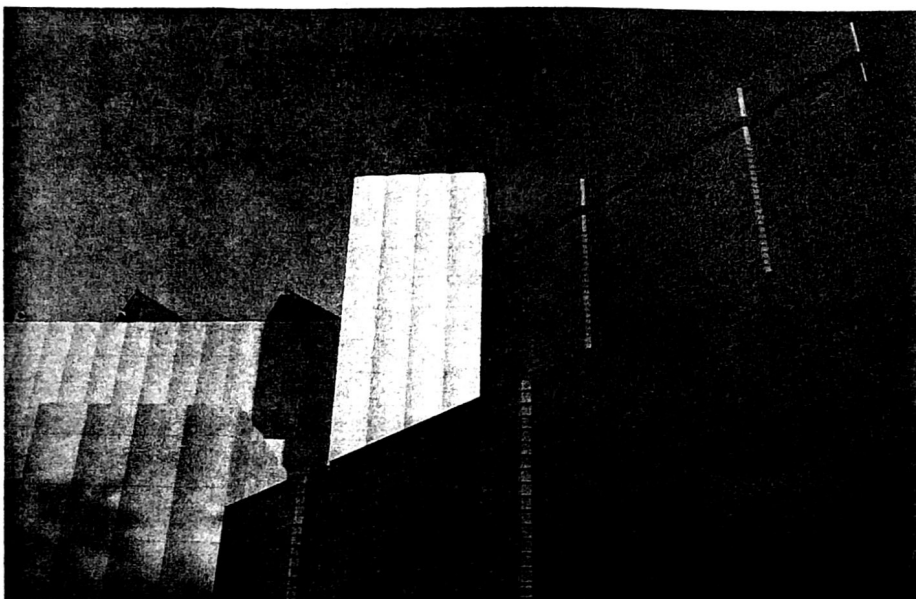
cracy that often hamper tradition-bound institutions in the East.

During Powell's tenure the museum has added some twenty-six thousand objects to the collection, most saliently in Far Eastern and pre-Columbian art—areas that coincide with Los Angeles's growing Asian and Latin American populations.

This was a consideration, according to Powell, "to the extent that you don't compromise on issues of quality. It was not a policy directive. But I did think that these were areas in which we should collect." He cites the Proctor Stafford and Constance McCormick Fearing collections, saying LACMA now "arguably has the best collection of Mexican pre-Columbian art in the United States." He points to Joe and Etsuko Price's Shin'enkan collection of Edo period paintings and to the Frances and Raymond Bushell collection of netsuke in the new Japanese pavilion. "I don't know if this addresses the demands of the community," says Powell, "but it certainly manifests who they are." He points out that ten or fifteen years ago there was a different interpretation of the museum's role because the western European heritage had been dominant for so long. "This museum has always done Asian shows," he notes, "but there is much more interest now."

That said, Powell goes on to explain that "L.A. is not different from the East Coast in terms of a museum's fundamental values: collect, display, educate. What you collect is an issue of quality. It's not appropriate for any institution to become a political entity, collecting so many x's whether or not they have a distinguished visual tradition."

Powell considers building collections the perquisite as well as the responsibility of his position. Yet he views it as especially tasking in recent



years, a period he wryly refers to as "*le mal du fin de siècle*."

Powell theorizes that the pluralistic cultural developments of the last fifteen years have historical precedents in the cataclysmic changes in western European and American cultures at the end of the nineteenth century. "By the end of the century," he says, "the explosion of trends and sensibilities, the search for new forms of expression, codifies as the art of the next half-century. Gauguin, Cézanne, Cubism—it was amazingly complex

difficult to collect contemporary art, Powell observes. "It's so expensive to collect anything, but you'd rather pay more than collect each person or style that comes along. The market has run up the prices. A museum will tend to be ahead of the curve in displaying works of art. Usually, investigations of a scholarly nature are in front of popular taste. But a young artist who commands two hundred thousand dollars—it's not the province of a museum to get involved with that. Museums are going to wait and see if they can encourage a gift."

LACMA calls itself a general art museum and, like its New York counterpart, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has a mandate to collect the world's culture from prehistory to the present. When Powell took over, he recognized that the museum was strong in eastern Indian and Southeast Asian costumes and art. In addition to strengthening the Far Eastern and pre-Columbian collections, he has stimulated the acquisition of contemporary and modern art, especially photography, and European painting from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Hans

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at the end of the Victorian era in Europe, and what is happening now is a similar phenomenon. Expressionism, Postexpressionism, neo-Expressionism, Neo-Geo, deconstructivism, postmodernism. But it remains to be seen whether any of these movements will have enduring value."

In these times of uncertainty it's

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and Varya Cohn collection of glass, pieces from ancient Greece to the present, was a unique addition.

Powell is adamant that great collections are built on gifts and that recent changes in U.S. tax laws have hurt LACMA and all American museums. "There is less of an incentive to give," he says. "The process has been complicated to the point where people don't want the hassle."

Since 1980 there has been a museum boom in Los Angeles, with the creation of the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Temporary Contemporary and the expanded role of the J. Paul Getty Museum. The competition is friendly yet has undoubtedly contributed to LACMA's own expansions—some 275,000 square feet of new or renovated space since Powell's arrival.

The architectural firm of William Pereira, which built the original museum in 1965, completed an expansion of the Ahmanson Building and a bridge to the Frances and Armand Hammer Wing in 1981, adding some 35,000 square feet of exhibition space.

years of construction. "Buildings are enjoyable, but in a way I'd rather have them all done," he says. Yet there are plans to build a library and lecture hall and to create new galleries.

Like many of Los Angeles's most important and interesting artists, LACMA has benefited from being twenty-five hundred miles west of the market forces that determine popularity in New York. The museum has developed a fine reputation for exhibitions marked by renegade, unconventional scholarship, departing from the standard Franco-centric view of art history. The Twentieth-Century Art Department has organized important exhibitions devoted to the Russian avant-garde, German Expressionist sculpture and "The Spiritual in Art." The museum has strengthened its holdings in German Expressionism, and the Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies, established in 1984, now consists of some five thousand prints and drawings and a library of four thousand volumes, one of the most comprehensive in the world.

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By 1986 Norman Pfeiffer, of the New York firm Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer, had designed the 115,200-square-foot Robert O. Anderson Building for modern and contemporary art, creating a new façade and courtyard for LACMA in the process. Last fall the 32,000-square-foot Pavilion for Japanese Art, designed by the late Bruce Goff and executed by a former associate, Bart Prince, opened to much acclaim from architecture critics.

Powell, who was involved in the construction of I. M. Pei's East Building when he was at the National Gallery, smiles ruefully about the seven

"Curators here look for areas that have not been overly academicized," explains Powell. "We really don't have a party line."

"That's an interesting aspect of Los Angeles," he continues. "Part of the excitement and vigor of the *mal du fin de siècle* phase we are entering now is here because L.A. hasn't been in the mainstream. People here don't say, 'We can't do that.' Instead it's, 'How do we go about getting it done?' But now it's going to be a different kind of environment. Los Angeles has become a big player in a larger international picture." □

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