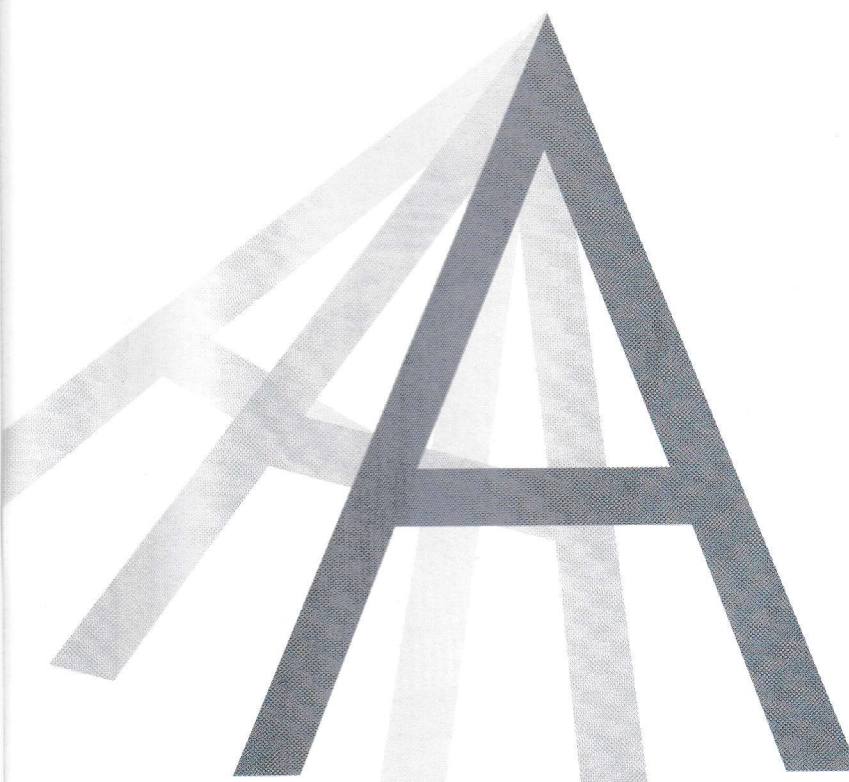


Ann Philbin SWINGS THE HAMMER

COMICS AS ART?
ABSOLUTELY. AND IT'S
JUST THE KIND
OF **SMART SHOW**
THIS MUSEUM
DIRECTOR LOVES.

BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATRICK FRASER



ANN PHILBIN HAS TWO PAINTINGS hanging in the anteroom to her office: A gigantic meld of abstraction and decoration by contemporary artist Lari Pittman dominates one wall and holds its own against a small Cubist portrait of a woman by Pablo Picasso. Philbin, ever conscious of the symbolic gesture, is making clear her vision as director of the Hammer Museum: To feature cutting-edge contemporary art in the context of a largely pre-modern collection.

When the surprising juxtaposition is mentioned, Philbin's eyes light up; she clearly delights in talking about art and the ideas they represent. Philbin is a true believer, one with unwavering faith in the importance of contemporary art. She approaches it with a contagious enthusiasm, which might explain the Hammer's meteoric rise of what was long perceived as a soporific university gallery.

Wearing a black jacket with fashionably frayed hems, she reclines in a lounge chair (due to continuing discomfort from back surgery) and is cheerful and witty as she talks about the Hammer and her latest accomplishment. She is staging the first museum exhibition to comprehensively explore the role of artists who created the funnies. Running from November 20 to March 12, 2006, *Masters of American Comics* features more than 500 pieces by 15 artists, including Winsor McCay, George Herriman, Charles Schulz, R. Crumb, and Art Spiegelman (who was also a consultant). "These are beautiful, amazing drawings," Philbin says of the show. "Comics did not interest me as a child. I came to them through the medium of drawing. They are an important part of American art history, but are not viewed that way. This is an exhibition that requires a serious, in-depth look. But we did not have the room to do that, so I went to Jeremy and Paul."

That would be Jeremy Strick and Paul Schimmel, director and chief curator, respectively, of Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art. Strick's first impression? "The possibility of working together was interesting and exciting."

Comic strips such as *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, *Krazy Kat*, *Dick Tracy*, and *Peanuts* from the early 20th century

will be shown at the Hammer, which, through its association with UCLA, has a mandate to provide a historical context for contemporary culture. At MOCA, which exhibits art made after 1945, the other part of the exhibition features comic books like *Fantastic Four*, *Mad Magazine*, *Zap Comix*, and a new form of comic novella: *Maus*. This show is no joke. Co-curated by scholars John Carlin and Brian Walker and coordinated by Cynthia Burlingham, deputy director of collections at the Hammer and director of the Grunwald Center, with MOCA assistant curator Michael Darling. Yale University Press is publishing the catalogue, with essays by Dave Eggers and Jonathan Safran Foer.

This exceedingly rare collaboration between two contemporary art museums in the same city has much to do with personal relationships, an area in which Philbin excels. "Annie has been doing a marvelous job," Strick says. "She has been successful at bringing an identity to the Hammer." Even though Russell Ferguson left MOCA in 2001 to become a senior curator at the Hammer, Strick does not view the Hammer Museum as competition. "The most important job any of us have in this regard is expanding the pool," he says, "generating enthusiasm for contemporary art, and finding new individuals and institutions that will be supportive. There is not a lot of point in looking over your shoulder at what the other person is doing, but to make sure you are doing the best job possible to attract support."

Philbin agrees. "I think it is our job as cultural institutions to help people to learn to think about their civic obligations. When people think about giving money, they think they have to give a lot. In fact, institu-



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tions survive by many people giving small amounts."

Strick's positive attitude may have something to do with the fact that Philbin is, in his words, "delightful." Charismatic, respected, and popular among her colleagues as well as artists and collectors, Philbin succeeds by dint of the charm offensive. In Los Angeles, it doesn't hurt that she is slim and attractive, looking considerably younger than 53. She wears her naturally curly dark hair pulled off her face, revealing her flashing eyes and winning smile.

Her magnetism, along with professional credentials, has attracted a well-heeled and generous board of directors, including art collectors Eileen Norton and Lee Ramer. Her most recent success was in recruiting respected curator Gary Garrels from his post as chief curator of drawings and curator of painting and sculpture at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Garrels says, "I have known Annie for a long time, and her vivacity, intelligence, and judgment are second to none. I've watched how she has been building this museum over the last six years, and I was happy to be invited to be a part of this. Los Angeles is without question one of the major creative centers, and the Hammer is at the heart of this community. To be a part of that was really appealing."

The Westwood museum was built to house the Old Masters and Impressionist-laden collection of oil magnate Armand Hammer, who died shortly after it opened in 1990. Lawsuits alleging that the museum was built with funds from his company, Occidental Petroleum, meant a shaky beginning. In 1992, the museum sold da Vinci's Codex Hammer for \$30.8 million (to the estate of Bill Gates) to establish a fund to indemnify UCLA when it agreed to manage the museum, which is responsible for Hammer's own collection, including prints by Honoré

Daumier and his contemporaries; the Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts with some 45,000 works; and the Franklin D. Murphy Sculpture Garden on campus. In 1994, venerable museum director Henry Hopkins came on board and provided stability. When he retired in 1998, the museum was poised for take off. Philbin provided the fuel.

These days at exhibition openings, the museum courtyard overflows with hundreds of artists, collectors, critics, and curators—in other words, the real aficionados of contemporary art. That includes UCLA's art department, one of the most respected in the country, and just down the street. Philbin says, "We've always tried to make our openings accessible to artists and students. As a university museum we see that as a priority audience. Our openings are not limited to members. We often have a DJ and it's wild. We cultivate that young audience because we want them to be supporters of culture when they grow up."

Philbin even has changes in store for the staid white marble museum designed by established architect Edward Larrabee Barnes. The space will be expanded and renovated by edgy architect Michael Maltzan, who built the temporary venue in Queens for New York's Museum of Modern Art. The new café will be operated by the tasty but affordable Joan's on Third, instead of the swish Patina chain. It's all part of Philbin's populist sensibility.

Typically, museum directors are academically trained art historians and many have advanced degrees in business administration. It is not often that they begin, as Philbin did, as artists. Equipped with undergraduate degrees in painting and art history from the University of New Hampshire, she moved to New York in 1976 to become an artist. To support herself initially, she worked as a researcher at the Frick Art

Reference Library, but her most formative experience was from 1978 to 1980, when she worked at two alternative yet influential contemporary art venues: The New Museum and Artists Space. At the time, each of those institutions had a female, feminist director in Marsha Tucker and Linda Shearer, respectively. She credits both with contributing to her decision to work for art institutions rather than pursue her own art career.

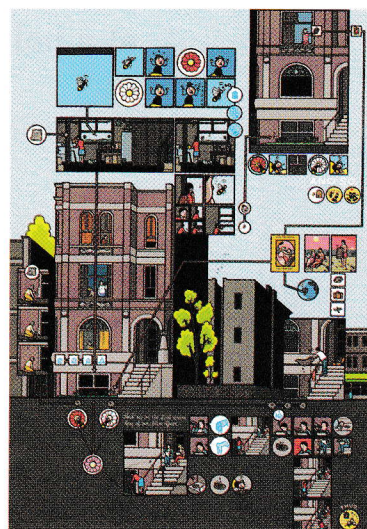
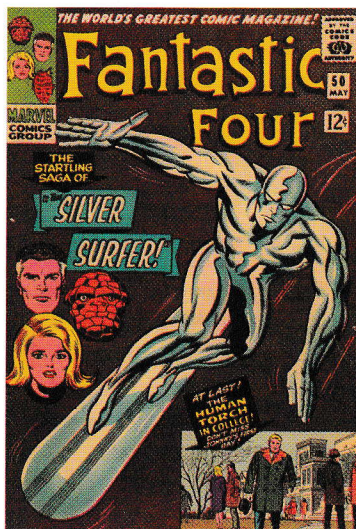
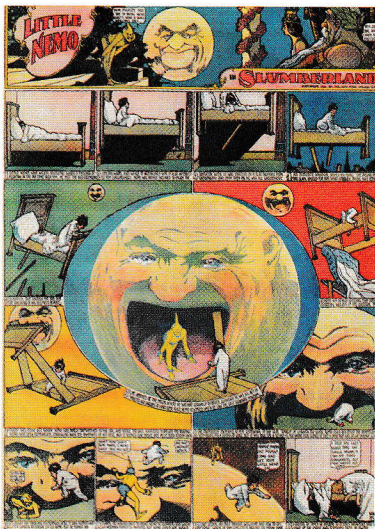
Philbin completed her master's degree in museum studies and arts administration at New York University, graduating cum laude while working as curator of the Ian Woodner Family Collection of Old Master Drawings. Perhaps it was too ivory tower, for she then joined the world of commerce, working at the Grace Borgenicht and then the Curt Marcus Galleries. By 1987, she no longer found that satisfying. "I was more cut out for nonprofit work," she says. "Fund-raising is the same as selling in a lot of ways; you're selling your institution."

After a few years of coordinating projects for Livet Reichard, including Art Against AIDS, she was hired as director of the Drawing Center in 1990, where she helped organize a modest exhibition of comics art, sort of a trial run for the current exhibition. After nine years there, she had created an identity for that institution by broadening the notion of what constituted drawing. She organized shows of both

Her history as an artist has defined her directorship of the Hammer. "It has made me artist-centric in every way that I approach the job. The Hammer's mission is about starting with the artist as the subject and audience. Even our historical exhibitions often have to do with the re-contextualization of things that artists want to look at." Certainly this is true of the comics show. From pop artists like Andy Warhol and Ed Ruscha to contemporary artists like Jim Shaw and Raymond Pettibon, comics have been a rich source of imagery and history.

"I've always believed that the public will come if you make yourself essential to the creative community," Philbin says. "This is a reverse way to build an audience and comes from my own experience as an artist and knowing the things I was interested in were often part of a history that didn't make it into the canon." As an example, she cites the 2004 exhibit of work by Lee Bontecou, a recluse who seldom exhibited her extraordinary sculptures and drawings since leaving the Castelli Gallery in the 1960s. A critical and public success, the exhibition, co-curated by Philbin, went on to MoMA in New York. "To rediscover the thing you think you know is part of our job," Philbin says.

After so much time in the East, she says it took about two and a half years to become comfortable in Los Angeles. She lives with her partner,



Little Nemo in Slumberland, December 1905; *Fantastic Four* #50, May 1966; Chris Ware's *Building Stories*, 2002; and *The Kin-der-Kids Abroad*, May 1906.

historic and contemporary works on paper—experience that left her perfectly prepped for the Hammer.

Although Philbin had powerful women as mentors, the world of museum directors remains overwhelmingly male. In the past year, female directors of the Getty Museum and the LACMA have resigned. Asked about the challenge of being a woman in this field, Philbin sighs. "I encounter sexism on a regular basis," she says, "but it doesn't do me any good to focus on it. I think I am incredibly stubborn and tenacious and I have learned patience. Basically, I don't give up."

Philbin's personal history offers another perspective. Raised in an Irish family, her mother was a nurse and an amateur painter who took her to museums, opera, and ballet. The family lived in the suburbs of Boston and Washington, D.C., where her father worked for the Kennedy Administration and later as head of the Small Business Administration. His liberal politics were a source of lively conversation around the dinner table with Philbin's five younger siblings, as was the notion of public service. "I grew up arguing about politics," she recalls.

Cynthia Wornham, director of external affairs for the Sundance Institute, in a tasteful bungalow above Sunset Plaza. Framed drawings by modern and contemporary artists hang in her house. They reflect her genuine appreciation for the intimacy of works on paper—like comics. "L.A. has a history of embracing the intellectual, even though it has the opposite reputation. It is a place that has nurtured that kind of outsider vision and eccentricity. The personal lifestyle here is wonderful," she says, "but I came here because I saw it as a hotbed of artistic excitement, actively tied to a total creative community."

Reflecting on the comics show, she says, "The 15 artists in the show are the true masters in that they all had a significant impact on the medium and have captured a shared experience of the 20th century. The show fits with what we do, showing a light on an area of art practice that had never received its due." Undaunted that more likely corporate sponsors had not contributed, the true believer concludes her pitch: "This is a show that we would have realized no matter what. We see it as an important, significant exhibition whose time has come." **D**