

MoMA's Former Director on How to Handle Artists and Billionaires

Glenn Lowry on the power of stress, why museums should never issue statements and whether art should be considered an asset class

By [Holly Peterson](#)

Illustration by Lorenzo D'Alessandro for WSJ. Magazine

March 12, 2026 12:00 pm ET



FOR THE PAST three decades, Glenn Lowry made a habit of traipsing through each gallery of the 708,000-square-foot Museum of Modern Art in New York City on weekday mornings. Trim and fit, wearing his signature Nehru-collared jacket, he might have been found kneeling to erase

a smudge on the wall, peering up to check on a painting's lighting or simply standing alone in a corner, witnessing how people flowed through a gallery. Lowry admits, "I drove the facilities guys crazy."

Before retiring last year at age 71, Lowry had followed in the footsteps of other art-world mentors who taught him that leadership requires an intimate knowledge of a building's physical space. David Rockefeller, who died in 2017 at age 101, served on the MoMA board for 40 years and ran it for 16, instilled in Lowry a philosophy of "leading from the back," allowing staff the space to develop rather than micromanaging from the front.

Lowry's juggling of staff loyalty, curatorial independence and board direction required a deftness of touch and grace. Reaching that balance gets dicier when navigating a boardroom packed with titans of American industry and finance. Lowry answered to (and occasionally pushed back on) figures such as the late Donald Marron of Paine Webber and mega-collector [Agnes Gund](#)—and, more recently, Ronald Lauder of Estée Lauder and Marie-Josée Kravis, formerly of the Hudson Institute (who chairs the board now).

Lowry describes his youth as "a classic case of a father vesting a son with his own ambitions." Warren Lowry, a German Jew and engineer who fled Germany in 1938 (his mother escaped France in 1941), had one ambition for his son: to become an Olympic skier. After initially following his father's dream by skiing on his college team, he went on to earn a Ph.D. in Islamic art for a planned career as a scholar. Lowry immediately landed a job directing his first museum, taking the gig in part "to disprove my father telling me there were no jobs in Islamic art."

Alfred Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, thought of its collection as "metabolic" or "self-renewing." Though the museum often deaccessions works of art today, Lowry says he believes in taking a more radical approach to shedding the past, either by gift, sale, long-term loan or even creating a separate museum—a position that few at MoMA share. He argues that if you are at a museum of modern and contemporary art, "You have to believe that the future will always bring great works of art that are as important as the works of the past."



Glenn Lowry's father had one ambition for his son: to become an Olympic skier. Glenn Lowry

You've been an elite ski and bike racer. Are you competing with yourself, or others?

In elite sports real struggle is rarely physical; it's always in the brain, and that fascinates me. But, yes, my wife would say I like crushing people, too.

Tell me about your relationship to stress.

One of the things that I learned from competitive sports is that I excel when I'm stressed. I need to feel edgy to perform well. Do I like being stressed? Not particularly, but I've learned how to harness stress for performance.

You said you don't appreciate your accomplishments.

I'm not interested in what I've done. I'm interested in what I haven't done yet.

Are you a control freak?

I care that you dot your i's, you cross your t's, that if you say you're going to do something, you do it.

How did you get your first job?

I went to a College Art Association job fair in a Hilton hotel. On every room door there was a sign-up list. I got to the one for the art museum's founding director at William & Mary, and nobody had signed up. I put my name down, and I'm pretty sure that I was the only person that signed up. I got the job.

Was that luck?

Yeah, of course. Pure unadulterated luck. Part of luck is putting yourself in a position in which to be lucky. The same serendipity led to my job as the MoMA director; my carrel-mate from my Ph.D. program, Nancy Nichols, had just gotten a job there with the promise that she could bring forth the next generation of museum leaders, whoever they might be. So she called me up and said, "I need you to interview for this job." And we had this long song and dance where I didn't want to apply and said, "I'm not interested for all sorts of reasons." And she basically said, "You need to do this for me."

What kind of leader are you?

David Rockefeller taught me that the problem with leaders who lead from the front is they can't see what's happening behind them. And I really internalized that. So I tried to be somebody who led from the back. You let other people go out in front of you, guide you, shape you. But you don't actually have to be the first person to do anything. You can be the second, the third, the fourth or the fifth. You can let your staff grow by supporting them and embracing them, without having to always say, "This is how you have to do it."

Can you tell when someone's kissing your a—?

Yes.

How do you create an environment that discourages people from sucking up to you?

I am interested in a collegial environment where people respect each other enough that they can actually argue with each other.

Are you systematic?

I'm disciplined. I believe in process. But I don't believe in process just for process.

Give me an example.

One problem can be, "Who painted this 16th-century painting?" or "How am I going to get to the top of this mountain in under 30 minutes?" If you're cycling, you have to think that through, because if you just go at it full speed, you're not going to succeed. You have to actually study the course. Think about the different shifts in elevation, different shifts in grade. Decide where you want to put your energy. It's all problem-solving; if you do the research to think it through, you're just likely to come up with better answers.



Lowry with David Rockefeller in 2009. JULIE SKARRATT

Many people downplay the importance of art. What is art's job in society?

I don't think art has a job. That's freightening art with too much. It's made because somebody wanted to make something that expressed his or her feelings in the most tangible form they could find.

Does art give us all answers?

No. I think art asks questions; people give answers.

A lot of people on the left and right protest museums for their public funding. How do you make the argument that they are worth preserving?

You can make the argument that museums are repositories of the greatest human achievements worth recording and sharing. There is value—and I don't mean financial value, I mean cultural, aesthetic and intellectual value—to preserving the achievements of mankind. And that goes from the Declaration of Independence to Picasso's [*Les*] *Demaiselles d'Avignon*. Why is it worth preserving? Because one, it's in and of itself estimable. And two, if we want to have anything remotely like a legacy, then we have to create a history for that legacy. Art is one piece of a very big equation about what we as humans can do.

What makes the Museum of Modern Art different from pretty much any other museum before it?

If a historical museum uses a telescope to look at history, so that it puts you in relationship to objects that are distant from you—decades and centuries, and even millennia—the Museum of Modern Art looks at the present with a microscope. So you have no field of vision, but you have incredible magnification. You see things in enormous detail.

Is that what modernity is?

I like to think that the role of a modern art museum is to be that space precisely between the immediate past and the future.

Art's an asset class. Once upon a time, art might equal 2% of an investor's net worth. Now it can easily represent 20% or 30%. Is it OK to make money on art?

I'm not a rabid capitalist, but why should art be different from other things? Art has always been sold, bought and sold. You go back to the origins of art: People commissioned art for their temples, churches, palaces, homes. And if you buy a work of art from an artist and you sell it at a later date, why shouldn't you be able to sell it for more than you bought it for? By the way, a great deal of art doesn't appreciate in value that quickly. Some of it can take centuries to appreciate. Some of it may never appreciate. So there's always a dimension of risk.

Is speculating on art acceptable to you?

I don't know how you legislate against greed. You can rail against making quick money on art, but it's not going to change. Part of that is because modern and contemporary art, which were categories that were never that financially esteemed, 25 to 30 years ago, suddenly became hot. And there was an explosion in interest, an explosion in new buyers and a subsequent explosion in prices.

Let's talk about your board in a polite way. Many rich people are a particular breed. Were the titans clashing?

When they sat around in their committees and in their boardrooms, whatever individual issues they had, whatever professional relationships they had, either with each other or outside—they were left at the door. I experienced lots of heated arguments over, “Should we do this or should we do that?” or “Why did you do this?” or “Can we do that?” But those were the kind of passionate arguments that you live for.

Do you find any comparisons between how to deal with a billionaire and how to deal with an artist? Are they both difficult in the same way?

I mean, look, billionaires and artists cover the waterfront, from incredibly easy to be around to very difficult. I have a lot of respect for people, those ultrawealthy individuals who commit themselves to supporting culture writ large, the museums and beyond—symphony, opera, theater. They don't have to do that. And so the ones who choose to do that, no matter how complicated or challenging the relationship might be, I have a lot of respect for that in the same way that I have an enormous amount of respect for artists. That's where the similarity, if there is any, intersects.

Tell me about an artist's psyche, or the best way to handle creative types.

Artists make work and they launch it into the public realm, and it makes them very vulnerable, and they're extremely sensitive to how that work is received. I have an enormous amount of respect for people who are willing to expose themselves the way artists do.

Do you believe that the left and the right meet in terms of the extremes of dictating culture?

An artist is willing to challenge the status quo, willing to put his or her personal beliefs on the line because they think it's interesting to test an idea, to put it into the public domain. That pluralism is what makes a democratic society interesting. So when you get the extreme right or the extreme left starting to say, Actually, those ideas are antithetical to the values we hold, there's a problem.



‘In elite sports real struggle is rarely physical; it's always in the brain, and that fascinates me,’
said Lowry, an avid biker. Glenn Lowry

You say you don't believe institutions should issue statements.

The answer to these questions was in our acts, not in what we wanted to signal with a statement. If you believe that artists are being marginalized, then help them by acquiring their work. Celebrate them by exhibiting them. Don't sit around and make statements that will ultimately ring hollow over time.

What do you think about vetting investments of your board members? Some museums have had board members leave over investments in physical defense and surveillance.

To the degree those investments are legal, I don't believe it's any of our business. If they're indulging in illegal activity, that's a matter of law. You start going down a line of judging people by what business they're in, what statements they've made, and to me it gets very close to fascism, where you start saying, This is the only true way that it can happen.

Tell me about Leon Black and Jeffrey Epstein.

As far as I know, Leon has never been charged with a crime related to Epstein. He's certainly been subject to various suits, but he's also been a very supportive trustee. He chose not to run for re-election for chair because he wanted to make a decision that was not going to be harmful to the museum. Our board looked very carefully at Leon and ultimately decided that he was a solid trustee and should remain.

Is Leon Black a good trustee?

In the middle of the pandemic, when institutions were laying people off, and many of our trustees brought up the possibility of laying people off, it was Leon Black who insisted, "We are not laying anybody off in the middle of a pandemic on my watch."

Does it excite you to have a problem to fix?

I get very bored if I don't have big problems. I love it when things get really difficult and complicated.

Are you better under deadlines?

Yes. Just give me a deadline. I will work to it. To me, a deadline is a very serious thing. I like the buildup of the stress to that deadline. When it's one week away, it's "Oh, my God. It's showtime."