UI Museum of Art director to step down to lead the Honolulu Museum of Art

The University of Iowa announced that Dr. Sean O’Harrow, director of the University of Iowa Museum of Art, plans to step down from his leadership role later this year. Originally from Hawai’i, O’Harrow will return to his childhood home to run the Honolulu Museum of Art starting in January 2017. O’Harrow will stay on at the UIMA until the end of the calendar year to provide continuity of service.

“I feel incredibly privileged to have been given the chance to lead one the finest academic art museums in the country for the past six years,” O’Harrow said. “As a result of incredibly hard work by UIMA staff, people around the world know more about this institution and its collection, and its educational and cultural roles across the state are gaining importance. My goal was to make the public aware of this magnificent gem here in Iowa, and with the new facility due to be completed not long after the museum’s 50th anniversary in 2019, I am certain people will travel far and wide to see what the University of Iowa has to offer them. The UIMA has a great future.”

O’Harrow arrived in 2010 from the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa, where under his leadership, the Figge helped care for the UIMA’s collection following the devastating flood of 2008 in Iowa City. Soon after, O’Harrow moved to lead the recovery efforts at the UIMA, where he helped increase the annual number of visitors and participants by over 500 percent, from around 40,000 pre-flood to over 200,000 now. He also helped significantly increase support for the institution during this difficult period. During the For Iowa, Forever More university-wide fundraising campaign, the UIMA was the first UI unit to reach and exceed its goal for the campaign, raising more than 2.5 times the target number of $5 million to over $13 million.

During his six years at the UIMA, O’Harrow organized high-profile initiatives, such as the J. Paul Getty Museum/Getty Conservation Institute conservation and showing of Jackson Pollock’s 1943 masterpiece, Mural, which attracted over 304,000 visitors in Los Angeles and another 83,000 people in Sioux City. The painting, viewed by many as one of the most significant works of art in the United States, was eventually included in a major international touring exhibition entitled: Jackson Pollock’s Mural: Energy Made Visible, curated by Dr. David Anfam. It opened in Italy at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection during the Venice Art Biennale in 2015 and subsequently moved to the Deutsche Bank KunstHalle in Berlin, Germany, and the Museo Picasso in Malaga, Spain. Almost half a million people visited the showings in Europe.

Under O’Harrow’s directorship, many significant works of art have been acquired by the UIMA, including part of the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation collection of ancient Chinese and Mesoamerican art, the James and Elizabeth Leach collection of American and German art, the Waswo X. Waswo collection of 20th-century Indian prints. As chair of the Art in State Buildings Committee, O’Harrow also helped the university acquire major pieces by renowned international artists, including Dale Chihuly, Richard Hunt, El Anatsui, and UI alumnus Charles Ray.

O’Harrow was very interested in serving Iowans in as many parts of the state as possible. As a result, he launched one of the most wide-reaching art- and exhibition-sharing programs in Iowa, Integrated Outreach With Art (I.O.W.A.), securing five years of support for the program from
the Matthew Bucksbaum family. This initiative partnered with numerous art institutions and communities across the state, including Sioux City, Mason City, Des Moines, Maquoketa, Dubuque, Cedar Falls, Cedar Rapids, and Davenport.

“The University of Iowa is immensely grateful to Dr. O’Harrow for his hard work and significant contribution to the life of the museum and university, and we thank him for helping lay the foundation for the new UIMA facility to be completed in the upcoming years,” said P. Barry Butler, UI executive vice president and provost.

O’Harrow is a member of the Iowa Arts Council board and the Association of Art Museum Directors.