

# Museum Chief Hopes to Erase Narrow Image

By CATHY CURTIS, Times Staff Writer

**H**ow formal do you want this?" Charles Desmarais, the newly appointed director of the Laguna Art Museum, stood awkwardly in the stylish office he will inherit in the fall.

"Straighten out your tie," the photographer replied. "Straighten your shirt a little."

"Okay, mom," Desmarais joked as he complied. A camera-worthy grin flashed across his boyish face—and his shirt and tie eased back into their gently askew state.

At 39, the director of the 15-year-old California Museum of Photography at UC Riverside comes to Laguna Beach with a strong reputation as an administrator and curator.

During his seven-year tenure at Riverside, the museum (which specializes in both the art and social history of photography) hired its first full-time curator and started an education program and an innovative quarterly bulletin. Most recently, the museum raised \$2 million to buy a former Kress variety store in downtown Riverside that will increase gallery space fivefold. The new location, redesigned by San Francisco architect Stanley Saitowitz, will open in early 1989.

Before Riverside, Desmarais—who earned his master of fine arts degree in photography at State University of New

York, Buffalo—was a curator at the Friends of Photography in Carmel; director of the Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography, now the Museum of Contemporary Photography, and editor of Exposure, the quarterly journal of the Society for Photographic Education.

Arthur Ollman, director of the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego, is one of several colleagues with high praise for Desmarais. "A college gallery has the possibility of being considered very secondary," Ollman said, "but Charles has made Riverside into a very credible institution."

"Charles has a very strong sense of scheduling challenging exhibitions. . . . He likes shows that are not particularly known for their easiness but for their ability to get the audience to stretch. He has a good scholarly background and a very good ability to [pay attention to both] contemporary and historical work."

Weston Naef, curator of photography at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, called Desmarais "one of the most talented and imaginative people in the museum field . . . an effective administrator and a great communicator, and on top it all a sincere supporter of contemporary art. We will miss him in our own field."

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KARI RENE HALL / Los Angeles Times

*'Perhaps because it's in Laguna and it's at the beach and all that stuff, [the museum] has at times had trouble being taken seriously. That's a major challenge.' It's a small museum in a very big game.'*

**Charles Desmarais,**  
director of Laguna Art Museum  
in his office at the museum

## Laguna's Art History Is One of Transition Since 1981

**W**hen Charles Desmarais assumes directorship of the Laguna Art Museum in October, the museum will have been leaderless for nearly a year.

The former director, William Otton, left in November to become president of the Art Institute of Southern California, also in Laguna Beach. Previously an associate professor of art and director of the Weil Gallery at Corpus Christi State University in Texas, Otton had come to the Laguna Art Museum in January, 1981.

He guided its transition from an easygoing local landmark making do on \$140,000 a year to an institution with a \$1.1-million budget. The museum is being accredited by the American Assn. of Museums.

Otton's major achievement was the \$1.5-million reconstruction and expansion of the museum's ocean-bluff structure, completed in 1986. The additional 9,500 square feet virtually doubled the size of the building.

In 1984, faced with having to close the museum during the renovation, Otton

accepted C.J. Segerstrom & Sons' donation of a 3,000-square-foot rent-free space in South Coast Plaza. The museum maintains exhibition space, a newly expanded shop and office space in this Costa Mesa "satellite" gallery.

Otton's tenure was also marked by unusually hectic staff turnover.

Robert McDonald, now director of the de Saisset Museum at the University of Santa Clara, was hired as the museum's first curator in 1984. His position was suddenly eliminated less than a year later, when Otton called the appointment "premature" in view of the museum's budget and programming.

Curator duties were assumed by Mike McGee when he was hired in 1986 as the "programs coordinator." McGee left Laguna last fall to become curator of the Modern Museum of Art in Santa Ana, a position he has since resigned. Michael McManus was subsequently appointed to replace McGee in Laguna, with the restored title of chief

curator.

Other departments at the museum also had personnel problems. The last development director, Tara Madden, came and went in the course of a single year, 1987.

Otton himself considered leaving in the summer of 1985 to accept the director's position at the Rockford Art Museum near Chicago. But he decided to remain at the Laguna museum when the board agreed to employ him on a contract basis, renewable annually.

The museum traces its origins to the Laguna Beach Art Assn., founded in 1918, whose members included painters Edgar A. Payne, Frank W. Cuprien and Anna A. Hills. In 1929 the association settled in a new building on Cliff Drive, designed by Myron Hunt.

The building was enlarged in 1951; in 1972 it became the Laguna Beach Museum of Art. In 1986, under Otton's directorship, the institution changed its name once again, to the Laguna Art Museum. □

—CATHY CURTIS



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Why is Desmarais leaving Riverside?

A bigger budget—\$1.1 million at the Laguna museum, in contrast with \$650,000 at Riverside—was one strong lure. So was the challenge of heading a museum that deals with a full range of media and the more direct responsibility of running a private institution rather than a museum answerable to a university administration.

There was also some chemistry. "My conversations with the board were tremendous," Desmarais said. "It's a very enthusiastic group of people [eager] to make a next step."

The nature of that next step is something he is ready to discuss in only general terms, pending further acquaintance with the museum and its community.

"The museum's challenges, which I also share," he said, "have to do with building on its 70-year history and recognizing that history while at the same time defeating an impression—that isn't always accurate—that [the museum] is provincial. There have been some incredible exhibitions they've done here that I would have been proud to have done."

Desmarais singled out the 1981 retrospective of Paul Outerbridge's photography, a 1984 exhibit of odd and unsettling contemporary imagery called "Anxious Interiors" and the American Craft Museum's "Craft Today: The Poetry of the Physical" show, on view in Laguna last summer.

"But perhaps because it's in Laguna and it's at the beach and all that stuff, [the museum] has at times had trouble being taken seriously," he continued. "That's a major challenge. It's a small museum in a very big game. Southern California is a major art center. . . . [The museum] certainly will have to continually announce its presence. . . . I think it can do that by surprising people occasionally by the kinds of exhibitions it does [and] by concentrating on quality—that is the buzzword here, the major interest of the board and the staff."

Some of the "surprises" Desmarais came up with at Riverside included a show on the little-known history of the photographic book and the commissioning of two photographers to "reinterpret" a group of old stereographic nega-

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tives from the museum's 400,000-plus collection of photographs, cameras and related objects.

Although the Laguna museum's collection numbers only about 2,000 works, Desmarais said his first priority will not be acquisitions but exhibitions and publications, areas in which "a minimal investment in time and money will yield a maximal return."

As far as specific exhibitions are concerned, Desmarais is waiting to see what has been scheduled before forming his own plans. He expects to be doing some of his own curating, especially in photography and architecture, although he wants to expand the museum's two-person curatorial department.

For the museum's South Coast

Plaza location, which he is eager to retain, Desmarais said he believes in finding "some things that are serious and important to do, but more oriented to people who fall into a place than to those who come in consciously."

Publications, he said, are "key to any museum that wants to have a long-term impact." Eventually, when money is available, he would like to see the museum produce a substantial catalogue or brochure for each exhibit.

Money is always an issue, of course, particularly when the just-under-\$1-million endowment generates only \$80,000 a year—for a budget 15 times that amount. One of the new director's first tasks, even before he officially occupies his new post in early October, will be to hire a development director.

"I don't know the philanthropic community of Orange County,"

Desmarais said. "My understanding is that the board is strong. . . . They seem to have good contacts. My job is to try to provide a consistent effort and the staff backup and the quality for them to sell."

Asked for his thoughts on the museum's relations with the Laguna Beach community, Desmarais pleaded newcomer's ignorance.

"I like it very much here, and in fact Kitty [Morgan, his wife] and I are looking to buy in Laguna, but I just don't know enough about it.

"Obviously, a major economic base of this community is tourism. That has some effect on the arts and crafts that get shown. . . . I think any museum ought to take responsibility [to exhibit work by local artists], but you apply the same standards to your own community that you do to anything else that you show."