She guided museum to prominence

By Marti Maguire
Correspondent

DURHAM - Kimerly Rorschach’s first “ahah!” moment with art happened in a school, not a museum.
So it’s fitting that, as a museum director, she has made her significant mark not at a large urban museum, but at university museums that are also classrooms. Rorschach has led the transformation of the Nasher Museum at Duke University from, literally, a hole in the ground to a nationally recognized museum that sends exhibitions across the world and is amassing an impressive collection of contemporary art.

The museum recently earned its national accreditation after a grueling process that Rorschach oversaw for well over a year. This year, she was named vice president of the Association of Art Museum Directors, an elite group of museum leaders from across North America that has only rarely chosen university museum directors as leaders.

“Kim is one of the most highly regarded museum directors in the country,” said Emily Kass, director of the Ackland Art Museum at UNC-Chapel Hill, “and not just for university museums, but overall.”

Her list of accomplishments in seven years as the Nasher’s director is long, but Rorschach ranks touching...
the lives of Duke students and Durham residents near the top. For her, university museums bring art to an audience that is uniquely primed to be influenced by it.

"You have this amazing opportunity to inspire them just as they're figuring out what they want to be and do," she says.

History with art

Petite and stylish, Rorschach speaks with a quiet precision that seems to belong in a museum, even as she sits behind her marble desk in a spacious office that is nearly devoid of art. Two orchid plants perch on either side as if to balance the drift piles of papers neatly arranged across the large, oval slab.

Rorschach, 55, was not always at home in museums, though she visited them often as a child. In fact, her first memory of a museum was of lying on the marble floor of the Houston Museum of Art, where her mother was a docent, and staring up the length of a white column thinking, "Get me out of here."

Years later, in a high school history class, she began to appreciate the portraits of George Washington and battle scenes of the French Revolution that could transport her to those times in ways that books couldn't.

"To look at something and know that someone created it when these things were happening, it just puts you there," she said.

In college at Brandeis University, she would spend her summers volunteering at museums. She eventually decided on an art history major, though initially she intended to study history.

She earned her Ph.D. at Yale, but she knew she didn't want to study art as an academic. She wanted to work in museums, where she would see and touch art daily rather than study and write about it.

"That's where the art is," she says of her decision to work in museums. "I wanted to have an experience where I would get to work with the actual objects, the original works of art."

She worked as curator at several Philadelphia museums, then took off a few years when her children were small. She returned to work a little earlier than planned when she landed a job as director of the Smart Museum at the University of Chicago, where she stayed until Duke hired her.

The academic setting is familiar to her. Her father was a physics professor, and her husband teaches at Duke. Her two daughters attended Duke; one just graduated and the other is a sophomore.

She teaches a class at Duke, and part of her job is to draw students to the museum, which she does through social events and working closely with faculty who use the museum in their classes. And they're not just art classes. First-year medical students do observation exercises there, for instance, and a recent exhibit on China's Three Gorges Dam provided fodder for students in Duke's Nicholas School of the Environment.

About the museum

Beyond classroom instruction, the 60,000-square-foot Nasher Museum of Art was meant to elevate the arts at Duke in a rather extravagant way. Renowned architect Rafael Vinoly designed an airy building with a 10,000-square-foot steel and glass "great room" at its center. Five pavilions branch out and house galleries, a sculpture garden, a lecture hall, a restaurant and museum shop.

Rorschach's job upon arriving in Durham was to make the Nasher's offerings live up both to its splashy accommodations and to the international stature of Duke itself. The Nasher's predecessor, in contrast, was a far more humble enterprise housed in a science building. While the old museum welcomed 10,000 visitors a year, the Nasher sometimes sees 10 times that number.

Rorschach said the old museum had a classical collection geared more for teaching than for visitors. She started out raising the museum's profile by attracting and creating world-class exhibitions and steadily collecting works of modern and contemporary art, which could be bought at lower prices and would rise in value more quickly.

Perhaps the biggest success in terms of attendance was an exhibition of Spanish painters El Greco and Velasquez in 2008 that drew nearly 75,000 visitors. The exhibit was touted in the Wall Street Journal as one of the top 10 for that year.

Other exhibitions showcase Rorschach's leadership in international collaboration. One recent exhibition, "The Vorticists: Rebel Artists in London and New York, 1914-18," was curated in cooperation with New York's Guggenheim Museum and went on to be shown in Venice and London.

Contacts a key asset

If Rorschach's job was to elevate the museum to the elite level, part of her appeal as a hire were her contacts among major museums in the United States and abroad.

"It was a real plum for Duke to attract her," N.C. Museum of Art Director Larry Wheeler told The News & Observer when she was hired in 2004. "She's better buddies with the big guys than I am."

Her job entails traveling across the country to meet with donors and to keep on top of current trends by visiting art shows in Venice and other locales. It sounds glamorous, and Rorschach admits it's fun. But it's also work.

In fact, leading a museum often keeps her apart from the actual art that drew her into museum work so many years ago. Instead, she spends a lot of time fundraising, establishing the goals for the museum, and making sure museum employees are working toward them.

Her colleagues give her high marks for her leadership.

"It's one thing to take an existing institution and make it better," said Kass of the Ackland Science Museum, "but to take something from the ground up and make it something great — not many museum directors can say they've done that."

Kass said Rorschach's calm veneer helps her do a job that has as much to do with fundraising and networking as it does art.

"She's definitely not a hothead," Kass said. "She always appears to be in control of any situation, not as a control freak, but as someone who has a finger on the pulse of what's going on."

KIMBERLY RORSCHACH

Born: March 17, 1956.
Career: Mary B.F. and James H. Semans Director of the Nasher Museum at Duke University.
Education: B.A. in art history, Brandeis University; Ph.D. in art history, Yale University; Fulbright scholar.
Family: Husband, John Hart; teaches law and history courses at Duke; two daughters.
Hobbies: Enjoys cooking and reading, and has a small collection of drawings in her home.
Fun fact: She is not an artist.