



▲ "We need to break down the stereotype that museums are places of elitism and exclusion," says Julián Zugazagoitia.

## Kansas City Chief

**In his first two years as director of the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Julián Zugazagoitia has brought in a slew of new funding, exhibitions, and wacky public projects that have boosted attendance** **BY GAIL GREGG**

Julián Zugazagoitia may characterize his early tenure as director of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art as "a lot of listening," but he also appears to have been in constant motion during his first two years in Kansas City.

Since his arrival at the museum in the fall of 2010, the former director of El Museo del Barrio in New York has brought attendance up 13 percent to 410,000 annual visitors. He's helped land a significant grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to finance development of a strategic plan. He's pulled together "pop-up shows" such as Rodin bronzes borrowed from the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation, which he scattered throughout the museum. He's created partnerships both inside the community (with local arts organizations) and outside (through initiatives with other

museums). "Julián hit the ground running—and he hasn't stopped running since his arrival," says David Hughes, cofounder of Charlotte Street Foundation, an arts-advocacy group based in Kansas City.

Zugazagoitia took the helm at the Nelson-Atkins (replacing Marc Wilson, who was director for the previous 28 years) after a decade in which the museum's "energies were directed inward to build the expansion," Zugazagoitia says. That expansion was the 165,000-square-foot Bloch Building, designed by architect Stephen Holl, which opened to critical acclaim in 2007 and allowed the museum to supplement its renowned Chinese and European galleries with space for contemporary and African art, photography, special exhibitions, and the Isamu Noguchi sculpture court. The completion of the

Bloch Building, Zugazagoitia explains, means the museum "can focus on heightened programming."

Born in Mexico City in 1964 to a mathematician father and an actress mother, Zugazagoitia received art-history degrees from the École du Louvre and the Sorbonne in Paris. In addition to his former directorship of El Museo, he has worked as the executive assistant to director Thomas Krens of the Guggenheim Museum, served as cultural attaché to the Permanent Mexican Delegation to UNESCO in Paris, consulted on European undertakings for the Getty Conservation Institute, and curated for the 2002 São Paulo Biennale in Brazil.

The well-traveled director, who speaks six languages, says he has been welcomed warmly in Kansas City, and he has worked hard to return that welcome. He and his wife, Tasha, bought a house on the Kansas side of town—a street named State Line literally divides Kansas from Missouri—and enrolled their two children in a local grade school. He has made a point to be out and about, attending art openings, dinner parties, and concerts. "This is the most outgoing person," says Morton Sosland, a longtime museum supporter whose family donated money for Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's *Shuttlecocks* (1994), sculptures of giant badminton birdies that enliven the museum's 22-acre lawn.

In fact, the Nelson-Atkins's welcome to Zugazagoitia was so warm that it came with a \$5 million special-initiatives fund, "in eager anticipation of what Julián could do for the place," as Sosland puts it. Named after trustee Donald J. Hall, of the Hallmark family, the fund was designed to give the new director flexibility to seize opportunities outside the usual budget.

Zugazagoitia remembers seeing the imposing Beaux-Arts lobby of the original 1933 Nelson-Atkins building for the first time and thinking, "My former museum could fit in here. I could program this lobby." And indeed he has. Hoping to make the museum more inviting to Kansas City's large Mexican community, he tapped the

Mattie Rhodes Center, the Guadalupe Centers, and the local Mexican Consulate to cohost last year's Day of the Dead celebration—and they planted a huge altar squarely in the center of the lobby's imposing columns.

People could add their own offerings to the visiting spirits of their loved ones, as is the tradition, and the entire community was invited to participate in weekend celebrations. "The Mexican American community had never had anything like that in the museum," says Sarah Rowland, chair of the board of trustees. This month, Mexican installation artist Betsabee Romero will assemble a new Day of the Dead shrine with the help of local artists.

A current show titled "Goya/Chagoya" features the work of Mexican American artist and Stanford professor Enrique Chagoya, who updates famous Goya compositions with modern elements, such as fighter jets in place of birds. Through February 3, prints from Goya's series "Caprichos" (1799) and Chagoya's "Return to Goya" (1999) are hung side by side, giving viewers a chance to compare them.

As with so many other institutions in struggling American cities, community outreach is vital. There are few tourists in Kansas City. Its public schools are cutting back on field trips. And suburban sprawl in the area means that it can be hard to get visitors out of their distant comfort zones and into the Nelson-Atkins's parking lot. Entrance to the museum is free, though visitors pay for special exhibitions, and membership stands at nearly 11,000.

To boost attendance, the Nelson-Atkins has invited museumgoers into the "conversation" through such means as Roxy Paine's *Scumak No. 2* (2001), installed in the minimal lobby of the Bloch Building, previously kept empty. Paine's automated sculpture poured a

concoction of polyurethane and burgundy pigment that hardened into organic forms, and visitors voted for their favorites. The top three vote-getters were donated to the Nelson-Atkins by Paine and his New York dealer, James Cohan Gallery. Zugazagoitia calls this project "the first occupation of the lobby" of the Bloch Building.

In November, the museum staged a more permanent occupation of the Bloch's pristine white passageways, when it commissioned *Chromoplastic Mural* by Argentine kinetic sculptor



▲ Roxy Paine's automated sculpture *Scumak No. 2*, 2001, was the first artwork to be installed in the lobby of the Bloch Building.

Luis Tomasello. This piece consists of more than 600 separate polyhedra that cast a fluorescent glow on the walls. And four whimsically decorated "Shuttlecars" designed by Asheer Akram and Peregrine Honig can be found ferrying visitors through the passageways. The project was financed by arts patron Crosby Kemper after he took a long tour of the sprawling complex with Zugazagoitia.

Another community-outreach program debuted this past spring, with the

ambitious exhibition "Decorative Arts at the World's Fairs, 1851–1939." Using \$20,000 from the Donald J. Hall Initiative, the museum invited people to submit plans for an outdoor pavilion, like those featured at all world's fairs. Zugazagoitia notes that the museum received proposals from a wide range of applicants, including the nine-year-old daughter of a local architect. The winner was Kansas City's Generator Studio and its "Sun Pavilion," made of snaking solar panels over three glass-walled cargo containers. The piece was constructed on the museum grounds as a temporary exhibition space.

Farther-flung initiatives include a curator-sharing relationship with the Detroit Institute of Arts. Under that arrangement, Nii Quarcoopome, curator of African, Oceanic, and Native American art at the Detroit museum, will split his time with the Nelson-Atkins, where he will work as a quarter-time employee. In 2010, Quarcoopome curated "Through African Eyes: The European in African

Art, 1500 to Present," which opened at the Detroit Institute and traveled to the Nelson-Atkins.

On top of all the programming, Zugazagoitia also found himself completing an intensive accreditation review by the American Association of Museums; accreditation was granted early this year and will last about 14 years. And in spite of a \$350 million endowment, fundraising is an ongoing part of the job.

But Zugazagoitia sees his true mission as eliminating barriers that keep visitors from entering the doors of art institutions. "We need to break down the stereotype that museums are places of elitism and exclusion," he has said, "to articulate why museums matter." ■

Gail Gregg is an artist and writer based in New York City.