

George Bolge: 'One of The Oldest Living Directors in the Business'

In a career spanning more than three decades in the museum business, George Bolge has seen, done and heard it all. He has opened two museums and helped grow a third to adult status. He has curated countless exhibitions – and stayed up until the wee hours before the openings making sure that exactly the right painting is hung on just the right wall that's painted in precisely the right color. He has published innumerable catalog essays and articles on art history, wined and dined scores of donors and shared his consulting expertise with institutions across the country.

Outspoken with an unfailing wit, he's not afraid to say what he thinks – and never takes himself too seriously. Any conversation with him will easily be the most entertaining you'll have all day – or maybe all year.

Caught at his desk on a recent morning, he is characteristically self-deprecating from the start of the interview. "Whatever you've done at this point in your career, whatever image or personality you have, there's little chance of correcting. When I fly in airplanes now, I'm no longer frightened. I'm happy with the results," he says.

"When guys reach this age (65) and have done wonderful things, they then either do some damn stupid things or the Feds catch up to them," he continues, laughing. "I want to do nothing to affect what I've accomplished so far. In my younger times I didn't mind crawling out on a limb. But when you're an old man you look silly."

There's little danger that a man with Bolge's credentials will fall into such a trap – or out of a tree. He joined the Fort Lauderdale Museum as



executive director in 1970 when it was located in a Las Olas Boulevard storefront. During his 18-year tenure, he drove the construction and opening of the award-winning Museum of Art | Fort Lauderdale facility in 1986. (He now holds the title of Director Emeritus.) He was executive director of the New Jersey Center for Visual Arts from 1991-95 and, in 1995, became executive director of the Boca Raton Museum of Art – where he was at the helm for the building and launch of its stellar new facility in Mizner Park in January 2001.

A resident of Parkland, Bolge keeps his oar in Broward County's cultural waters as a member of the Broward Cultural Council's Public Art and Design Committee. "Here I am back home," he quips. He was involved in the initial stages of the County's public art program 30 years ago, which took its first steps by "strategically placing monuments – major works of art." He still subscribes to this philosophy. "I'm the resident 'plop art' guy. I've been trying to solve this dilemma of public art vs. fine art. Public art has become a generic thing. But I believe it provides us an opportunity to discover some of the most talented artists of our time – today's Michelangelos and da Vincis.

"You want to give vent to creativity in the city, but you also have to show people something that's really good. We're always on that precipice," he continues. "This area can only excel and be competitive with New York and Chicago by the quality of what we can show."

While he may differ at times with his colleagues on whether to commission new works by emerging artists or purchase pieces by established names in the field, he is in full agreement about the value of public art's role in our community. "It makes a wonderful environment. This program has given the community a foot up. It's one of the best programs in the country," Bolge observes. "It has raised the level of cognizance in the community and given us a level of pride."

In a career that's far from over, George Bolge can look back with the confidence and security that comes from a job – in fact, several jobs – well done.

"I'm one of the oldest living directors still in this business," he jokes. "It's not only building two museums from scratch with good collections and not having them go belly up. The corporate and foundation money has become more difficult to raise and we have to rely more on what we bring in at the front gate, but I'm still very enthused by this area. South Florida is a very energetic place. I have a sense of pride in this community."

And despite his protestations to the contrary, he's likely to keep going out on limbs – and saying what he wants. "I can get away with it," he confesses, with another laugh. "People say, 'Oh, that's just George.'" ★ – Leon M. Rubin