

cathy leff

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Interview by Steven Heller

This year, The Wolfsonian museum in Miami Beach marks its 10th anniversary. Housed in an impressive art deco structure, a former cold-storage warehouse at Florida International University, the Wolfsonian has emerged as a well-spring of design artifacts. Although the museum's focus is on decorative, applied, and fine arts from 1885 to 1945, the vast range of its permanent collections—from matchbooks to Machine Age murals, from political posters to architectural elements—represents the highest standard of popular art. What began as a personal collecting obsession by its founder, financier Mitchell Wolfson, Jr., has evolved into an invaluable study center for scholars of the post-Industrial and Machine Ages. Moreover, under the rubric “propaganda art,” the Wolfsonian (wolfsonian.fiu.edu) is the prime repository of advertising created for political, social, and cultural messages in democracies and dictatorships alike. This winter, the museum hosts two significant exhibitions: “In Pursuit of Pleasure: Schultze & Weaver and the American Hotel,” which examines the architects responsible for the most luxurious U.S. hostelries; and, opening on Feb. 25, “Revolutionary Tides: The Art of the Political Poster 1914–1989,” which analyzes the recurrent themes unique to the genre. In this interview, Cathy Leff, the director of the Wolfsonian since 1998, and publisher and executive editor of its *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, talks about the role of the Wolfsonian in Miami and the design communities, as well as the future of the institution.

HELLER: The Wolfsonian began 10 years ago as a private collection. Since then, the museum has formed an affiliation with Florida International University, has taken over a fantastic Mediterranean Revival building where it houses and displays an unparalleled archive of “decorative and propaganda art,” and has expanded to include another venue, in Genoa, Italy. What is your mission?

LEFF: The Wolfsonian's mission is to use this incredible patrimony of more than 100,000 objects, rare books, and printed materials to promote the examination of modern material culture and to enhance the understanding and appreciation of objects as agents and reflections of social, political, and technological change. Our goal is to make our collection accessible to multiple audiences, encouraging its use for teaching and research through exhibitions, publications, educational tools, and academic and public programs. **HELLER:**

Given that the museum began by collecting and warehousing “decorative” and “propaganda” art, how do you build a program that reaches people who may view the word “propaganda” negatively? **LEFF:** Our definition of propaganda has always been broad—“art in service of ideas and ideology.” I think the consistency of our message and the quality of our exhibitions, publications, and programs over the past 10 years has led our audience to trust us—and even understand that propaganda takes many forms.

HELLER: Your current exhibition, “In Pursuit of Pleasure,” covers the history of some great hotels. How does this fit into the “service of ideas or ideology?” **LEFF:** The history of hotels is an important chapter in the development of modern America. Hotels speak about commercial travelers in the early 19th



Presentation drawing of the Hotel Pierre in New York City by architectural firm Schultze & Weaver, 1928. Photo: Silvia Ros.

century, and they have been a mainstay of the country's commerce. More than mere places to briefly reside, hotels were locations for conducting business and for meeting clients as business relationships extended across the nation. As public spaces, hotels speak about urban pride and aspirations. No progressive city with hopes of growth and prosperity could afford to be without one. **HELLER:** Is there a philosophical reason why 1945 has been the cutoff for your collection? Does it have more to do with historical criteria than esthetic ones? **LEFF:** Our institution was set in motion by the vision of an individual—Micky Wolfson—who set the parameters to be from 1885 to 1945, beginning at the height of the industrial revolution through the Second World War, a time that seemed to mark change in the world order. There

is nothing philosophically, however, that prohibits the museum from going beyond 1945. After all, our interest—the nexus of design and context—did not stop at 1945. Our approach is to look back, but through the eyes of today, to bring attention to the power of design in shaping human behavior. I think we will be most successful as a resource if we broaden and deepen the collection as defined today—to try to be everything would dilute our potential to be the best in the world of what we have. Our public programs and exhibitions, though, can look at contemporary issues and design. **HELLER:** Why is Micky Wolfson so fascinated by such decidedly oppressive art from fascist and totalitarian regimes? **LEFF:** I think it's more of a fascination with how design has been used to promote ideology. We're interested in how design has both altered and been altered by cultural change, industrial innovation, and strategies of persuasion. We focus on a period that is marked by the rise of all the masses—including mass political movements. "Revolutionary Tides," organized by Jeffrey T. Schnapp of the Stanford Humanities Lab at Stanford University [and launched last fall at Stanford's Cantor Center for the Arts], is one such exhibition; it explores the role of crowds in modern visual culture and its impact on mass political movements. **HELLER:** Art institutions tend to avoid wedding the words "art" and "propaganda" in the same sentence. But art has long been used as a tool and weapon of persuasion. Is there a gold standard that you use for determining whether work of this nature is indeed "art" or something else? **LEFF:** We are not an art museum, at least not in the conventional sense, though we do have fine arts—both paintings and sculpture—in the collection. We are interested in art that conveys a message, as opposed to art for art's sake. **HELLER:** Your 2003–2004 exhibition, "Weapons of Mass Dissemination," dealt with both sides of the propaganda war in World Wars I and II, but is there a more direct relationship to today's propaganda war, other than the title of the show? **LEFF:** Definitely! I think what was so interesting about the show—which, by the way, was planned more

than a year before the start of the Iraq War—is that we can look at it in the context of current events. The wartime themes examined in the show resonate strongly today. Strategies for informing the populace, rallying a nation, and demonizing the enemy have not changed. What have changed are the means by which these messages and images are transmitted. Though our collection focuses on a particular period, we're interested in demonstrating its relevance to our own lives and times. The timing of this show, though



Protest poster by Amado Oliver Mauprivez, 1937, from the exhibition "Revolutionary Tides." Photo: Silvia Ros.

not planned as such, reinforced that relevance. Design has been and continues to be a powerful force in influencing behavior and emotions. **HELLER:** How is the material used for scholarship purposes? And what do you hope will come from the scholarship? **LEFF:** The Wolfsonian is a leading center for advanced research on design, decorative art, and propaganda in the modern period. We support the interdisciplinary investigation of our holdings through exhibitions, publications, and curricula development. We support independent research through an annual competitive fellowship program, en-

couraging research in late-19th to mid-20th century material culture. We also periodically invite specialists from other institutions to visit, conduct research on specific areas of the collection, and consult with our curators about the results of their research. Visiting fellows, while conducting their own research projects, have also offered expertise on collection matters. These outside experts have proven invaluable for identifying collection strengths and weaknesses. **HELLER:** I understand you've come into a considerable amount of funding for future endeavors. What will you do with this windfall? **LEFF:** We were very fortunate to have been included in a recent County General Obligation Bond issue, in which Miami-Dade County voters approved more than \$500 million in funds for cultural facilities. We are beginning to work on our agreement with the county and propose to expand our cultural and educational offerings by improving the historic properties we own, including converting our storage facility into an accessible open-study center. **HELLER:** Where will the Wolfsonian head in the next few years? **LEFF:** We hope to establish a formal program with our sibling collection in Genoa, Italy, further enhancing our reputation as an important center for the study and appreciation of modern material culture. I am looking forward to having our collection be totally accessible online, which is critical to advancing our scholarly goals. Today, if you don't exist online, you almost don't exist. We have a collection here in Miami that does not exist elsewhere. It is incumbent upon us to get it out to a broad community. **HELLER:** Finally, what about the importance of graphic design? Obviously, the collection is full of paper: posters, books, magazines, and such. What is the relative importance of your less ephemeral objects and the realms of type, typography, and graphic arts? **LEFF:** We don't distinguish between high and low—that is, a printed brochure could convey as much meaning to us as an important piece of furniture or painting. It's all about context and how these artifacts served as agents of reform, manipulation, or persuasion. **P**