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'I love to deal with light, space and people'

"The challenge is to make inanimate objects animate," says Bonnie Roche, the director of exhibitions at the Mingei International Museum.

By Robert L. Pincus

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Seeing how animated she becomes while talking about the objects in the museum's galleries, you quickly sense how suited she is to her new charge: as designer of its shows.

This is a novel identity for the slim, stylish Roche. She's been an architect for two-plus decades in New York. But then she's assumed multiple identities in this role, too.

Roche first worked as a staff architect for Skidmore, Owens and Merrill, but for several years she's been the principal of her own firm.

She has designed residential interiors for such well-known folks as Paloma Picasso. She also created a museum store for Louis Kahn's famed Yale University Art Gallery and came up with the master plan for changes to the 72nd Street Mall in Central Park. But Roche is probably best known for her renovations of theater spaces, including the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center.

While working on Picasso's home, she invented a new magnetic and pin permeable surface, which has been widely marketed. (It's a recommended product on Oprah's Web site.) So you can call Roche an industrial designer, too.

But the recent project of which she is proudest is the orientation room of Center for Jewish History in New York, which uses projected images, theatrical lighting and the careful use of a small space to bring the organization's archives to life for visitors. She sees it as the distillation of her ambitions as an architect.

"I love to deal with light, space and people. It's how I got into architecture. My work has always been about a sense of engagement and theatricality."

When the Mingei came calling, she thought the opportunity was intriguing. But it still took some persuasive words from her longtime friend, San Diego architect David Rinehart, to clinch the deal.

He's done all of the Mingei's architectural projects and he is also on the board.

Though she had never devoted herself to museum work previously, Rinehart knew Roche was right for the job.

"Bonnie is an unusual human being with absolutely incredible talents. The objects at the Mingei are the best of their kind and I knew she could come to the Mingei and help us see new possibilities in them."

Rob Sidner, the museum's director, says of her, "We hit it off so perfectly as to what the museum is about and now, in working with Bonnie, I've seen that she has an amazingly intuitive approach to showing the art in an ideal way."

For her part, Roche doesn't make such large claims for her shows or talents, but feels that working in the museum fits her sensibility.

"The one thing I have loved about working with theaters is that it was about dealing with the public," she emphasizes. "It's true of museums too."

She's already assembled shows large ("The Beauty of Use: Mingei International Museum at 30") and small ("American Viewing Stones: Natural Art in an Asian Tradition"). And she is intrigued by the prospect of installing another show as big as "The Beauty of Use" – the nationally touring "Craft in America: Expanding Traditions," scheduled to open Oct. 20.

"It's always about making the space, the architecture and the art one," she says.