

MARTIN ROTH INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Rosie Goldsmith:

Martin Roth became the Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in September 2011. Actually, he's the V&A's first foreign director since its founding in 1852 ...and is the first German to head up any major British cultural organisation.

Born in Stuttgart, Professor Roth spent most of his previous career running German museums, famously overseeing the complete modernization of the Dresden State Art Collections after the end of the German Democratic Republic and the damage of the Second World War.

Today he's at the helm of one of the most popular museums of art and design in the world, the V&A in the heart of London ...where I am interviewing him today.

Martin Roth, How would you describe your role as director of the V&A?

Martin Roth:

This is mainly keeping the legacy, the amazing legacy. Being part of that museum for 160 years, which, by the way, for a German is quite unusual, because whenever you work in German institution, it's a rather young institution, either built after the war or after reunification. So that's the very first time that I am in an institution that has a programme and strategy running for 160 years.

Rosie Goldsmith:

Would you describe your role as an arts specialist or as a cultural manager? How do you see yourself?

Martin Roth:

It's a bit tricky, honestly. I don't like this "arts manager" thing. I never liked it. Of course you have to run an institution like the V&A or another museum. If you trust a manager who runs a car company today and a museum tomorrow and a nuclear plant the other day, it's a different approach. You have to have an amazing knowledge and an experience – and I hope I have it – to run an institution like that. At the same time what I'm doing in my daily practice is management. I quite often had a situation when journalists were shadowing me and they were surprised that I don't come at 10 o'clock, sit in the library reading a book, having lunch with some colleagues and going on the golf course at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. It's a tough business. It's raising funds, it's HR, it's a lot in public, it's lobbying, it's running a huge company.

Rosie Goldsmith:

What do you personally care most about developing at the V&A?

Martin Roth:

For me a museum is a very political institution, it always has been. It's a luxury institution. This is the European tradition that we have institutions that are just open for a public to use. It's not always about targeting, not always about education, but it's part of education. It's not always just to enjoy yourself, but it's part of it. From the beginning this museum was called the museum for everyone. It was the palace for the people, as it was said in the 1860s. But the society changed. And we have a different society today. And London is a great city, as we know, it's a very global city. I know that word means nothing, but London is a global city and it works, I think, rather peacefully. Living in London is a very positive way to see the future. And the V&A is part of it. And to reflect this global history in one of our major cities, mega-cities of the world – I think that's one of our most prominent roles for the next years.

Rosie Goldsmith:

How significant is it for you, but also for the V&A, that you are German?

Martin Roth:

First of all, this is Europe. And it's the year 2013. Whatever we do, we have international teams, if you go to the Deutsche Bank or if you go to BBC. I think V&A has 28 different nations working in the team and the staff. So it's nothing unusual. The German part of it is quite unusual and being the first non-British museum director in the national museum. We have a lot of German curators in this country, but not in a national museum... Actually I think I was a little bit like a test person. At least that's how it feels. Someone said, but it was just a joke: "We just try it once with you and if it doesn't work we will not do it again."

I think there are different implications, impacts that made it rather unusual. First of all I worked in Dresden for quite a long while, 10 years. Part of my job description, part of what I did was to reconstruct and rebuild a lot of Dresden, reconstruct a lot of war damage in the museums...or, talking about looted art - restitutions. So it was all related to the war. Coming to London and working in a museum that still has shrapnel impact or was heavily bombed - we just don't know it, we don't talk about it. I think it's my generation that has the task to keep a certain kind of awareness, a greater kind of awareness and talk about what happened. So being here in London is about my experience of running a museum, but at the same time it's being a kind of "cultural ambassador" and to try to create bridges. Having said that, I'm a bit surprised that we don't know more about each other today. The funny thing is that we have lost a little bit of the memory, at the same time today we know more about China, Brazil, and the BRIC states and whatever. We lost somehow the feeling of what's going on in Manchester, Munich and Marseille, and whatever, so we have to revitalise both the past, the history, but at the same time the way we work in Europe.

Rosie Goldsmith:

Is there a difference between the way you work here, in London, at the V&A, and the way you worked in Dresden?

Martin Roth:

Absolutely. I'm a friend after all those years, of short decision making, immediate reaction, having things done. And even if there is an error or mistake, then let's go back again and we try again. While here at the V&A, we try to be extremely safe, making only decisions if we are sure we can do it and so on.

Rosie Goldsmith:

Do you feel less creative here?

Martin Roth:

No, I don't think so. I remember the first two or three years in Dresden were... just awful. To understand what was going on and try to find the right way and be more efficient - it takes a long time till you are part of this system and till you understand an institution. It's always a little bit like sitting between gearbox and clutch. It's a bit like an engine. No, definitely not.

This country - and that was a surprise for me - this country is run by committees...and meetings...and minutes...and committees...and boards...and audit committees. To a certain extent, I think, to have someone who is taking the risk being in a leadership position, running an institution in a way that it's really making progress and huge steps - it's not very easy to develop that strategy in the UK because we are really part of a very well developed control system. But - I'm a fan of that system, because the arms-length principle that we have in this country is one of the best management solutions that I have ever found for the cultural sector. So it's a bit in-between both possibilities, but I don't think that we really like leaders in this country.

Rosie Goldsmith:

European cultural institutions are going through a crisis of funding...how are you here at the V&A handling the Funding Debate?

Martin Roth:

Europe is just at the beginning of the crisis. And it's not only about culture and museums and operas and theatres. It's about the situation in Europe itself. Whatever happens in the next 10-15 years, we have to be part of that system. I'm not one of those museum directors who ask for exceptions and want to do something different. We are part of that system, so we have to go with it. Or, in other words, I'm in that business for more than 25 years – in this case business means leadership position – I can't remember that I had one year without a budget cut. Budget cuts are part of the system and I would miss it if I didn't have one, that's what I mean. But at the same time, there is a very difficult contradiction, because at the same time I'm really convinced that culture, the arts are probably the only frame that keeps Europe in a certain way together. This heritage that we share, the tradition that is our tradition.

Rosie Goldsmith:

Can the V&A, can museums survive in this era of austerity?

Martin Roth:

If we say "museums", if we use the notion of "museums", if you talk about the landscape of museums, if we talk about the variety of museums, then I will say "no". We have too many museums, definitely. That has nothing to do with austerity, that's just too much. There was this amazing boom of museums and I don't think that we need all those museums. But we need all the major collections. Those major collections are to support the society in really difficult times. It's our decision in the end what we will do if the budget cuts get even worse. I talked to some colleagues yesterday coming from Madrid and they have budget cuts up to 30-40 percent. That's really difficult. So what do you do in the end? Is it the staff? No, I don't want to change staff, we keep that. Is it the collection? No, I don't want to start to sell objects, definitely not. Don't even touch that idea. Entrance fee? I think it's a great progress here in London that we don't charge for national museums. I said once: "over my dead body". I'm not sure if I should have said that. But if you want to be open for everyone in those difficult times, then we shouldn't charge an entrance fee. We have to make a decision in the end. Up to now it is still working, so I'm very positive.

Rosie Goldsmith:

In 10 years time, what do you hope to have achieved – here – as a German?

Martin Roth:

Something that would be really great: it's if we don't have to debate that question again, if it is just not worth to think about it if you are German or not German. I said it so often, but I feel so European being born 10 years after the war. If you have more of that European identity in a very simple and positive sense, I think that could be part of it. It has to do with a bit of understanding, it has to do with languages, it has to do with everything, but it's just ignoring those differences.

Rosie Goldsmith:

You were just over 10 years in Dresden. Imagine you are going to be 10 years at the V&A. What is the one thing or several things that you would like to change or do? Your ambition, your goals for yourself, for the V&A, for your role here.

Martin Roth:

It doesn't sound very exciting, but it's a difficult topic: we are right in the middle of a city that is extremely expensive. Every square inch here costs a lot of money. How do you organise a museum in the future when think that a storage facility has to be right in the middle of the city, because it's important for the collection, it's important for the visitor, it's important for the research, it's part of this social system here, where everyone tells you "now you have to move out forty miles to run that outside of London". How to run a museum not as a window shopping, cultural window shopping institution in such a city like London? It's not very exciting, but if it's still a museum in 10 years and not a commercial, cultural institute, then I think I did a great job.