

## Lighting the Guggenheim - English text

Mary Ann Hoag is the Director of Lighting at the historic Guggenheim Museum. She talks fondly and enthusiastically about the unique beauty and character of the building she has been lighting for almost twenty years. *"It is impossible to work here and not think about Frank Lloyd Wright, his concept is a constant presence. Some of the guest designers who work here try to wrestle the building to the ground, but the best have been the ones who just embraced its quirks and and work with them"*

The Guggenheim opened in October 1959, six months after the death of Frank Lloyd Wright. He had a strong vision for how the art should be displayed and viewed, taking into account a great deal of natural light. *"It's a very special place with great potential and many obstacles: every show is like 'reinventing the wheel', like starting from scratch, making each exhibition function within the constraints of the building. This museum is so particular in its architecture that really makes its own rules as far as exhibition designing and lighting is concerned."*

The curved walls and the unique spiraling ramp gallery with ceiling heights of only 9 feet that vary as it climbs up mean extra careful work when it comes to design lighting, but the true challenge is the dome skylight, so iconic and dominating; managing the intensity of the light from it, in a way that the work is viewable - and still intact for years to come - is almost impossible, and in fact it was kept completely obscured for several years.

*"Frank Lloyd Wright somehow didn't think much about the strains that ever-changing natural light would put on the artwork and on the viewer. He also didn't worry about the actual damage to the works when exposed to sunlight, and some of which can be so vulnerable. Maybe in those years there wasn't enough information and fuss over these things. Nowadays we have two translucencies above the dome, we worked with designer Matthew Tanteri who is specialized in natural light and he suggested these plastic diffusers in order to get the light as uniform as possible. We did this two years ago and for the first time we had a truly workable situation, though the light it casts can seem a bit gloomy at times. And even now it still changes from weather to weather, season to season and at different times of the day, but again you have to accept and embrace that, though is hard for me because I want to create a look for each show and stay with it. I want a consistency that sometime is hard to obtain. Dusk is usually the worst time as far as light goes, being nor here nor there. The best time is at night, when we have only artificial light. As for the other original skylights along the ramp galleries, those are no longer in use and have been replaced by 3500 kelvin T5 fluorescent tubes"*

Before approaching the Guggenheim Hoag was a freelance lighting designer, engaged mostly in theatre productions. *“I come from the theatre, and still miss it a lot. I miss the fast pace, the diversity of each production, the dynamic and dramatic quality of light on the stage. Originally I was working here on a temporary basis so I would still have time for the odd production, but when eventually I took over the position of director I didn't have the time anymore. I miss the spirit of a theatre production, the more collaborative process: you have costume, lighting, set designers, everyone working together to create something much bigger than you all together, where the sum is larger than the parts.*

*In an art exhibition is a very different kind of process: is all about the artist and his or hers concept and we are at the service of that singular vision. I have grown to really love this type of work; among many things, the museum have taught me how many shades of white are out there, and all the many tricks to tweak with each.*

*I am proud to be in charge of lighting such an amazing museum, and I still get a thrill from my job here. I still love walking down the ramps and taking in the unique atmosphere of the place, whether is empty after hours or when is busy with visitors.*

*I sometime find the time to work on other commissions or take on collaborations with other museums, such as a recent one for the Museum of American Indians in NYC – part of the Smythsonian. There I have recently lit the 'Ceramica de los Ancestros' an extensive and unique exhibition of Central American antique ceramics. I used mostly narrow directional G.E. PAR 35 watt, 8 degrees, They are a gorgeous lamp, with a nice soft edge, an even field of lighting and a nice color. Also, they have a lens in front of the envelope, and do not require another lens as a barrier between the lamp and the artworks”*

In 1991/92 the museum went through a major renovation that included the building of an adjoining tower that also offers new exhibition areas, some cleverly lit with natural light. At the same time an entirely new lighting system (created and manufactured by Lighting Services Inc) was designed and put in place by Peter Barna and Renee Cooley, from Light and Space Associates.

*“I'm still using fixtures from the 1992 refurbishment, a lot of halogen tungsten loaded up with with great accessories. I use MR16 in all kinds of beam width and wattage: I would drop a white screen, put a little frosting, 'top-hatting', louvering, manipulating the light so I get exactly what I want. Accessories are really what enable me to finesse the lighting. I'm slowly transitioning over to LED – I use it mostly in other projects - but I'm not quite ready to use it here. In such particular space is still not ideal, and while I employ it for small areas and details of the building I find it very limiting when it comes to lighting the artwork. LEDs are not enclosed fixture, so it doesn't have the flexibility and versatility of a well accessorized halogen tungsten lamp. Though I know that is changing and I'm very interested to see how other museums are using it.*

*The new Whitney is the first major museum to use only LEDs and I think the light there is beautiful, they did a fantastic job”*

The Guggenheim Museum has recently opened the exhibition 'Burri, the Trauma of

*Painting'* a major retrospective of the Italian artist featuring several pieces rarely seen in the United States, such as the melted plastic and steel series, alongside the burlap and resin works for which he's universally known.

*"The Burri show was a particularly challenging project, his pieces vary so much in textures and materials, from sack-cloth to steel, from plastic to resin. Some are more akin to sculpture than to painting. So every piece needed it's own particular light; I had to be careful with the steel and plastic ones so they wouldn't look too brassy. When I work with large scale 2D pieces, such as in Burri's, I need to light the whole surface consistently, without noticeable 'spots' of light. I will often use an LSI Wall Wash with a Q100T3, and then I'll add some G.E. constant color MR16's, which have a wonderful color rendering quality, so I blend two direction light sources; adding to that there's the daylight and the fluorescent we use for the walls. For the smaller scale works, where I cannot use the wide quartz wash, I used the constant color MR16's, but added just one small touch of warm light to match the other large works. I did this with a 35watt PAR20 Narrow flood. I always look for consistency when lighting an exhibition, and as ever my main goal is to keep the overall effect cohesive and consistent. Burri's works can seem quite sombre at times so I made a special effort to bring out the colours as much as possible, and to make the work stand out from the gallery background"*

According to Mary Ann Hoag *"a good lighting director has to understand the consequences of every choice that is made, and to take into account the viewer experience too, not only how it makes the art appears. For me, what is most important is unity, to have a sense of consistency. I cannot have a chaotic scheme with too much variety of lamp types, brightness, directions and different manners to light the work. The art is the only thing you should notice, is what you are drawn to and everything else takes a back seat to that. You have to work with the artist's vision and that of the exhibition designers: our role is to stand back, to capture the essence and translate it into impeccable lighting that fades in the background"*