Seventeen curatorial departments. 1,800 full-time employees. 900 volunteers. And 5.2 million visitors, who each year trek to Fifth Avenue to experience more than two million works of art spanning 5,000 years of world culture. And within these stats works Gary Tinterow, a Houstonian with a creative legacy. 

Commencing this June, Tinterow’s curatorial thumbprints will be seen in Matisse: The Fabric of Dreams – His Art and His Textiles, the first exhibition to take on Matisse’s fascination with fabrics, carpets, Parisian gowns and Turkish robes, currently on view at the Royal Academy in London. The exhibition marks the first public unveiling of Matisse’s textile collection – referred to by the artist as his “working library” – which has been packed away in family trunks since Matisse’s death in 1954. 

Already honored by France with the Legion of Honor award, Tinterow is the new curator of 19th-Century Modern and Contemporary Art and a Met vet in the making. 

Your dad Bobby Tinterow was a Houston legend, whose band played at the Shamrock Hotel. Coming from a musical family, was there cacophony in the house? It was actually hard for my father to listen to us play. My brother Chaya and I wanted to follow in our father’s footsteps, so we both learned to play instruments. Daddy was so innately musical he didn’t need to practice.

Did you and Chaya enjoy hanging out with your dad? It was always an adventure. I got to meet all these fascinating people. As a child, I remember being very comfortable talking to adults. Not that I had anything particularly interesting to say, but I wasn’t intimidated.

Perhaps the entrepreneurship you inherited from your mother Dariece helped you launch the Met’s blockbusters? Yes, in terms of my modus operandi, organizing and orchestrating big events.
Do you feel a responsibility to enlighten viewers? For me, the whole point is to provide an opportunity to share these works of art and to share an idea with the public. That’s why we work so hard on the graphics and the intellectual component of the exhibitions. It’s about making these connections.

Do you feel the role of the curator has changed and why? It has – and not for the better. What’s happened is that museums have become big institutions. As they become more popular, the facilities become larger. In order to maintain an improved facility, you have to raise money. In order to raise money, you need a development department. You have to mount programs that will bring people in so that you can pay the development staff. It becomes a spiraling bureaucracy in which the curator’s voice becomes smaller in comparison to all the other voices.

And it shouldn’t be? In the curator’s perfect world, you’re at a museum that has so much money in its endowment that it can take care of the art, sweep the floors and open the doors to the public without raising money.

Is that why it was important to found the Association of Museum Curators? The idea is to help us curators articulate for ourselves what it is that we do. Once we understand what we do, we want to help our trustees, collectors, public, etc. understand in order to create a better sense of the value that we bring to the industry, which is, museums in America. We’d write documents that outline the principles of our profession and to indicate what the best practices are. We’ve got about 500 members across the country, and we are well on our way to formulating all these various professional manuals.

Is acquiring and maintaining major benefactors the basis of competition among art institutions? It works both ways actually. Every museum has a different context and range of facilities that they can offer to a prospective donor. We each have a different culture, support group and social ambiance. What is even of more significance is that the collectors are going to have to vie with each other for space on our walls. Each of the museums in Manhattan only has so much space. If you want to see your collection on the walls of a major institution, they have to be willing to give up some of their very valuable wall space for your art. The diminishing resource is space on museum walls. That’s the restricted commodity.

Over the last decade, you’ve renovated a historical house in Stone Ridge, New York, that claims George Washington slept there. Yes, he did in November 1782. It’s been published in Architectural Digest and World of Interiors. The house belonged to Cornelius Wynkoop, who was third in command of the New York army and therefore had been working with Washington. When the war was over, Washington came to thank the Dutch community for its support. Every year, I commemorate his visit with a party where you have to come as you were in 1782.

Do you dress as George Washington? If I’m anybody, I guess I’m Cornelius Wynkoop, the owner of the house in 1782.

As a newly appointed curator, do you have any special goals? I very much want to engage artists in and outside of New York with our collection.

You’ve had many opportunities. What hold does the Met have on you? It’s being able to walk out of your office and look at Byzantine jewelry or Greco-Roman sculpture or an exhibition on Ormolux. To see the range of artistic creation over 5,000 years is constantly challenging and stimulating. There’s also the pleasure of working with [museum director] Philippe de Montebello and his team. It’s a huge place, but at the same time, one in which, because of the culture Phillippe has created, is very respectful of the odd ducks that curators are. So we are allowed to be eccentric and to walk around with our heads in the clouds.