
CHARLES
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New director's ideas may jolt S.F. museums

Just six months into Max Hollein's directorship of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, his mark on the two museums in his care is strongly felt. After a long period of artistic predictability and administrative uncertainty, the museums are righting themselves.

But Hollein is not settling for mere management of the institutions. An internationally recognized leader in the field who led three German museums simultaneously before his appointment here, he is thinking deeply about the future of museums and their relation-

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New director could elevate museums' role in art world

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ship to their multiple audiences. His ideas could potentially go further than a much-needed shakeup, leading to a rebirth of the Bay Area's largest visual arts organization. Along the way, they just might radically transform the region's role in the world of art.

For Hollein, the job starts with what he describes as a re-emphasis on the distinctions between the two Fine Arts Museums — and between them and their internationally significant colleagues in the city, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Asian Art Museum.

"We are going to differentiate the two institutions, the de Young and the Legion of Honor, more clearly," he says. "Because I think they represent two entirely different concepts of museum."

The Legion of Honor, he points out, is built on the model of the "Eurocentric museum" — "a classical paintings gallery in neoclassicist architecture." The older de Young started as a reused world's fair pavilion in 1895 with an eclectic collection of curiosities and leftovers from the California Midwinter International Exposition of the previous year. From their start, then, "the two institutions represent a different attitude about art, and what art is and can be."

He sees the future of the Legion as "celebratory of the arts, (with) large-scale retrospectives, and a very strong focus on Old Master exhibitions," along with "certain 19th century and Modern" offerings.

"The de Young will be way more, I would say, multicultural," he says, where "the social historical, political context of art and cultural objects will play a much deeper and more complex role." It would also be more experimental: "You might exhibit certain works that you put up for debate ... shows where you are kind of challenged to come up with your own opinion."

Fine Arts Museums watchers likely will be surprised to hear such thinking coming from the organization's top echelon. For too long, the museums have treated their essential administrative and governance concerns as something apart from equally crucial art and education matters. Partly as a result, media and other commentators have also focused on internal politics and financial challenges, with little discussion of their relationship to mission — to the core institutional service to its communities.

Without saying it in words, Hollein's actions remind us that the two go hand in hand. You can't run a nonprofit without attending to its fiscal health or the welfare of its personnel. But the best way both to raise money and to keep your employees motivated is by building an ambitious program of the highest quality. Hollein inherited a history of operating deficits that goes back several years, and he allows that the museums may well be in the red at the end of his first fiscal year next June. But an institution that is rich intellectually and artistically improves its odds of mundane success.

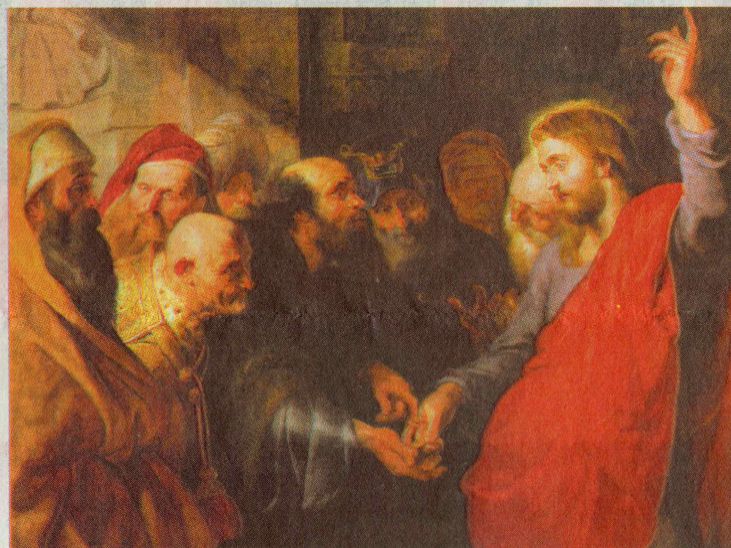
Meanwhile, as chief executive officer — a role he reclaimed this year from the board president — Hollein is charging forward. At the top administrative level, he has hired a new chief financial officer and director of development, and instituted a new curatorial position in contemporary art. He has also assumed the duties of his former chief operating officer, preferring, he says, a flatter administrative structure with more direct reports.

His spending plans revolve around what he calls intellectual infrastructure: reworking the website and "making



Stephen Lam / Special to The Chronicle

Max Hollein, director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, may radically transform the region's role in the art world.



Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Classic works, like Peter Paul Rubens' "The Tribute Money" (circa 1612), are what Hollein envisions for the Legion of Honor.

strides in digital education" by adding and developing staff. "All of the major shows next year will have multimedia, free, digital pre-courses that you can take — so you can have a richer experience seeing the show.

"I am a very strong believer that the communication of the museum with its audience doesn't start or end during the visit," he says. "We'll do multiple things to make people understand that the museum is an educational facility" that delivers "cultural knowledge — even if you're not visiting us."

The de Young will commission a series of artist-designed playgrounds, extending its offerings to the museum grounds and drawing upon the combined strengths of its contemporary art and education staffs.

Most important, from an art critical point of view, is a renewed focus on scholarship in support of exhibitions. "Almost all of the exhibitions that we are putting forward," he vows, "will be generated by us in the future."

A significant challenge faces museums outside the world capitals of art, where an easier pace may reduce the pressure to constantly invent. The simple thing is to bring in a show organized and packaged by another museum, and represent it for the edification and entertainment of the local audience. But a steady diet of predigested fare is not sustaining in the long term.

Even if it makes no apparent difference to the audience, Hollein says, "in regard to the standing of the institution among its peers, it certainly makes a big difference if you have a strong voice in the cultural discussion." The question, of course, comes down to

whether the museum is to be a middleman, serving art up to customers, or an originator.

Hollein acknowledges that the museum, in recent years, has not taxed itself in this way. He talks of "invigorating the internal capacity to come up with genuine curatorial content that's based on our own scholarship, knowledge and understanding of the collection." Of creating "original programming that we will then send on tour both in the U.S. and in Europe." While he is careful to praise the credentials and skills of his staff, he sees this as "a formula for energizing the institution."

"Now is the time for the curators within the institution to step up," he says.

At the same time, the price tag associated with big shows from the great museums has significantly changed over the past 10 years, since the days of the entrepreneurial former director John Buchanan. "Other 'competitors,' so to say, came up," Hollein says. "Abu Dhabi, Qatar, the Saudis."

The multimillion-dollar budgets of large shows like the recent David Hockney and Frank Stella exhibitions can be put to better use. In addition to traditional, if tantalizing, offerings such as pendant shows of the early and late works of Claude Monet and a look at recent excavations at the Mesoamerican city of Teotihuacán, expect new twists on standard Fine Arts Museums themes.

Fashion, for example, has been a staple at the de Young, which maintains a large collection of textiles and costume. "Fashion of Islam" (exhibition titles are tentative) will look at historic and contemporary modes of dress in Muslim cultures — including recent

haute couture from major houses, little-known outside the Islamic world. It's a show that should be eye-opening for many of us, and a service to the quarter-million Muslims who live in the Bay Area.

"Gods in Color: Painted Sculpture of Classical Antiquity" will display the results of years-long research on the original — gaudy, to current taste — colors on ancient works. Authentic sculptures, sans color, will be shown alongside replicas as they are thought to have looked.

And the racier side of art history will be the subject of an exhibition to be shared with renowned partners — the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Kimbell Museum. "Casanova: The Pursuit of Pleasure" will look at the art and mores of 18th century Europe through the lens of the famous adventurer and libertine.

One of Hollein's dreams is to one day be able to say, "Here on the West Coast, major, major Old Masters exhibitions are happening, and they are not just 'The Etchings of Durer' or something." A show on the theme of "Raphael, Botticelli and the Pre-Raphaelites" will contrast Fine Arts Museums collection gems by 19th century British painters to important works by the 15th century artists they rejected (Raphael) and embraced (Botticelli).

Hollein's own experience is grounded in contemporary and modern art. His first directorship was at Frankfurt Germany's Schirn Kunsthalle, a noncollecting museum, and his first hire in San Francisco was a "curator-in-charge, contemporary art and programming," a new position. Of course, a comprehensive museum program cannot ignore the art of its time, but what should be the approach of the Fine Arts Museums in a city with one of the great contemporary museums — the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art — less than 5 miles away?

Hollein makes it clear that he is not keen on a steady diet of large-scale retrospectives — though a big Stuart Davis show is on the books for April. He wants to engage artists in unconventional ways, getting them to consider outdoor spaces and underused parts of the buildings. In this way, "we can be more playful, and to a certain extent even bolder," than SFMOMA, he says.

An opportunity to test the possibilities of the new approach will present itself in the coming year, which marks the 100th anniversary of the death of Auguste Rodin. Stanford University's Cantor Collection of Rodin is one of the largest anywhere, comprising some 200 sculptures. But the Legion of Honor's collection of 90-plus works is, by one measure, more significant because much of it was purchased directly from the artist or from his studio after his death, and made by his own hand or under his supervision during his lifetime.

The Legion will publish the first catalog of its Rodin holdings — that's the scholarship Hollein is promising, and it is long overdue in this case: Most of the works have been at the museum for 50 years or more. The originality part? Curators will work with two widely known contemporary artists, Swiss-born Urs Fischer and Sarah Lucas of England, on interpretive installations meant to broaden our understanding of Rodin and bring it up to date.

It all adds up to the real possibility of a museum newly engaged with the audiences of today. Not a superfluous museum of contemporary art — but a much-needed contemporary museum of art.

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