

New York's Met lures head of top S.F. art museums

By Charles Desmarais

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the largest and most prestigious visual arts institution in the U.S., has selected Max Hollein, director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, as its new artistic leader.

The New York museum has been searching for a director since the high-profile resignation of Thomas P. Campbell a little more than a year ago. At a meeting of the Met's board of trustees Tuesday, the museum named Hollein as the 10th director in its 147-year history.

Hollein was appointed to his current position in March 2016 and began work in June of that year. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco comprises two of the Bay Area's largest and

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most significant museums, the de Young and the Legion of Honor. He will have been at that job for little more than two years when he moves to New York in August.

Hollein hadn't planned such a short tenure, he said in a phone interview. He worked at his last post for 15 years, eventually serving as director of three significant institutions simultaneously in Frankfurt.

"I stay at these institutions for a long time," he said. "But when they call you from the most important museum in the world, you obviously listen. And this is something you just have to do."

"It's the mother ship," said Dede Wilsey, longtime president of the FAMESF board of trustees, referring to the Met. "When Max told me about this a couple of weeks ago, I told him he had to take the job. ... The only place that could compare is the Louvre."

Daniel Brodsky, chairman of the Met's board of trustees, is equally happy with the museum's new director. "He is an innovative and inspiring museum leader and has a proven record of building collections and organizing outstanding exhibitions," Brodsky said in a statement. "His knowledge of and passion for art is expansive, and we have great confidence that he will develop a shared vision and a strong collaboration with our extraordinary curators, conservators, program leaders and supporters."

With an annual budget of \$305 million and an endowment of more than \$3 billion, the Met is the choicest museum appointment in the U.S. More than 7 million people

visited the museum last year. It was also named the world's No. 1 museum for the third year in a row by users on TripAdvisor, and in 2016 was the second-most Instagrammed museum in the world, after the Louvre.

By comparison, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco had a combined operating budget of \$61 million in fiscal year 2017-18, with an endowment of \$133 million. Visitorship last year was just short of 1.7 million.

Both museums have experienced some financial difficulty in recent years. Hollein inherited a history of operating deficits at FAMESF. That has been reversed, Wilsey and Hollein said in a joint interview at Wilsey's home. Fiscal year 2018 "is on track to end with a slight surplus" of about \$400,000 and 2017 was break-even, according to museums spokeswoman Linda Butler.

Among Hollein's programmatic accomplishments, the museum cites the purchase and gift of a large collection of works showcased last year in the exhibition "Revelations: Art from the African American South." He also shined a spotlight on in-house curatorial talent with such exhibitions as "Summer of Love" and, currently on view, "Cult of the Machine." An excellent new series of "Digital Stories" is an online complement to exhibitions.

The Met's troubles are not yet behind it. When Campbell resigned, the museum was coming off a spending spree that included a \$15 million renovation of the former Whitney Museum of American Art, now called the Met Breuer, as a temporary exhibition space for contemporary



Michael Macor / The Chronicle

Max Hollein has been selected as director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He will start in August, after two years in S.F.

art. The new program added \$17 million in operating costs. Partly as a result of that, Met officials warned that annual deficits could balloon to \$40 million if they were not addressed.

The museum instituted a hiring freeze and reduced its payroll by about 100 employees through a combination of layoffs and voluntary buyouts, announced a "pause" in plans to build a new \$600 million wing for modern and contemporary art, and substantially reduced the number of special exhibitions each year. The current operating deficit is about \$10 million annually, which the museum plans to whittle to zero by 2020.

Significantly, the Met also returned to an earlier leadership structure, unconventional for museums, that split the functions of director and chief executive officer. Hollein, who bears both titles at FAMESF, will report in New York to Dan Weiss, president and CEO of the Met.

That formal structure exists, Weiss said in a telephone interview, because "ultimately the museum has the requirement that someone is accountable for the overall well-being of the institution."

"Max and I will be partners," Weiss said, "and Max

has a seat on the board as I do, and we're both accountable to the board, as well. ... Max and I hold the same view on this. The Met's a big, complicated place, and Max's area of expertise overlaps with mine quite considerably." Hollein will focus "on the content side" of the museum as Weiss deals with administration.

In interviews, both men professed great mutual respect. Hollein, who is 48, said, "Both of us have a fairly holistic view on how a museum should be run." Weiss, 60, pointed out, "I'm an art historian with an MBA, and he's an art historian with an MBA."

That synergy may be efficient, but it may not comfort those who called for the Met to hire as director, for the first time, a woman or a person of color. The museum's search committee, led by trustees Candace Beinecke and Richard Chilton, reviewed "approximately 100 nominations, comprising a broad and diverse pool," according to press release.

Former Met fellow and Wellesley College art history professor Liza Oliver was among those who had publicly urged the museum to make a bold change. In a New York Times op-ed last year, she called the Met "myopic in its

hiring at the highest levels of administration" and pointed out that few of the country's largest and most prestigious museums have ever been led by a woman.

In San Francisco, FAMESF trustees were told of Hollein's appointment at their regular meeting Tuesday. Earlier, Wilsey said that a committee largely made up of the same people who conducted the 2015-16 search would lead a new effort. "They don't know it, but I've chosen — they will find out tomorrow," she said.

FAMESF has had significant turmoil at the top since the death of John Buchanan in 2011. Counting long interims without a professional director and the short tenures of Hollein and his predecessor, Colin Bailey (hired away by the Morgan Library in New York after only two years), a new director will oversee the seventh administration in fewer than 10 years.

Asked whether the board has a plan to address the inevitable disruption of such turnover, Wilsey said, "I take (the appointment of Hollein at the Met) as one of the greatest compliments that the museum could possibly have."

In the new search process, she said, "We'll hire the best person we can find. ... There aren't better museums, because MoMA will be filled, the National Gallery will be filled, and the Met's filled. I would put us up against any other museums. I don't think there's a better museum. ... They're comparable, but not better."

"So if I were a director, and had a choice of running two museums that are very well run, well funded, in San Francisco, I would take that over Kansas City or whatever museum is around."

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