

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

What to look for in the next Fine Arts Museums leader

Museum people don't turn down the top art job at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and few cultural scholars would say no to the directorship of the Morgan Library & Museum. So, it's no blemish on the record of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco that its last two directors left after short tenures to run those prestigious New York institutions.

If you're going to sit at the head of a table, beneath a dangling sword weighted with donors' demands, community needs, staff ambition and everyone's sense of entitlement — not to mention professional critical harping — you may as well do it in New York, a city built around great art offerings, collections, facilities and talent.

Yet that does leave the museums with a question I posed to the president of their board of trustees, Dede Wilsey, in an interview on Monday. What can be done not only to hire

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good people, but also to retain them?

I regret to report that it seems the board has given little or no thought to that challenge. One indication of willful disregard of the matter: Wilsey's insistence that there has been little turnover at the top.

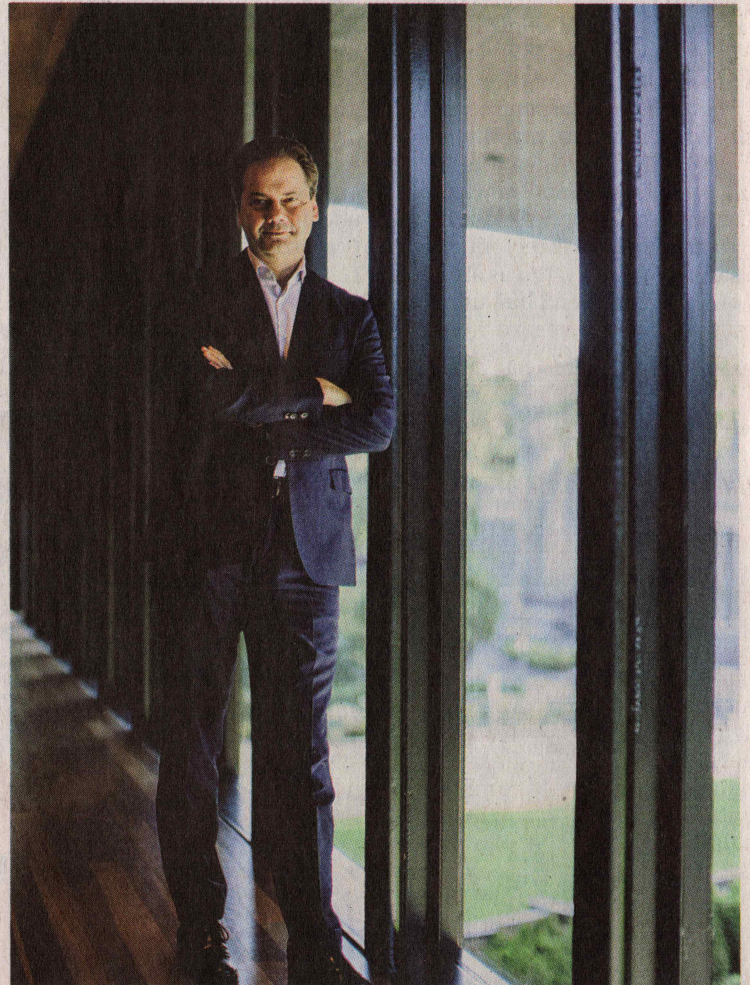
In my Tuesday piece on the appointment of Max Hollein as the new director of the Metropolitan, I stated that a new director of the Fine Arts Museums — the umbrella organization comprising the de Young and the Legion of Honor — will oversee the seventh administration in less than 10 years.

By Wilsey's reckoning, her spokesman said in an email, there have been only “two directors since (John) Buchanan passed away” in 2011.

However, assuming a hire before 2021, in 10 years the museums will have had directors Buchanan, Colin Bailey, Hollein and the new person, as well as interim bosses for a year or more between each formal “permanent” appointment.

It matters little what titles those caretaker individuals bore, or even if the role was shared. Leadership changed at the top, and staff, board and the community were required each time to adapt to new management styles and ideas.

All this is important because, as much as I share the Bay Area's love for these two great museums, I see endemic weaknesses that threaten their otherwise promising future. The Fine Arts Museums' board
Desmarais continues on E2



Stephen Lam / Special to The Chronicle 2016

Max Hollein, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco director since 2016, is leaving to lead the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Jason Henry / Special to The Chronicle 2014

Former Fine Arts Museums Director Colin Bailey, one of the S.F. museums' many leaders in the past 10 years, with Aimee Ng, a curator from New York's Frick.

Choosing the next museums leader

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cannot control the ambition of its director, and shouldn't even try. What the board most needs at this crucial moment is not someone it can master, but a willing partner.

It is an instinct toward control, in fact, that underlies many of the museums' false steps. It is, one assumes, the impulse that keeps the museums' governing body from reaching for members much beyond a long-empowered circle. It is the root of the hubris that too often traps the trustees into singing the institution's praises, as they downplay its needs.

It is no surprise that the museums' most generous individual donor is given wide berth and a strong voice in governance. It is, in fact, appropriate in some respects. Wilsey's devotion to the institution is unparalleled, and the impact of her gifts on the museums' capacity to do big things should not go unacknowledged. Moreover, she is completely within her rights to decide which programs, acquisitions and infrastructure she wishes to support with her own money. If she says no, it just may not happen if no one else steps up.

At the same time, by accepting the position, board members take on the responsibility for final governance decisions. If they abrogate that obligation, even in the name of pleasing their powerful and persuasive president, they fail their institution and their community.

At one point in my interview with Wilsey, the idea was broached that San Francisco is an inherently better place to be an art museum director than, say, Kansas City. It was an offhand comment, but an iron-



Catherine Bigelow / Special to The Chronicle 2016

Dede Wilsey and Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco Director Max Hollein at the Antiques Show in October 2016.

ic one. I have spent a fair amount of time in the museums of Midwestern cities, both in their galleries and in their boardrooms. I can testify that the de Young and the Legion have been known to fall short of museums in far less cosmopolitan places.

Compared with San Francisco, those are often cities with far fewer eligible trustee candidates, circumscribed global interactions, constrained financial resources and limited traditions of art collecting and art making. There is no reason a San Francisco institution, with all the benefits of this environment, should be measuring itself against institutions that succeed despite their relative challenges and limitations.

There is no more provincial attitude than the conviction that what we have is of the highest quality, that we know best the definition of quality and that it is an unchanging ideal.

The most vital museums, wherever they might be located, are those that are governed by excited, engaged trustees. They travel widely to see art and learn about other programs, other institutions. They do the hard, sometimes humbling work of unflinching self-evaluation, with reference to aspirational, benchmark organizations.

A good new director will not want a meddling board that tells them how to do their job. Neither will they want a disengaged board, however.

"We'll hire the best person we can find," Wilsey said. Of course, she knows that what is best must also be a good pairing with president, board and institution. It was she, in fact, who drew an analogy to dating and marriage.

She asked for my recommendations to the museums' director search committee. I suspect she meant candidate names, but I thought I would take the opportunity to suggest a general approach to the task of recruiting and retaining a good match.

Cast a wide net. Every board these days will say that it wants to promote diversity, but in this most progressive of all cities, can the museums walk the walk? Expanding the number of women and people of color at the top level of museums is a social justice goal worthy of pursuit on its own terms. It can be a smart move, as well, since the biggest institutions seem caught in a (ahem) rut of their own contrivance. Want to show real leadership? Be sure that your idea of "the best" is not constrained by old habits and false assumptions.

Don't stop there. Diversity of opinion, experience, strategic skills is even more important than gender and ethnicity, though it can often accompany those characteristics. Can the board find someone who will leaven discussion and planning with new insights?

Choose for love. You're not looking for a hot date — you want a long-term thing. Consider: What is the real basis of this relationship? Is it mere surface attractiveness or a deep, mutual understanding and shared definitions of success?

Choose for boldness. Can you find someone who will tell the board not what it wants to hear, but what it *needs* to hear? Clearly, she or he will have to be a team player, prepared to carry out policies developed ultimately by the trustees. But are you willing to solicit criticism of trustee-held assumptions and encourage challenge to long-standing governance process?

Don't be too impressed by pedigree. It's nice to announce the appointment of someone with a long list of accomplishments at prestigious posts. What, then, is left for them to prove?

Get in shape. No one wants a flabby partner. Any good director will want a board that is engaged and empowered, not in thrall to one major donor or a small group of the most vocal. At the same time, they are entitled to respect of their knowledge and experience — not to mention their prerogatives as the final word when it comes to management decisions.

Be transparent. Maybe this should be the first item on the list. Hollein was widely credited with bringing a breath of fresh air to the Fine Arts Museums. The reason was that everyone knew they could trust what he said and that he would share as much as he possibly could. Now, the responsibility for such openness shifts back to where it has always belonged: to the board of trustees.

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