

Ex-Met director chosen to lead S.F. museums

By Charles Desmarais

In an extraordinary conclusion to its six-month search for a new chief executive, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco will effectively trade the departing Max Hollein for the man he replaced at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

At a meeting of the FAMSF trustees Tuesday, the board chose Thomas P. Campbell as director. In that role, Campbell will assume responsibility for leading two of the Bay Area's most prominent visual arts institutions, the Legion of Honor and the de Young Museum.

His appointment comes at a time when the organization must restore confidence in the continuity of its leadership — the entrance to the director's office has been a virtual revolving door for the past seven years — and continue to build on recent artistic and fiscal success. At the same time, Campbell must rehabilitate his own professional reputation after a rocky final period at the Met.

Campbell says he will waste no time in tackling those challenges; he plans to start work

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Wednesday. "I want to be on the ground running — I very much look forward to rolling up my sleeves and getting to meet the staff and the board and the donors," he said.

Campbell, 56, spent more than eight years as director of the Metropolitan. A native of Cambridge, England, he is a scholar known for his research on European tapestries (he's been nicknamed "Tapestry Tom"). He rose through the ranks at the Met during a curatorial career there that began in 1995.

He oversaw a huge increase in attendance at the New York museum — up a reported 50 percent to more than 7 million visitors annually — and the critical success of an expanded, if expensive, focus on modern and contemporary art.

But the new director also arrives in San Francisco following a somewhat unpleasant departure from the Met. He announced his resignation there in February 2017, his exit reportedly prompted by mounting budget deficits and other

management failings.

Campbell asserts that he left of his own accord, though he acknowledged, "It was a complex moment. There were some humbling lessons in that period. But I feel that I've also learnt an enormous amount that (carries) forward with me as I move on to San Francisco."

He maintains that financial problems at the Met that were rooted in the 2008 recession were being addressed. "We had to make some difficult decisions," he said, "but I think we set the museum on the trajectory towards financial stability and sustainability."

He also says the Met's board of trustees had given him a mandate, despite some staff resistance, to modernize the institution. The Met board's choice to replace him with Hollein, who is known for his enthusiastic embrace of contemporary art, new management ideas and digital audience engagement, would appear to support that.

Also shadowing Campbell is a formal complaint that alleged he



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Thomas Campbell, shown in 2016, will replace Max Hollein as head of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco — while Hollein took Campbell's former job.

had an "inappropriate relationship" with a female staff member. The complaint, the New York Times reported, was quietly settled. Campbell will say only that "there are some issues I can't talk about."

"It saddens me that some of my tenure is judged through the prism of the allegations you mention," he said. He has called such allegations "gossip and innuendo." FAMSF trustee Carl Pascarella, who was on the search committee that recommended Campbell to the larger board, said he had "not seen facts that would corroborate" such reports.

Campbell's success in growing attendance is credited, in part, to the Met's expansion of its modern and contemporary art program under his leadership. That included leasing the former Whitney Museum space to develop the Met Breuer modern and contemporary art building, which opened in 2016 a few blocks from the main museum.

That record surely attracted FAMSF officials to Campbell. Total visitorship last year at the San Francisco museums was just short of 1.7 million, a number dwarfed by the Metropolitan's 7 million. The FAMSF board will be closely watching for progress.

Of course, the new director won't have the same kind of resources available as he seeks to build. With a combined operating budget of \$57 million and an endowment of \$133 million, FAMSF has roughly one-fifth the Met's \$305 million to spend each year, and only a small fraction of the Met's massive endowment of more

than \$3 billion.

The Fine Arts Museums have had significant challenges at the top in recent years. Campbell will be the fourth director — not counting several interim leaders — since the death of John Buchanan in 2011. One of his most significant tasks will be to build trust that he is there for the long haul. Staff, donors and the community will rightly expect him to commit to a longer term than the two-year stints served by his two predecessors, Hollein and Colin Bailey, who left to become director of the Morgan Library in New York in 2015.

Campbell would not talk about the length of his contract nor commit to a specific tenure, but he said, "I've had two jobs in my life, one for seven years and one for 23 years. It's not my character to jump about."

FAMSF would not release Campbell's salary or other details of his contract. The New York Post reported that his Metropolitan Museum compensation was \$1,428,935 in 2015, which included the value of "a grand, four-bedroom, four-bath Fifth Avenue apartment provided by the museum."

He also will have to tackle persistent budget shortfalls at the Fine Arts Museums. Under Hollein, FAMSF seems to have stanchied the bleeding, but only barely — the museums report a surplus of about \$250,000 for the last fiscal year, less than half of 1 percent of overall expenditures.

If the business aspects of running the Fine Arts Museums are crucial, however, it is the quality of its programming that will ultimately be the test of the new director —

and of the board's support for his agenda.

Hollein had begun challenging curators and educators to shake off the lethargy that seemed to have afflicted the de Young and the Legion, both of which had come to rely on imported exhibitions rather than original scholarship and innovative programming. But that renewed ambition was only just taking hold, and it remains to be proved that the sometimes frenetic pace can be sustained.

"I am very much supportive of that vision," Campbell said. "Max and I are friends, we talked about the work he was doing in San Francisco. In many respects some of the initiatives he was taking echoed the sort of work I had done at the Metropolitan."

Campbell's art credentials are unquestioned, and the contacts he has made over two decades at one of the world's great museums should be invaluable here. Of course, achieving greatness at a top regional institution, with 17 curators and an overall staff of 510, will require a different approach from the Metropolitan. There, he had 17 distinct curatorial departments and a total of 2,200 employees.

Campbell's new position will inevitably be seen by some as a step down, but the challenge he faces in San Francisco is significant. In New York, the question was how to deploy seemingly limitless resources; here the job will require tougher decisions and the setting of more fundamental priorities.

On another front, the appointment of one more white man to a powerful museum position is not likely to sit well with those who have demand-

ed greater diversity in such jobs. That call, heard widely throughout the field, was taken up by FAMSF staff in June, when a letter signed by more than 100 employees asked the board to seriously consider women and people of color during the search.

The museums, a department of the city and county of San Francisco, did not answer specific inquiries about the search process, the number and diversity of applicants, or the size and makeup of the final candidate pool. Spokesman Larry Kamer released a statement that said, "The Search Committee worked with its search consultant to review a substantial number of diverse candidates. In the end, the committee was unanimous in its recommendation of Tom Campbell."

Trustee and search committee member Belva Davis, a noted television journalist who is African American, said the group had not interviewed any people of color but that she supports the committee's choice. "I tried to judge by my own experience," she said. "I am impressed when someone can use the word 'diversity' and it didn't crack their face."

Said Campbell: "I think that the question of diversity is one of the most significant facing the country as a whole. It was a high priority for me at the Met, and I worked with the board and with the staff to diversify the board, diversify staff, diversify the collections and diversify the programs. And I look forward to bringing that experience with me to the fine arts museums."

One of three children of a businessman and a publisher, Campbell attended a centuries-old private boys' school in his hometown of Cambridge. He earned a degree in English language and literature at Oxford University.

After a stint at the auction house Christie's, he attended London's Courtauld Institute of Art, where he began his intensive research in tapestries, and where he was awarded both a master's degree and a doctorate.

Campbell and his wife, Phoebe, have two children, an adult son and a daughter in high school.

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