



Scott Rudd

**Thomas Campbell now leads S.F.'s Fine Arts Museums.**

# Museums have a new director — now what?

**By Charles Desmarais**

Who doesn't believe in second chances? And who does not want the best for two of San Francisco's leading museums, the Legion of Honor and the de Young, as well as for their new leader, Thomas P. Campbell?

As one of thousands whose lives are enhanced by the art the museums interpret, I am a booster. And as someone who learned the hard way the challenges of museum management, I am a Campbell admirer.

I just hope they will all survive their overseer, a little-understood organization called the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

That mouthful of a title can refer to the venerable Legion and de Young themselves, as a pair. I am thinking now, however, of the three legal entities with similar-sounding names that oversee them, which are sometimes grouped under the same rubric (or FAMSF, for short). Two of those three, a news release announced recently, appointed Campbell director and CEO, effective Nov. 1.

Confused? Let's consult the museums' website. On a page deep within, we find: "The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco are governed by three Boards of Trustees: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the Fine Arts Museums Foundation and the Corporation of the Fine Arts Museums."

Each of the three boards, we learn, has a slightly different governance function, different bylaws and legal structures, and even different numbers of trustees. There is a total of 105 trustee positions (though the

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# How are museums run? It's a mystery

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same person can sit on more than one board). The boards also have different budgets, apparently, and they are subject to different reporting requirements.

I could go on, but I will spare you. The simple takeaway is that transparency is not an essential part of the institutional DNA.

I could write several paragraphs on the difficulties of finding and interpreting financial information on the museums. Actually, I did, but decided not to bore readers with it. Suffice to say that a very deep dive into one of the museums' three websites will bring you to an annual report with two pie charts and a single paragraph to account for the entire \$60 million budget.

You can request more detailed information from the museum, but not in plain language. There are no website links to IRS-required Form 990s or audited statements. Charity Navigator, a respected website that rates more than 9,000 charities on their fiscal operations, gives FAMSF two stars of four ("underperforms most charities in its Cause") for accountability and transparency.

It only makes you want to dive deeper when the museums refuse to entertain certain questions one might expect a department of the city and county of San Francisco to readily answer. Like the compensation of the chief executive. Or any measure of the diversity of candidates for the job. Or even the number of

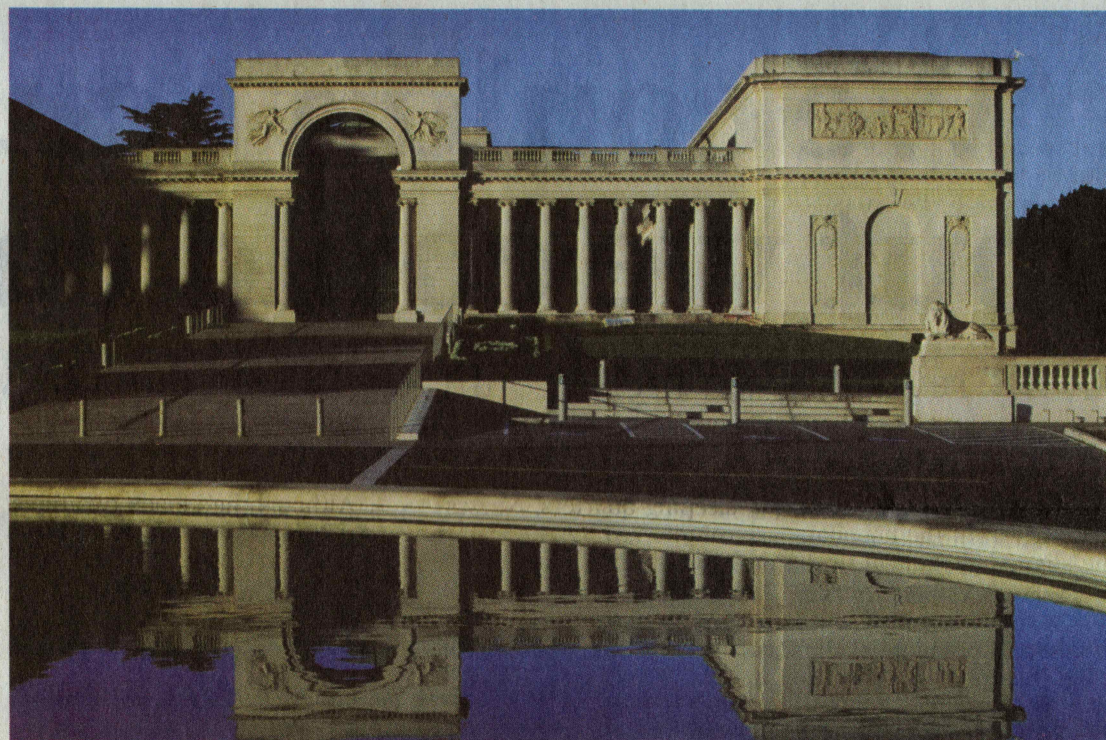
people interviewed.

Which brings us to the man who was selected.

I have long held that museum boards rarely *select* a good director, though they can luck into one. A committee (14 people, in this case) is chosen for a range of reasons, generally having little to do with its members' knowledge of museum management. They are not all in a position to make a careful choice purely on the merits of the candidate, particularly when a powerful and persuasive chair is in charge.

In choosing Campbell, I suspect that the search committee relied on the instincts that failed the FAMSF in the past, leading it into the cul-de-sac from which it was only recently emerging. White; male; English public school, Oxford and Courtauld education; former employment at a big-name museum — even a British accent and a cultivated manner — it all must have felt not only comfortable but exceedingly posh.

Campbell brings with him a fair amount of baggage from his last position at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the rollout of his appointment was never going to be easy. FAMSF officials thought they could manage away the hard parts, by controlling the information that would be released, restricting press access to members of the search committee and trustees, and by hiring a PR professional described on his website as "an expert in managing difficult, public-facing challenges that affect reputations, brands and careers."



De Agostini / Getty Images

**A byzantine system encompassing 105 trustee positions governs the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, along with the de Young Museum — the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.**

Campbell played his cards very close to the chest in our first conversation, and he has mastered the spin technique of answering his own questions when he doesn't like the ones asked. All of which is understandable at this point in his relationship to a new community, and it certainly would have helped in his search committee interviews.

Museum directors are not generally fired outright (though, full disclosure, I once personally achieved that distinction). They are allowed to resign. Either way, a departure is not always viewed as a failure in the high stakes museum game. When I lost my job, I got a call from a prominent director I barely knew, who told me the tale of his own dismissal and described it as a rite of passage for ambitious directors.

Museum leaders who don't make waves are doomed to cowering at one end of the boardroom table, and their institutions are boring. But the best ones — the ones who take risks and may be punished for it — use the experience on their way to the peaks of their careers.

Thomas Campbell may need a few months to get his mojo back, but he has the art training, contacts and hard-earned management experience to make a great director of our beloved museums. Crucially, as he said in an interview last week, he had previously pointed the Met in the general direction the San Francisco museums were headed under Max Hollein, his short-tenured predecessor here.

Both men worked to extend the digital reach of their museums; both opened the door to

current ideas of management and, critically, of art. "There is a real energy to be gained," said the man who originally built his reputation as "Tapestry Tom," "from the thoughtful intersection of historical and modern and contemporary art."

That boldness, applied to a broad range of interactions with a board that sorely needs such clarity of purpose, can turn Hollein's brief declaration of intention into a real legacy. Coupled with a new transparency, which Campbell has yet to assert but that Hollein had begun to model, our second chance will have worked out well.

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