
Art museums prepare to offer free admission on Saturdays

By Charles Desmarais

This spring, opportunities to experience some of history's most significant works of art will expand considerably for San Franciscans. Two of the Bay Area's most important art museums, the de Young and the Legion of Honor, announced Tuesday that general admission will be free to city residents on Saturdays, beginning April 1.

The Fine Arts Museums of

San Francisco, the umbrella organization for both institutions, also announced changes in admission prices that will affect many other visitors, including people with disabilities and those who receive food assistance (SNAP benefits). The new policies are in addition to an existing program of free general admission to all on the first Tuesday of each month, and free general admission every day for people under 18.

The two units of FAMSF

together comprise one of the largest art museums in the U.S. With a current general admission price of \$15 and combined attendance of about 3,700 on Saturdays — the biggest day of the week — the change is sure to have a fiscal impact.

"It's a big deal," FAMSF director Thomas P. Campbell said in an interview. Admissions are an important revenue stream for the museums, and the costs of serving visitors is

Museums continues on A6

Free admission trend spreads to S.F. art museums

Museums from page A1

high. Still, he said, if the museum reaches new audiences with this program, "I hope it's going to cost us a lot more."

Campbell acknowledged a slow-growing national trend toward free admission, calling the new FAMSF policy a "pilot project" that he would like to expand to the rest of the Bay Area or to all of California.

"It would be nice to see the numbers going up," Campbell said, "but it's not just about

numbers. It's about reaching different communities."

To achieve that goal he said that the museum might, on certain Saturdays, try targeting certain districts of the city with special programming, planned in conjunction with community representatives.

"The museums have a responsibility to be accessible as they can be, to as many people as possible," Campbell said. "We have a very active exhibition program that encourages people to return again and

again. But we also have these wonderful permanent collections, and we want more people to see them."

In response to potential cynics, he said, "Yeah, call it a 'marketing ploy.' Our business is engaging people with art, and my job is getting people to come to the museum."

Admissions policies for art museums can seem as complex as airline ticket prices. Entry fees differ from museum to museum, and they can vary depending on what is on view, the age of the visitor, and even his or her employer or the day of the week.

The general admission fee for the Fine Arts Museums is currently \$15 for adults. There is no charge for people under age 18. Special exhibitions — which will not be free under the new policy — can cost much

more. The de Young's "Monet: The Late Years," which opens Feb. 16, carries a top price tag of \$35, with discounts offered to seniors, students and children. A membership program, starting at \$119 annually, includes the benefit of free admission.

By comparison, general admission to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is \$25 for adults, free for visitors age 18 and younger. The recent Magritte show was \$35 before discounts. SFMOMA occasionally offers free "family days" but has no regular program of free admission for non-members.

Admission to the Fine Arts Museums, founded in 1895 and 1924, was without charge until the 1970s, according to FAMSF spokeswoman Miriam Newcomer. When the de Young's new building opened in 2004,

admission was \$10; the \$15 charge was instituted in 2016.

To pay for the change, Campbell said he would seek corporate sponsorship. A "charitable trust department" of the City and County of San Francisco, FAMSF is operated in a complex government/nonprofit partnership overseen by three separate boards. Though 24 percent of the annual budget is funded by a city appropriation, the boards are expected to raise additional funds for operations.

According to the Association of Art Museum Directors, the professional organization for the largest North American museums, in 2017, 32 percent of art museums charged no admission fee. Another 7 percent offered entry by suggested donation.

Nationally, admissions ac-

Museums continues on A7

counted for 7 percent of the average museum annual operating income in 2017. The Fine Arts Museums report a substantially higher 13 percent coming from admissions, but general admission at FAMSF amounts to roughly 2.5 percent, with the rest earned from special exhibition fees.

The national move to free general admission to art museums — but not for special exhibitions — has been gathering steam for some years. The Minneapolis Institute of Art was a pioneer, dropping such charges in the 1990s. The Cincinnati Art Museum went free in 2003, the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore in 2006. Some institutions, notably those supported primarily by government funds such as the Smithsonian In-

New policies

Admission policies, beginning April 1, at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (the deYoung and the Legion of Honor):

Free Saturdays: Free general admission every Saturday for San Francisco residents; requires valid photo ID or postmarked envelope with home address.

Free First Tuesdays: Free general admission for all visitors the first Tuesday of every month.

Free Access: Free general admission, and discounted special-exhibition admission, during normal museum hours (also dedicated Access Days) for any visitor with a disability plus one guest.

Museums for All: Free general admission during normal museum hours for all visitors receiving food assistance (SNAP benefits) with a valid EBT card.

Discover & Go: Free general admission, once per year, during normal museum hours for California library cardholders, who must go online (<https://sfpl.discoverandgo.net>) for a Discover & Go museum pass before visiting.

For details: Refer to the museum websites, <https://legionofhonor.famsf.org/visit-us> and <https://deyoung.famsf.org/visit-us>, or call 415-750-3600.

stitution and the National Gallery of Art, have never assessed an entry charge.

Maxwell L. Anderson, currently the president of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, has

been a particularly articulate proponent of free admission to art museums. He led the transition to such a policy as director of the Indianapolis Museum of Art in 2009, and again as director at the Dallas Museum of Art in 2012. In each case, the shift was an unmitigated success, he said in a phone interview.

“At Dallas, we went from attendance of 330,000 a year to 670,000, and from a largely white audience to majority minority. It was a radical change,” Anderson said. “We were getting about 2.5 percent of our operating revenue from general admissions,” which, he said, was readily replaced by contributions, including a \$9 million corporate grant the museum received shortly after going free.

In dealing with donors, Anderson told the Dallas Morning

News at the time, the best strategy was “to say we value participation over cash, because participation will drive philanthropy.”

FAMSF director Campbell said that in the end, however, the move to free admission is not about money.

“We need every penny — there’s a risk element here for us,” he said.

But this is a plan to provide people with access to an experience that is all too rare in our digital, media-soaked world.

“Museums are where we go for the pure, the un-pressured,” Campbell said. “Museums are places of respite.”

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic.

Email: cdesmarais@sfchronicle.com Free weekly newsletter: t.it.ly/ArtGuyReviews