



Dede Wilsey
oversaw the Fine
Arts Museums of
S.F. for 21 years.

Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

COMMENTARY

Fresh start for S.F. art museums

Momentous shift in leadership
leaves opportunity, uncertainty

By Charles Desmarais

Thomas P. Campbell, director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco since his appointment a little more than seven months ago, can be an entertaining companion. At this point in his tenure, however, he is cautious during interviews or when speaking publicly. One can almost watch him mentally forming entire paragraphs, then going through with a red pencil, before he utters a thought.

The style suits his institution well right now, as the museums under his wing, the de Young and the Legion of Honor, adjust to a new reality. After 21 years, Dede Wilsey no longer leads their board of trustees as president.

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Wilsey is, of course, the highly visible society figure who has been so much more than the glamorous woman repeatedly pictured by *The Chronicle* at charity events. Her donations and her persistence are universally recognized as key elements of the success of many capital campaigns in the Bay Area, most conspicuously the effort that built the de Young, which opened in 2005. But she was also criticized for missteps.

The museums “paid a \$2 million settlement to a former high-ranking executive who said Wilsey had her ousted for revealing alleged mispending of museum money,” according to a 2016 *Chronicle* report. There was also substantial staff and board turnover, which some attributed to what *The Chronicle* called “Wilsey’s autocratic leadership style and accusations that she used museum personnel to tend to her personal art collection.”

All this led to a feeling of instability that seeped through the institutional walls into the larger community. However, despite the quiet critics, the majority of the trustees re-elected her as president repeatedly and rubber-stamped her selections of new board members.

It was said that the 2012 pho-

Dede Wilsey and FAMSF governance

April 1993: Elected trustee of FAMSF for the first time

April 1996: Elected chairman

April 1998: Elected president (succeeding Richard Goss)

April 2001, April 2004, June 2007, June 2010, June 2013 and June 2016: Re-elected president

2012-16: Also served as CEO

June 2019: Named chair emerita

tography exhibition “Real to Real,” drawn entirely from the collection of Wilsey’s son Trevor Traina and co-organized by his personal curatorial adviser, was produced at her command. I’m not so sure; sometimes all it takes is for a major donor to express a wish or a whim and donor-cautious museums will indulge it. The de Young would not be an outlier in this.

Of course, that influence is harder to resist when the donor has arrogated to herself the role of chief executive officer, as Wilsey did, with board approval, after the death of director John Buchanan two days before the end of 2011. She left the CEO role in 2016.

Yet there was probably little she could have done to prevent



Scott Rudd 2018

Thomas P. Campbell was appointed director in 2018.

what Campbell calls “the unfortunate turnover” in the director’s chair before his hiring. Two consecutive leaders, Colin Bailey and Max Hollein, left after two-year stints to head prestigious New York museums. Campbell’s job is to clean up the mess.

It’s not that his predecessors did a poor job, but that they were not here long enough to achieve the stability FAMSF has craved for at least seven years. Campbell launched a strategic planning process with the staff that will produce the first comprehensive strategic plan, he says, since Buchanan’s administration.

He instituted a Free Saturdays policy for city residents, “an indication,” he said in an email to *The Chronicle*, “of my intent to create greater engagement between the museums and the city.”

He pointed to “new intern-

ships in partnership with Mayor Breed’s Opportunities for All program, as indicative of our hopes to expand (the) diversity of our future pipeline.” And he correctly evaluated his own decision to schedule the international blockbuster exhibition “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,” as a “nimble move to bring in an important show that is central to ongoing debate about race and identity politics in the culture sphere.”

Wilsey said last week, “I have worked with four directors in the past. (Tom) is a wonderful combination of the best qualities of all those great men. He has the intelligence and knowledge of Colin; the humor of John Buchanan; the leadership qualities of Max; the financial acumen of Harry (Parker, director of FAMSF from 1987 to 2005).” What she left unsaid is that each of those leaders had her to lean on, financially and for political influence, even if it meant accepting her foibles and defending her from public criticism.

As Parker said in a 2015 interview with *The Chronicle*, “people want to keep the Dede magic going.”

“It’s like Queen Elizabeth,” he continued. “If you’ve got something that ain’t broke, don’t fix it. There has never been a serious opponent or candidate to succeed her.”

The new president of the FAMSF board, Jason Moment, is as reticent as the director at this nascent stage in the growth of the revamped body he will lead. “(I) just want to make sure I don’t speak out of school,” he

said in an email to *The Chronicle*. Earlier, he had spoken excitedly of the opportunity to develop the board.

Campbell plans at least two years of “lobbying and cultivation,” he said, as the board looks to add people with a deep commitment to the community and art knowledge.

It’s a task that has been too long deferred. While the museums will not (nor should they) reveal the giving records of all its trustees, FAMSF has no minimum expected donation for board members, as most museums do. However, the board has too many members giving too little for a museum with international aspirations and a \$62.5 million budget. It was only last week, in fact, on the same day they named a new president, that the trustees adopted term limits — a policy still too weak because it allows easy exceptions, but a step forward all the same.

The leadership changes, at the top and potentially across the board, could make for an uncertain time in any institution. Yet, with two solid years of balanced budgets and a veteran director in place — one who has repeatedly assured anyone in earshot that he plans to stay — the museums are clearly experiencing a new confidence.

Fine Arts Museums, we are inclined to share the feeling. Please don’t break our hearts.

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