

New director of many skills for Fine Arts Museums S.F.

By Charles Desmarais

Austrian-born Max Hollein has been named director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, its board of trustees announced Tuesday afternoon.

The position is the top job at FAMSF, which comprises two of the Bay Area's largest and most important cultural facilities, the de Young Museum and the Legion of Honor. Job responsibilities include managing roughly 550 employees and an annual budget of about \$60 million. Hollein replaces Colin Bailey, who left in April to become director of the Morgan Library & Museum in New York City.

The search for Bailey's replacement was conducted by a 12-person committee of trustees led by Jack Calhoun, former president of Banana Republic and a member of the board's executive committee.

Hollein is currently director of three noted museums in Frankfurt, Germany, a broad responsibility that should prepare him for the Fine Arts Museums' structure. He has directed the Schirn Kunsthalle, a non-collecting museum of contemporary art, since 2001. Since 2006, he has served as director of the Städel Museum,

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Hollein brings array of skills to de Young, Legion of Honor

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with a collection of European art from the early 14th century to the present, and the Liebieghaus Sculpture Collection, which encompasses ancient Egyptian to neoclassical sculpture.

Born in Vienna in 1969, Hollein has lived with art from birth: His father was the Pritzker Prize-winning archi-

tect Hans Hollein, an influential pioneer of Postmodernism; his mother was a fashion designer. He began his career at the Guggenheim Museum in New York after studies in art history at the University of Vienna and in business administration at the Vienna University of Economics. He oversaw the expansion of the Städel Museum in 2012, doubling gallery space and adding a

wing for contemporary art.

"Hollein's combined art and finance perspective, his impressive background simultaneously leading three great art institutions in Frankfurt, his fundraising acumen, and his ability to harness technology and new media to increase income and engage audiences, make him a perfect match," Calhoun said.

In a telephone interview



Gaby Gerster

Max Hollein has two decades of experience at museums in Europe and the United States.

Tuesday, Hollein said, "I feel a certain momentum in San Francisco, within the city, within the whole cultural at-

mosphere there. You have these two great, seminal institutions. I feel if there's a really strong director there, and a strong exhibition program, collection building, outreach, it's something that can bring the institutions to another level."

Board President Diane B. Wilsey echoed that thought. "There is a renaissance happening in San Francisco," she said, "and we have been looking for someone who can capitalize on this energy to take us forward into our next chapter. I am excited for the fresh thinking and ideas that Max

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will bring to us and to the city.”

“More and more museums,” Hollein said, “especially encyclopedic ones, do not exist as solely a place to visit, but also as a center of cultural education, complex narration and contemporary discourse. Developing this further and implementing it for a diverse audience, within an environment that is already so rich and full of opportunities and flourishing platforms, will be a significant mission.”

The job of museum director these days is far from an easy one. The Fine Arts Museums

of San Francisco, as a combined entity, ranks fifth in attendance among U.S. art museums, according to the Art Newspaper. The position description distributed as part of the search ran to five pages — typical for the field — requiring expertise in personnel and facilities management, fundraising, communications, branding and marketing, audience development, government relations and more — in addition to a strong background in the various requirements of art acquisition, conservation, exhibition and scholarship.

It is widely agreed that Harry S. Parker III, who held the

job for 18 years beginning in 1987, handled that juggling act well. Under his leadership, the Legion, shuttered for three years after the Loma Prieta earthquake, was refurbished and expanded, and the de Young was completely replaced by an architecturally distinguished building.

After retiring in December 2005, Parker was followed by the late John E. Buchanan Jr., a flamboyant impresario who brought in crowds but was criticized as less attentive to the traditional measures of a museum’s quality: care of collections, initiating original exhibitions, sponsoring art history

scholarship. During his tenure, the FAMSF rose to fourth among U.S. art museums in admissions income. But that, of course, also made it the fourth most reliant upon admissions income to meet its annual budget: Exhibitions now account for something like 15 to 20 percent of the income in any given year.

Asked about his attitude toward the blockbuster exhibitions on which museums have come to rely, Hollein struck the perfect tone. “Obviously, if you work on a project, you want to share it with as many people as possible. So I’m all for a very ‘popular’ response. Neverthe-

less, doing exhibitions solely so that they trigger popularity is not what it should be about.”

Hollein embraced the notion that an institution with the “level of collection and the level of esteem” of the Fine Arts Museums must originate its own programs, research and exhibitions, even as it collaborates with other institutions: “It’s important for the reputation of these institutions to be a relevant and interesting partner to the other peers.”

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