



Norbert Miguletz / Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt

Max Hollein directed museums in Germany, including Schirn Kunsthalle, which hosted this Tobias Rehberger exhibition.

Art world endorses museum director

Media, other directors call Hollein a visionary and innovator

By Charles Desmarais

The appointment last week of Max Hollein as director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco generated excitement here, but it was also news around the world. Now the respected director of not one, but three museums in Frankfurt, Germany, Hollein will leave June 1 to lead the de Young Museum and the Legion of Honor.

Meet Max Hollein: The appointment of Max Hollein as director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (the de Young and the Legion of Honor) is major art news for the Bay Area — and internationally. The Chronicle's art critic talks with Hollein online at <http://bit.ly/22PLyO6>. The original news story on the appointment is also online at <http://bit.ly/1pHTDSZ>.

further Allgemeine Zeitung. (That's not counting an equal number in publications from New York to Paris to Kuwait.) Many of the German headlines were rueful: "Max Hollein's farewell is the end of an era." "A visionary departs." "The reformist has resigned."

Hollein continues on E3



Gaby Gerster

Hollein begins his new job as director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco on June 1.

Art world applauds museum director

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“Hard to replace.” And my favorite, at least in the English translation I was given, “A sunny child for San Francisco.”

That last headline almost perfectly sums up the reactions I heard from American museum leaders I contacted for their thoughts about Hollein’s move here. All of them gushed.

Michael Conforti is personally known to many in the Bay Area. He began his career here in the late 1970s as curator of painting and sculpture at the Fine Arts Museums. Director of the renowned Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass., from 1994 until his retirement last year, he also served as president of the Association of Art Museum Directors for two years (2008-10). Along with Hollein, he is a member of an international advisory committee of museum directors to the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.

“In the world of museum directors,” Conforti said by phone, “he’s absolutely seen as one of the leading — if not the leading — directors of his generation.” In addition to his skills as a curator, fundraiser and marketer, Conforti added, “He has a seriousness of purpose; he’s deeply thoughtful about art museums — where they have been and where they are going.”

Gary Garrels has known

Hollein for several years, having shared breakfasts when both were in Venice for the Biennale, the important international showcase of contemporary art, and visited him in Frankfurt. Garrels, senior curator of painting and sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, was excited by the prospect of a new curatorial voice in town.

“He’s done these very ambitious, complex, intellectually driven thematic exhibitions that are really not typical of what most museums do,” Garrels said. “I give him enormous credit for taking on these kinds of ... exhibitions that are not going to drive the box office, but they’ve been very stimulating contributions to the field. They’re not just contemporary, but weaving contemporary back with 19th century or earlier works, establishing a historical continuum.”

As to the relationship of Fine Arts Museums programs to those at his own institution, Garrels said, “SFMOMA cannot do everything. We can’t possibly do everything that one would ideally want in an area with this population, and the level of education and interest in culture here. We need it very badly for the Fine Arts Museums to be an institution of great quality and ambition. It holds an incredible position of leadership in the arts community here. And the whole



Courtesy Städel Museum

Städel Museum, one of three German museums Max Hollein will leave to direct the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

community will just benefit so much from having the program be dynamic and ambitious, and setting very high standards.

“And, of course,” Garrels added, “Max has an incredible network of relationships with other directors and curators and museums all over the world” that will enable him to attract major exhibitions and other shared resources.

James Cuno, president and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust, and Thomas Campbell, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, have both gotten to know Hollein through their participation in what is known as the Bizot Group. The most exclusive association of fine arts leaders in the world, it is

composed of the directors of Europe and America’s (and, increasingly, Asia’s) largest and greatest museums. Hollein is the chairman of the group, elected by his peers.

“I think (San Francisco) is going to get a dynamic and important exhibition program,” Cuno said, “because he certainly has been able to do that in Frankfurt. And it will include modern and contemporary, I’m certain, to complement SFMOMA. But it will be the full range of exhibitions and programs that one associates with an encyclopedic museum. (And) I think there’ll be a strong public voice — he’s articulate and personable. He’s not going to come across as a distanced, aristocratic figure,

because he’s not that.”

Campbell said he was “delighted” with the appointment. He spoke of Hollein as the leader the Fine Arts Museums need at this time, and of his personality. The institution “is one of the great American encyclopedic museums, and with strong leadership I believe it can really play a very significant role in the network of American museums. And I think Max is a brilliant choice. His proven experience working with collections that span from antiquity to the present, his proven experience working on a major rebuilding program — fundraising and managing that program. He’s been very thoughtful in his introduction of digital technology in the service of, rather than in competition with, art collections. And, of course, there’s such potential to build a creative relationship ... with Silicon Valley.”

“He’s been an innovator in a conservative field,” Campbell said. Then he described the tool that Hollein may find most important of all as he joins a community and an institution that face many challenges: “He’s a German with a sense of humor!”

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