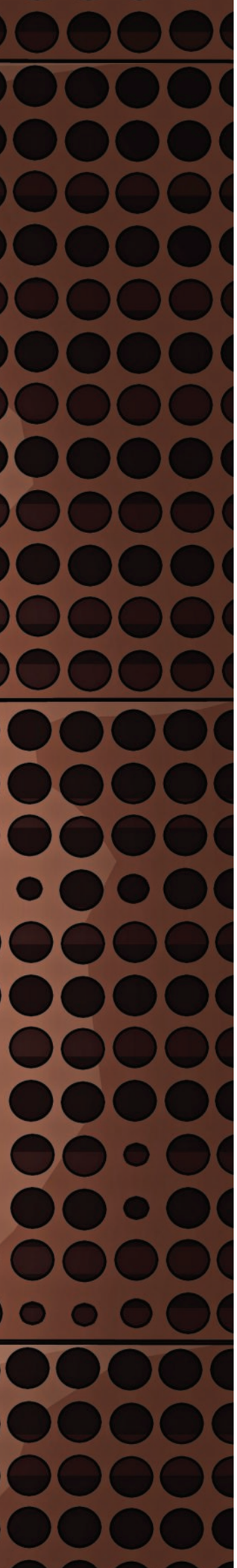


Tut, tut

Already criticized for presenting too many "froufrou" shows, Fine Arts Museums director John Buchanan opens a controversial King Tut exhibition with the museums' artistic reputation hanging in the balance.

BY PAMELA FEINSILBER

ILLUSTRATION BY BENJAMIN WACHENJE

John Buchanan doesn't look worried. He's well aware of the talk that has centered on the San Francisco–owned Fine Arts Museums (the de Young and the Legion of Honor) since he became FAM's director in February 2006, a few months after the new de Young opened. He knows he's been panned in the art world for presenting too many shows to entice visitors—mostly with an overabundance of fashion, jewelry, and the decorative arts—and not enough that challenge them, as well as for bringing in too many big exhibitions from other museums, rather than having FAM originate its own. He must have heard the rumors that he's on his way out. Yet he seems as calm as Stow Lake on a windless day. You'd never know that the moment of truth for his most controversial decision yet is at hand. Buchanan is opening "Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs," an exhibition created not by a museum but by a company better known for producing sports events and concerts by the likes of Britney Spears and Yanni.

Buchanan, who came to San Francisco after 11 years at the Portland Art Museum, is a trim, ingratiating man—always dapper in a well-cut suit, courteous, fairly beaming with helpfulness. While some in Portland complained that he presented too many of what *San Francisco Chronicle* art critic Kenneth Baker referred to as "pageantry" exhibitions celebrating "the riches of bygone European aristocracy," Buchanan also raised funds to enlarge the museum and expanded its collections, especially of Native American and modern art. When FAM hired Buchanan, Dede Wilsey, the board's extremely powerful president, spoke of the new director's knowledge, charm, energy, and fundraising ability. "His ambition is the same as mine," she added, "which is to make this the finest museum west of the Potomac."

Buchanan is certainly making the Fine Arts Museums the most popular. He's seen FAM's household-membership numbers grow from 72,000 to 97,000, the highest in the nation, he says, after New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art

Dede Wilsey, the Fine Arts Museums' board's powerful president, with FAM director John Buchanan, at the opening of "Yves Saint Laurent" last October.

and MoMA. Even in these lean days, exhibitions like "Artistic Luxury" (pieces by Fabergé, Tiffany, and Lalique) and "Warhol Live" (Andy Warhol's pop music–centered work) have drawn crowds, and the Friday Nights at the de Young events are attracting younger visitors with live music, dancing, readings, films, and lectures. Walk through the de Young on one of those evenings, Buchanan says happily, "and you realize that we are really a people's museum. This is the least elitist place you can go in San Francisco."

He is particularly proud of last year's big display of Dale Chihuly's glasswork and 2006's "Chicano Visions," mostly from actor Cheech Marin's collection, because each drew large, diverse audiences. Although neither show was lauded by critics such as Baker, they are "among my favorites," he says, calling the spirit behind them "truly de Youngian."

Of course, what is "truly de Youngian" is truly debatable. Two years ago, Baker wrote that "some local artists, art dealers, collectors, and other frequent museumgoers have begun to question Buchanan's priorities, wondering whether he is more interested in fluff than fine arts." Baker, who has been observing FAM for nearly 25 years, was referring to such exhibitions as "Masterpieces of French Jewelry," "Nan Kempner: American Chic" (renamed "Nan's Closet" by some), and "Marie-Antoinette and the Petit Trianon at Versailles." In San Francisco's small, insular art world, many people, including past and current FAM board members, did not want to talk to Baker or would do so only anonymously, and I found that to be true as well. (Barnaby Conrad III, the one board member who spoke publicly for that piece, has been mum ever since.) The critique that Buchanan is favoring the masses over art aficionados—and, by doing so, damaging the museums' reputation—has never diminished.

"His ambition is the same as mine: to make this the finest museum west of the Potomac," Wilsey said when hiring Buchanan. Four years later, he has certainly made it the most popular.

In 2007, Buchanan drew a rebuke from well-known art blogger Tyler Green for even thinking about hosting the Tut show, which includes more than 130 items from the tombs of Tutankhamun, his ancestors, and their acolytes. The presenting organization is AEG (formerly Anschutz Entertainment Group), a global mass-market event production company owned by conservative Denver-based billionaire Philip Anschutz. AEG owns several sports teams, including the Los Angeles Kings, and runs many facilities, L.A.'s Staples Center and the Colosseum at Caesars Palace among them.

With its subsidiary Arts and Exhibitions International, AEG is, in Buchanan's words, the Egyptian government's "solely authorized agent" for this tour of the Tut riches. In 2005, when the exhibition opened in Los Angeles, it was loudly booed in the press, not only as a mere crowd-pleasing "treasure house" show but because of its over-the-top display, which AEG designed. ("It was more like going to Pirates of the Caribbean than going to an art museum" is how outspoken *Los Angeles Times* art critic Christopher Knight described it to me.) AEG's Tim Leiweke didn't help matters when he told *USA Today*, "I'm not sure there's so much difference between 'Tutankhamun' and Celine Dion."

Buchanan negotiated for changes to make the exhibition less showy and more scholarly before signing Tut and family into the de Young for nine months, with the highest ticket price above $30. Then the economy tanked, leaving him at risk of losing the critics *and* the crowds. But the lure of ancient gold could swing things the other way, too, bringing the museum a burst of new visitors and funds at a time when endowments are down and donations are presumably threatened.

Many who believe Wilsey handpicked Buchanan have thought for months that she's changed her mind. The talk has been that he has a one-year (or possibly month-to-month) contract, to give him time to look for another position. Asked if Buchanan will be leaving next year, Wilsey says, "I have no reason to think he won't be here"—not the most direct response. Although she has been gracious and enthusiastic each time I've encountered her, she is a tough, determined leader of those two museums. It's hard to know just what is going on in the FAM offices, but it's no secret that Wilsey worried about taking on Tut, even appointing a special committee to study the arrangement with AEG and asking the board to approve the decision.

"The board was satisfied with the contract and the caliber of the exhibition, and I'm not going to block something that everybody else thinks is a good idea. And it might be great," she says. "I'm keeping my fingers crossed about the whole thing."

The exhibition must have looked like a cash cow in the beginning. In five months at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, it drew more than 900,000 people; at Chicago's Field Museum, more than a million; at the

DREW ALTIZER

Franklin Institute, a science museum in Philadelphia, almost 1.3 million. Even at the small Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale, the show attracted more than 700,000 visitors, no doubt aided by an ad campaign touting the arrival of the "King of Bling."

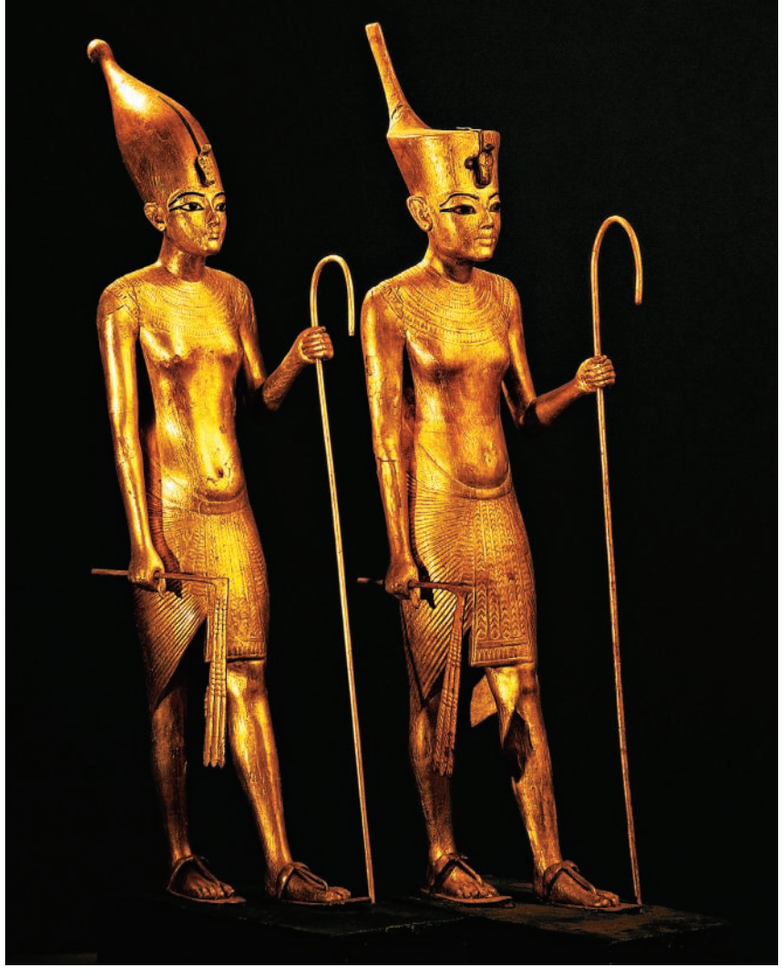
One reason for the turnout is the original Tut show, "Treasures of Tutankhamun," which the promotional material never fails to mention. Organized by the Met, that 55-piece exhibition opened at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., in 1976 and traveled to six other American cities, including Los Angeles and San Francisco. It drew so many visitors—eight million, encouraged by more commercial marketing than the museum world had seen—that it is considered the first art-world blockbuster. Before Tut I and an earlier exhibition, "From the Lands of the Scythians," museum stores had seemed like almost an afterthought, a place where you could buy a souvenir poster and maybe a coffee cup. The items created to help offset the costs of importing Scythian gold pieces from the USSR included solid-gold replicas of pieces on view that cost $3,500—in 1975.

Like most sequels, Tut II has been bigger, louder, and more costly. The very beginning of the exhibition set the tone. The presentation started with Egyptian actor Omar Sharif declaiming, on multiple screens, on the discovery of Tut's tomb and treasures in 1922. Then a door slid open, and visitors moved into a darkened, theatrically spotlighted space heavy on mood music. "*Melodramatic* is the word I'd use," says Christopher Knight about this kind of installation. "It amps up the material in a way that I think is condescending. It can't stand on its own, so we have to give it some razzle-dazzle. It's much more about the exhibition as an event."

And for those who wanted a memento, the planners had gathered oodles of Tut and mummy keepsakes. *Dallas Morning News* writer Michael Granberry, blogging from London—where the show filled the massive exhibition space attached to one of AEG's arenas, the O_2 dome—found wine chests shaped like Tut's sarcophagus, Tut key chains, umbrellas, T-shirts, refrigerator magnets, and dog collars, a Tut bobblehead, Tut Monopoly, a game called Mummy Rummy, Tut-shaped crème brûlée–white chocolate wedges, even a tissue box with the Kleenex coming out of Tut's nose. If that seemed chintzy, there was also a Tut necklace costing £5,000 (then about $10,000). "And what can I say?" Granberry wrote. "The place was packed."

When he saw the show in L.A., Knight was appalled by the grand finale: a pair of large TV screens displaying CT scans of Tut's mummified corpse, which purportedly showed that the boy king's sudden death at age 19 was probably not a murder. Knight had already seen this at home on the National Geographic Channel. (National Geographic is also a presenter of the exhibition.) "It was just ludicrous," he says, "like going to an art museum to watch Omar Sharif introduce you to a television show."

The overriding concern for Knight and the other critics, though, is that a nonprofit art museum was hosting an exhibition by a for-profit entertainment company.



"Gold was coming in, silver was coming in—the artists got better and better," says curator Renée Dreyfus, defending the 1300 BC–era work. These gilded wood, 24-inch-tall figures portray Tut as King of Upper Egypt (left) and Lower Egypt.

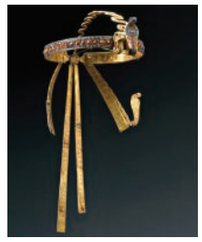
There were wine chests shaped like Tut's sarcophagus, a Tut bobblehead, even a tissue box with the Kleenex coming out of Tut's nose.

"I would have no objection if AEG were doing this in a rental hall," Knight says. "It used to be that corporations helped museums to function. In this instance, it's museums helping a corporation to function," in part by providing a tax-exempt setting and personnel, including extra security in some venues. "Museums are educational institutions, and they're not doing what museums do. So they're the ones that should be ashamed."

It's not just that AEG is "the ultimate fan experience," according to its website, or that the museums are handing over a chunk of their income from ticket sales to AEG. The Egyptian government is also getting its cut: Zahi Hawass, secretary general of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, said that his government would receive a minimum of $6 million from each show and stood to gain much more when attendance was strong—for instance, $13 million in Philadelphia—to pay for building a museum in Cairo and doing other preservation work. The museums themselves won't reveal the terms of their contracts with AEG. Buchanan will say only, "The basic premise is that our costs are covered on the front end," adding that AEG took care of the mega-insurance for what he estimates is $1 billion worth of objects now on display.

Museum directors hosting Tut II mention the first-time visitors and new memberships the show will undoubtedly attract. But the recession has surely complicated that math. Even before the economy plummeted, the goal in Dallas—the show's last stop before San Francisco—was to break even. One report said that attendance was running 40 percent lower than predicted.

KENNETH GARRETT/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



Clockwise from left: a chest ornament made of gold, silver, and semiprecious stones, brought in exclusively for Tut's San Francisco visit; a crown made of gold, glass, obsidian, and carnelian; a 10-inch-tall calcite lid of a small chest that held one of Tut's organs; a mirror case made of wood, gold, and silver leaf.

The Dallas Museum of Art isn't saying whether it lost money on the deal, only that it would cover operational costs and increased its membership. Buchanan says he feels "cautiously optimistic" about attendance in San Francisco.

If Tut II irks critics less than it did in previous venues, it will be thanks to Buchanan and Renée Dreyfus, who insisted on upgrading the exhibition. FAM's curator of ancient art, Dreyfus oversaw Tut I's visit to the city, in 1979, and originated the exhibition on ancient Egypt's female king, Hatshepsut, that was part of the de Young's grand reopening, four years ago. She makes a strong case for Tut II, both historically ("This truly is one of the great periods in terms of world history, not just Egyptian history") and aesthetically ("Gold was coming in, silver was coming in, stones of all kinds—the artists got better and better. The quality of the objects is extraordinary").

The problem was, the event organizers weren't stressing those points. One critic wrote that the layout in Los Angeles "lurches from object to object, and it's never quite clear why the art on view is the art on view." In some cases, the wall signs and catalog didn't cover the most important information, and the labels and catalog didn't always agree. The exhibition filled 35,000 square feet in London and 16,000 in Dallas; it will take up 11,000 square feet at the de Young, in the galleries downstairs where the Hatshepsut items were displayed.

"Primarily, the show was going to spaces [such as the Franklin Institute and the O_2 dome] that were not art museums," says Dreyfus, "and we do have our standards." She has revised the printed material, including the catalog, eliminated the mood music and photo blow-ups, and replaced four objects from Tut's tomb with four that are "far more interesting and beautiful." (The Dallas Art Museum used Dreyfus's material.)

"Before we ever, ever, ever even thought about bringing this exhibition here," she emphasizes, "we had to make certain we could do things like this."

Dreyfus created her own layout, doing away with what she calls "the more dramatic aspects," and doubtless made the exhibition more educational. Once school starts this fall, FAM plans to open the de Young to field trips on Mondays, when it's normally closed, and has raised funds to let the kids in free. No matter what Dreyfus and the museum do, however, the exhibition will reinforce the view that Buchanan's focus is on crowd-pleasers. Kenneth Baker's comment to me about the "Artistic Luxury" show could apply to Tut, too: "We live in the most interesting artistic time in history, and that's what they're giving us?"

In his 2007 article on fluff and fine arts, Baker mentioned comments in the local art world that Buchanan's programming was in response to suggestions from Wilsey. After all, she raised the money to rebuild the de Young and got the board to change the bylaws to allow her to stay on as president for three years longer than was previously permitted. (She says that she's not sure if she'll step down in October 2010, when her fourth term ends.) Many believe Wilsey wanted Buchanan to lead the museums because the two share a love of fashion and jewelry, and she wanted to see more of those kinds of shows.

"Actually, not," Wilsey says. "I'm the one saying, 'John, that's enough.' I'm saying, 'Stop with these shows. Show art. You can only do that if you have a comparable show of painting, of serious art.' Because I hear the criticisms, too, and I say, 'John, it has to be equal.' You can have a blockbuster, you can have Nan Kempner—OK, she was born and raised here, and the show was at the Met first, so that blesses it—but it's very important for us to always balance."

Wilsey insists that there's been no parting of the ways. She says she didn't mind the fashion shows, since more serious work was up elsewhere. A retrospective of fashions by Yves Saint Laurent, for instance, was at the de Young at the same time that drawings by Leonardo da Vinci and a prestigious collection from Germany were in the Legion of Honor.

"If you think a show is froufrou, go over to the other museum, where there's a very scholarly show. That fluff pays the bills," Wilsey says firmly. "It pays for everything everybody else wants to do. Chihuly sold out like you wouldn't believe."

"That fluff pays the bills," says Wilsey. "It pays for everything everybody else wants to do. Chihuly sold out like you wouldn't believe."

So which audience should an art museum seek to please? The clash over what the museum experience should be sums up the controversy over Buchanan's tenure. Some think that critics such as Baker and Knight are blatant

LEFT AND MIDDLE RIGHT: KENNETH GARRETT/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC; TOP AND BOTTOM RIGHT: ANDREAS F. VOEGELIN/ANTIKENMUSEUM BASEL AND SAMMLUNG LUDWIG

A painted wood model boat from the era of one of Tut's predecessors, Pharaoh Amenhotep III.

elitists condescending to the masses, who don't know any better than to applaud the work of a Dale Chihuly or a treasure-trove display like Tut's. As Knight sees it, "The museum's obligation is to turn a general audience into an elite audience. It's there to train your eye, to train your critical faculties—that's its function."

Once, the Fine Arts Museums was more likely to promote more difficult art and non–household names. In those days, FAM's highly respected chief curator, Steven Nash, was in charge of programming. He left in 2003, after the earthquake-damaged de Young closed and attention turned toward getting the museum rebuilt; hiring his replacement was left to whoever would succeed longtime director Harry Parker. That would be Buchanan, who calls himself chief curator. The curator in charge of modern and contemporary art, who left in early 2008, has not been replaced either. These are two more reasons Buchanan lacks the respect of art critics.

Buchanan says that with several galleries in two museums, FAM's programming is always diverse, in part because it originates from the permanent collections, which include American and European paintings, sculpture, and decorative art; textiles; tribal work from Africa, the Americas, and Oceania; and the noted Achenbach collection of prints, drawings, and illustrated books. "So I would say to my critics, 'Don't like this? Blink, and you'll see something else.'"

Indeed, for half the time Tut II is in town, a four-decade retrospective of prints by John Baldessari, an important L.A.-based artist, will be at the Legion. And Buchanan is importing at least one blockbuster that critics should appreciate. In Paris, parts of the Musée d'Orsay (known for impressionist and modern art) are set to close for renovations, and Buchanan has arranged to show works from that stellar collection in San Francisco starting next summer. (He's in talks with Paris's Musée Picasso about a similar arrangement.) And he won't need an AEG to do it: Through the 1975 Arts and Artifacts Indemnity Act, the federal government underwrites the insurance for exhibitions of foreign art up to $1.2 billion. That's how the Met brought Tut I here.

Buchanan is importing a blockbuster critics should appreciate: works from the Musée d'Orsay. But museum directors rarely acknowlege the conundrum attached to any blockbuster.

Even so, museum directors rarely acknowledge the conundrum attached to any blockbuster: The more people it attracts, the more diminished the experience becomes for each of them. In the large crowds, with their timed tickets, it's hard enough to see the work, let alone concentrate on it. The quiet and time for reflection, for developing an opinion or comparing one object with another, just aren't available—if they were, the exhibition would be a failure from the museum's point of view. Even well-done audioguides don't help. They march people through, stop them at specific pieces, overlook others, and replace the listener's responses, pro or con, with the narrator's comments. Baker calls audioguides "a dubious gift," although you pay to use one: "It's another revenue stream, so of course it's going to be vigorously promoted."

But art critics don't run museums; people like Buchanan and Wilsey do. Wilsey sounds serious when she says that the key word for the Fine Arts Museums, even in these difficult days, is *balance*. Wilsey and Buchanan both say that he's on a rolling contract: In March, he said it had rolled into one more year; more recently, she said it was being renegotiated. So after Tut closes, Buchanan could well still be here, especially after nailing the Musée d'Orsay exhibition. He still needs to steer FAM through the recession and not depend on unexceptional crowd-pleasers to do it. He really needs to hire those two curators, though, and give them the freedom to originate shows that might draw more accolades than audiences. Buchanan will never lose his critics until they're sure he's interested in making museum visitors think and feel, not just getting them in the door. ■

PAMELA FEINSILBER IS A *SAN FRANCISCO* CONTRIBUTING WRITER.