THE SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

Leadership Transition Planning
Listening Project with Museum Constituencies and Stakeholders

Summary of the Ideal Role and Attributes of the Next Director

Final Report to the Board of Commissioners
March 4, 2021

Note: this document is advance reading for a final discussion of the Listening Project scheduled for the Board of Commissioners meeting on March 8, 2021.

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Confidential – Not for Distribution
Introduction

This report summarizes the key themes from a listening project chartered by the Transition Task Force of the Saint Louis Art Museum in the context of the search for the next director of the Museum.

The goal of the listening project was to identify and affirm the ideal leadership characteristics and attributes of the next Barbara B. Taylor Director of the Saint Louis Art Museum informed by perspectives from across the Museum, the St. Louis community, and the art museum field.

Through individual interviews and focus groups, 229 people participated in a conversation about the Museum today, opportunities for the future, and the ideal role and attributes of the next director.

This report summarizes key themes on the context for the search and outlines the ideal role and attributes of the next director based on the interviews and focus groups.

This final report was prepared for review by the Board of Commissioners in advance of discussion at its meeting on March 8, 2021. This document is based on two earlier presentations to the Transition Task Force on February 1, 2021 and March 1, 2021.
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Listening Project Goals

• To engage a broad range of constituencies in a conversation about the Museum today and in the future.

• To identify and affirm the ideal leadership characteristics and attributes of the next Barbara B. Taylor Director of the Saint Louis Art Museum informed by perspectives from across the Museum, the St. Louis community, and the art museum field.

Methodology

• The listening project used qualitative data collection through confidential interviews and focus groups (see summary of participation on following pages).

• The Transition Task Force guided and affirmed the participation framework (categories of participation and specific invitees).

• K/W used structured areas of inquiry with consistent discussion points across all participants.

• Two K/W team members were used for each event: facilitator/interviewer and notetaker/listener.

Timeline

• November 2020 to January 2021: Stage 1, Internal Perspectives (interviews and focus groups).

• January 2021 to February 2021: Stage 2, External Perspectives (interviews and focus groups).

• February 2021 to early March 2021: briefings on key themes by stage; final report.
## Summary of Internal Participants

These categories and invitees were developed by the Transition Task Force with input from the Museum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Completed</th>
<th>Invited</th>
<th>Participation Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current Voting and Advisory Commissioners</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>93%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trustee and Friends Board Presidents</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director, Senior Staff, Curators</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Commission Presidents</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign Donors, Leadership Circle, Collections Donors, Other</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>56</strong></td>
<td><strong>71</strong></td>
<td><strong>79%</strong></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Groups</th>
<th># of Groups</th>
<th>Total Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trustees and Honorary Trustees</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends Board and Honorary Friends Board</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collectors Circle Members</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum Volunteers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Museum Staff</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>66</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Participants in Internal Perspectives</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>122</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

A list of participants is available separately.
### Summary of External Participants

These categories and invitees were developed by the Transition Task Force with input from the Museum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Completed</th>
<th>Invited</th>
<th>Participation Rate</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corporate and Foundation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic/Education/Regional</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>86%</td>
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<td>Arts and Culture</td>
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<td>100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Institutions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National / Thought Leaders</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis / National Artists</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>24</strong></td>
<td><strong>47</strong></td>
<td><strong>51%</strong></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Groups</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bearden Fellowship Alumni</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic/Education/Regional</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arts and Culture</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artists</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Participants in External Perspectives</strong></td>
<td>51</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

A list of participants is available separately.
Note on Listening Project Conversations

It is important to note the time period and context in which the interviews and focus groups took place in 2020 and early 2021. These larger events were noted by many participants and, in the case of the pandemic, influenced the methods of the listening project itself:

Covid-19 Pandemic. The ongoing challenges and hardship faced by individuals, families, communities, and organizations. Interviews and focus groups took place entirely on Zoom or by phone due to the pandemic.

Protests. Calls for racial and social justice, nationally and locally in St. Louis, throughout the spring, summer and fall of 2020.

The 2020 election. All internal interviews and focus groups took place between Election Day in November 2020 and Inauguration Day in January 2021. External interviews began on January 6th, 2021.
The Context for Leadership
The Museum Today: Strengths, Opportunities, and Challenges

The listening project asked internal participants to share their perspectives on the Museum today and in the future as context for their thoughts on the ideal characteristics and attributes of the next director.

All participants spoke to a profound opportunity for the Museum to build on the consequential and transformative changes of the past two decades.

Participants saw a promising window of possibility open to the Museum and conveyed strong constituency support, deep interest and capability in the organization, and the necessary resources to move forward.

There is genuine and heartfelt optimism about the Museum’s future grounded in a clear-eyed view of strengths, opportunities, and challenges.
Strengths

The Collection. The breadth, depth, encyclopedic scope, and quality of the collection; the central and defining role it plays in the Museum’s history, mission and identity.

Free to All. The importance of this well-known facet of the Museum’s profile and foundational commitment to accessibility.

Financial Position. The Museum’s considerable financial strength; without the recent and longstanding challenges faced by many museums and cultural organizations.

Profile and Reputation. The Museum’s profile as a vital cultural asset in the St. Louis community and its reputation for exceptional stewardship of its core assets.

Governance, Leadership, and Staff. The experience, engagement, and commitment of the Museum’s governance, executive leadership, and staff.
Opportunities

**Diversity, equity, and inclusion.** Realizing the full promise of the Museum’s evolving plans and priorities; moving forward along several dimensions: organization and staff, relationship with the community, exhibitions and programs, accessibility and outreach, and governance.*

**Exhibitions, programs, and audience engagement.** Reimagining how the Museum expresses its mission through exhibitions and programs that engage and build audiences, foster lasting connections with art across time and cultures, address accessibility and relevance, and advance the field.

**The Collection, collecting, and collectors.** Further strengthening the breadth and depth of the collection, the Museum’s relationships with longstanding and emerging collectors, and the role of acquisitions and gifts of art in the Museum’s future.

**Digital innovation.** Expanding on recent progress, building new capabilities and strategies, and realizing the promise of digital tools across the full spectrum of the Museum’s mission and audiences.

**Collaboration in St. Louis.** Playing an active and consequential role as a leader in the arts sector, as a collaborator with others, and as a catalyst for the cultural vitality of the broader community.

*specific reference was made to the Museum’s August 2020 Diversity Study Group Report.*
Challenges

Diversity, equity, and inclusion. Realizing the full promise of the Museum’s evolving plans and priorities; moving forward along several dimensions: organization and staff, relationship with the community, exhibitions and programs, accessibility and outreach, and governance.*

Planning, organization, and execution. Articulating a renewed vision and strategic priorities for the future. Aligning the Museum’s leadership, management, organization, resources, and processes to support those priorities. Evolving the Museum’s ability to achieve outcomes through new programmatic initiatives and new organizational approaches.

Continuity and change. Balancing the pace and direction of change with the Museum’s history, current constituencies, social and political context, and funding base.

St. Louis. Navigating a complex and dynamic environment in which the Museum is a cultural leader, a community of staff and volunteers, and a recipient of significant taxpayer support.

Long-term financial strength. Keeping an eye on the Museum’s public funding and fundraising in the context of changing political leadership, an evolving philanthropic community, and emerging social and civic priorities seeking public and philanthropic support.

*specific reference was made to the Museum’s August 2020 Diversity Study Group Report.
The Context for Leadership
The Opportunity for the Arts in the Future of St. Louis

St. Louis – the City, County, and region – is changing along several dimensions: political, social, economic, demographic, cultural, and philanthropic. Forward progress in these areas is not always linear and smooth; however, there is confidence about the long-term positive potential of these changes. There is urgency and optimism to keep St. Louis moving forward.

There is a deeply held belief that the arts have an important and unique role to play in this future – as a vital community asset, as a facet of the quality of life, and as a force in the conversation about history, identity, race, and equity (a conversation taking place nationally with specific history and resonance in St. Louis).

This belief reflects two often noted principles: that artistic expression and conversation about that expression fosters human understanding and connection; and that expanding the breadth and depth of people participating in this dialog benefits everyone.

The larger civic and arts community both desires and expects the Museum to play a meaningful and lasting role in the future of St. Louis. In this view, as one of the leading arts institutions in St. Louis, and the leading art museum, the Museum should be a catalyst for the vibrancy and evolution of the arts and of St. Louis. The strengths of the Museum (commitment to quality, encyclopedic collection, stability of funding, positive reputation, prominent profile, programmatic capabilities) are important starting points.
The Opportunity for the Arts in the Future of St. Louis, continued . . .

Both St. Louis and national thought leaders noted that the work of shaping the Museum’s role in, and relevance to, the community carries both opportunities and challenges; and is different from how art museums traditionally have developed programs and reached audiences.

There are important choices for the Museum to make as it engages with and becomes relevant to the broader community: of mission, vision and priorities; of talent, staffing and organization; of engagement and communication; of scholarship, program, and exhibitions.

What is not in question, however, is the imperative of an active and impactful role for the Museum in the arts and in the community.
The Context for Leadership
The Changing Role of the Museum Director

The possibility of the arts to foster change is also related to, and influenced by, a larger national conversation about the role of museums in an era of increased accountability and expectations. This conversation – merging questions of history, practice, narrative, and purpose – is active in art museums, in the communities they serve, and in the minds of their stakeholders and funders.

In describing the contours of this larger conversation, several arts leaders in St. Louis and nationally noted that the role of the museum director has changed over the past several years, with increasing pressure and expectation on all facets of the director’s role and a significant level of dynamism and change in the external context for museums.

Arts and museum leaders observed that the next director will face highly visible expectations and accountability for both process and outcomes. Balancing these competing forces will require deep maturity and breadth of perspective in the director; active support by governance and volunteer leaders; and careful consideration of capability and depth of the museum’s other key leadership roles working in partnership with the director.
The Ideal Role and Attributes of the Next Director

Framing Terminology

The report uses the following terms in describing the themes from internal and external perspectives regarding the next director:

**Role.** n. *a function or part performed especially in a particular operation or process.* Related themes are summarized in terms of key elements of the role.

**Profile.** n. *a representation of something in outline; a portrayal of the significant features of something.* Related themes are summarized in terms of key features of the ideal person.

**Attributes.** n. *a quality or feature regarded as a characteristic or inherent part of someone or something.* Related themes are summarized in terms of key personal and professional characteristics.
The Ideal Role of the Director

Champion for Art and the Role of the Museum

The director is a champion for art across time and cultures. The director actively keeps art at the center of the Museum’s mission and activity, advocates for art in the broader world, speaks to the abiding principles and standards of a leading museum, and envisions a consequential role for the Museum.

The director, among others, will guide the Museum through a process of determining what stories are told through art, who participates in creating those stories, who hears them, and what art is collected and exhibited in their telling. A measure of this leadership role will be external, listening to and engaging with collaborators and communities outside the Museum.

Reimagining the role of the Museum, and within that, the role of the collection, programs, exhibitions, and scholarship will be a significant intellectual and creative endeavor—developing new narratives about art requires exceptional scholarship. This work is not the sole province of one person; the ideal role for the director is to foster a spirit of inquiry, rigor, and collaboration.

Architect for Change

The director is a thoughtful architect for the evolution and growth of the Museum, combining vision, planning, and deliberate action to realize change over time. Such an architect grounds designs for the future in an understanding of past accomplishments and present context, anchoring future ambitions in current foundations.
The Ideal Role of the Director, continued . . .

**Leader**

The director is the chief executive responsible for setting direction, catalyzing the organization to move forward, and fostering the engagement of others in this common project. The director is a leader, both internally and externally, guiding the Museum’s fulfillment of its mission at a strategic, organizational, and operational level.

The director will guide the talent strategy, organizational structures, and programmatic approaches that will bring to full fruition the mission and reimagined role of the Museum. The director will also be a key voice in diversifying the Museum’s staff across the institution and encouraging similar efforts among the Museum’s governance.

**Steward**

The director is a pro-active steward of the Museum’s assets, including people, collections, finances, facilities, profile, reputation, and external relationships. The steward role considers current needs and attends to requirements for the Museum's long-term health.

Following more than two decades of exemplary stewardship of the Museum’s finances, the next director will play a critical role in ensuring the long-term financial strength of the Museum.
The Ideal Role of the Director, continued . . .

Public Face and Civic Presence

The director embodies the mission and role of the Museum in the community, among arts and culture organizations in St. Louis, with City and County stakeholders, and with regional, national and international partners. The director speaks, acts, and collaborates on behalf of the Museum in the broader civic realm. As noted above, the larger arts community in St. Louis sees an essential role for the Museum as a leader in the arts and in the community, reinforcing the importance of the director’s external role.
The Ideal Profile of the Director

The ideal profile of the next director includes the following features:

Respected and recognized leader in the art and museum field. A person with credibility, experience, and gravitas as a leader and a champion of art.

Thoughtful advocate for the role of museums in the current era. A person with deep personal interest in art, a nuanced appreciation for the evolving role of museums, and an active voice in this conversation.

Open, extroverted, outward facing by disposition and experience. A person energized and engaged by the opportunity for dialog, conversation, and communication with others.

Empowering and decisive. A person who fosters the engagement, growth, and achievement of others as an aspect of their leadership; a person able to translate vision and plans into actions and outcomes.

A citizen of St. Louis. A person with the will and interest to become part of St. Louis; motivated by the possibilities of both the Museum and the community. Note: this is a prospective aspect, something the next director will look forward to, rather than a requirement related to being a current resident or native of St. Louis.
The Ideal Role and Profile of the Director in Context of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the Saint Louis Art Museum

The listening project asked participants about the director’s ideal role in diversity equity and inclusion (DEI). This was raised in the context of the St. Louis community, the active dialog among museums about cultural relevance and equity, and the August 2020 Diversity Study Group Report.

Several essential points emerged regarding role and profile of the director with respect to DEI:

**Belief in, and commitment to, the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion;** an understanding of how those values influence and animate the entire Museum enterprise; and an appreciation of their relevance to the Museum as a publicly funded institution.

**Inclusive and collaborative ethos and approach to advancing DEI at the Museum** and in the Museum’s engagement with the community; a willing and humble partner and collaborator.

**Leading the Museum’s work including evolving the Study Group’s recommendations into a broader plan.** The director will need to advance DEI across Museum, including staff leadership and management, talent development, governance, programming, and external relationships.

**Experience in advancing diversity, equity and inclusion work in an organization or community context.** Ideally, the next director will have material prior experience in DEI work.
Attributes of the Director: Personal Characteristics

**Approachable and Open.** An ability to connect with people of all backgrounds and invite them into conversation. A neighborliness and friendliness suited to the ethos of St. Louis.

**Emotionally Intelligent and Relational.** Experience and skill in building relationships with different types of people and communicating effectively with a range of constituencies. Astute and sophisticated in establishing and nurturing relationships with others.

**Listener.** An empathetic leader who listens to voices throughout the organization and in the community.

**Intellectually Curious.** Genuine and broad intellectual interests and openness to new ideas, perspectives, and experiences.

**Passionate and Inspirational.** A level of energy and enthusiasm for art, for the Museum, and for St. Louis that elevates the engagement and commitment of others.

**Flexible and Resilient.** A tolerance for ambiguity and facility in responding to changing circumstances.

**Trustworthy and Courageous.** Underlying ethical values, integrity, strength, and confidence.
Attributes of the Director: Professional Characteristics

Knowledge of, and commitment to, art history and scholarship; depth and breath of knowledge appropriate to an encyclopedic collection.

Experience and expertise in art museums with encyclopedic collections; domain expertise in the principal functions of art museums.

Experience in financial planning and stewardship; knowledge and experience in the funding models and strategies of complex cultural institutions, including public funding.

Experience in fundraising and philanthropy; understanding of fundraising principles and strategy; experience building philanthropic relationships; experience with collectors in a philanthropic context.

Political acumen and governance experience; experience with institutional governance bodies; facility in building relationships with stakeholders; and political sophistication.

Experience with and knowledge of management principles and practices in the nonprofit sector.
### Summary of Ideal Role and Profile of the Next Director

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Profile</th>
<th>Role and Profile Re: DEI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Champion for Art and the Role of the Museum</strong></td>
<td>Respected and recognized leader in art and museum field</td>
<td>Commitment to the values of diversity, equity and inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Architect for Change</strong></td>
<td>Thoughtful advocate for the role of museums</td>
<td>Inclusive and collaborative approach to the work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leader</strong> (Internal and External)</td>
<td>Open, extroverted, outward facing</td>
<td>Leader of the Museum’s work in DEI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Steward</strong></td>
<td>Empowering and decisive</td>
<td>Experience in DEI in previous leadership roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Face and Civic Presence</strong></td>
<td>A citizen of St. Louis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Implications and Considerations

*K/W offers the following considerations in the form of questions. These are facets of the leadership brief of the next director that warrant additional discussion as the search moves forward.*

How best to describe the *current moment and future direction* of the Saint Louis Art Museum for the purposes of the director search? What *priorities and opportunities* are highlighted in framing the next director’s remit to lead the Museum?

Is the ideal next director principally a *steward* of the Museum as it is today, a *leader* of an enterprise on an established course, or a *catalyst and change agent* imagining new directions? What *aspirations* will be part of the dialog with candidates during the search process?

What is the Museum’s *appetite for risk* (in expressing its mission, in investing in new activity, in organizational change, in new leadership)? What is the *ideal posture toward risk* in the next director as a leader of the Museum?

How prepared are the Museum’s *governance and key stakeholders to support* a period of (calculated) *risk-taking and* (careful) *experimentation* as the Museum defines new directions in partnership with the broader community?
Implications and Considerations, continued . . .

How will the significant complexity of the director’s role be addressed in the search? Should a balance between the five roles be established, or a priority among them be declared? How can the Museum’s management team and organizational structure complement the director’s ideal role and priorities?

How, and with whom, will the next director and the Museum establish durable external relationships related to advancing the Museum’s DEI work and relevance? How much prior experience in this work is desirable in the candidate pool?

What are the essential or necessary commitments required for the next director to be a “citizen of St. Louis?” When and how should these expectations be conveyed?