

# Unpacking “Gravitas”

A museum director reflects on gender inequities in the museum field.

By Kaywin Feldman

*Kaywin Feldman's remarks during the general session of the 2016 AAM Annual Meeting & MuseumExpo were considered by many to be the highlight of the conference.*

**A**s I conclude my two-year term as the Alliance's board chair, I want to share a few observations that are very important to me both personally and professionally.

I became a museum director at the age of 28. After I'd been in the job for about three years, I interviewed at a slightly larger museum in Texas. During the meeting, the board chair said to me, “You are far too young and far too female to have a curator ever report to you.”

A few years ago, I related that story to the then-director of this Texas museum, a strapping 63-year-old former football player. Even though I had been director of two larger art museums for many years, when I told him the story, he said, “Well, that's good advice. It's probably true.”

I'd like to speak to you today about power, influence, and responsibilities from a personal perspective...I have encountered “far too young and far too female” for most of my 22-year career as a museum director.

I'm very grateful to the three museum boards that hired me as their director. These boards bucked the trends in hiring me and giving me a chance. I love my job, and I feel so fortunate to have had such a rewarding career.

I've done a fair amount of interviewing to get to where I am, and I heard the exact same concern every time I was not hired. Every time I was hired, this is what they always said: “We're worried that she doesn't have gravitas.”



I'd like to unpack “gravitas” for a moment. It was one of the key Roman virtues, along with “pietas,” “dignitas,” and “virtus” (which, incidentally, comes from “vir,” the Latin word for “man”).

“Gravitas” signifies heft, seriousness, solemnity, and dignity. It is weighty and replete with importance. I have come to realize that it is also subconscious code for “male.”

In fact, the dictionary gives the following two examples of “gravitas” in a sentence:

- A post for which he has the expertise and the gravitas.
- A comic actress who lacks the gravitas for dramatic roles.

Funny that the negative example of “gravitas” is female.

Urban Dictionary defines the word as “a part of the male anatomy,” going on to say, for example, that the few female news anchors who are thought to possess gravitas are often assumed to be lesbians or described as shrill and therefore do not last long in their

positions. Instead, American news anchorwomen are often [described as] “perky.”

Please understand that my beef isn't with the word “gravitas” itself; it is with the cowardly discrimination that hides behind the use of the word. It's this [line of] thinking:

- Women don't have gravitas.
- Leaders must have gravitas.
- Women can't be leaders.

We recently completed a branding process at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, working with the design firm Pentagram. We had been in the fun and engaging process of fully defining and expressing our brand for the previous four years. Pentagram studied us and responded, “Your full name is too long. Luckily, your acronym is pronounceable. You're just saying [it] wrong. Instead of being MIA—Missing in Action or the Miami International Airport—you should be ‘Mia,’ which means ‘mine,’ ‘my own,’ or ‘beloved’ in eight languages.”

That was pretty compelling, but our team was concerned. At first, nobody articulated it. But the discomfort derived from Mia being a female name. Finally, one of our trustees voiced it: he didn't like Mia because "it is not strong. It's not classical or smart. It's just not serious." I pointed out that if our name were spelled "SAM" or "STEW," he wouldn't have had the same reaction. What he was clearly saying was that the name—a female name—didn't have "gravitas."

A recent *New York Times* article noted that when a profession that is largely male transitions to largely female, salaries go down significantly, even after adjusting for education, experience, and geography. The implication is that the job just can't be as serious, challenging, or sophisticated if it can be done by women.

When I read it, I realized that this was one of the main reasons many boards are reluctant to hire women

directors. Deep down, they fear that it would demean and debase their museum—and the profession—if a woman can do it.

In the art museum field, about 45 percent of museum directors are female. That's great. But among the 17 largest encyclopedic art museums, with budgets over \$30 million, there are only two of us. A colleague noted that the Association of Art Museum Directors is replete with foreign accents, noting that art museums are now importing men from abroad.

I promise you that boards don't explicitly decide that they want to hire a man; I know they have the best of intentions and are committed to diversity. But they think a director has to exude silver-haired, baritone solemnity, and therefore they unwittingly rule out female applicants. This sort of underlying sexism is so much more insidious even than the trustee who once said directly to me, "Things would go a lot

better if you would do as you're told."

Again, I am deeply grateful for all of the opportunity that I have had in my career, however hard I had to fight for it. I'm one of the lucky ones. Of course, I believe that leadership qualities are equally found in women as in men, even if they can look and sound a bit different. I feel the responsibility, however, to call it out, and I urge all of you to use your influence to make sure that our society's power structures no longer hide behind implicit discrimination and bias.

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