Christopher Bedford, chief curator of exhibitions at Ohio State University’s Wexner Center for the Arts, has been named the Henry and Lois Foster Director of Brandeis’ Rose Art Museum.

A native of Scotland who grew up in England and the United States, Bedford has risen rapidly through the ranks at the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Wexner, acquiring along the way a reputation as a visionary thinker about the engagement of art and the role of museums in society.

At 35, Bedford will be among the youngest museum directors in the United States when he takes over at the Rose on Sept. 15. He comes to Brandeis promising bold steps to open a new era in the museum’s history and to more thoroughly integrate the Rose into the life of the campus – a central goal set by the Future of the Rose Committee in its 2009 report.

"Chris' appointment demonstrates Brandeis' commitment to strengthening the Rose as a center of innovation and excellence in the study and exhibition of the visual arts," President Fred Lawrence said. “He understands the breadth of our ambition for a great museum as part of a great university.”

Prominent personalities of the contemporary art world, including Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts President Joel Wachs and artists Mark Bradford and Charline von Heyl, joined leading faculty and administrators of the university in praise of the appointment, citing Bedford’s keen grasp of the contemporary art scene and his ability to get things done.

“I am committed to the idea that art is integral to life, and university art museums are a perfect platform to demonstrate that commitment,” Bedford said in a recent telephone conversation from California, where he spent the first part of the summer at the Getty Leadership Institute for museum directors and curators.

“It is essential that the community be drawn into the museum socially and intellectually, and that the collection be integrated into the curriculum of the university,” he said. “This is not just a matter of service to the community – it will be an enrichment both of the community and of the museum. Ideally, it’s a mutually beneficial relationship.”

One of his top priorities, Bedford said, will be “to commission a major work of public sculpture for the exterior of the museum that connects to ideas of social engagement and social justice. Those concepts are central to my thinking and to the core ideology of Brandeis, too.”

He said he feels it is essential to begin thinking about expanding the museum and making it a destination point for social activity both on campus and in the region.
While Bedford acknowledges that these ideas will “take a lot of fundraising,” perhaps his most innovative and integrative idea will cost little or nothing.

“He has a breadth of understanding that is rare and inspiring, even awe-inspiring. He also has his feet on the ground.”

- Steve A.N. Goldstein

Bedford proposes “to take the conventional model of curating and turn it on its side if not its head.” Instead of having a single curator or director “drive” an exhibition, he would try “from the very beginning of an idea through its development into an exhibition to very determinedly engage minds from different disciplines across the university – art history, life sciences, environmental science – to work out thematic concerns that bind all the participants.”

Provost Steve A.N. Goldstein ’78, who appointed Bedford in consultation with members of a search committee of faculty, students, alumni and staff, said that “Chris Bedford understands the potential for art to impact society, the importance of art to help us understand the human experience, and the ability of art to change us.

“He has a breadth of understanding that is rare and inspiring, even awe-inspiring,” Goldstein said.

“He also has his feet on the ground,” Goldstein added. “He knows how to get shows on, how to communicate with artists, donors, collectors and others in the museum world. He understands what it takes to do the work of the modern art museum.”

Both Bedford and Goldstein said that the new Rose director is coming on at a moment of golden opportunity for the Brandeis museum.

“The campus is ready and excited about embracing the materials, using art as a springboard for education and scholarship,” Goldstein said. “That’s only the beginning. Combined with the creative, entrepreneurial spirit of Brandeis, we can bring the world of modern and contemporary art to campus and serve as a place for international discussion of the meaning of that art.”

Bedford said that the way the art world and the campus rallied in opposition to selling art from the Rose when the university was in financial crisis created a broadened awareness and appreciation of the Rose collection and its importance to Brandeis.

“I look forward to capitalizing on the legacy of that time, turning an unfortunate moment in the institution’s history into a positive moment of amplified visibility,” Bedford said.

Jonathan Unglaub, incoming chair of the Fine Arts Department and a member of the search committee, called Bedford a stellar choice.

“During the interview process, Chris demonstrated a commanding knowledge of the contemporary art world and earlier modernism, a thoughtful eloquence in articulating the challenges of running a museum, a real strategic vision about building audiences and reaching out to university constituencies and a practical know-how that belied his youth,” Unglaub said. “His enthusiasm is infectious, and will inspire an already engaged community here at Brandeis. Chris’ personal connections with major artists, his impressive exhibition record and his reputation as a prolific critic will generate a new, exciting buzz about the Rose beyond the halls of academe.”

Joel Wachs, president of the New York-based Andy Warhol Foundation, also was highly enthusiastic about Bedford’s appointment. The foundation supports creation, presentation and documentation of contemporary visual art, particularly work that is experimental, under-recognized or challenging in nature.

Bedford “is great,” Wachs said. “He is completely in touch with the contemporary art world, very smart and very energetic. He is a people
person. He's a scholar, he writes about art, he's continually exploring new ideas. This is a great opportunity for him and a real test of Brandeis as well."

Mark Bradford, a leading contemporary artist with whom Bedford has worked extensively, says that “for me, he has been the best of two worlds. He has the capacity to think professionally and maturely and get the job done, and at the same time he has the capacity to be flexible. He really, really believed in what I was doing. He really has integrity. He has a lot of faith in the artists he works with and the institutions he works for.”

Charline von Heyl, a German artist who is currently working on a show with Bedford, says “I like the way that his eye works. He is one of those guys who has vision that is stubbornly true to his taste. That sounds like a no-brainer, but it is not so often that you meet that in the art world.” The project she's involved with Bedford on at the Wexner “is visionary. I'm really proud to be asked and to be involved in it.”

Scott Edmiston, director of Brandeis' Office of the Arts and head of the search committee, called Bedford “passionate, inspirational and a true visionary.”

“He has his finger on the pulse of what's new and what's next. His ideas for the future of the Rose promise a dynamic mix of artistic innovation and academic scholarship,” Edmiston said. “He has a compelling belief in the unique role of university museums as leaders in the art world.”

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