

The Evolving Role of Museums: Preserving the Past, Portraying the Present, and Shaping the Future

Deadline for application: Monday, October 17 at 5 pm

Deadline for non-binding Expression of Interest: Monday, Sept 26

“For museums, the choice is either resilience or irrelevance.”

LaNesha DeBardelaben, President and CEO, Northwest African American Museum, Seattle, Washington

Museums are gateways to magic with visitors given a chance to excavate the past, spotlight the present, and imagine the future. Museums, like all of society, continue to reconsider their mission and how best to accomplish it. Even in the face of the pandemic, the Smithsonian continues to demonstrate its resilience and relevance..

Smithsonian curators and staff have developed programs that extend beyond their buildings, with community outreach programs and expansion of their digital resources. They are analyzing what is “right”/”wrong” within their spaces, what is missing, who is missing, and what the future of museums holds for “us all”? In addition, they continue to contemplate “Whose objects are these anyway?” and the return of “priceless” and culturally sensitive objects to their communities. “The Smithsonian needs to lead morally as well as legally,” said Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III on June 3 after the Board of Regents voted to return 29 magnificent objects from the Kingdom of Benin, looted by the British military in 1897.

In addition, the Smithsonian also must face how to examine and tackle a host of current challenges that divide the U.S. Museums have realized that they need to share both beautiful and curious objects, to find ways for visitors to see themselves in the exhibits, and discover meaning in the objects and stories they experience. Successful museums can inspire us to act on what we’ve learned, to thrive on emotions museum visits have generated, and to build empathy for the different perspectives we’ve encountered. What makes an object iconic, and why does it so appeal to me?

Today, with widespread demands for diversity, equality, justice, accessibility, and dignity becoming centerstage in the public eye, museums are focusing on and directing resources to meet the desires and needs of a varied public. Many museums have adapted by redoubling outreach programs and significantly expanding virtual offerings, bringing the museums **to people** in creative and innovative ways. Museums are more relevant than ever, and they have demonstrated a willingness to change. Their role is not to tell a single story but to showcase the power of many voices, many stories as they foster critical conversations and create a more inclusive museum culture. We are the museum and vice versa.

Today, there is much new to engage and support all museum visitors. The most recent addition to the Smithsonian’s is the opening of The Molina Family Latino Gallery inside the National Museum of American History. The Gallery is the first step in the planned opening of a new

museum, which will illuminate U.S. Latinos' historical and cultural legacies and will be followed by the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum in Washington, D.C.

These two join the much-heralded National Museum of African American History, where a wonderful new offering, Culture's Reckoning and Reconciliation, "Our Shared Future: Reckoning with our Racial Past," a collaborative, multidisciplinary platform, allows us to explore how race has informed each of us.

Additionally, the Smithsonian's Learning Lab is a virtual gateway to millions of the Institution's digital images, recordings, text, videos, etc. in history, art and culture, and the sciences—all for free. With its varied audiences in mind, the Smithsonian's goal is to be accessible to all by expanding its accommodations and programs for visitors with disabilities, including those with vision and hearing loss, autism, Alzheimer's, dementia, etc.

Through these types of expanded offering, more and more of our stories can and will be told.

The 2023 Smithsonian Faculty Fellowship offers a different kind of teaching and learning experience for faculty and students in celebration of the more than 25-year partnership between Montgomery College and the Smithsonian Institution, more recently with the Smithsonian Office of Educational Technology. A large number of our students have never entered a museum of any kind. The 2023 Smithsonian Faculty Fellows most certainly change the lives of many MC students by inspiring their own museum stories, as 225 former MC professors have done before, bringing more than 25,000 of our students, faculty, and friends to the Smithsonian's vast riches and opportunities. Is this your year to become a Smithsonian Faculty Fellow?

To learn more, please visit the Paul Peck Humanities Website, Smithsonian Faculty Fellowship, or contact:

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