

# museum

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A BENEFIT OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE AMERICAN ALLIANCE OF MUSEUMS



**Honoring the Monuments Men  
Taking Washington by Storm  
What Do We Value?**



American  
Alliance of  
Museums



# WHAT DO WE VALUE?



*David J. Skorton became the 13th secretary of the Smithsonian Institution last July, overseeing 19 museums and galleries, 20 libraries, the National Zoo and numerous research centers. Educated as a cardiologist, Skorton previously served as president of the University of Iowa and Cornell University, has had a longstanding interest in science and the humanities and in his spare time plays the jazz flute and is an amateur beekeeper. He is a featured speaker during the AAM 2016 Annual Meeting & MuseumExpo.*

**“We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom.”** —Scientist E.O. Wilson

**W**hat do we value as individuals? What do we value as communities? And what do we value as nations? As we gather for the annual AAM meeting in Washington, DC, I think these are important questions to ask, because we will not attain wisdom if we do not know what we value. And we will not use the potential power and influence of our museums responsibly if they are not grounded in our values.

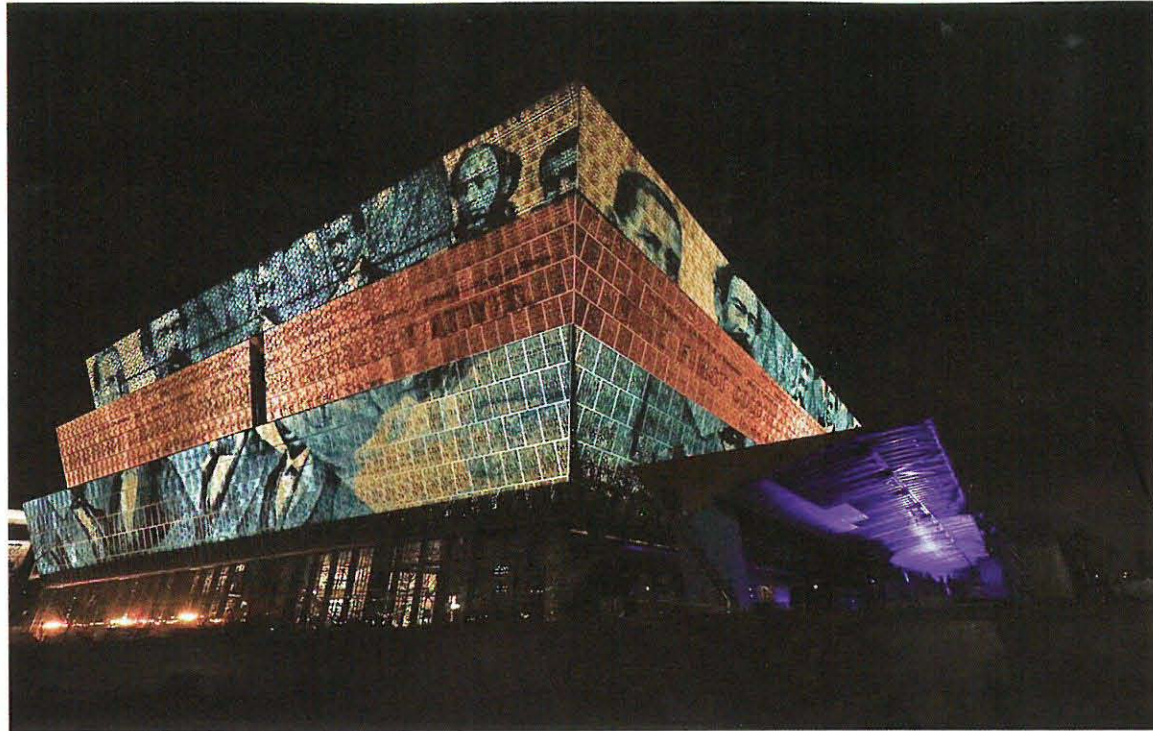
For all of us, answering these questions is more critical today than ever before. As individuals and in

our countries, our core values—how they are identified, shared, applied and supported—are debated on college campuses, on the streets of our cities and in our nations’ capitals around the world. Meanwhile, democratic and humanistic ideals are threatened by everything from terroristic acts of extremist ideology to the social atrophy that comes from cynicism and apathy.

As we gather here in the heart of American democracy, it is worth noting that the American people’s trust has drastically eroded in the

Above: David J. Skorton receives the symbolic key to the Institution from the Smithsonian Chancellor, Chief Justice of the United States John Roberts, during Skorton’s installation ceremony at the historic Arts and Industries Building on Oct. 19, 2015. Right: The Washington Monument and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall in Washington, DC.





institutions that have traditionally embodied those ideals. According to a 2015 Pew Research poll, only 19 percent of Americans say they can trust the government always or most of the time. In the same survey, only 14 percent say Congress has a positive effect on the way things are going in the country, while 75 percent say its impact is negative. And a 2015 Gallup poll shows disapproval of the Supreme Court at an all-time high of 50 percent.

How do we begin to rebuild the foundation of our democratic ideals and give people around the world a sense that institutions are responsive to their needs? I cannot offer formal policy solutions. I can, however, as a scientist, educator and museum leader, help identify some of the tools that may enable us as individuals and institutions to address the challenges of the day—and preserve and nurture what we value. We need to be more creative, innovative and flexible in solving society's most intractable problems.

### New Ways of Thinking

As Albert Einstein observed, “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” What kind of thinking is demanded today?

Fresh, creative, innovative thinking. Thinking alone, thinking in groups. Active, engaged thinking. Thinking that includes the courage to go where the observations and conclusions take us, uninhibited by dogma or prior bias. These are easy to aspire to, but hard to achieve. How do we get there?

First, we must look at problems with what has been referred to as “beginner’s eye and mind.” Too often we avoid thinking about important and complex issues not because they are actually unsolvable, but because the “experts have already spoken.”

Instead, we need to teach the skills necessary to be open minded, approach problems without prior bias, see the problems clearly—and achieve wisdom. This is the Zen notion of “the beginner’s eye and mind.” As Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki described it, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few.”

Second, to solve community issues, we must learn to think as a community. The traditional scientific method has been wonderfully successful. Modern life is indebted to it. However, the method has proven less successful on its own in solving some of society’s more complex and seemingly intractable problems, such as poverty, hunger, lack of education, social injustice, access to health care

and economic inequality—all problems that require close listening, emotional distancing, weighing of arguments and counter arguments and—among the most critical—the direct participation of those most affected by the issues.

Third, and the pivotal point, is to teach others to think creatively. One of the most effective ways to do so is through the arts and humanities. So, in this country, we need to reverse our nation’s seeming disinterest and disinvestment in the arts and humanities, but do so in a way that does not sacrifice our investment in science. This commitment must be based on an understanding that the arts and humanities complement science and that together they make us all better thinkers, better innovators, better decision makers and better citizens.

### Appreciating the Human Experience

To understand what it means to be human and to understand the complex problems that the world now faces requires us to deploy every technique of understanding at our disposal, including and especially those at the heart of the visual and performing arts, social sciences and cultural studies.

## Our American government must take the lead in reinvesting in the arts and humanities, both in rhetoric and with resources.

Yet, from the federal to the local level in this country, we are investing less and less in education and in the arts and humanities. Not surprisingly, when funding cuts in education are made, it is often the arts and humanities that suffer disproportionately.

It has been said that science helps us to understand what we can do; the arts and humanities—our culture and values—help us decide what to do. Studying the arts and humanities develops critical-thinking skills and nimble habits of mind, provides historical and cultural perspective and fosters the ability to analyze, synthesize and communicate.

As author Daniel Pink observed, “The last few decades have belonged to a certain kind of person with a certain kind of mind—computer programmers who could crank code, lawyers who could craft contracts, MBAs who could crunch numbers....The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind—creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers and meaning makers. These people—artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big-picture thinkers—will now reap society’s richest rewards and share its greatest joys.”

All of us in the arts and humanities, including those at institutions like the Smithsonian and other cultural organizations, should also actively and clearly demonstrate how these disciplines help us articulate and appreciate the human experience.

Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard University, eloquently described the value of an education in the arts and humanities, noting: “It is far better to create in students the capacities to confront the circumstances of life with a combination of realism and resilience and with habits of mind and skills of analysis that transcend the pres-

ent. Students in the humanities learn how to think critically and communicate their ideas clearly, and those transferrable skills lead to rewarding lives and careers in every field of endeavor.”

I have heard many times that the private sector in the United States can and should shoulder more and more of the support of the arts. Patrons of the arts, humanities and sciences, from the Medicis to modern-day philanthropists like Smithsonian Regent David Rubenstein, have shown the immense good that philanthropy can do. But I do not believe we can rely primarily on charitable giving from individuals and corporations. Our American government must



take the lead in reinvesting in the arts and humanities, both in rhetoric and with resources.

### The Power of Museums

In my new position as secretary of the Smithsonian, I am learning quickly the leading role museums and other cultural institutions can play in our communities, the country and the world, and how they can affect and stimulate discourse and action. Museums have a great power, but it is a more ethereal power. It is what political scientist Joseph Nye coined “soft power” 25 years ago to refer to the power of ideas, knowledge, values and culture to influence rather than the power of military and financial might.

As Gail Dexter Lord and Ngaire Blankenberg wrote in *Cities, Museums and Soft Power*:

“Museums empower people when they are patrons for artists and thinkers; when they amplify civic discourse, accelerate cultural change and contribute to cultural intelligence among the great diversity of city dwellers, visitors, policy makers and leaders.... Museums present beautiful, accessible and meaningful spaces in which communities and individuals can meet, exchange ideas and solve problems.”

In 2015, Dexter Lord and Blankenberg noted in *Museum* magazine that “...the rise of cities and the role of civil society—are pushing museums from the margins toward the center of soft power.” Museums are using their soft power in many creative, unexpected ways to provide wisdom rather than mere information. They are using the “beginner’s eye and mind,” bolstering communities and elevating the arts and humanities to their rightful places of importance in society.

The Smithsonian is working hard to be a place where the community—on a local, national and global scale—can take advantage of all that museums offer.

We value creativity; we encourage our staff and volunteers to approach problems and see issues through a variety of lenses and in new and novel ways. We exhibit and focus on art, science, culture and history in ways that teach and inspire, but,

at times, challenge commonly held notions. We recognize our responsibility to lead and encourage civil dialogue on important and transitional issues facing the nation and the world. As America’s largest museum and research organization, we are obligated to produce creative and thoughtful exhibitions, programming and research with themes, content and approaches that may be provocative and controversial. And a career in higher education and medicine has taught me that creativity—whether in the sciences, arts or humanities—fosters controversy. We neither seek nor avoid controversy—we anticipate it and welcome the opportunity to explain the creative choices we make. We must take risks. We must be involved in vital issues facing the world.

### Addressing World Issues

Take the realm of cultural diplomacy. The British Museum loaned the Cyrus Cylinder, sometimes referred to as the first “bill of human rights,” to Iran in 2010 and to the United States in 2013, where it travelled to several museums across the country, including the Smithsonian’s Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. This 6th-century BC clay cylinder covered with ancient Babylonian cuneiform continues to shape political debate and cultural rhetoric 2,600 years after its creation.

A large portion of the Smithsonian’s cultural diplomacy efforts are now focused on cultural preservation. By working with international partners, we have launched recovery efforts following events such as the March 2015 attack on the Bardo National Museum in Tunisia, the April 2015 earthquake in Nepal and the ongoing destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq.

Museums can be agents of social change. For instance, consider the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture: When it opens on the National Mall this September, it will tell the simple, complex, powerful and poignant stories of the African American experience that are a foundational part of the American story. But before the building has even opened, the

museum has been convening people to discuss the issues of race that still permeate society—from the Black Lives Matter movement to voting rights.

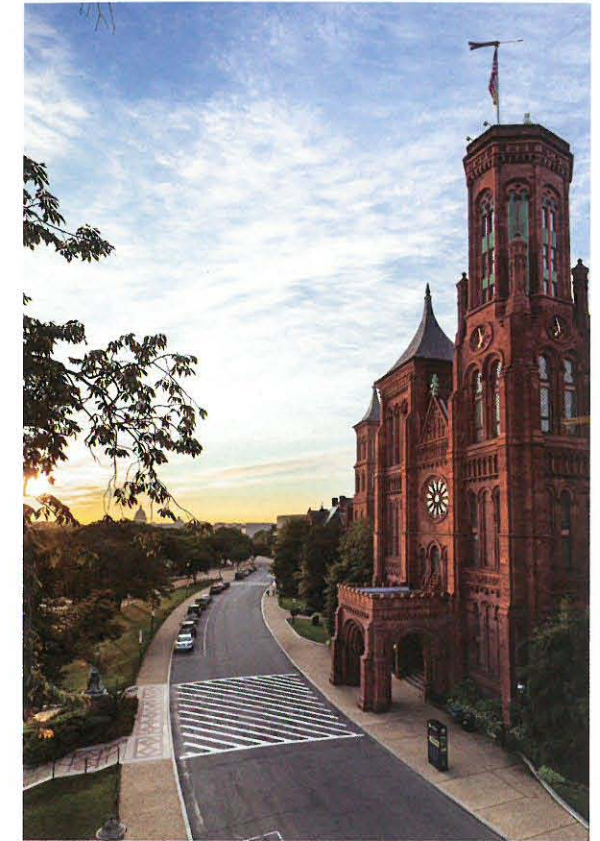
During this election year here in the US, our National Museum of American History opened the exhibition “Hooray for Politics!” with memorabilia from this year’s presidential campaign, which will be updated as the year goes on. Coupled with our ongoing exhibitions “The American Presidency” and “The First Ladies,” visitors can debate which was our most important presidential election: 1860 or 1932? 1960 or 2008? Next year, we will open “American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith,” a cornerstone exhibition focusing on our country’s founding principles.

At the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s newly renovated Renwick Gallery, we are hosting record crowds for “Wonder,” an innovative exhibition showcasing nine contemporary artists, each of whom was given one gallery to create a unique installation. “Wonder” is different in concept, design, execution and scope than anything we have done before.

A new Smithsonian Libraries exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and National Portrait Gallery, “Come Together: American Artists Respond to Al-Mutanabbi Street,” displays American artists’ books and prints that were created to show support for the booksellers, writers and readers in the wake of the March 5, 2007, car bomb that killed or wounded more than 130 people in Baghdad’s historic center of bookselling. An exhibition like this shows how the arts and humanities can not only enrich our lives with joy and beauty but can also heal with their unique insights into the human condition.

### The Wonder of Discovery

A billion light-years away, the power of two black holes colliding created ripples in the fabric of space-time, which radiated outward throughout the universe as gravitational waves. Albert Einstein predicted the phenomenon a century ago. Recently, those gravitational waves were detected with a



highly sensitive instrument expressly built 22 years ago to detect them, the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO). Rich Isaacson, an early proponent of LIGO, said that it seemed like a fool’s errand at the time. He said: “It never should have been built. It was a couple of maniacs running around...using materials that hadn’t been invented yet.”

That ability to think creatively, to dream about the possibilities and to come up with innovative solutions, is what modern institutions can not only preserve but inspire: the wonder of discovery, whether in culture or art or science or technology or history. Museums all need to work to impart our wisdom in creating new worlds and opening new vistas for visitors online and in person.

The museum community, individually and collectively through organizations like AAM, has much to offer. I am proud that the Smithsonian is hosting the annual AAM meeting and I look forward to learning more about the valuable contributions your museums are making to your communities and the nation. <<