

# Bringing Africa to the World

By Jennifer Steinhauer

Oct. 25, 2018

WASHINGTON — Gus Casely-Hayford, of London, started as the director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art in February. He talks about his passion for sharing the astonishing breadth of his parents' continent, the need to go global and digital, and his desire to renovate. This interview has been edited and condensed.

**What strikes you about the differences between London and Europe and their institutions and art audiences compared with Washington?**

Here in the Smithsonian we are part of a consortium, a family of museums, and we attract a very, very broad spectrum of audiences, and we have this remit to address the needs of all Americans. For us particularly within that consortium as a national museum that's focused on Africa, we also have to think globally, not just thinking about potential audiences in Africa but also peoples of African descent.

So we have this very complex remit. Unlike in Europe where I've worked in institutions like the British Museum — and I've worked with almost every national museum in Britain — the remit focused around non-Western arts practice is very often seen through the legacies of the colonial lens. And here we're unencumbered by some of that.

It offers an opportunity of being much more dynamic and really engaging with artists in a different way; I find that enormously exciting. It's a real privilege to not be weighed down by that as a kind of intellectual encumbrance.

**Americans might be surprised to hear you say that. They feel those encumbrances in their own way.**

They are there, but in a different sense. Most museums come out of an enlightenment moment, and that attempt to create categorizations across cultures, across people. So often Africa was placed at a huge disadvantage when compared with the West, and our museum, created here on the National Mall in the '60s was very much a reaction to those kinds of categorizations.

Not being placed within that kind of vision of the world has meant that we have been able to build relationships and to think of Africa in a different kind of way than many museums in Europe, and I see that as a real blessing. Working as we are now with museums and museum

experts across the African continent, it's a real benefit. Africa is forcing those who will listen to reconsider the continent.

**I know you've talked about the film "Black Panther" and the costumes. I wanted to ask you about the scene in which the thieves are working to steal that work of (African) art. I'm curious how that struck you.**



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I watched it with my daughter and my wife. My parents were born in West Africa, grew up through the period of the end of colonialism. I was kind of born with that as a memory but it's still very present in my imagination.

I think what that film did was to unite peoples of those three generations who have some kind of genealogical connection to the African continent around that sense of grief that we all share, that feeling that somehow, an acknowledgment that the power of our history has been almost systematically ignored.

And what that was about is saying that we have to take back these narratives. And I think that's what this institution was constituted to do, to give back the narrative that it feels like has been omitted as part of a lot of Western education. That sense of grief expressed in those scenes is something that needs to have the spaces to work itself out.

**What are your central goals for the museum? What changes do you want to make?**

We are a more than 50-year-old institution. The building isn't as old as that, but the building has begun to look its age and we need to reinvest, and that will mean a reconfiguration of our physical spaces. But beyond that, the idea that this space that sits on the National Mall can be the convener of a national, of a global conversation around African art — it's an ambitious statement.

**Do you see any particular relationship between this institution and the African-American museum?**

Yes, we have a relationship because we tell stories which are contiguous. Emotionally, of course, there is a deep connection. There is this kind of appalling kind of cultural tragedy that happens with enslavement, this rift, this tear across peoples.

That institution offers a kind of gorgeous, beautiful catharsis, a way of dealing with some of these things, a way of thinking of these histories in dynamic and refreshing ways. But those stories are underpinned and contextualized by what goes on here.

**Have you had a chance to listen to people taking in the museum?**

Our museum is going to go through a major transformation. I go around now and the objects speak to people. People walk into museum spaces and you can see them aghast at the space itself, and I want people to come into our museum and feel that the setting is fitting for telling what for me is the greatest story of cultural production that there is to tell.

I would want as many children as possible to come here, but for those who can't, I think we really do need to try over the course of my tenure to find ways of reaching out to them and we'll do that through television, we'll do that through digital resources, we'll do that through social media.

**What do you feel you have left to learn?**

Traveling around Africa just astonishes me every visit. There are more pyramids in Sudan than Egypt. There's longer traditions of Christianity in Ethiopia than there is anywhere else. The stories that you find across the continent, they defy the sorts of limitations of prejudice or the lack of knowledge that is pretty ambient. There is an incredible kind of wealth, of richness, and that is the thing I take whenever I travel to Africa, which despite everything is doing astonishing things.