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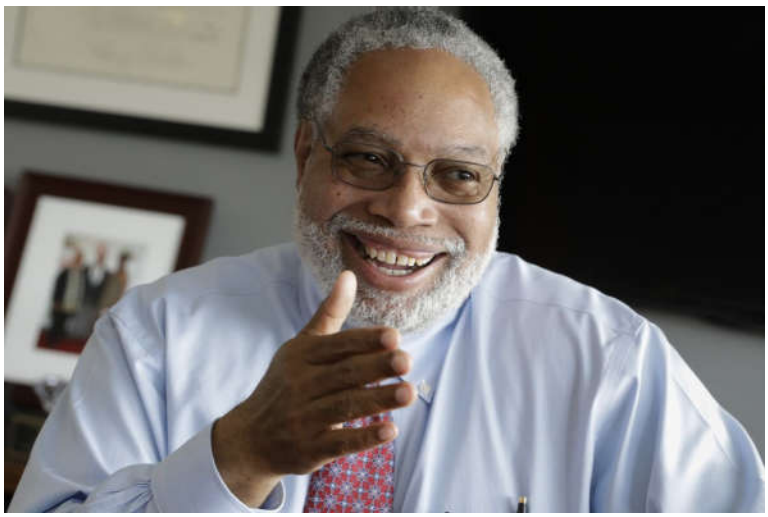
U.S.

Historian Who Launched African-American Museum Is Named Smithsonian Institution Chief

Lonnie Bunch said 'building a museum from scratch' prepared him to manage the Smithsonian's $1 billion budget



Lonnie Bunch, in a 2017 photo, takes the helm at the Smithsonian Institution after having successfully launched the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. PHOTO: J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Kelly Crow

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The Smithsonian Institution on Tuesday named museum director Lonnie G. Bunch III to be its next chief—the first African-American and the first historian hired to run the world's largest museum and research complex.

Mr. Bunch, a 66-year-old native of Newark, N.J., is best known for overseeing the building and launch of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture nearly three years ago. On June 16, he will take charge of the institution's 19 museums, nine science research centers and the National Zoo. He succeeds David Skorton, a cardiologist who is leaving to be president and chief executive of the Association of American Medical Colleges.

Mr. Bunch said he is "humbled and honored" by the job, adding that he intends to

position the Smithsonian as a cultural voice capable of speaking out on scientific and social issues that affect Americans—from the environment to migration to matters of race and class.

“It’s important for people not to see us as an attic of nostalgia but as a cauldron of ideas,” he said. “We can be part of a broader conversation, be part of the glue that holds this country together.”

Mr. Bunch’s seasoned experience within the institution appealed to the 17 members of the Smithsonian’s governing Board of Regents, according to Steve Case, board vice-chair who co-led the search committee. “We need someone with vision who can rally the people who work here,” Mr. Case said. “Lonnie obviously knows and loves the Smithsonian.”

The choice of Mr. Bunch marks a significant tilt toward the humanities for the nearly 175-year-old Smithsonian, which has only ever hired men from the scientific arena or former university presidents deemed capable of managing its $1 billion budget and roughly 7,000 employees.

By contrast, Mr. Bunch embodies the Smithsonian lifer, a historian who started out at the National Air & Space Museum in 1978 and worked his way up—with several stints elsewhere—to associate director of curatorial affairs at the National Museum of American History in 1994. (A slave-cabin display there includes a sculpture of a young girl modeled after his daughter at age 10. She’s an adult now.)

Mr. Bunch said his tenure taught him that the Smithsonian’s exhibitions, which can take a decade to plan and stay up even longer, need to be freshened or reshuffled more often to avoid seeming out of date.

“We must become more nimble and ripe with technology,” he said during a press conference.

When Mr. Bunch was named director of the planned African-American museum in 2005, he said he was determined to model a faster, more expansive approach. He started with one staff member, no site and no collection, and in less than a decade he transformed the concept of a museum honoring the history and accomplishments of African-Americans into an eight-story, $540 million museum with a collection of 40,000 objects.

Half of the museum’s funding came from private donors, the other half from Congress. About four million people have visited since it opened in September 2016, according to the museum.

He said his experience “building a museum from scratch” prepared him to toggle between the myriad projects and people in the Smithsonian orbit, from contractors to curators to designers. As Secretary, he will also need to foster ties to the scientific community and protect more than 155 million objects and specimens that make up its collections. He will also need to oversee an army’s worth of building projects, both on Washington’s National Mall—where a majority of the Smithsonian’s museums are located—and farther afield. He will also have to help hire his own replacement at the new African-American museum. Mr. Bunch said he has already asked Spencer Crew, a history professor at George Mason University who previously served as director of the Smithsonian’s American history museum, to step in as acting director.

Mr. Bunch received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in American history and African-American history from Washington’s American University in 1974 and 1976, respectively. His wife, Maria Marable-Bunch, is associate director for museum learning and programs at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian. Mr. Bunch is also known for writing on topics like the impact of race in the American West and the black military experience.

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