

# Leader of Smithsonian's African American Museum to Direct Entire Institution

Heralded for the success of the museum he led from idea to fruition, Lonnie G. Bunch III is the first African-American to lead the Smithsonian Institution



Lonnie G. Bunch III. J. Scott Applewhite/Associated Press



By **Graham Bowley**

May 28, 2019



Lonnie G. Bunch III, a historian who as its founding director opened the Smithsonian's [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) to critical applause and huge crowds, will serve as the next secretary of the entire Smithsonian, its most senior position.

Mr. Bunch will be the first historian and the first African-American to oversee the Smithsonian's 19 museums and galleries, the National Zoological Park and research centers. He will take over on June 16, the Smithsonian announced Tuesday.

Mr. Bunch led a decade-long effort to create a museum to recognize the achievements of black Americans, as well as the horrors of slavery and the struggle for civil rights. It fittingly opened on the National Mall in September 2016 at a ceremony at which President Barack Obama spoke.

Mr. Bunch, 66, will become the Smithsonian's 14th Secretary.

"Lonnie Bunch guided, from concept to completion, the complex effort to build the premier museum celebrating African American achievements," John G. Roberts, Jr., Smithsonian Chancellor and Chief Justice of the United States, said in a statement. "I look forward to working with him as we approach the Smithsonian's 175th anniversary, to increase its relevance and role as a beloved American institution and public trust."

In the same statement, Mr. Bunch said he looked forward to ensuring "that the Smithsonian will be even more relevant and more meaningful and reach more people in the future."

When he joined the National Museum of African American History in 2005, he faced an uphill task: constructing a new museum from scratch, working with Congress to fund the museum, attracting big name donors, and building a collection from nothing.

The result was a new public museum at the heart of Washington's cultural landscape designed by the Tanzanian-born architect David Adjaye to evoke a crown motif from ancient Yoruban sculpture, or

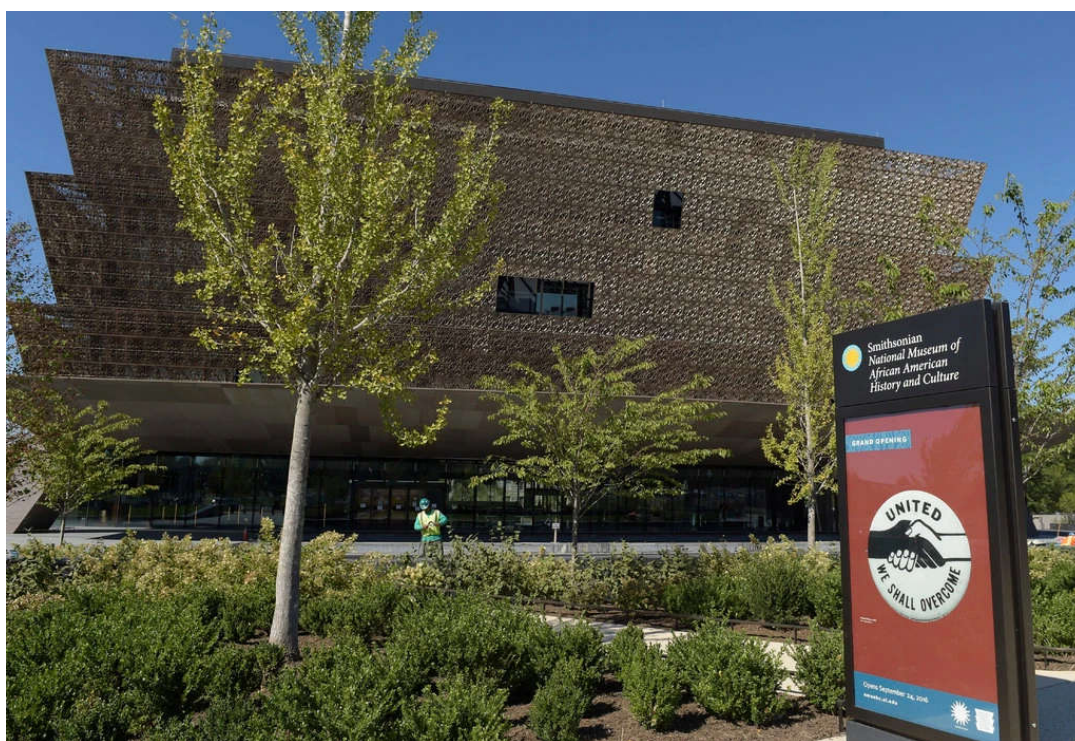
alternatively women's hands lifted to the sky in prayer.

All along, Mr. Bunch insisted he did not want to create a public space for a black audience only, but for all Americans. The African-American story, he said, was an American story, as central to the country's narrative as any other, and understanding black history and culture is essential to understanding American history and culture.

On Tuesday, the Smithsonian said the distinctive museum he had played such an important role in bringing into being had gathered a collection of 40,000 objects and attracted 4 million visitors since it opened.

Many of the objects gathered by Mr. Bunch's team were treasures donated by ordinary people. It ran an "Antiques Roadshow"-style project in 15 cities that encouraged people to give heirlooms from their closets and attics.

He was appointed to the secretary position following a search by an 11-member committee led by David Rubenstein, chair of the Smithsonian Board of Regents, and Steve Case, vice chair.



The National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington.

Mr. Bunch replaces David J. Skorton, a cardiologist and former president of Cornell, who announced in December he was leaving his position to return to the world of health care and medicine as head of a nonprofit organization. He had served as secretary since July 2015.

Dr. Skorton had succeeded G. Wayne Clough, another former university president, who had led the Smithsonian for seven years.

During Dr. Skorton's four-year tenure he oversaw important milestones and the completion of a \$1.88 billion capital campaign. He also was in charge of the Smithsonian's strategic plan, which includes ambitions to reach a greater audience. But perhaps the Smithsonian's highest profile success during his tenure was the opening of the new National Museum of African American History and Culture under Mr. Bunch's directorship.

Mr. Bunch has spent his career in museums. He was the president of the Chicago Historical Society and had experience working inside other Smithsonian museums: the National Museum of American History and the National Air and Space Museum.

In a statement, Mr. Rubenstein said Mr. Bunch "is a deeply respected scholar, educator and leader."

After "birthing a wildly successful startup within the Smithsonian," Mr. Case said, Mr. Bunch had "a vision for driving cross-institutional collaboration to create a virtual Smithsonian that can reach everybody, everywhere."

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