

EXECUTIVE PROFILE

The art of reopening



COLLEEN DUGAN

Chase F. Robinson, director of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and Freer Gallery of Art, speaks at an exhibition opening reception in 2019.

Chase F. Robinson became director of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian in late 2018.

A year and a half later, he's seen the galleries through a government shutdown and pandemic that have, so far, closed the museums for nearly four months out of the 17 he's been in charge.

It's a unique situation that's left him with many lessons – “the professionalism and commitment of our staff is certainly one,” he says.

Now, he's working with Smithsonian leadership to plan for the future, including the eventual reopening of the galleries during the Covid-19 pandemic and the 100th anniversary for the Freer Gallery in 2023.

When did you first realize the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic might have on the gallery? For lots of reasons, I had early warnings. As a museum that's devoted mainly to Asian and Middle Eastern art, we have close ties with institutions the world over. I've spent half of my adult life living abroad. Our museum is part of a global supply chain of culture – people and objects flowing from museum to museum – and this was starting to be disrupted. By late January, we'd grown concerned.

What plans are in place for reopening? Plans are still being formed, but the imperative will clearly be to protect the health of our staff and the public. They will be phased and incremental. There may be staggered dates and hours, varying from one museum to the next. Social distancing measures will be put in place.

You penned a piece in USA Today about the role the National Museum of Asian Art can play in countering xenophobia. Can you talk about the

► THE BASICS

CHASE F. ROBINSON

Dame Jillian Sackler director, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution

Age: 57

Residence: Falls Church

Education: Bachelor's in independent studies, Brown University; Ph.D. in Near Eastern languages and civilizations, Harvard University

Family: Married, two grown children

First job: On a Saturday morning cleaning crew in a local mall

role you see art playing in this effort? Xenophobia can be triggered or exacerbated by political and social anxieties; history shows that war and pandemics are especially powerful. Ultimately, however, it's the byproduct of unfamiliarity. When we state our values and mission, we don't merely describe the breadth of our collection or beauty of our galleries. We also propose the impact that we want them to have: to foster understanding and respect and to generate empathy. Trying to experience the world as others do, however imperfectly, is an act of solidarity.

How have you personally been handling the stresses of the past several months? We have two retired greyhounds, two cats and about 20 koi. Know it or not, they contribute mightily to our physical and emotional well-being. But I've been concerned mainly about the well-being of my staff, who are coping with the anxieties caused by closed schools, remote work, concern for the health of friends and loved ones and the like.

What's something that's been bringing you joy over the last few months? I've spent more time in my garden – pulling weeds, planting seeds and pruning trees – than I'm willing to admit.

Looking back, what's a moment in your career that you're particularly proud of? I spent the first 14 years of my career at Oxford. When I was a young parent, with young kids, with very little seniority or even much experience, the university showed immodest confidence in my abilities and promise – and gave me the responsibilities to exercise them.

What's a dream exhibit or piece you'd like to see at one of the Smithsonian galleries? Thanks to the collecting appetite of James McNeill Whistler's patron, Charles Lang Freer, we have the world's largest collection of Whistler's works. What we don't have, because it's in Paris, is his iconic portrait, “Whistler's Mother,” formally known as Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1.

Favorite museums to visit outside of D.C.: The Pergamon Museum in Berlin and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston.

Favorite under-the-radar art or cultural site in Greater Washington: For fans of Frank Lloyd Wright, modernist architecture in general and/or cantilevered roofs in particular, how about the Pope-Leighey House in Alexandria? A lean machine of a house – not a single wasted space.

– Interview by Emily Van Zandt

Read the full interview
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