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# Ngaire Blankenberg, new director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art



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Ngaire Blankenberg, director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington. © Ngaire Blankenberg's personal archives.

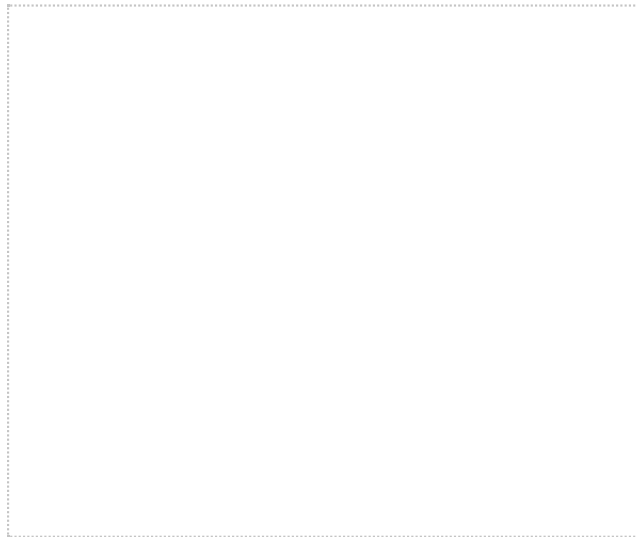
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**Who is Ngaire Blankenberg, who has been head of the prestigious Smithsonian National Museum of African Art (NMAfA) in Washington since July 6? This independent consultant, a South African national, born in Canada to South African and New Zealand parents, has an impressive career. Over the past two decades, she has collaborated with 55 museums in more than 40 cities around the world. Among her most recent collaborations, she cites the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, her hometown, the Geneva Museum of Ethnography (MEG), the Al-Ula project in Saudi Arabia and the new Museum and Archive of the Constitution at the Hill (MARCH) in Johannesburg.**

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A teacher at the International University of Catalonia, based in Barcelona in recent years, Ngaire Blankenberg co-authored *Of Cities, Museums and Soft Power* (AMM Press, 2015). This book on the role of museums in the 21st century starts from *the* observation that "*Paris, for example, does not have the same influence as France, just as Barcelona does not shine like all of Spain. The museum, tinged with colonialism in Europe and endowed with special diplomacy, has changed. Modern museums no longer carry a necessarily national imagination, but rather are linked to the large cities that house them, the places where current crises are most felt, whether in terms of housing, inequality, migration and xenophobia.*"

## Transformation in sight at the Smithsonian

Open mind and strong personality, Ngaire Blankenberg says he is "*very honored to work in the new direction that the great public institution represented by the **Smithsonian** wants to take*". And for good reason: this huge institution serves as the federal Department of Culture, with 19 museums and 21 libraries across the United States, not to mention the National Zoo in Washington. Its new director since 2019, African-American historian Lonnie Bunch, founded the **National Museum of African American History and Culture** in 2005. Starting from scratch, it assembled a collection of 40,000 pieces and made the museum a central point of attraction, with 6 million visitors between 2016 and 2019.

*"His view of the necessary transformation of museums makes the mission exciting,"* says Ngaire Blankenberg, who has immense respect for him. She is ready to start from these questions: *"What does it mean to be an African art museum in the United States? What is the relationship, both local and transnational, between this national museum and its city, Washington, where 55% of the population is made up of African Americans and migrants from the African diaspora? What is the museum's responsibility towards the continent and the diaspora, whether in the Caribbean, Central America or Europe?"*

## From television to museum practice in Johannesburg

Ngaire Blankenberg arrived at this summit as a self-taught, driven by his curiosity and sense of freedom. Modest, she says she has "*more width than depth*", because she does not have the classic background of museum directors - long studies in art history and conservation. When she decided to leave Ottawa to move to South Africa in 1997, it was to continue her journalism studies there, with a master's degree in Arts, Media and Cultural Studies from the University of Natal.

She makes documentaries and programs in Johannesburg for a production house that offers her a fork, when she wants to change her pace of work, after the birth of her two children. *"The company had won the contract to transform Constitution Hill Prison in Johannesburg into a museum,"* she says. *The project was part of historical heritage, tourism and education. My team has been self-educated, moving from a way of telling stories on television to a way of telling stories in three dimensions. The objective was for the museum, an instrument of conservation and inclusion, to have an impact in post-apartheid South Africa."*

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## A historical and contemporary collection

The NMAfA in Washington, D.C., whose former director Augustus Casely-Hayford, a British native of Ghana, left in early 2020, is therefore waiting for its new director. It will be installed as soon as the restrictions related to Covid allow it, to find a unique collection, both historical and contemporary. The latest acquisitions range from traditional wedding baskets to recent works by Malawian-born visual artist Billie Zangewa.

Long interested in decolonization, Ngaire Blankenberg believes that the stakes arise differently depending on the regions of the world: "*In Africa, post-colony museums are in a lamentable state, while in Europe, there are fairly racist colonial institutions, dominated by white officials with a particular culture and type of dynamic, which must be dismantled*".

A diligent reader of Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe, she cites among her current readings *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (AK Press, 2020) by African-American poet and activist Alexis Pauline Gumbs. A reflection on how marine mammals protect their offspring from climate change, which reminds her of another essay that is equally important to her, Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom of the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in the Ruins of Capitalism* (The Discovery, 2017). Suffice to say that the change at the NMAfA promises to be radical.

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