

Smithsonian Names New Leader of National Museum of the American Indian

Cynthia Chavez Lamar, an acting associate curator, will be director of the museum, which has one of the largest collections of Native and Indigenous items in the world.



By Sarah Bahr

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The Smithsonian Institution has named Cynthia Chavez Lamar as the new director of the National Museum of the American Indian.

Chavez Lamar — who is a member of San Felipe Pueblo, a Native American tribe in New Mexico’s middle Rio Grande Valley — will assume the post on Feb. 14.

“I don’t see this as something that I have achieved on my own,” Chavez Lamar, who is also of Hopi, Tewa and Navajo heritage, said in a phone interview on Tuesday.

“There are many Native and Indigenous peoples before me who have been in prominent roles,” she added, “who have struggled and persevered to ensure that our stories and our perspectives as Native people were heard.”

Chavez Lamar, 51, has served as the museum's acting associate director for collections and operations since January 2021. She has been the assistant director for collections since 2014.

She will oversee the museum's three facilities: the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington; the George Gustav Heye Center in New York; and the Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Md., which houses the museum's collections, conservation laboratories, and curatorial and repatriation offices.

She earned a doctorate in American studies from the University of New Mexico, a master's in American Indian studies from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a bachelor's in studio art from Colorado College.

Chavez Lamar will be the third director of the museum, whose Washington location opened in 2004. She succeeds Kevin Gover, a citizen of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, who left in January 2021 after 14 years. He is now the Smithsonian's under secretary for museums and culture. Machel Monenerkit, who is a citizen of the Comanche Nation, has served as the museum's acting director since Gover's departure.

The museum has one of the largest collections of Native and Indigenous items in the world — with more than a million objects and photographs and more than 500,000 digitized images, films and other media.

“I've endeavored to connect Native and Indigenous peoples to the collection,” said Chavez Lamar, who said she plans to remain in Washington. “Moving forward, that is something that I think is particularly important for the National Museum of the American Indian.”