



Museums & Heritage // News

Smithsonian women's history museum names its first director

Nancy Yao, the director of New York's Museum of Chinese in America, will take the helm at the in-development Washington, DC museum in June

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Nancy Yao
Courtesy the Smithsonian Institution

Nancy Yao—who has been the director of New York’s Museum of Chinese in America (Moca) since 2015 and previously held positions at Yale University, Goldman Sachs, the Council on Foreign Relations and elsewhere—has been hired to be the first director for the Smithsonian Institution’s [American Women’s History Museum](#), which is in advanced development stages.

“Museums play a critical role at the nexus of scholarship and public access,” Yao said in a statement, adding that building a space to tell “the stories of American women will take intentional conversations, creative inputs and energetic curation”.

The planned Washington, DC museum, which was [formally created](#) by the US Congress in 2020, is expected to take shape at a [yet-to-be-determined site](#) on or near the National Mall. Late last month, on the eve of Women’s History Month, the Smithsonian revealed it had already [raised more than \\$55m](#) toward the project.

Yao has seen Moca through a transformative if turbulent period. Shortly before the onset of Covid-19, a fire tore through the Chinatown building that housed much of the museum’s archive, [destroying or damaging](#) many materials. In 2021 the museum [cancelled](#) a planned exhibition focused on the Asian American art collective Godzilla after several members withdrew from the show in protest of what they saw as the museum’s support for the construction of an enormous new jail complex in the neighbourhood. The cancellation did little to assuage critics of Moca, who [protested the museum’s post-pandemic reopening](#) over board co-chair Jonathan Chu’s alleged complicity in the gentrification of Manhattan’s Chinatown and the museum’s alleged support for the jail project.

Amid those challenges and controversies, Yao has steered Moca toward an [ambitious \\$118m expansion](#) that will be designed by artist and architect Maya Lin. The project will more than triple the museum’s footprint and is expected to open in 2025.

“The last eight years have been hard; everything that could possibly hit us did,” Yao told [The New York Times](#) [↗](#). “I started wondering if someone would see my potential value for another place of work.”

Yao will take over from the museum’s interim director since March 2021, Lisa Sasaki, on 5 June. She joins a staff of 14 working with a federal budget of \$2m.

In addition to the planned American Women’s History Museum, plans to create a [National Museum of Asian Pacific American History and Culture](#) and a [National Museum of the American Latino](#) in Washington, DC are also in planning stages.