

Donors Pledge \$55 Million for Smithsonian's New Museum of American Women

Melinda French Gates, Tory Burch and Alice Walton are among contributors helping the museum deliver on its promise to represent women on the National Mall.

By Zachary Small

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Without a building or even a determined site, leaders for the Smithsonian's proposed American Women's History Museum have spent the past two years drumming up anticipation and support from donors. On Monday, the institution announced more than \$55 million in gifts that will help solidify its financial future, though it has yet to receive final Congressional approval.

"Together, we will create a museum that celebrates the women who have helped build this country," Lisa Sasaki, the museum's interim director, said. "These donations are pivotal in the realization of this vision."

Among the major contributors are the fashion designer Tory Burch, the Walmart billionaire Alice L. Walton and the philanthropist Melinda French Gates. "The stories we tell about our country's history so often overlook the contributions of the women in every generation whose efforts and ideas helped make us who we are today," French Gates said in a statement. "By paying tribute to the women who shaped our past, the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum empowers and inspires the ones who will shape our future."

But the timeline for completing the museum remains uncertain as officials jostle for a prominent spot on the National Mall's promenade that might instead go to another new Smithsonian institution, the National Museum of the American Latino. The alternative location is near the Tidal Basin's eastern shore. Congress still needs to formally designate the spaces.

Regardless of the wait, the American Women's History Museum's 14 employees are working with an annual operating budget of nearly \$2 million to create a wishlist for the institution's collection, which will pull from about 157 million objects in the Smithsonian's possession, and likely new contributions from donors.

"It's a rare opportunity to start a museum from scratch," Sasaki said, adding that the museum would focus on outreach and educational programs that could be used in schools around the country. Half of the Alice L. Walton Foundation's \$10 million gift will support digital education programs, which became an important focus of the museum's planning during the coronavirus pandemic lockdowns.



Lisa Sasaki, the museum's interim director, emphasized that it would not present a singular narrative of womanhood. "From the DNA of this museum, there has been a desire to be inclusive," she said. Smithsonian Institution

Sasaki said the museum would be organized around themes including women's contributions to politics, entertainment and science. When asked about individuals that visitors might expect to see, she named the suffragist and civil rights activist Mary Burnett Talbert, the "Shanghai Express" actress Anna May Wong and the breast cancer researcher Shyamala Gopalan, who was Vice President Kamala Harris's mother.

There is no monolithic experience of womanhood, and Sasaki emphasized that her museum would not attempt to create a singular narrative. The institution will include an oral history program for visitors to submit their own stories, for example. But Sasaki said that she plans to include transgender women, who have been subject to increasing harassment and violence at a time when there is a national discussion, and deep partisan divide, about the acceptance of transgender identities.

Prepared to navigate any potential criticism in the museum-making process, Sasaki has been reading a book by the Smithsonian secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III, "A Fool's Errand," about his experience building the National Museum of African American History and Culture. She gives the book to incoming staff and her advisory council to prompt discussions about what they might encounter.

"We have a job to build a museum that's going to serve the public for a very, very long time," Sasaki said. "From the DNA of this museum, there has been a desire to be inclusive."