

# Smithsonian's Museum of American Women Names Its Founding Director

Nancy Yao will lead the museum as it prepares to select an architect and finalize a location on the National Mall.

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There are still many unanswered questions about the Smithsonian's proposed American Women's History Museum despite the new institution's receiving congressional approval more than two years ago. Nobody knows how much construction will cost, what objects will be displayed in the galleries or precisely where the building will stand on the National Mall in Washington.

But the museum is one step closer to determining its future: On Monday, the Smithsonian Institution announced that Nancy Yao, who currently leads the Museum of Chinese in America, will become the cultural center's founding director.

"Never did I think that I would have this opportunity," Yao said. "You work hard and hope that one day someone will notice."

Lonnie G. Bunch III, the secretary of the Smithsonian, said in a statement that "Nancy's proven experience, skill and leadership will be crucial in bringing to life the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum and enabling it to creatively tell a more robust and complete story about who we are as a nation."

Before entering the museum world, Yao worked for the Council on Foreign Relations and Goldman Sachs. She has also frequently lectured on the governance of nonprofit organizations at the David Geffen School of Drama at Yale University.

For the past eight years, Yao has served as president of the Museum of Chinese in America, an organization based in Manhattan that has faced tragedies and controversies during her tenure.

Early in 2020, a fire destroyed the building where a majority of its collection was stored, though Yao later estimated that almost 98 percent of the 85,000 objects were salvaged. She soon initiated a \$128 million capital campaign to cover the costs of securing a permanent home for the museum designed by Maya Lin; the campaign has raised about half of its target at just more than \$60 million.

But local support for the museum decreased as activists criticized the organization for accepting at least \$35 million from the city, which was investing in Chinatown to gain support for a jail expansion. Yao said that the ordeal was a misunderstanding — that the money came from the city's Department of Cultural Affairs and was unaffiliated with the neighborhood jail. Demonstrators still protested at the museum, and artists withdrew from an exhibition.

"The last eight years have been hard; everything that could possibly hit us did," Yao said. "I started wondering if someone would see my potential value for another place of work."

Since March 2021, Lisa Sasaki has served as the interim director of the American Women's History Museum. Last month she announced more than \$55 million in pledged donations from philanthropists including the fashion designer Tory Burch and the Walmart billionaire Alice L. Walton.

Sasaki said then that the museum would be organized around themes like politics, entertainment and science. But Yao indicated she would scrap those plans when she starts as director in June.

"It will not be topic-based," she said, adding that more research about the programming needed to be done.

"The greatest vision for this museum is that it's a process, and there needs to be both breadth and depth," Yao recalled telling her interviewers. "More broadly, someone might describe this as the history of 167.5 million people in this country — and their ancestors."