

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS
African Museology International Exchange
with the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art

Context: Evolving Museology

As the world's largest museum, education, and research complex with a mission to increase and diffuse knowledge, the Smithsonian Institution (SI), based in Washington, DC (USA), is constantly examining how to share information and reach audiences in more accessible ways – and how to respond to our changing world. Building capacity and capability – of our own staff and of cultural and science sector colleagues globally – is central to how we operate and part of our ethos to advance global practice. In that vein, SI, with leadership from the National Museum of African Art (NMAfA), is examining many professional processes – including collections management and research – to better understand the role of museums in a fast-changing world. As an African art museum, with a large collection of historical and contemporary work from throughout the African continent, NMAfA is seeking to redress the historical reliance on Western knowledge frameworks and academic expertise to conserve, document, frame, and interpret our collection, at the near exclusion of the expertise of those from whom and where the collection originates (i.e., Africa and the African diaspora).

Opportunity for Multi-Way Exchange

In coordination with, and with support from, the U.S. Department of State's Cultural Heritage Center, SI is developing a **two-year cultural exchange program** that will bring together scholars and experts from African nations and the diaspora with U.S. counterparts and institutions. Led by NMAfA and managed by the Smithsonian's Office of International Relations (OIR), the program complements a NMAfA Mellon Foundation grant being implemented by the NMAfA that aims to develop an African museology focused on documentation, care, and research that crosscuts conservators, registrars, archivists, and curators. The project will result in a framework for prioritizing African knowledge in museum practice, collections management, and research policies and procedures appropriate for a 21st-century Global African Art Museum located on any continent.

This exchange program will engage cultural heritage practitioners from the Continent as knowledge-partners and collaborators on Museum **pilot projects** of mutual interest. Projects might include provenance research, research into modes and practices of African knowledge systems and new knowledge production; research into indigenous knowledge-informed conservation and documentation; digital tools for research and engagement; art, heritage, and soft power, and more. Smithsonian staff will have the opportunity to share their knowledge and expertise, as well as learn from program participants.

Together, the exchange cohort and SI staff will develop new and informed approaches to Afro-museology that are domestically and internationally applicable to both NMAfA and African and diaspora museums and art centers. Program participants will have access to diverse experts throughout the Smithsonian, including colleagues at the National Museum of the American Indian who are also actively looking at issues related to indigenous knowledge and how those issues intersect with museum practice. The internal exchange between group members will be an added benefit and contribute to a true multi-way exchange.

Participant Diversity

The Smithsonian and State Department will select **eight individuals** to join this cohort, which will be comprised of a variety of mid-career cultural heritage practitioners (10-15 years of experience). Each of the eight participants will have demonstrated innovative approaches to their practice and be committed to knowledge sharing and to creative and regenerative museum practices that aim to proactively and positively contribute to ongoing individual, community, and social well-being. Each participant should have

an impactful platform from which they engage with diverse communities. 'Cultural heritage practitioners' will be interpreted broadly, recognizing that many people who are the most influential in preserving heritage on the Continent, including artists, curators, educators, media producers, designers, and traditional healers, among others, do not necessarily work in museums. The cohort may represent wide geographic diversity, but each will have a connection to a geography or geographies represented in the NMAfA collection, which applicants can learn more about via the NMAfA website: <https://africa.si.edu/>.

Program Components

The program will have three phases, each described briefly below. Participants are required to participate in all three phases.

Phase 1:

SI will oversee a virtual launch of the program during which the cohort will meet one another and the SI program leads online. The cohort will be familiarized with the Smithsonian Institution, broadly, as well as the NMAfA, and the work of the State Department's Cultural Heritage Center; the group may also be introduced to other relevant U.S. partners and Smithsonian-wide programs of interest and relevance. Early discussions will be focused on reassessing protocols of collections care through an African lens and identifying relevant pilot projects for collaboration and research at the NMAfA.

Phase 2:

The cohort will spend two weeks in the United States (Washington, DC area), with NMAfA serving as the hub of all activity. The group will work closely with each other and with staff from NMAfA to design the pilot projects and explore the collection and collections management practices. In addition to core activities at NMAfA, the cohort will have the opportunity to exchange knowledge and professional approaches with additional SI leadership and change makers through discussion and program observation. They will have the chance to visit multiple SI museums, labs, collections spaces and education spaces, all in the service of promoting dialogue and generating ideas for Africanizing collections care and documentation. They will also interact with Department of State leadership and staff engaged in cultural heritage preservation and protection in Africa and around the world.

Phase 3:

SI will continue to support the cohort, as a group and individually, as they embark on their pilot projects over the next 12 months or so following the DC-based experience. Each participant will receive USD \$5,000 to support the development of their pilots. The group will convene online once every four to six weeks to share learnings, with *ad hoc* discussions or meetings and exchanges happening by teleconference, video conference, or email in between. Each member of the cohort will publicly communicate about their projects in ways they have identified in Phase 1 – such as through blogs, articles, presentations, photo-essays, public programs or exhibitions - either throughout or at the culmination of the pilot project. SI will partner with U.S. embassies in participants' countries to identify ways to amplify the work of the cohort members.

Eligibility - Applicants should have all the following to be considered for selection:

- Ability to participate in all three phases of the program, including ability to travel to the United States in summer or fall 2023 (dates to be determined).
- Solid proficiency in English (spoken and written) and comfort working in a professional context in English.
- Valid passport (by February 2023); passport must not expire before April 2024.

- Willingness and ability to conduct a pilot project upon return to home country to include a public-facing component (i.e., public program, public presentation, etc.).
- Access to reliable internet for conducting regular online meetings organized by the Smithsonian Institution.
- Ability to participate in occasional virtual meetings outside of the hours of 09:00 – 17:00 to connect with the NMAfA and Smithsonian team.
- Must self-identify as a cultural practitioner as broadly defined in the Participant Diversity section of this document.
- A demonstrated connection to objects in the NMAfA collection, which can be explored further here: <https://africa.si.edu/>.

Learning More

The Smithsonian and the State Department’s Cultural Heritage Center hosted a Zoom call to answer specific questions about the program and application process on Friday, 9 December 2022. A link to the session recording is provided below. Please note, the passcode is required to access the recording.

Session Recording: https://smithsonian.zoom.us/rec/play/rxrw53iU3lpDRKlnGmP0gG2PPC2X45-VfVb1K5g7JD5FYJgCt17ECJOLkOAbGM8qG6KBMj_eQZwL1O3s.JpunQsA_dWr3A2By

Passcode: z.ZyOLTW

Interested individuals should submit the below, each as a separate attachment (four (4) total), to Global@si.edu with subject line “NMAfA Program Application” no later than 11:59pm ET on Monday, 2 January 2023:

- 1) A statement of interest, in English, about participation in the program (no more than three pages, size 12 font, and double-spaced). Within the statement, applicants should describe their own cultural practice and potential or existing ties to the NMAfA collection.
- 2) A one-paragraph description in English of how the applicant will work with an area of focus from the list below for the project duration. This area of focus will form the basis of the pilot projects participants will carry out once back to their home countries. The paragraph should identify how the area of focus can impact their cultural practice.
 - a. Collection Strategy Plan—NMAfA is in the process of reviewing and rewriting how to approach adding to the collection going forward
 - b. African Naming Project—NMAfA’s database administrator, along with their archivist, is looking at how they use terminology in cataloguing and in their database
 - c. Objects of Concern (e.g., from conflict zones; funerary objects)
 - d. African Museology, which is looking at the following:
 - i. identification of objects needing special handling: gender-restricted; powerful; sacred
 - ii. handling, storage, and exhibition of objects with special requirements
 - iii. traditional care protocols
- 3) Resume in English
- 4) One letter of support in English (letter can speak to applicant’s background, experience, creativity/innovation, or other qualifications)

Applicants must submit all requested materials listed above by the deadline to be eligible for selection. Applicants will be evaluated based on suitability for the program and materials provided. Final applicants may be invited to participate in a virtual interview. Due to the volume of applications, it is likely that only finalists will be contacted.