

Voices and Visions for Our Future

Strategic Plan: Executive Summary | 2024-2028

Foreword



As the United States' first federal art collection, founded in 1829, the Smithsonian American Art Museum and its Renwick Gallery (SAAM) steward the most comprehensive and inclusive collection of American art and is a leader in the collection, study, conservation, and enjoyment of American visual culture. From painting to sculpture, folk art to photography, and video games to contemporary craft, we celebrate artists whose work reflects the American experience and the diversity of regions, cultures, and traditions of the United States.

SAAM provides a unique experience to visitors and scholars, inviting them to enjoy and find deeper understanding within a collection that spans more than four centuries and consists of over 48,000 artworks in all media by more than 7,000 artists. The Smithsonian American Art Museum includes the Luce Foundation Center for American Art, the first visible art storage and study center in the nation's capital; the Lunder Conservation Center, where visitors can see conservators at work; across town is the Renwick Gallery, our branch museum dedicated

to American craft. Our commitment to research and teaching is another defining characteristic that expands the Museum's impact and reach. The Museum fuels innovation in American art scholarship through its Research and Scholars Center, which provides emerging and established scholars with financial support, publication guidance, unparalleled research resources, and access to a network of colleagues at the Smithsonian and experts in the field. Through our distance learning programs and summer teacher institutes, we also reach teachers, classrooms, and adult learners across the country and around the world.

As a steward of the nation's collection of American art, SAAM has an ambitious set of mandates. First and foremost, we serve the country by collecting, preserving, exhibiting, and generating scholarship on the art and craft of the United States that reflects all time periods and all art movements, as well as the diversity of our nation's people. We also serve the public by telling stories about American identities and histories through art, both on-site and online.



Cover: SAAM's newly reinstalled modern and contemporary galleries. Photo by Ron Blunt

Top left: Stephanie Stebich in front of Louise Nevelson's *Sky Cathedral*. Photo by Libby Weiler

Left: Smithsonian American Art Museum. Photo by Tim Hursley

Right: SAAM's Renwick Gallery. Photo by Ron Blunt

Page 3: Visitors in *Experience America*. Photo by Albert Ting

Note: In keeping with our name—the Smithsonian American Art Museum—we use the term “America” / “American” and “United States” interchangeably to refer to the United States of America. Further, throughout this plan, references to SAAM or the Smithsonian American Art Museum as an organization also include its branch museum dedicated to craft, the Renwick Gallery.



We engage the millions of people who visit our museum each year, along with those who participate in our educational and training programming, see our traveling exhibitions across the country, and access our digital platforms from around the world. We undertake these mandates at the highest level, heeding James Smithson’s call for “the increase and diffusion of knowledge” to drive us forward.

As we chart the future of SAAM through this strategic plan, we also reflect on the present moment. Faced with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and seismic societal changes, we nonetheless position ourselves for the future. During the past four years, we have significantly increased our profile through collaboration with other Smithsonian museums, US government agencies, and cultural institutions



nationally and internationally. We have redoubled our commitment to being first in museum technology. We have furthered our leadership in developing unique multi-faceted exhibitions like *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man* (2018–19) as well as projects demonstrating our strength in scholarship like *Alexander von Humboldt and the United States: Art, Nature, and Culture* (2020–21). Recent notable collection acquisitions include a significant Amish quilt collection, contemporary Native American art, and the *L. J. West Collection of Early African American Photography*. We have also secured our financial sustainability through a spate of fundraising milestones, raising over \$5 million for the Renwick Gallery's fiftieth anniversary, exceeding a \$10 million fundraising campaign for fellowship and academic programs, and raising \$92 million of our \$100 million current campaign goal, part of the broader Smithsonian Institution's \$2.5 billion campaign for 2026.

With these successes in hand, this new strategic plan sets out even greater ambitions for our local, national, and international impact through service. We seek, above all, to lead in the scholarship of American art and craft. We aim to do so boldly, with a collection that expands the voices and visions for the field and exhibitions that provoke wonder in audiences around the world. We will continue to build on our strengths in research and ties to field-defining scholars and the next generation of American art historians to add a depth to our work that makes it stand out among our peers. We strive to provide a best-in-class, accessible visitor experience and to ensure that our programs increase our relevance, reach, and impact around the world. We commit to maintaining our leadership in the use of museum technologies to help us reach these aspirations. In all these efforts, we endeavor to recognize shared expertise and develop the staff across the institution who make these public manifestations possible, including administration, conservation, curatorial, exhibition design, development, research and scholars center, publications, education, external affairs, digital strategies and many more.

In his installation as the Fourteenth Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III announced his ambition that the Smithsonian be "the place Americans look to understand themselves, their history, and their world. We must be the glue that helps to hold the country together." SAAM has a crucial role to play in that powerful vision. Art has a unique ability to help us better understand ourselves and others. And artists help us see the world differently. We believe art can be a tool to teach us how to think about where we come from and how to create a more just future for all going forward.

—Stephanie Stebich

The Margaret and Terry Stent Director,
Smithsonian American Art Museum and Renwick Gallery





Page 4: SAAM family days. Photos by Norwood Photography

Top: Alicia Eggert's *This Present Moment* on view at SAAM's Renwick Gallery. Photo by Albert Ting

Above left: Visitor examining works in *J. P. Ball and Robert S. Duncanson: An African American Artistic Collaboration*. Photo by Albert Ting

Above right: Visitors in front of works by Jeffrey Gibson. Photo by Albert Ting

Our Mission

Sharing the stories of our nation through American art and craft to inspire reflection, spark dialogue, and build connection.



Bisa Butler's *Don't Tread on Me, God Damn, Let's Go! - The Harlem Hellfighters* on view at SAAM's Renwick Gallery. Photo by Albert Ting

Our Vision

SAAM is a place to picture yourself in American art. As the global leader and trusted source on American art and craft, we engage our community, the nation, and the world by exploring tradition and innovation while showcasing the bold and unexpected. We celebrate a wide range of artistic expressions, reminding us that we are all makers.



Visitors enjoying SAAM's photography collection in the newly reinstalled modern and contemporary galleries. Photo by Albert Ting

Our Values

- Curiosity and Joy
- Accessibility and Inclusion
- Respect and Engagement
- Excellence and Leadership
- Sustainability and Care



Top: SAAM painting conservators at work in the Lunder Conservation Center.
Above: Local DC bands perform at Luce Unplugged music series. Photo by Jacob Medley
Right: Opening celebration of *Sharing Honors and Burdens: Renwick Invitational 2023*. Photo by Pixelme Studios

Our Goals

To remain a leader in the years to come and to offer a compelling, twenty-first-century museum experience, we will focus on four key goals to guide our future.

1. Shape the field of American art and craft.

SAAM will undertake bold, innovative exhibitions, research, and educational programming that capture the imagination of the nation and the world to expand perspectives and build the ecosystem of American art and craft.

2. Offer our visitors a highly accessible and engaging museum experience.

SAAM will enhance how visitors of all backgrounds can see themselves belonging at SAAM, in our buildings and in our digital spaces.

3. Raise the visibility of SAAM locally, nationally, and globally.

SAAM will develop branding and communications strategies and use programs like traveling exhibitions and community partnerships to reach more people.

4. Foster an effective, creative, and collaborative work environment.

SAAM will continue its growth into a great place for our people to work together to fulfill our mission and goals. We will demonstrate our values—Curiosity and Joy, Accessibility and Inclusion, Respect and Engagement, Excellence and Leadership, Sustainability and Care—across all of our activities.



Above: Visitor watching Carrie Mae Weems's *Lincoln, Lonnie, and Me - A Story in 5 Parts*. Photo by Albert Ting
Right: Teachers from across the country gather for one of SAAM's summer teacher institutes. Photo by Peg Koetsch



Across all four goals, there will be areas of focus for all our work

Inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility

In accordance with SAAM's 2021 IDEA Roadmap and the American Alliance of Museums' 2022 "Excellence in DEAI" report recommendations, the principles of inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility will connect across all of SAAM's work. We will expand the scope of who and what we represent in our galleries—ensuring that our collections and exhibitions reflect a fuller story of American art and craft—as we aspire to have people from all backgrounds feel welcome and see themselves represented at SAAM.

Data-driven understanding

To accomplish our vision, we must understand our audiences through research. We must develop and deploy data intelligently to continually improve our programs and activities. Such data will guide our staff's expertise and will help us be the best possible organization.

Digital engagement

Arts and cultural institutions are reconsidering their digital tools, using them to reach people who do not attend cultural spaces because of historic exclusion, distance,

a lack of disposable income, or other systemic reasons, and as a way to improve our internal collaboration. Expanding these tools and making them more accessible increases the diversity of access to cultural experiences; grows awareness, reach, affinity, and inclusion while creating opportunities for conversion in the future; and supports the deployment of new and emerging ideas in our exhibitions, programs, and other activities.

Ensuring sustainability

We must work efficiently and sustainably to ensure that our activities are aligned to our financial, environmental, and human resources, enabling our staff to carry out our work with creativity and pride befitting the home of our nation's art collection. To do so, we must plan and coordinate effectively across departments and levels and develop new streams of revenue. As we become a more climate-sensitive organization by preparing for and mitigating the impacts of the climate crisis, we will empower people (both staff and visitors) to turn knowledge into action so that generations to come can make informed choices. We must steward our resources carefully for a more sustainable future.

Above: Janet Echelman's *1.8 Renwick*. Photo by Bruce Petschek



Looking Ahead: The Future of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum leads the field of American art and craft in all areas of activity—through its collection, exhibitions, research and scholarship, education initiatives, public programming, visitor experience, and working environment.

This five-year strategic plan builds on SAAM's institutional history as a leader in expanding conceptions of American art and craft. Our strong holdings in self-taught art and craft contribute to a diverse collection. Notable works by African American and women artists demonstrate a distinctively inclusive, democratic perspective on what constitutes American art and creativity that embraces both uncredentialed artists and makers as well as academically trained ones. SAAM's scholarship and research programs—including the Luce Foundation Center for American Art, Lunder Conservation Center, Research and Scholars Center, and the academic journal *American Art*—play a vital role in the U.S. art historical ecosystem. Our foundation of leadership in sharing our collections through traveling exhibitions and educational programs—both throughout the United States and across the globe—are bolstered by the Smithsonian Institution's 2022-27 strategic plan, "Our Shared Future."

Effective strategic ambitions must be situated within the wider operating context, which has grown more complex in the cultural sector due to changes in visitation, audience expectations, and staffing caused in part by the

COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the development of this plan, SAAM assessed trends affecting the sector as well as its peers. Some shifts that emerged as particularly salient were an increased focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the cultural sector and beyond; a new understanding of how changes in workplaces affect arts organizations; a renewed need for museums to consider their relationships to varied communities and ecosystems; and greater emphasis on the possibilities digital tools present for increasing audience engagement, reach, and accessibility. We also align our ambitions to those set out by the Smithsonian Institution's 2022-27 strategic plan, particularly its mandates to "be a trusted source that explores and grapples with what it means to be American," to "ensure that every home and classroom can access the Smithsonian's digital content," and to "build a nimble and effective Smithsonian so we can better achieve our mission." As the oldest and largest Smithsonian art museum, SAAM is well positioned both to contribute to the realization of these initiatives and to develop strategies and best practices that can be replicated by other art museums as well as Smithsonian museums and research centers.

SAAM looks forward to a dynamic future and is committed to sharing the stories of our nation through American art and craft to inspire reflection, spark dialogue, and build connection.

Top: Visitor in the exhibition *Many Wests: Artists Shape an American Idea*, a groundbreaking, multi-year, joint curatorial initiative between SAAM and four collaborating partner museums. Photo by Albert Ting



SAAM

Smithsonian
American Art
Museum

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—**Stephanie Stebich**, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director,
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