

**Smithsonian Institution**  
**National Museum of African Art**

**Director:** Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole

**Total Full-Time Employees:** 29

**Annual Budget (federal and trust) FY 2008:** \$6 million

**Approximate Number of Artworks:** 10,000

**Background**

The Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art is the only national museum in the United States dedicated to the collection, exhibition, conservation and study of the arts of Africa. The building houses the museum's collection, exhibition galleries, public education facilities, an art conservation laboratory, a research library and photographic archives.

Founded in 1964 by the late Warren M. Robbins as a private educational institution, the Museum of African Art occupied a town house once owned by Frederick Douglass, a former slave, newspaper editor, abolitionist and statesman. The museum had a few examples of Douglass memorabilia, and was given a fine collection of 19th-century paintings by African American artists. The collection of African material was relatively small and so exhibitions of African art were often of loaned materials.

The museum's entrance pavilion is a welcoming introduction to Africa, its art, peoples and cultures. Visitors are greeted with traditional and contemporary African music, as well as a film that runs continuously. The space also is home to interactive computer stations that allow visitors to access information about museum exhibitions and programs, objects in the permanent collection and facts about Africa-related events taking place at other Smithsonian venues.

In 1979, the Museum of African Art became part of the Smithsonian Institution following an Act of Congress, and in 1981 it was officially renamed the National Museum of African Art. In 1983, Sylvia H. Williams and Roy Sieber joined the museum as director and associate director for research and collections, respectively. Plans were made for a new facility on the National Mall that would be accessible to a new and larger audience, and in 1987, under the leadership of Williams, the museum was relocated to its current facility at 950 Independence Avenue S.W.

**Collections**

The museum's collection of more than 9,000 African art objects represents nearly every area of the continent of Africa and contains a variety of media and art forms—textiles, Photography, sculpture, pottery, painting and jewelry and video art—dating from ancient to contemporary times.

The museum has the largest publicly held collection of contemporary African art in the

United States.

### **Exhibitions**

The museum has nearly 22,000 square feet of exhibition space, which is reconfigured periodically to meet the requirements of the museum's changing exhibitions. The Sylvia H. Williams Gallery, located on sub-level one, is devoted primarily to contemporary art; the Walt Disney-Tishman African Art Collection has a dedicated space in the museum to rotate a selection of the 525 objects from this collection; and the remaining galleries offer exhibitions on various subjects.

Exhibitions for 2012/14 include both traditional and contemporary subjects:

The Walt Disney-Tishman African Art Collection Highlights – ongoing.

African Mosaic: Celebrating a Decade of Collecting – ongoing.

Lalla Essaydi: Revisions May 9, 2012 – December 9, 2012

African Cosmos - June 19, 2012 – December 9, 2012

Elliott Elisofon Photographic Exhibition- October 2013 – January. 2014

Chief S.O. Alonge: Photographer to the Court of Benin, 1926-1989 – February. 5, 2014 - August. 24, 2014

### **Education and Research**

The National Museum of African Art offers a variety of educational programs, including lectures, films, storytelling, musical performances, young people's workshops, teacher's workshops, and conservation and curatorial clinics. The museum also has programs and activities at Washington, D.C., area schools and embassies.

The Warren M. Robbins Library, named for the museum's founder, is a branch of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries system and supports research, exhibitions and public programs of the museum. It is the major resource center in the world for the research and study of the visual arts of Africa, and houses more than 32,000 volumes on African art, history and culture. It is open to scholars and the general public by appointment Monday through Friday.

The museum also houses the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, named for the famed *Life* magazine photographer. Elisofon's association with the National Museum of African Art began as a founding trustee in 1964. Upon his death in 1973, he donated his African related materials to the museum, including more than 50,000 black-and-white negatives and photographs, 30,000 color slides and 120,000 feet of motion picture film and sound materials. The bequest became the foundation for the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives.

Since 1973, the archives holdings have grown to include more than 180,000 slides and color transparencies and 80,000 black-and-white photographs. In addition to the collection of Eliot Elisofon, major collections include approximately 5,000 black-and-white photographs taken by Constance Stuart Larrabee in South Africa between 1936 and 1983, more than 10,000 slides depicting Yoruba art and culture by Henry Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal and a historical collection of about 13,000 postcards. Special collections include late 19th- and early 20th-century photographic albums with significant anthropological and historical research value.