From the Hill to the Castle: Warren Robbins and the Founding of the National Museum of African Art

by

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Preface

Upon my first visit to the National Museum of African Art in March of 2011, I wondered, “How did we get a museum about African art and culture before getting a museum about African American art and culture on the Mall?” My inquiry into this question led me to the museum’s history. I started this thesis project in July of 2011, hoping to discuss the history of American minority museums, focusing on the founding of the National Museum of African Art as my primary example. I began by researching and writing the early history of the museum before it joined the Smithsonian Institution in 1979, which today is considered to be its official founding date.¹

Within the first day of my research, I realized that a comprehensive history of the museum’s early history from its founding as a private museum by Warren Robbins in 1964 to its joining the Smithsonian in 1979 did not exist. I aimed to accomplish this project by researching archived newspaper articles and the museum papers at the Smithsonian Institution Archives. I inquired about two accessions, 10-096 “National Museum of African Art, Office of the Director, Correspondence, 1963-2009” and 10-117 “National Museum of African Art, Office of the Director, NMAfA Files, 1964-2008,” both includes Warren Robbins’s personal papers for the period before 1979. I learned that these accessions were restricted for public viewing until January of 2025 and 2024, respectively. This restriction created a major dilemma in how I was to write the museum’s history. In order to circumvent this major block in

my anticipated research, I began reaching out to past and current museum staff members that had known the museum’s founder, Warren Robbins, personally.

First, I reached out to National Museum of African Art librarian, Janet Stanley, who had joined the museum in 1979 during its transition into the Smithsonian Institution. She connected me to Robbins’s widow, Lydia Robbins, (née Puccinelli) and his biographer Elaine Sooy Goodman. Robbins’s had personally asked Goodman to write his biography and shortly before his death he authorized her manuscript. Goodman’s biography focuses on his personal story and provided me with crucial insight and personal accounts that helped round out the museum’s history before joining the Smithsonian.

On November 18, 2011, I met with Mrs. Robbins’s in her home in Washington, D.C. for an interview. During this visit, she gifted me a book entitled Speaking of Introductions that was published for private circulation for museum friends and donors. The book mostly includes biographies written by Robbins for various museum lecturers and longtime supporters. Most importantly, the book also contains copies of letters written to Robbins by public figures and several documents that outlines his goals for the museum.

By critically studying Robbins’s personal papers, financial reports, archived newspaper articles, Goodman’s manuscript, and by interviewing Janet Stanley and Lydia Robbins, I wrote a comprehensive history of the museum between 1964 and 1979. After writing an overview of the museum’s history during this period, I began looking at its political context, which was referred to in some of these accounts, but was not fully discussed. In order to critically engage with the museum’s goals, I
studied the accounts found in my research in context of national and local politics to understand the museum’s complex significance.

I received permission from Janet Stanley, Lydia Robbins, and Elaine Sooy Goodman to quote them and their given material. Without their contribution my project would have not been made possible. With the combination of oral histories and archival research, I created a comprehensive history and accompanying critical analysis of the Museum of African Art’s founding and early history.
Introduction

*Museums perform their most fruitful public service by providing an educational experience in the broadest sense: by fostering the ability to live in a pluralistic society and to contribute to the resolution of challenges we face as global citizens...*

-American Association of Museums, 1992

Today, the National Museum of African Art (NMAA) serves as an example of the potential, limitations, and symbolic power of the American museum. In November of 2011, the museum held a workshop sponsored by the African Studies Association. The museum’s director, Dr. Johnnetta Cole, outlined new initiatives, including an outreach program that planned to have African immigrant community leaders join the museum as members of an advisory board. This initiative to bring more of a community element to the museum’s programming was met with great enthusiasm and yielded a lot of questions from the audience of scholars, museum administrators, and African art aficionados. It was received as a new and revolutionary approach to how the museum presents African objects.

Yet, the NMAA’s early history and mission before it was incorporated into the Smithsonian in 1979 represented something much more revolutionary: it fully aimed to function as what a museum dedicated to a minority group should, and potentially could, be. When I began researching the museum’s history, I came across only a few journal articles that summarized the museum’s early history in a couple of paragraphs. I learned that Warren Robbins founded the Museum of African Art (MAA) in 1964 “as an instrument of cross-cultural understanding,” specifically
between black and white Americans.² Living in Washington, D.C. during the early 1960s, Robbins aligned his goals with the integrationist approach of the Civil Rights Movement, using the museum as a forum for creating a dialogue among members of its audiences.

In trying to understand why Robbins created a museum with such a specific socio-political goal, I found I needed to go beyond the object on display to look at how and why the museum began during this period. Unlike most museum founders, Robbins was not a wealthy art patron who founded a museum to house his personal collection. Instead of fulfilling the traditional museum role as a repository for the formal display of art, the institution he had in mind from the outset was a community-based museum intended primarily for a black audience.³

Robbins’s intentions did not receive unanimous support from the black community. When the MAA began garnering more press and recognition from local government officials, some black critics contested Robbins’s mission on the grounds that he was white. While black middle-class residents initially needed to be persuaded that African art could bring credit to the race, they eventually became the biggest supporters of the new museum. From its founding, based on Civil Rights integrationist rhetoric, and through its alliance with Democratic government officials

² Elaine Sooy Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.” Unpublished manuscript used with permission by the author. Note: All quoted material from this text may now be in the Smithsonian Institutions Archives.
³ Name changes of African Americans reflect changing racial discourses. My use of terminology: I use black during points of analysis and African American, specifically when speaking in points related to African art, culture, and politics to not confuse the subject I am referring to.
during its campaign to join the Smithsonian, the museum draws its historical significance from black politics.

The issue of the ownership of a group’s identity is revisited in each chapter of my thesis. First the black middle class wanted to disown African art. Then participants in the Black Arts Movement wished to re-appropriate African art to create a separate Black American identity. Finally, the transfer of the MAA from Robbins’s direction to that of the Smithsonian shifted how the museum’s contents were displayed. Each phase in the museum’s development created controversy as to how African art should be taught. Breaking away from traditional museum practices, Robbins maintained that art objects should not serve only for observation and aesthetic gratification but also as tools to help inform black pride and sense of heritage.

As reflected in the rapid increase of minority museums today, the use of art as a source of cultural knowledge and identity has become common practice. Yet Robbins’s goal was set aside when the Smithsonian acquired the MAA. Due to its role as the nation’s only federally funded museum, the Smithsonian serves as the flagship of American museum culture, practices, and theory. Though museums aim to educate the public, the community-based programming established by Robbins focused on the local audience rather than scholars conducting research. That Robbins’s vision was a radical deviation from this traditional museum type is evinced in the MAA’s transformation from being a community institution focusing on local black residents as its primary audience to a more esoteric museum geared towards academics upon its acquisition. This shift in the museum’s focus on its local black
audience has the museum still actively striving to attract non-white visitors, as reflected in the new advisory board initiative. While this change brought the museum a stronger permanent collection, esteem from Africanists and art historians, and a stable budget, they created an old-style museum far less dynamic than Robbins’s Museum of African Art.

Despite the MAA’s significance, no comprehensive history of the museum’s existence between 1964 and 1979 has been published. Through personal interviews with some of those who worked in the museum during this period, research in Robbins’s personal papers at the Smithsonian, study of archived newspaper articles, and consultation with Robbins’s biographer, Elaine Sooy Goodman, I have been able to trace the MAA’s early history. I do not discuss the museum’s contents because there is no catalog raisonné of the early permanent collection available. Most descriptions of the museum’s permanent collection from 1964 to 1979 are extrapolated from Robbins’s oral history and second hand accounts by museum staff and supporters. This thesis examines this formative period in the museum’s history and situates it in the context of black national politics, local race relations in Washington, D.C., and the response of the American museum to these socio-political movements during the 1960s and 1970s. These three aspects help make clear why the

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4 A 2004 report shows that although the museum has a higher average of black visitors than the standard art museum (with 37%), though most visitors are white (45%). In addition, only 28% of U.S. visitors reside in the metro Washington D.C. area and more than 80% of visitors had a bachelors and/or graduate or professional degree. See Smithsonian Institution Office of Policy and Analysis, “An Overview of Visitors to the National Museum of African Art in June 2004,” September, 2004. Also see, “Increasing Museum Visitation by Under Represented Audiences: An Exploratory Study of Art Museum Practices,” Smithsonian Institution Office of Policy and Analysis, June, 2001.
museum’s founding is historically significant and illustrates why its mission was revolutionary for its time.\(^5\)

In Chapter One, I examine the historical, political, and personal moments that created the impetus for Robbins’s approach to the display of African art in the museum. I first provide a brief biography of Robbins to illuminate his personal developments and his experience with the issues he discussed throughout his career at the MAA. I then discuss Robbins’s goals and programming for his Center for Cross-Cultural Communication, which leads to the opening of the Museum of African Art in 1964. I present a brief overview of the history of African art in the United States to illustrate how we studied the subject before Robbins established the MAA. In order to understand the political significance of the museum’s founding, I discuss the main ideas that Robbins borrowed from the Civil Rights Movement to show how the movement influenced his study of African art and museum planning. I also consider how race relations in Washington, D.C. created a political situation specific to the city that inspired Robbins’s community-based programming. Outlining the limitations, successes, and symbolic purpose it had during its first years as a private community-based museum.

In Chapter Two, I detail the major changes and challenges that plagued the museum during the 1960s and through mid-1970s, showing how community-based private museums are limited by lack of funding but are also in many ways free to

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\(^5\) Although much has been written about the representation of African objects in European collections, this thesis does not discuss this subject. Although the European market made African objects available to the earliest American collectors, race relations specific to the United States have affected the manner in which African art is displayed.
create their own dialogue and approach to cultural understanding. It is important to note that Robbins was not the first to establish a community-based museum or to use black art as a means of empowering African Americans, but rather the MAA engaged in as a national trend. I discuss the role of black art in the Black Power and Black Arts Movements to understand how major and local museums responded to these new ideas. Focusing in on local city politics, I explore the criticisms local black residents directed against the MAA, evidence of the difficulty the museum faced in trying to meet all the expectations of its intended audience. A major expansion to the main building in 1970, the founding of the museum library, and the donation of photographer Eliot Elisofon’s archives points to the museum’s successes in terms of its political mission and gaining public recognition. However, as a private community-based museum, the MAA dealt with funding limitations that threatened its longevity and ultimately led to Robbins’s proposal that the Smithsonian Institution acquire the museum.

In Chapter Three, I critically engage with Robbins’s campaign for the Smithsonian’s acquisition of the museum to elucidate how he presented his political goals. I analyze the congressional hearing concerning the acquisition to understand how Robbins modified his mission for the Smithsonian. While Robbins’s strategy proved successful, the MAA’s mission significantly changed under the leadership of the new museum director, Sylvia Williams. The Smithsonian’s acquisition of the MAA held high symbolic value, especially in context of the institution’s history of excluding minority art, history, and culture. Yet, by establishing a prestigious African art museum, the new museum staff reduced much of the community-based
programming and altered Robbins’s political mission in favor of a formal academic museum programming.

As exemplified in the NMAA’s return to providing a community-based program, today many museum administrators and academics have embraced the museum as an educational space with the responsibility of teaching positive multicultural values. In 1992, the American Association of Museums published a statement summarizing the complex new responsibility that museums hold:

“Museums perform their most fruitful public service by providing an educational experience in the broadest sense: by fostering the ability to live in a pluralistic society and to contribute to the resolution of challenges we face as global citizens…”

Before the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the American museum had been reserved for a white educated audience. Due to laws of segregation combined with the assumed intellectual inferiority of black Americans, visiting museums had long been considered a white bourgeois pastime.

Robbins founded the MAA as a site for “cross-cultural communication,” and an overview of national black political movements contextualizes the significance of such an undertaking. The developments in the Civil Right Movement (CRM) clearly informed Robbins’s integrationist approach. Although several different ideologies and attitudes towards racial integration can be identified within the movement, its largely integrationist attitude as taught to him by various teachers in his life is important for understanding why Robbins chose this platform at this particular moment.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, the desegregation of public schools, buses, and housing was occurring across the country. As I discuss further in Chapter One, Robbins was living in Europe, working as a Foreign Service officer during this period and thus viewing the events from an international vantage point. While he did not set foot on the continent of Africa until 1973, nearly ten years after founding the museum, his international occupation shaped his goals for the museum. Realizing the importance of learning about foreign cultures to positive cross-cultural understanding, he saw the United States as deficient in this area. As his interest in African art grew, he used his relationships with politicians, Foreign Service workers, and ambassadors to obtain the initial donations of African art.

Robbins’s Pan-African approach, which entailed using African art to educate the public about African American culture and history, defined his planning of the MAA. This artistic Pan-Africanism became a major part of what defined the Black Arts Movement (BAM). However, because it had a white founder, the museum contradicted the black separatist values of the Black Power Movement (BPM) from which this new artistic ideology derived. From a list of the major supporters of the MAA before 1979, it becomes clear that Robbins specifically recruited those who believed in the integrationist approach to racial equality. He received persistent criticism from black activists who followed the black separatist ideology of the BPM. Although not all black audiences agreed with the museum’s programming and

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mission, the MAA prevailed and gained respect from its intended black and white audiences. Despite divisions within its targeted black audience, the eventual support it earned from the black community attests to the unique role the museum played in legitimizing culture and creating a platform for cultural understanding and respect.

Local race relations and black politics also help explain why the founding of the MAA served as a politically symbolic moment in Washington, D.C. During the MAA’s development, the city witnessed heightening racial tensions within its poverty-stricken black neighborhoods, culminating in the race riot of 1968. With the enactment of the Home Rule Act in 1973, the predominantly black city finally made political progress, yet racial tensions did not cease. Frustration and local racial tensions remained high as the museum continued its goal of maintaining an integrated space for the benefit of both black and white visitors.

Although many museums today are dedicated to the preservation of minority groups’ heritage, culture, and art, Warren Robbins’s vision was one of the first in this nationwide change in the American museum. At the intersection of national black politics, race relations specific to Washington, D.C., and sweeping changes in museum practices as a result of the social movements in the 1960s, Robbins’s museum challenged the traditional conventions of the American museum to create a new democratic space that responded to its national and local community. The chapters that follow demonstrate how the Museum of African Art’s early history exemplifies the unique and challenging role of contemporary museums dedicated to American minority groups.
Chapter One: A Museum is Born

To instill in the alienated Negro an underlying feeling of self-esteem will generate incentive for self-development . . . Historical circumstances have deprived the 20 million American citizens of African origin of both of these ingredients of self-esteem.

-Warren Robbins

In 1964, when Warren Robbins founded the Museum of African Art (MAA) in Washington, D.C., it was the first museum of its kind to respond directly to the U.S. political climate of the 1950s and 1960s. The museum was innovative in terms of its content and political mission. Not only was this to be the first museum entirely dedicated to African art, but also it would be organized as a community-based museum with a political mission “as an instrument of cross-cultural understanding,” a new concept at the time. This chapter discusses how such a museum came to be, first looking at the lessons and events that shaped Robbins’s goals, then examining national and local Washington, D.C. politics to understand the context in which the museum the museum came to be, and, finally, how shifting museum practices in response to these political movements helped contribute to the Museum of African Art’s unique program and mission.

Cultivating a Collector

While the nation’s socio-political climate informed the MAA’s purpose and organization, the personal story of its founder, Warren Robbins, helps us understand how such a museum came to be. Born in Worcester, Massachusetts on September 4, 1923, Robbins grew up in an Irish and Jewish neighborhood, but had very little contact with black people other than household domestics. Robbins was raised in a Jewish family with a father who was a wealthy stockbroker more interested in
business than politics. It was Robbins’s rabbi, Levi Olan, who influenced his political views. Rabbi Olan brought black children to the Hebrew school, encouraging his Jewish students to support civil rights and to understand black people as equals.\(^8\) In a 1993 speech, Robbins noted that his friendship with his black housekeeper’s son also taught him the importance of racial equality, something he worked for throughout his career. Robbins remembers:

My journey to Africa began when as a child, I encountered a lady of considerable carriage and dignity who came to our house each Monday to help my mother with a substantial weekly wash generated by eleven children of whom I was the youngest. Her name was Mrs. Morrill, and as with another ‘non-pink’ lady who had preceded her in the job some years earlier, a certain Mrs. English, it was always with the title ‘Mrs.’ that my mother and all of the children addressed her; never by her first name. After all, she didn't call my mother ‘Pauline.’ There was clearly a subliminal message being taught here which was not lost on me as a child, though I do not recollect that the principle was ever discussed. It simply went without saying.\(^9\)

Robbins did not develop an interest in academics at a young age. In fact, he was almost held back in the fifth grade and was a C student at Classical High School in Worcester.\(^10\) Later, Robbins became interested in writing and photography, earning sufficiently good grades to be accepted into the University of Michigan. Once there, he studied English, history and cultural anthropology, and continuing on to earn his master’s degree in English, for which he focused on the role of semantics in creating cross-cultural understanding. It was Professor Leslie White, a cultural anthropologist, who had the most impact on Robbins. As summarized by his widow, Lydia Robbins, he learned from White that “If you understand the culture, you can communicate

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\(^8\) Quoted in Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^10\) Ibid.
White’s teachings inspired Robbins’s mission with the Museum of African Art and can be detected in the public discussion about the museum, up until it joined the Smithsonian in 1979.

Robbins’s study of cultural anthropology and international relations led him to his career as a cultural attaché. In 1951, Robbins joined the Foreign Service and launched American educational programs in Western Europe. By 1961, he was promoted to Director of the American Cultural Programs for West Germany. During his tenure in Germany, Robbins created reeducation programs that taught German civilians about United States’ history and culture. He soon learned that Europeans undervalued his intellect due to his nationality: many believed that Americans were uncultured in comparison to their European counterparts. In order to improve the United States’ reputation, Robbins sought out American artists and luminaries to present public programs that showcased American culture and intellect, including S.I. Hayakawa and an unknown Maya Angelou. Robbins also published a monthly magazine in Germany modeled after *The Atlantic Monthly* and two journals that were distributed to Austrian teachers. He hoped to present a positive image of America by promoting the country’s cultural values through these programs and publications. As Robbins told his biographer, Elaine Sooy Goodman, he felt that regardless of his greatest efforts, the images of Jim Crow racism in the United States hampered positive portrayals of his country. She summarizes how:

> In Stuttgart, Germany, [Robbins] sat at his desk, deeply indignant at the suffering people of color endured in America. By that time a cultural officer

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11 Lydia Robbins, Personal interview by Alyssa Lanz, November 17, 2011, Washington D.C.
12 Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
with the American Consulate, Robbins had spent the past five years seeking ways to explain America to Germans and Austrians. If we can understand and communicate with those with whom we are unfamiliar, Robbins realized, we are far less likely to distrust, hate or wage war against them.¹³

Robbins’s first encounter with African culture began with the book Afrika, published by Ernst Fuhrmann in 1922. In his own words, the images and styles he saw on its pages were both “intriguing and inspiriting.”¹⁴ In 1958, while on the island of Sylt, Germany, he purchased his first pieces of African art. A year later, stationed in Hamburg, Germany, Robbins, along with his friend, and future Senator, S.I. Hayakawa, purchased thirty African objects in a local curiosities shop. Robbins had met Hayakawa when he had asked him to speak as a part of his lecture series in Germany and the two connected on their mutual appreciation for African art. A foreign-born conservative, Hayakawa founded the U.S. English Organization and was the first to lobby for English to be the country’s official language. Hayakawa would later serve on the MAA’s Board of Trustees and offer his testimony at the congressional hearing for the Smithsonian Institution’s acquisition of the museum.

During his time abroad, Robbins continued collecting African art, favoring traditional antique objects such as ritual masks, sculpture, and musical instruments. In April of 1960, Robbins read Eliot Elisofon’s book The Sculptures of Africa, on his way back to the United States after completing his service abroad. He purchased the book in Paris and later credited it with further shaping his interest in African art.

Robbins was not formally trained as an Africanist or art historian and this lack of education in this field would later subject his role at the MAA to criticism. In fact,

¹³ Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
reading such monographs on African art helped him learn the subject on his own. In his words, “It took me six days to do it justice and the reading marked the beginning of my own growth in this field.”

Published in 1958, *The Sculpture of Africa* offered an unprecedented look into images of different African communities and their art. In the introduction, the anthropologist Ralph Linton deconstructs the meaning and myth implied by the term “primitive art.” He writes, “…it should be repeated that primitive art is not naïve, nor technically deficient. Its curious associations of ideas are logical and understandable in terms of the artist’s culture.” Linton also emphasized that these objects were being re-contextualized as art by Western standards but were originally made as objects with cultural functions beyond the aesthetic. In explaining the context of these pieces within their own ethnic groups, Linton attempts to facilitate cross-cultural understanding between the book’s African subjects and the intended Western readership. This encounter preceded Robbins’s later accomplishments at the MAA and, perhaps, helped him formulate his museum mission and the language he would use when discussing the museum.

Although Robbins moved back to the U.S. because of a department transfer, he soon began a new hobby of displaying the African objects he had collected while abroad. In 1961, Robbins began displaying his personal collection in his residence at 530 Sixth Street Southeast in Washington, D.C. In an article poignantly entitled “African Art Enthusiast Has Never Seen a Safari,” Robbins is

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16 Eliot Elisofon et al., *The Sculpture of Africa* (New York: Frederick A Praeger, 1958.)
described as having built his own “museum” in his home, complete with a glass ceiling and wall text. He welcomed outside visitors and gave lectures on each object but admitted to not having visited Africa and having bought most of his collection in European shops. In the article, he refused to be called an “expert,” insisting, “I’m just an enthusiast.”\(^{17}\) When he retired from federal service in 1962, Robbins was inspired by his experience abroad and his new African art collection to start a second career as a museum director. Although he would publicly share that he retired because his parking spot was taken away, Mrs. Robbins’s insists, “He said he came back because he lost his parking space, but I think that was a joke.”\(^{18}\) The true circumstances of his leaving his post are unknown. He later stated, “I decided to stay [in the United States] and use the cultural affairs experience I had to foster an understanding of African art in the U.S.”\(^{19}\) From the outset, Robbins made it clear that he was not interested in the display of African art purely for its aesthetic value; his primary goal was to uplift black Americans.

**Tenacity; Creating a New Museum**

In 1963, Robbins founded the Center for Cross-Cultural Communication, which would later open the Museum of African Art in 1964 as one of its major initiatives. Goodman found a letter to the artist and activist Ben Shahn, written by

\(^{18}\) Lydia Robbins, interview.
Robbins in December of 1962, outlining his goals for the new center. According to Goodman:

First, [Robbins] planned to publish training materials for the numerous institutes of international public affairs at universities throughout the United States. The second part of the program would assume the task of promoting within the nation a better understanding of what is involved in inter-cultural connections, with special reference to the United States Information Agency and its relations with Congress. The third facet of his program would be a local pilot project utilizing cultural activities to bring the African Diplomatic Community, Howard University and ‘white’ Washington into interaction.  

Earlier, in 1963, several milestones in the national struggle for civil rights had occurred. In April, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” which encouraged others to disobey immoral laws in pursuit of racial equality. The summer of “Freedom Riders” had just come to an end and on August 28th, only weeks before the Center’s founding, the March on Washington attracted approximately 200,000 participants to whom Reverend King delivered his now historic “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial.

The new institute started in Robbins’s Washington, D.C. basement. Soon he hired a small staff of secretaries to help call and write local patrons, asking them to invest in his new venture. One of his first secretaries, Karen Cook, worked with him on proposals to artists, diplomats, and politicians in Washington and abroad. She recalls:

Mostly I composed letters to folks whose support Warren was soliciting. I quickly learned the litany of his pitch—cross-cultural communication, cultural relativism, the crying need to provide African Americans with insight into the glory of traditional African culture. I wrote a backgrounder which outlined his goals in detail, and included it with most of the letters.

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20 Quoted in Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
But I think that far more crucial was the role I played as Warren’s Listener-in-Chief.\textsuperscript{21}

Initially, Robbins was unable to secure the funding he thought possible; even his own family dismissed the idea for the center. As remembered by Mrs. Robbins, “At the beginning his family thought he was a little bit crazy; they thought ‘how are you going to survive?’ But he insisted and he said, ‘You don’t understand what I am trying to do, but you will.’”\textsuperscript{22} Later, his eldest sister Evelyn would contribute to the museum, join the board of trustees, work at the museum on a daily basis and donate her salary to support its operations.\textsuperscript{23}

For one of his projects, Robbins helped organize a modern European art show called “Paintings, Prints and Drawings by Twenty Modern European Artists” at Howard University. Robbins had planned to open a museum at the university including African art and modern European art to demonstrate the former’s influence on Western art. The university already had an impressive art history department that included African American art, but less that of African art. The head of the department, Professor James A. Porter, had written the first major monograph on African American Art, \textit{Modern Negro Art}, in 1943. Porter also studied art from Haiti, Cuba, and West Africa, and his work shaped the Pan-African art history curriculum at Howard during his term there (1953 to 1970). Robbins told Goodman that he wanted to attract a wider white audience to the university’s art gallery. Consistent with his goal to elevate respect for black Americans, his goal was to bring white visitors to the campus to interact with the black student body and faculty. However, the university

\textsuperscript{21} Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
\textsuperscript{22} Lydia Robbins, interview.
\textsuperscript{23} Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
rejected Robbins’s proposal to open his museum on campus; he believed that the fact that he was white caused the rejection, which he was disappointed with.  

Despite its humble beginnings, the center furthered its goal of using Robbins’s African art collection and his network of collectors to create a program that promoted a deeper understanding of African culture. Unfortunately, there is no documentation on record that lists what objects comprised the MAA’s permanent collection and donors during this period. This lack of standard museum documentation reveals Robbins’s inexperience in museum planning and scholarship. Later exhibition catalogues, however, give some indication of the types of art media and collectors who comprised Robbins’s network of supporters, which I discuss further in Chapter Two.

During the new center’s planning stages, Robbins had already decided that it would operate a museum dedicated to African art, which would offer a community-based program that he began publicizing in the local press. He continued to publicize his unofficial personal museum and soon began receiving local recognition for his new “museum”. In 1963, the Margaret Dickey Gallery, a local art gallery in Washington, awarded Robbins a grant to curate a show featuring his African art collection as a part of the gallery’s educational program. Although Robbins had yet to formally open what would become the Museum of African Art, his publicity campaign and networking with local supporters had started to build his reputation as a local art expert.

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24 Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
Robbins’s goal for the center was not only to facilitate cross-cultural understanding between black and white Americans, but also to instill a sense of pride in his black audience. He promoted African art as evidence that the ancestors of African Americans were not “primitive” or “savages” but intelligent and sophisticated human beings who created the precursor of the Western concept of art, often reiterating, “Strictly for reasons of social understanding, I want to demonstrate the influence of African sculpture on modern Western art and hope to make both Negroes and white people aware of the unique contribution that African culture has made and has yet to make.”26 When the museum first opened, Robbins wrote in a prospectus:

It will be necessary, first of all, to instill in the alienated Negro an underlying feeling of self-esteem which will generate incentive for self-development . . . Historical circumstances have deprived the 20 million American citizens of African origin of both of these ingredients of self-esteem. In his quest for full status in American society the Negro American has no particular desire to identify with his African background. . . At the same time, the Negro American has been excluded from the large white society with which he would identify. Consequently, without a concrete cultural foundation in either Africa or America he must struggle with a basic personality void.27

Black militant activists throughout the museum’s existence would protest this aspect of the MAA’s mission, especially during the late 1960s and 1970s with the arrival of the Black Power/Arts Movement. When the center first opened, Washington’s black middle and upper class also objected to Robbins’s method of contributing to African American’s sense of identity. As Cook recalls, “I was exposed daily to the mighty resistance of most people—but especially middle- and upper-class blacks—to the idea that anything worthwhile had come out of what was usually

26 Quoted in Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
27 Ibid.
called in those days the Dark Continent.”

Despite opposition from local black residents, Robbins continued enlisting patrons to support his new center, including Ben Shahn, the author Ralph Ellison, and local government officials.

In building the MAA’s collection, Robbins did not discriminate against the quality of any donations. According to Janet Stanley, the Chief librarian at the National Museum of African Art, Robbins accepted any donation in order to encourage future museum support. She recalls how Robbins:

Would take in anything because he didn’t want to offend people. He wanted to encourage people to donate and build the collection that way. He didn’t mind taking on mediocre or inferior quality art works if he got a few good pieces. He was a bit more of a wheeler-dealer, so in that sense he wasn’t a purist in the way [the later director] Sylvia [Williams] was a purist. Museums may take in a few mediocre pieces if there is a collector who wants to donate a bunch of objects and you really only want a few…Warren was the kind of person who would say, ‘Yeah, we’ll take everything …’ During Warren’s period, when there was no budget, he took a lot of different things of varying quality…

Mrs. Robbins served as one of the MAA’s earliest curators. Having worked with Robbins on many exhibitions, she remembers his tenacity and assertiveness in making sure they maximized the space and displayed as many artifacts as possible:

He didn’t want to be second-guessed. From time to time when I was working on an exhibit we’d be working on it, then a night before he would come over and look at a case I worked on and he would say, ‘Get another piece in there.’ ‘Don’t second-guess me, I’m the director.’ That’s what he was, some people had difficulty with him, and I thought he was difficult, too, but that’s what he was and if he had been laid back—he wouldn’t have achieved what he achieved.

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28 Quoted in Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
29 Janet Stanley, phone interview by Alyssa Lanz, November 2, 2011.
30 Lydia Robbins, interview.
Although Robbins had been in touch with other African art curators and collectors, he never showed an interest in maintaining a certain caliber of art. Nor did he, as a collector, express an explicit preference for any medium, artist, or region. The only pieces Robbins disliked were contemporary works. As Mrs. Robbins recalls, “His feeling was, contemporary art is similar all over the world…but he wanted to stick to the traditional because that was where the culture came from.” Clearly, Robbins did not wish for the MAA to house exclusively masterpieces; that would later cause friction between him and his successor, Sylvia Williams, when the museum joined the Smithsonian, discussed further in Chapter Three.

In September of 1963, Robbins began preparing to open an official museum outside of his home. He opened his prospectus with “Why a Museum of African Art for Washington,” an essay published in his book, Speaking of Introductions, that had been made available through private circulation to his friends and colleagues. In his foreword, Robbins enumerated eight major reasons for the need for this museum, thus revealing the MAA’s political goals. The reasons are listed as:

1. A psychological basis for social growth
2. Respect and identity requisite to self-esteem
3. The semantic fallacy of racial categories
4. Misconception about African culture—Its heritage
5. Differences between integration of the Negro and assimilation of the European in American society
6. Self-esteem as antidote to aggression
7. Communication barriers preclude true integration
8. Isolation (segregation) versus communication (integration)  

31 Letters to Douglas Newton show that Robbins had taken loans from the Museum of Primitive Art for various exhibitions. Robbins also had contact with the Grand Palais in 1966. See Smithsonian Archives, record unit 00-034, box 1.
32 Lydia Robbins, interview.
33 Robbins, Speaking of Introductions, 176-179.
The connection Robbins made between racism and low self-esteem largely stemmed from psychological studies inspired by the Clarks’ 1954 study. The 1954 landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* reversed the 1854 ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that sanctioned “separate but equal” schools. One groundbreaking moment in the *Brown v. The Board of Education* case was Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s 1954 study describing how black schoolchildren developed negative self-perceptions and stereotypes due to their segregated environments. The Clarks’ testimony concluded that segregated schools contributed to the low-esteem of black Americans.34 The ruling on desegregating public schools was made partially in the interest of the black pupils’ psychological well-being. This inspired one of the philosophical sentiments behind the movement: that race equality and black civil rights could emotionally, mentally, and spiritually develop the black American, thus improving society as a whole. Later, the psychologists Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey published “The Mark of Oppression” in 1962, in which they proposed that racism led to inner-directed rage and self-hatred. The need to foster black pride and dignity became a major part of the Civil Rights Movement, and later, the Black Power Movement.35

Summarizing Robbins’s argument for the necessity of an African art museum, he wrote that the two main overarching goals were “to affirm the value and significance of original African culture [and] to bring to the attention of a broader

public the high regard in which it is held in art circles throughout the world.” In the context of national and local black politics and race relations, Robbins’s goals illustrate how he intended to use the museum as a demonstration of the socio-political movements occurring across the country. While the museum’s effort to push forth such a specific political goal is still debated today, Robbins steadfastly maintained his goal of instilling pride in the museum’s black audience and cross-cultural understanding from the white audience.

A New Space for Change

Looking to transform his home collection into a public museum in 1963, Robbins purchased a residence for $30,500 that had once belonged to the abolitionist Frederick Douglass (fig. 1). It was located at 316 A Street Northeast, a white middle-class residential street located a few blocks away from the Supreme Court. Robbins had limited funding for daily operations and had to take out a small loan from the bank in order to purchase the Douglas house, and the modesty of his means made the Museum of African Art’s longevity uncertain. As one critical reporter noted, “Robbins believes that the best way to launch a museum is to launch it and see if the money rolls through. Let’s hope it does…”

In January of 1964, Robbins received zoning approval to open the MAA on the premise that the “administrative supervision should be sufficient to prevent

36 Warren Robbins, Speaking of Introductions, 176-79.
38 Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
“outright commercialization,”” in accordance with the local zoning codes. The museum had been proposed as a small-scale educational center; Robbins declared he had no intention of bringing in large groups of visitors. With approval from the District Commissioners and additional authorization to build more than one building on the lot, Robbins secured a home for the Museum of African Art.

In announcing the purchase of Douglass’s home in an interview published in the Washington Post, Robbins stated that “[the museum’s goal] is not just to be another museum for art education, it will be to use what we learn from art to understand more about people.” Taking a political turn, he added, “Equal regard as well as equal rights must be achieved…we want to show what a rich heritage the Negro has. The museum will not be just to study tribal sculpture as art.” The home’s location, with its close proximity to Capital Hill, would allow for more visibility and make a statement about the MAA’s political goals.

Robbins’s purchase of the residence allowed him to draw on Douglass’s political and historical legacy to shape the mission of his new museum. In September of 1966, Robbins formally opened the Frederick Douglass Institute of Negro Arts and History as a part of the Museum of African Art. It occupied half of the building and intended to serve primarily as a history museum for schoolchildren. The new institute took a Pan-African approach to its mission. It aimed to teach museum visitors about African American historical figures and artists. In 1967, the Ford Foundation awarded the institute a challenge grant of $250,000 required to be matched through private

fundraising. The grant supported a three-year initiative to develop “teaching aids, displays and exhibits for use outside the institute...[and] continue its efforts to provide educational programs for school dropouts and other hard to reach members of the Negro community.”

The collection would come to include a re-creation of Douglass’s study and paintings by Edward Mitchell Bannister, Henry O’Tanner, and Joshua Johnston, which I discuss further in Chapter Two.

The museum went through a number of titles that included Douglass’s name, before Robbins settled on the Museum of African Art. When Robbins first incorporated the museum, legal documents referred to it as the “Cross-Cultural Center.” On December 2, 1966, Robbins changed the name to the “Frederick Douglass Institute of Negro Arts and History: Museum of African Art,” connecting the museum to its location and the new institute. On May 21, 1971, the museum’s name changed again to the “Frederick Douglass Museum of African Art.” While the museum was publicly known as the Museum of African Art from its inception, the three major name changes reflect Robbins’s emphasis on the site’s history as well as the shifting politics in which the term “negro” began to fall from favor.

Soon after purchasing the home, Robbins volunteered the space as a stop on the Capital Hill Historic Homes tour. The MAA’s location in the Douglass residence helped secure publicity and attract visitors to the museum’s unofficial first exhibition. As a preview of the new museum that would occupy the space, Robbins created a

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44 Smithsonian Institution Archives, accession 97-076, box 9, “Document of Legal Incorporation.”
display in four rooms that featured African art on loan from local collectors. Many initial reviews noted the building, a feature Robbins stressed in his publicity for the museum. In many future articles discussing the museum, Douglass’s historical significance as a crusader for black rights provided the lead for positive reviews that emphasized the museum’s political mission.45

On May 3, 1964 Robbins opened the new Museum of African Art to the public. The inaugural exhibition at the new site included sculptures from Robbins’s own collection and works on loan from photographer Eliot Elisofon, the Museum of Primitive Art, the Smithsonian Institution, and other private institutions such as the University of Pennsylvania.46 Elisofon was very involved in the MAA’s founding, and his wife, Joan Elisofon, even helped install the first exhibition. In fact, Robbins credits Chaim Gross, Eliot Elisofon, and his wife, Joan, for their encouragement to open the museum officially.47 Accompanying some sculptures were paintings and prints by Picasso, Cezanne, and other modernist European artists, intended to make visible the influence of African objects on the modernist movement. Present at the grand opening were Douglass’s granddaughter, Fannie Douglass, and political figures such as Wayne Fredericks, the deputy assistant secretary of state for African affairs. Before the opening, local officials had already publicly embraced the new, 

46 According to Robbins, other donors for the inaugural exhibition included Harold Rome and Irwin Hershey although there is no official record of what objects they loaned. See Warren Robbins, Speaking of Introductions, 73-74.
47 Warren Robbins, Speaking of Introductions, 73.
experimental museum. The Washington, D.C. school superintendent, Carl F. Hansen, predicted that the MAA would make a “very valuable addition to [Washington, D.C.’s] educational and cultural life.”

Robbins initially focused on displaying African art as a predecessor to European modern art in order to illustrate its sophistication. This demonstrates one way in which Robbins felt he could instill pride into his black audience: by showing how their ancestors influenced white traditions, not the other way around. This was an idea he took from an article written by Elisofon in *Atlantic Weekly.* In presenting a “comparative gallery,” Robbins explained (fig.2):

This will constitute an education job among three groups, not merely among white people, but among American Negroes, and among Africans themselves who tend to play down their tribal heritage and who do not realize that from the standpoint of universal criteria of good art, some of their work (not all of it) reflects an amazing degree of technical skill and a high aesthetic sense, all of which has caused African wood sculpture and metal casting to be judged as among the great artistic traditions of the world.

By the end of 1964, the Museum of African Art had secured a measure of public support and enthusiasm. In a letter to Robbins, President Lyndon B. Johnson wrote:

I want to congratulate you on the establishment of the Museum of African Art in the Frederick Douglass House. Such an institute, by portraying the ancient cultural background of Africa, can contribute immeasurably to better African-American relations and to a better understanding of the Negro-American as well. I have heard a good deal about your single-handed efforts during this past year to launch the Museum and I send you best wishes for its future success; it is a most worthwhile educational project.

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48 White, “Ex-Slave’s Home to Become Art Museum.”
49 Robbins, *Speaking of Introductions,* 73.
50 Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
This letter demonstrates how the museum had been received as a much-needed and significant educational project. With its rapidly spreading local recognition, Robbins’s collection grew exponentially. However, the overwhelmingly positive reactions from white and black middle-class supporters did not curtail criticism from local black activists. Although black middle-class in Washington were initially not particularly excited about an African art museum, eventually they supported the museum “since no one else had made any attempt to accomplish what he had.”

The History of African Art in the United States

The presentation of African art in America began in the late 1800s, for the most part in natural history museums, which treated African works as ethnographic artifacts. In the twentieth century, art museums began to display African art as “masterpieces,” while natural history museums continued using these material objects to define and categorize African culture. These two different contexts would inform debates that arose over the display of non-Western art during the 1960s and 1970s when multiculturalism became a national topic. With the rise of social movements and public discussion of cultural pluralism, black intellectuals and activists had the opportunity to create new institutions to address these issues. Their specific agendas and subsequent programming ushered in a new type of museum.

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52 Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.” Note: From my research, no record of black supporters can be found. These accounts were told to Elaine Sooy Goodman through interviews with Warren Robbins and his colleagues. See Elaine Sooy Goodman, “Warren M. Robbins and the Founding of the National Museum of African Art.”

The Hampton University Art Museum, founded in 1880, was one of the earliest institutions to collect African objects. As described by the museum today, “Its primary mission has remained unchanged: to provide knowledge and understanding of, and respect for, diverse cultures and traditions. From the beginning, the collections of the Museum were to instill a pride of ethnic identity and knowledge of world cultures.”\(^{54}\) Major art museums began collecting African objects as well, including the Cincinnati Art Museum in 1890 and, later becoming one of the most influential and innovative institutions in the politics of African art display, the Brooklyn Museum of Art founded its African art collection around 1900.\(^{55}\) These institutions, among only a few others, placed African objects in their “primitive art” wings. As summarized by Kathleen Berzock and Christa Clarke, some museums implicitly promoted the legitimacy and importance of these collections “as a means of fostering cross-cultural awareness among the predominately white middle class and upper classes—the museums’ primary patrons—and of appealing to middle-class African Americans, a minority growing in influence,” through the action of collecting such objects but not so much in public discussions of these collections.\(^{56}\) In future discussions concerning the Museum of African Art’s mission, Robbins explicitly presented this objective but also hoped to attract black working class visitors.

Alfred Stieglitz’s 1914 exhibition of African sculpture in his Gallery 291 in New York City served as a groundbreaking moment in the recognition of African art


\(^{55}\) For more details on the history of African Art in the United States see Berzock and Clarke, *Representing Africa in American Art Museums*.

in the United States. The show displayed African objects as predecessors to modernist art, long before Robbins would do so in the MAA. Soon, major museums across the country began displaying African art from this perspective. The Museum of Modern Art’s (MoMA) 1935 exhibition “African Negro Art” was regarded as the most seminal moment in this trend, featuring a wide array of African objects, including masks, sculptures, jewelry, and furniture, and stressing their influence on modernism. This exhibition removed the lengthy cultural contextualization that commonly accompanied pieces in natural history museums. Instead, MoMA displayed the objects for their aesthetic value. After the exhibition’s nationwide tour, more institutions began collecting African art with the same modernist agenda.

The increased interest in African artifacts created a wider public interest in seeing American museums display these objects and led to the expansion of the field of African studies throughout the country. Within the discipline of art history, 1957 marked the official arrival of African art. Roy Sieber earned the first doctorate in the field with his dissertation “African Tribal Sculpture” from the State University of Iowa, and soon more universities began offering courses in African art.

In the spring of 1957, Nelson A. Rockefeller opened the Museum of Primitive Art in New York City. In an early catalogue’s preface, Rockefeller explains that its original name was “The Museum of Indigenous Art,” but he realized that this title “[suggested] in reality a museum of the arts of original populations of the six

57 Ibid.
59 In May, 1969, the entire collection was donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art where it remains on display today.
He chose the term ‘primitive’ because at the time it was “generally accepted” for non-Western art. Rockefeller said that he intended to present the objects for their aesthetic merit; he did not want to create yet another ethnology or natural history museum: “our aim will always be to select objects of outstanding beauty whose rare quality is the equal of works shown in other museums of art throughout the world, and to exhibit them so that everyone may enjoy them in the fullest measure.” Although he realized that these artifacts could be seen with a new understanding as pieces of art, he did not use these objects specifically to offer a black audience insight into their heritage. Rather, he saw these works as a new experience for the art seeker, who during this period was generally white and highly educated. Although there had been previous museums that included African art with a mission similar to the MAA, in the 1950s the American public museum had not been embraced as a public educator with a social or political agenda.

Civil Rights in Motion

In the 1960s, Robbins acted on his belief that African art could foster cross-cultural understanding and inform African American identity. He combined the emphasis on racial integration from the Civil Rights Movement with a Pan-African ideology. It is important to note that although Pan-Africanism as a cultural movement

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
predates the Civil Rights Movement, it is better remembered as a major force in the Black Power/Arts Movement, which I will discuss further in Chapter Two.\(^\text{63}\)

*Brown v. The Board of Education* catalyzed what we now call the Civil Rights Movement, which up until Robbins’s return to the U.S. had included the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1960, and other political non-violent protests and organizations spearheaded by the black churches that served as its central network. Although black art was not a defining element of the movement, the mid-1960s would see a steady increase in presentations of black art in public museums, especially with the significant role art would play in the Black Power Movement, more specifically with the formation of the Black Arts Movement. In context of Civil Rights’ agenda and political strategy, Robbins’s vision for how African art could contribute to the movement’s goals was unique. Although he was not the first to use black art as a socio-political tool, his approach to the display and study of African art during this period diverged from how art historians had treated it before. The political landscape of this period added special significance to his mission of cross-cultural understanding.

The words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., images of black protests, and legislative reform supporting black civil rights caught the attention of all Americans, including Warren Robbins. Robbins’s integrationist approach reflected his support of the Civil Rights Movement. His mission also was a product of racial tension and political climate in Washington, D.C. during this period, where he would eventually open his new museum.

Black Relations in the Nation’s Capital

Given the Museum of African Art’s location in the nation’s capital, the founding of such an institution served as a local symbolic gesture. While other black museums existed, such as the Frederick Douglass House Museum in Anacostia founded in 1916, these institutions aimed for preservation more so than the political goal of “cross-cultural understanding.” The focus on interracial understanding was significant not only within the larger context of the Civil Rights Movement, but also within the turbulent history of race relations in Washington. African Americans began migrating to Washington, which was not wholly a slave-based economy, in the early nineteenth century. During this period, free black residents outnumbered slaves, but the issue of slavery dominated local debates and politics. In 1836, Congress imposed a gag rule on the discussion of slavery, which was not lifted until 1844. The slave trade was abolished in 1850 and slavery itself was not abolished there until April 16, 1862, nine months into the Civil War.64

Between 1860 and 1867 Washington’s black population increased from 75,000 to 125,000, mostly due to the arrival of newly emancipated slaves. According to Audrey Elisa Kerr, the main two attractions for former slaves were the potential for federal government jobs and a black public school system that was the best in the country.65 The rapid growth in the local black population created a need for increases in public schools, welfare, and other public programs, causing financial strain and growing resentment among white residents and government officials. During this

period, Washington was still ruled directly by Congress. Although a 1866 congressional act gave voting rights to local black residents, they were still at the constant mercy of Congressmen including Alabama Senator John Tyler Morgan, who once said Congress had to “burn down the barn to get rid of the rats…the rats being the negro population and the barn being the [local] government of the District of Columbia.”66 Such attitudes based on the notion of white supremacy failed to alleviate the poverty plaguing the city’s black population.

By 1900, a black middle-class had formed, while freed black families continued to migrate from the South in hopes of escaping Jim Crow racism. Black professionals, including lawyers, doctors, and government officials, deliberately distanced themselves from the working-class, newly freed black population. As noted by one resident during this period, “It was a segregated city among blacks. The lighter-skinned blacks didn’t associate with the darker blacks, and the Howard University blacks didn’t associate with anyone.”67 The social divisions among Washington’s black community resulted in fragmentation and lack of a united political strategy. Fifty years later, black middle-class locals identified with the integrationist strategy that defined the Civil Rights Movement, while local working-class black residents resented white and black elitism and opted for more radical protests in the struggle for local black rights.

Although the rapid increase in black federal government employees reflected the changes occurring across the country, some white government officials met it

67 Ibid., 28-29.
with much resistance. For example, Mississippi senator and Ku Klux Klan member Theodore Bilbo served as the district commissioner in 1944. He proposed that black residents should be sent back to farms, deported to Africa, and opposed an anti-lynching law. In opposition to the increased presence of black federal employees, he once said, “If you go through the governmental departments there are so many niggers it’s like a black cloud around you.”68 Such sentiment prevented progress in alleviating local race tensions, especially since black federal employees were almost never assigned to work on local city councils.

During the mid-1950s, the city attempted full integration of its public schools, but tensions between white and black residents continued. In the early 1960s, racial tensions in the nation’s capital continued to intensify as after “white flight” many black middle- and upper-class families also left Washington.69 The black residents who remained constituted the majority of Washington’s population, but most were poor and working-class and still faced racial segregation in education, housing, and the local job market. In November of 1959, the National Association of Intergroup Relations Officials (NAIRO) commissioned a study to measure the progress of racial integration in Washington. Founded in 1947, NAIRO was an extension of the Council of Executives of Community Relations Boards and received support from the

68 Jaffe and Sherwood, Dream City, 28.
69 I define white-flight using the Miriam Webster Dictionary definition “the departure of whites from places with increasingly or predominantly populated by minorities.” For more details on the national trend of white-flight during the mid-twentieth century United States, see Kenneth T. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.)
American Council on Race Relations.\textsuperscript{70} The commission hoped to measure positive progress, following up on a 1948 survey by Dr. Joseph Lohman that revealed, “The Negro was completely segregated and was subject to a variety of discriminatory indignities.”\textsuperscript{71}

In NAIRO’s 1959 report, various surveys confirmed a substantial gap in the representation of white over black individuals in the police and government workforce, as well as access to education. The report explained how Washington still struggled with racial tensions despite attempts to reverse institutional and legal practices of segregation. In concluding the report, one commission member, the sociologist John T. Blue, Jr., optimistically stated that there had been some progress in the attainment of racial equality. He concluded that Washington was ‘quasi-egalitarian’ in that it had reached a desirable point of deinstitutionalizing racial practices. Yet, “true integration, the acceptance of persons without consideration of race is as yet only a partially fulfilled ideal.”\textsuperscript{72} Viewing Washington as a model for the nation’s progress, the report detailed the failures of integration legislation but summed up this progress as overwhelmingly positive. This optimistic conclusion exemplifies how public reports hoped to assuage grievances from the local black community and improve the nation’s image. As the site of national and local black

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 73-74.
protests, the political landscape of Washington, D.C. during this period served as the ideal backdrop for Robbins’s vision.

For the Museum of African Art, Robbins often referred to it as a “teaching museum.” Around this time, he hired Edward Cutler as Assistant Director to help run the MAA’s educational program. Cutler had studied painting at the Philadelphia College of Art and worked in the African gallery at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archeology and Anthropology. Once Cutler joined the museum, he and Robbins made an effort to hire African museum staff to implement the educational programs mainly designed for elementary school students, including storytelling, demonstrations of African musical instruments, and arts and crafts projects.

The American Museum: From “Temple of Culture” to “Cultural Forum”

The United States’ first museum founded in 1773 served as a political statement. The Charleston Museum in South Carolina, modeled after the typical European museum, was established to display the blossoming colonies’ intellect. The post-Civil War era marked a rapid increase in personal wealth, out of which came the creation of private art collections later displayed in public spaces. During the late nineteenth century, natural history served as the most popular museum subject.

Before the turn of the century, the newly amassed personal art collections supplied and helped create the public art museum, which would soon surpass the natural history museum’s popularity. Some of these institutions, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art founded in 1870, necessitated the establishment of corporations dedicated solely to the museum operations. Various society museums relied on members’ dues to build their private collections and fund museum

operations. As membership grew within these local museums, the modern museum evolved into a corporation with a board of trustees.\textsuperscript{74}

In 1932, Paul Marshall Rea, a former consultant to the Advisory Group on Museum Education of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, characterized twentieth-century museums as exhibiting the following features:

1. They have a broad purpose of public service.
2. As independent corporations their whole energy is devoted to museum development and they are free to adapt their policies to changing conditions.
3. They have all secured widespread community support.
4. Most of them have obtained the support of tax funds from municipalities.\textsuperscript{75}

While Rea’s characterization of the new American museum hints at community-based programming and response to socio-political changes, there would not be a radical transformation in this direction until the 1960s. In response to new discussions of multiculturalism, the American museum changed drastically, but the founding of smaller community-based museums occurred before major corporate museums took up the challenge. The MAA’s founding exemplifies this pattern. Mainstream museums did work towards the same ideals of these smaller museums, but preceded cautiously out of fear of losing their large audiences. Thus, the later Smithsonian’s acquisition of the MAA served as a symbolic moment in the American museum’s transformation in that it represented a major museum’s acceptance of progressive values, further discussed in Chapter Three.


\textsuperscript{75} Rea, \textit{The Museum and the Community}. 
During this period, Civil Rights and other political movements were creating a paradigm shift in museum practices. With more minority groups demanding representation in museums as artists, professionals, and visitors, the American museum’s role began to change. The Museum of African Art’s mission signifies a response to these changing expectations and audiences.

In 1971, Duncan E. Cameron published an article, “The Museum, Temple or Forum,” in *Curator: The Museum Journal* that summarized the changes that occurred during the 1960s. In his description of the differences between the “old-style museum” and the “new modern museum,” Cameron assigned a ‘temple’ imagery to the former, and a ‘forum’ imagery to the latter. The temple-like museum was a space where the authenticity of the facts and artifacts it housed was not questioned, as “the public generally accepted the idea that if it was in a museum, it was not only real but represented a standard of excellence.” In other words, the museum as a temple provides cultural legitimacy to its contents. This helps us understand why black Americans and, in the future, other minority groups looked to the American museum to house their histories, culture, and objects. As a part of the search for recognition as human beings deserving of basic human rights, the museum offered an opportunity to legitimize black American culture in a public educational setting, open to all racial groups.

Although the museum as temple could help legitimize a given minority group, with the introduction of new content came new demands and expectations. In

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order to counter preconceptions of a group, such as black Americans that had long been subjected to racism and racist ideals there had to exist a constructive dialogue to impart these new pluralistic values. This new museum, which Cameron describes as the forum, offered a space for cultural discourse that asks the viewer to critically observe and respond to mistreatment in previously neglected histories. He writes “the establishment…must in effect, finance the revolution by creating opportunities for the artist and the critics of society to produce, to be heard, to be seen, and to confront established values and institutions…These are the functions of the forum!”

Thus, the museum as forum implies a civic responsibility to include exhibitions pertaining to modern political issues.

A document written by George Brown Goode in 1895 demonstrates how even before the twentieth-century series of socio-political movements, museums felt responsible to cater to their local communities needs. He discusses how the museum of his time had the responsibility to advance learning, serve as an adjunct to the classroom, impart special information, and reflect the audience’s culture. Goode’s essay reveals that Cameron’s definition is not a wild departure from how museum professionals have historically thought of the museum’s function. This set of responsibilities reemerged, however, with a new political emphasis during this period. While Goode’s essay is written with the white bourgeois subject as the assumed museum visitor, by the 1960s the museum’s responsibilities were expanding to embrace a new, more diverse museum audience.

77 Ibid., 69.
As visualized by Cameron and other museum professionals during this period, the museum’s enhanced social role created new issues of cultural sensitivity and understanding. Elaine Heumann Gurian writes:

> Historically, it can be argued that museums have been created to promote the aspirations of their creators. Art museums are created by wealthy patrons and collectors to reinforce their status and aesthetic, while science-and-technology centers have been created by wealthy merchants to enlist the public’s concurrence about the progress and future of industry...finally counterculture museums have been created by people of all classes who want to preserve a particular viewpoint that has not been expressed in other museums.\(^\text{79}\)

In relation to the MAA, Gurian’s observation speaks to why the museum was particularly significant during this era. Most museum founders and directors were determined to advance their ideas, and their individual agendas are often infused into their museums through the missions they publish, the objects they choose to acquire, and the texts that often accompany these objects. Robbins’s progressive philosophy offered a counter viewpoint by creating a museum focusing on Africans and African Americans and consciously looking to include the local community audience.

The founders’ and directors’ inherent personal influence results in what Eilean Hooper-Greenhill cites as the main obstacle to achieving cultural diversity within the museum: lack of diverse museum professionals. Hooper-Greenhill points to the predominantly white staffing of major museums as a persistent problem. She argues that in order to promote multiculturalism through the object, museums must strive for a more racially diverse staff, including the curators, trustees, and, even, security personnel. The MAA strived for a racially diverse staff and Elaine Goodman

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describes how during school workshops in the museum, “African folktales were read aloud and explained by Africans. Children and their adult chaperones were dressed in African clothing. Daily life in Africa, its famines, droughts, fickle climate and living conditions were also elucidated by Africans.” This inclusion of African staff members integrated into the museum’s educational programming helped create a new type of museum and demonstrated Robbins’s goal of teaching others the truth about African history and culture in order to cultivate respect for Black Americans.

Despite the lack of general experience and resources for most mainstream museums, which impeded the American museum’s transformation from temple to forum, by the end of the 1960s, the public museum began to be accepted as offering the most accessible space in which to teach positive multiculturalism, similar to the MAA. Reflecting the United States’ new sense of cultural pluralism during this period, the MAA exemplified the new community-based museum, offering a public forum responsive to particular issues prevalent in Washington. In creating a democratic museum, Robbins faced the many challenges that museums across the country confronted as they tried to meet new demands without all the right tools to address them responsibly, including hiring African staff, investing in educational

80 Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
school workshops, and creating the Frederick Douglass Institute to supplement the museum with a specific African American component.

In some respects Robbins’s position as an amateur museum director benefited the MAA, since the kind of museum he aspired to create required a way of thinking that had not been taught to museum professionals and promoted a new understanding of black art and culture. Robbins’s discussion of his goals and strategies implies an awareness of how revolutionary the Museum of African Art was, often referring to the museum as a “teaching museum.” As summarized by Janet Stanley, “He used to say we are an education department with a museum attached for him.”

Robbins’s intuitive understanding of how a museum could function followed the new museum model as forum rather than the traditional concept of the museum as a temple. The onset of the Black Power/Arts Movement around 1965 created new issues for the MAA’s publicity and organization. In the context of an evolving black separatist agenda, Robbins’s position as a white man singlehandedly operating a museum dealing with black art, culture, and politics created problems for the museum’s community-based agenda. The MAA’s challenges in answering the criticisms of local black activists, sustaining its budget for daily operations, and maintaining its mission as a racially integrated community-based museum are explored in the following chapter.

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82 Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
83 Janet Stanley, interview.
Chapter Two: Expansions and Limitations

I cannot support efforts, which teach pride based upon separatism... I cannot lend whatever legitimacy the Institute/Museum has to offer to movements, which would gain long-deserved rights for one group by resorting to the very methods and attitudes of the group responsible for the cruel infringements of those rights.

–Warren Robbins

Warren Robbins proclaimed the Museum of African Art to be the first of its kind in its role as community educator, often stating, “We are an education facility with a museum attached.”\(^8^4\) In actuality, the museum functioned as a part of a larger trend in museum practices occurring in the United States during this period. In this chapter, I look at how the MAA acquired funding and sustained its mission in its early years before Robbins began campaigning to join the Smithsonian Institution. I focus particularly on how Robbins took on a new role as an expert in the field of African art, expanded the permanent collection, and established connections with politicians and influential donors. The museum would soon find itself in a vulnerable position. Robbins did not want to compromise its original political mission despite criticism from black activists. The continuous limited resources and ever-growing educational programming exacerbated its financial hardships as a small, private community-based museum. Understanding the museum’s financial instability and Robbins’s strategic networking reveals how the MAA would eventually become susceptible to unwanted changes when seeking to be acquired by the Smithsonian.

\(^8^4\) Janet Stanley, interview.
Black Power and Pride

Many trace the rise of Pan-Africanism in the United States as a political ideology to Marcus Garvey’s 1920s Back-to-Africa movement, which not only encouraged black people to move back to Africa but also promoted the study of African history and culture as a means of generating black pride.85 Robert Collins and James Burns note that the promotion of Pan-Africanism during this period coincided with the liberation of African nations, in which “an emerging African elite [sought] to replace the colonial order with a pan-African union of all former colonies.”86 The idea of making Pan-African values the foundation of individual pride and cultural self-awareness returned to the forefront with the Black Power Movement (BPM), which gained public attention in 1965. That year, the BPM’s black separatist ideology ignited the black community in response to a series of race riots, beginning with the Watts Riots in Los Angeles. The leading voice of the movement, Stokley Carmichael, described the need for "black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, and to build a sense of community."87 While the Civil Rights Movement used an integrationist approach to foster self-confidence and empowerment in black men and women, the BPM proposed that the formation of a separate black identity was the only means of achieving this objective.

86 Robert Collins and James Burns, “Nationalism and Independence,” in *A History of Sub-Saharan Africa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 335.)
Ron Karenga, a black scholar and activist who was another leading figure in the BPM, helped define the movement and would influence what has since become called its “aesthetic and spiritual sister,” the Black Arts Movement (BAM).\(^8^8\) For Karenga, Pan-Africanism served as the basis for black separatism and offered a non-Eurocentric understanding of African and African American history. Of African art he wrote, “Tradition teaches us, Léopold Senghor tells us, that all African art has at least three characteristics: that is, it is functional, collective and committing or committed. Since this is traditionally valid, it stands to reason that we should attempt to use it as the foundation for a rational construction to meet our present day needs.”\(^8^9\)

Karenga uses Senghor’s abstract definition of African art to highlight the argument that African art is distinct from the European tradition, hence emphasizing the need for African Americans to find artistic expression from within the African Diaspora.

Although he did not consider himself a member of the BAM, the black poet and novelist Ishmael Reed in a 1995 interview outline the historical impact of the movement:

There would be no multiculturalism movement without Black Arts. Latinos, Asian Americans, and others all say they began writing as a result of the example of the 1960s. Blacks gave the example that you don't have to assimilate. You could do your own thing, get into your own background, your

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\(^8^9\) Ron Karenga, “Black Culturalism in Nationalism,” in *The Black Aesthetic*, 33.

Léopold Sédar Senghor served from 1960 to 1980s the first president of Senegal upon its independence. He had founded the political party called the Senegalese Democratic Bloc in 1948. Initially, he promoted the preservation of Senegal in the French Commonwealth. He won Senegalese public support with his alliance with the train conductors of the Dakar-Niger line and in 1960 led Senegal to independence. Educated in France before returning to his native Senegal, he was also a cultural theorist. See Jacques Louis Hymans, *Léopold Sédar Senghor: an Intellectual Biography*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1971).
own history, your own tradition and your own culture. I think the challenge is for cultural sovereignty and Black Arts struck a blow for that.⁹₀

Although this was not the first time that black art was used to elevate black cultural legitimacy, the emphasis on black art as a political means of self-empowerment and non-assimilation created a new cultural model for other minority groups. Consequently, Robbins’s adoption of this ideology for the MAA’s mission helps us understand how the museum was revolutionary in this moment during the BPM/BAM and why other minority groups would later look to museums to legitimize their own cultures.

While Karenga promoted the study of African art as a means of a spiritual revitalization, he also recognized its potential power of cultural authentication. As theorized by Hoyt Fuller, among others, the BAM criticized the art produced during the Harlem Renaissance as insufficient in that it did not enhance the political, social, and economic mobility of the black masses. Fuller’s autobiography Journey to Africa describes how he embraced black separatism upon his return from three months spent in Africa and eventually became a leading voice in both the BPM and BAM.⁹¹ In his essay “Towards a Black Aesthetic,” first published in The Critic in 1968, Fuller describes how black art had to dispel the assumption of the Eurocentric heritage of humanity. He argues that African Americans should assert a distinct black voice in order to uplift the race and create self-confidence. Eugene Metcalf explains the context within which Fuller came to this conclusion: “A people said to be without art,

⁹¹ See Hoyt Fuller, Journey to Africa (Chicago: Third World, 1971).
or with a degraded form of it, reputedly show themselves lacking in the qualities that dignify human experience and social interaction.”\textsuperscript{92} Black art functioned as a means of creating a positive racialized self-perception.

The acknowledgment that Africans were creating legitimate objects of art helped counter popular views of the African as savage. As noted by the black author and activist Amiri Baraka, born LeRoi Jones and who adopted his Muslim name in 1967, African history was relevant to the issues that were challenging twentieth-century African Americans. Baraka believed in combining all artistic traditions of African descent to create a new art form distinct from European tradition. He emphasized that the Africanization of the black American was a spiritual, psychological, and intellectual transformation, cautioning in a 1974 interview that “merely by dressing in Afrikan [sic] clothes and speaking Swahili and cultivating a superior diet” one did not become a revolutionary black American.\textsuperscript{93} One had to learn and practice all aspects of African history, culture, and art in order to create a new distinct black identity.

Karenga, Fuller, Baraka, and other leaders of these movements emphasized the importance of black Americans empowering their own community by means of black separatism. While Robbins’s Pan-African approach to the MAA paralleled the BPM and BAM premises, the black separatist ideology conflicted with a white man’s promotion of such an ideal. Although Robbins’s mission for racial integration was


politically aligned with the CRM, his Pan-African ideology aligned politically with the more radical Black Power Movement. The white advocacy of this specific point would be protested among local black activists later in the MAA’s development. It is important to note that Robbins never publicly acknowledged that his Pan-African approach was specifically influenced by or partly related to BPM or BAM, but in the political context of the 1960s, this could not have been a coincidence.

**White Man, Black Museum**

Amongst the political turmoil, this period in African American history also marked the beginning of the black museum movement. Although the MAA was founded in line with the trend toward community-based museums catering to a black audience, it deviated in respect to the race of its founder: African American scholars saw black ownership of these cultural centers as a crucial aspect in creating “Black Pride.” Most notably, Harold Cruse, in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), argued that African Americans had to gain control of cultural institutions that were misrepresenting African American history and contemporary black life. He maintained that “In this war of identity over cultural standards, the Negro functions under a double or triple jeopardy: without literacy and cultural critique of his own, the Negro cannot fight for and maintain a position in the cultural world.”

These ideas of black ownership led to the demand for black art in museums in order to legitimate and share it with the general public. Calling for the recognition of local black artists and historical figures, black activists who founded local museums intended to educate

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their black audience about their culture, arts, and history. Most of these new museums did not predominantly feature African art in their permanent collections, although they sometimes did discuss the continent in temporary exhibitions.

As summarized by Faith Ruffins, “The people who founded [black] museums did so in part to make some of this political debate, progressive performance style, and Pan-Africanist rhetoric available to the community at a grass-roots level…Their museums were vehicles for social change, often speaking to the wider African American community.” Before this moment, most of these museums were a part of black universities, virtually isolated from local communities and reserved for educated African Americans. The proliferation of black museums in the late 1960s derived from the Black Power Movement’s agenda of separatism as a means of self-empowerment.

In 1961, Margaret Burroughs founded the Ebony Museum of Negro Culture in Chicago. Soon after, in 1965, Charles Wright founded the Museum of Afro-American History in Detroit and Edmund Barry Gaither was brought in as the first director of the National Center for Afro-American Artists in Boston. The black museum movement related to the previously discussed idea of the museum as forum, and these spaces worked to counter prejudices and inform black pride through cultural dialogue. Not only did these new museums preserve African American culture, history, and identity, but they were also a part of the black political movements that came to prominence during this period. Similar to the MAA, most of these museums were

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96 Ibid., 566.
founded by non-experts to serve the local community, with permanent collections consisting of black artifacts and art, focusing heavily on public educational programming, and were privately funded, having to deal with budget restrictions. However, black non-experts almost exclusively headed these black museums and Robbins continually dealt with public criticism of being a white man running a black museum.

The same month Robbins opened the MAA, Malcolm X established the Organization of Afro-American Unity. In May of 1964, Malcolm wrote in a letter that while African Americans “…might remain in America physically, while fighting for the benefits the Constitution guarantees us, we must ‘return’ to Africa philosophically and culturally and develop a working unity in the framework of Pan-Africanism.” Malcolm’s call for Pan-Africanism as the context for a distinct self-produced black identity independent of white Americans continued spreading among black urban communities, including Washington, D.C.

Despite immediate support from local officials, Robbins continued to receive opposition from local black militant activists who did not support the founding of a black museum by a white man. In remembering his critics, Robbins in his later years stated, “I understand [the objection]…at least as far as it is possible for a white man to understand. But the fact is that the museum is for the whole community, not just for one segment of it…White people should know about African culture too.” In 1969, a black militant activist named Gaston Neal confronted Robbins on this issue.

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98 Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
As a black separatist, Neal argued, “Robbins is a classic story of a white man handling black culture...he has a colonial mentality...He makes money off his shop just like the white promoters of black music.” Yet, Robbins claimed that he always took a modest salary and claimed that for the first few years, he only earned enough to cover living expenses.

Neal’s black separatist agenda proved the main source for his criticisms of Robbins and the MAA. Neal later added, “Robbins is Jewish, you know. They [referring to Jewish people] were black. He should be citing the early history of the Jews before they separated and mixed with other races and became white. But it’s to his self-interest to hide it. His interest is Zionistic.” Neal went on to criticize Robbins’s choice of the Frederick Douglass residence noting, “Not that brother Frederick Douglass wasn’t great in his own way, but there are no Nat Turners, people who have said to hell with being slaves.” In response to Neal’s radical and controversial allegations, Robbins simply replied, “This museum will be here long after Gaston Neal and I are both gone.” Yet, Robbins offered a more direct and reflective rebuttal to this criticism in a 1968 letter:

I cannot support efforts which teach pride based upon separatism and hatred and which mimic the methods, the language and the behavior of the worst forces in white society that have been brought to bear upon Negro society. I understand and am in sympathy with the human frailties and the psychological torment at the root of certain paradoxes in the Black Power Movement. But I cannot lend whatever legitimacy the Institute/Museum has to offer to movements, which would gain long-deserved rights for one group by resorting to the very methods and attitudes of the group responsible for the cruel infringements of those rights. Negro activists who

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100 Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
101 Ibid.
hate are no more right than white bigots and patronizers who themselves are responsible for today’s legacy of reverse hatred. For our institution to condone indiscriminate hate mongering by acquiescence to it would be inimical to what I believe in and with the ideals of this country which I continue to believe will some day be realized.102

Although there were no reported public demonstrations against the MAA’s opening, Robbins made sure to continue to appeal to Washington’s black middle class, the members of which did not identify generally with the BPM. In order to garner positive support, Robbins specifically worked to bring in prominent figures such as politicians and ambassadors to African nations, from Henry Kissinger to the ambassador to Senegal, O. Rudolph Aggrey. With the help of social events and fundraisers hosted by influential black and white members of D.C.’s political society, Robbins continued to gather support from local middle- and upper-class black families.

A Community Museum in the Public Eye

While Robbins’s main objective was to create a platform for cross-cultural learning, his programming placed a strong emphasis on the participation of black museum visitors. His decision to cater to a black audience meant being more inclusive of the local community, which was predominantly black. Washington in 1965 was the first major American city whose black population exceeded the white population. In 1927, the sociologist William H. Jones had documented that African

102 Quoted in Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
Americans did not visit local museums and little had changed in the interim. In comparison to other museums in Washington, D.C., the MAA was one of the only cultural centers that aimed for a distinctly black audience. This aspect of the MAA’s programming drew the most media attention. In 1966, the MAA’s Frederick Douglass Institute received a $20,000 grant from the Modern Language Association of America to initiate a program allowing elementary school students to study its permanent collection. The funding would also help the museum organize an exhibition featuring forty famous African Americans. Robbins presented this project as an initiative that had the potential to instill confidence and cultural pride in young schoolchildren. He remarked, “These children can’t really feel pride in being Negro if they think of Africa as it is pictured in Tarzan movies and Jungle Jim comics.” Although Robbins himself was not immune to the misconceptions of Africa’s “primitivity,” by promoting that very idea as the inspiration for European modernist artists, he hoped that by making acquaintance with their ancestor’s art, black children would develop a more sophisticated understanding of Africa. This contradiction in Robbins’s presentation of black art existed throughout his directorship of the MAA. Although well intentioned, his simultaneous embrace of exoticism and rebuttal of that very notion shows an inconsistency in his understanding and portrayal of African art.

Despite these problematic aspects, the MAA’s programming proved successful in redefining the traditional role of the museum as educator. With

programs such as black heritage workshops, school field trip programs, and public lectures, the MAA offered multifaceted education for adults and children, mostly addressed to a black audience, as emphasized by Robbins’s socio-political agenda. The educational program’s expansion helped the museum increase its presence in the local museum community.

Robbins was also targeted for not employing black staff members. A 1966 article in the Washington, D.C.-based periodical *Afro-American* accused the MAA of not having any black staff members. In response, Robbins wrote:

> It has come to my attention that someone on the *Afro* staff has been tracking down the story that the Museum of African Art “does not have colored people on the staff.” I assure you in deepest sincerity that nothing could be further from our intent. We make every effort to seek and find persons interested in this field to work with us and help us. Most of the help that we get have been volunteers and a goodly portion of our volunteers have been Negroes. The fact of the matter is, however, that it is very difficult to find people in general, qualified in the field of African art and museum administration, to work for us at the very minimal full or part time salaries that we are at this stage able to afford. And the number of Negro professionals in this field is limited.\(^{106}\)

To secure the MAA’s reputation as a progressive museum serving its African American audience, Robbins took measures to ensure that his educational programs were taught and supported by black personnel. Mrs. Robbins confirms that Robbins believed in the importance of having a black staff:

> [Robbins] always had several African Americans and he also had Africans working in the educational department on the third floor, where they had a gallery dedicated to children. And the Africans would talk about Africa and have outfits that the little girls could put on and they had drums and musical instruments for the kids to play…we didn’t have masterpieces but everything had to be in the correct style…He also had an assistant director who was black.\(^{107}\)

\(^{106}\) Quoted in Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”

\(^{107}\) Lydia Robbins, interview.
According to Mrs. Robbins, however, the relationship between Robbins and his staff was not always easy. She recalls, “He was fearless and he was confronted by black people from time to time because he hired several black people and if they didn’t like his personality or what he was doing they would sort of all gang up on him and he would stand up to them. He was not afraid of that sort of thing.”

While Robbins worked to perfect the MAA’s educational programming, he also delivered lectures to outside groups that shared his goal of racial equality. While not formally trained as either an art historian or Africanist, being the MAA’s founder and director, he later proclaimed himself an expert on the topic. He spoke to church groups and black interest groups, such as the National Association of Colored Women, on subjects pertaining to African and African American art history.

In his role as director, Robbins published the first volume of *African Art in American Collections* in 1966 with his co-author and close friend Robert Simmons. The book includes objects from private and museum collections. Most collectors featured were Robbins’s friends and MAA donors, including Chaim Gross, Gaston de Havenon, and Eliot Elisofon. He also wrote about himself, recounting his personal history and explaining how he taught himself about African art.

The book was critically panned, one critic noted that: “*African Art in American Collections* seems to be an interesting example of a missed opportunity.” Nonetheless, the U.S. government distributed approximately 3,000 copies when it

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108 Lydia Robbins, interview.
110 Robert Simmons biography and qualifications to co-author are book is unknown.
was first published to U.S. embassies in Africa as gifts for local government officials.\textsuperscript{112} Also, President Lyndon B. Johnson presented the book to African ambassadors after delivering a speech on African policy and, a year later, to White House guests at reception marking the anniversary of the Organization of African Unity.\textsuperscript{113} President Johnson and his associates used Robbins’s book and mission as a means of displaying respect for and solidarity with African nations, which were gaining independence at a time when racism directed against the United States's own black population persisted.

The government’s recognition also helped publicly designate Robbins as a specialist in African art, although academically trained experts continued to deny him such status. Both art historians and Africanists deemed Robbins’s authority on the subject inadequate: one anonymous critic termed him a “passionate amateur.”\textsuperscript{114} Despite such criticism, Robbins continued to balance his role as museum director with his flourishing role as an African art expert, which he enjoyed and did not allow to be compromised by his critics.

Meanwhile, Robbins continued to be concerned about the MAA’s finances. With the majority of the available funding dedicated to educational programming, Robbins devoted much of his time to attending local art-related events at which he could connect with wealthy art patrons. Robbins’s networking proved successful as he continued to attract new donors to the museum, including government officials

such as Vice President Hubert Humphrey, a longtime supporter of civil rights. As early as the 1948 presidential campaign between Harry Truman and Republican opponent Thomas Dewey, Humphrey had strongly advocated for the Democratic Party’s platform to include minority interests. In a speech at the Democratic convention, he stated:

To those who say, my friends, to those who say, that we are rushing this issue of civil rights, I say to them we are 172 years late! To those who say, this civil rights program is an infringement on states' rights, I say this: the time has arrived in America for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states' rights and walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights!"\(^{115}\)

Although all did not embrace Humphrey’s progressive ideas, as a few Southern delegates walked out of the convention in reaction this speech, they shared much in common with Robbins’s vision. Humphrey would later become chairman of the MAA’s board of trustees and played an essential role in the transfer of the museum to the Smithsonian.

**Local Turmoil**

In the early 1960s, D.C. still did not have a locally elected government, known as the right of home rule. With the simultaneous ongoing protests of the Civil Rights Movement, local residents were fighting for home rule. Congress’s opposition to home rule had been justified on the basis that the federal government needed to assure the nation’s capital safety and control the federal tax dollars appropriated to support the city. However, many local residents viewed the denial of home rule as a

racist provision preventing the black majority from choosing their own representatives.

Unlike previous presidents, President Johnson made home rule a major priority, which helped enliven discussion of the act. In the same week he signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Johnson sent letters to and spoke with senators, advocating for approval of a bill proposed in July of the same year. In a televised speech, he proclaimed, “…I am confident that the House of Representatives will affirm the right to democracy for the almost 1 million citizens of the Capital City.”

Despite Johnson’s efforts, the bill failed to pass in the Senate, but local mobilization for the act picked up momentum as a result. Various other bills concerning local Washington voting rights continued to be proposed but never passed.

In 1967, Johnson announced a reorganization of the local government in order to remedy the lack of home rule. He replaced the three appointed district commissioners with a mayor, deputy commissioner, and nine-member council. Johnson’s pick for mayor, black politician Walter Washington, answered to home rule activists’ goal of having a black representative that reflected the city’s black majority. One anonymous white lawyer quoted in the Washington Post said, “Lord help us if those niggers ever get home rule.”

The appointment of Mayor Washington did not amount to a full victory for local residents, but it marked a turning point in D.C.’s history. At last, a black politician represented the city’s black

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residents, who by now made up two-thirds of the city’s population.\textsuperscript{118} Washington’s appointment did not fully eliminate racial tension in the nation’s capital, however. This highlights the MAA’s significance in continuing to promote cross-cultural understanding. In fact, Mayor Washington became a frequent guest at MAA events, underlining the museum’s connection to local politics.

A year after this milestone in local politics, Martin Luther King’s assassination resulted in the Washington riots of 1968. Initially the riots appeared to be a demonstration of anger over King’s death. However, the vandalism of local businesses and mass looting took on a political meaning specific to the area. Most participants were working-class black residents and for many of these protestors the attacks on local businesses were directed against the white-controlled local economy. During the next few days, protestors called for re-distribution of local capital to reflect the black majority. The radical demand for re-distribution of wealth stemmed from some ideas of the Black Power Movement that had gained support among the black working class in Washington. Residents of all ages were aware of the politics surrounding the riots, but not all supported the black separatist ideology. As reflected in the words of a local black elementary-school student in reaction to the protests:

Right now I want to be an American, not a black and not a white man, but an American boy…to change the war between races so there will not be a black man and a white man but an American man. To remember that you cannot judge a man from a color. Right now I would like to forget about Black Power, Soul, and all the burning of stores.\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{118} See Eli Zigas, \textit{Left with Few Rights: Unequal Democracy and the District of Columbia}.
This sentiment summarizes the way in which racial tensions and political instability in the nation’s capital affected all of its residents. The political turmoil in relation to black civil rights in Washington highlighted the need for and significance of the MAA’s political mission. As a community-based museum, the MAA targeted local residents as the most important audience for its educational programming and promotion. While its location in the nation’s capital meant that it also drew a national and international audience, local black politics during this period created the demand for a community museum that responded specifically to the issues plaguing the MAA’s neighbors. Robbins’s particular combination of the integrationist and Pan-African approaches suggested a remedy. For Robbins, Pan-Africanism did not mean black separatism, but it could function within an integrationist approach meant to teach white Americans about black people.

**A New Paradigm Shift: Museums and Exhibitions Hit Home**

The MAA was not the only museum committing itself to the new “community museum” trend or focusing on the black population. During this period, major museums were reacting to the demand for more representations of black art and culture, offering community-based exhibitions. The highly publicized and controversial “Harlem on my Mind” exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA) in 1969 was a significant example of this.

In the context of the Black Arts Movement and the increased demand for black artists in museum collections, the curator, Allon Schoener, hoped to create a political exhibition that would address the history of neighborhood of Harlem, located
only a few dozen blocks from the museum, in a groundbreaking way. It attracted large audiences and is still remembered as a critical moment in African American cultural history. As noted decades later by the *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman:

“Before ‘Harlem On My Mind’ the cultural establishment had largely relegated black culture to natural history museums as if it were anthropology and not art. And so ‘Harlem On My Mind’ was to be a breakthrough. But its unusual installation undermined this very goal because it suggested that black culture was still to be treated differently from other cultures in the Met.”

The exhibition opened to protests and public criticism by some of Harlem’s black residents and other black communities across the country. Local African American artists also objected to the exhibition, criticizing Schoener’s curatorial decisions as to how Harlem’s history was depicted. The Harlem Cultural Council had been enlisted by the MMA as consultants but withdrew their endorsement months before the opening. One of the consultants concluded, “It could be a magnificent show but the emphasis is more on show-biz techniques than on content.”

Once the exhibition opened, more African American artists led protests on the MMA’s steps, criticizing Schoener’s exclusive use of photography as failing to show the artistic versatility of black artists and for his choice of newspaper articles that chronicled negative events in Harlem’s history. As summarized by a Black Emergency Cultural Coalition member, “[the MMA] should make a serious statement or no statement at

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all. There are [many other] artists in the black community, for instance, and they’re not represented.”\textsuperscript{122}

The MMA created accompanying educational programming for the exhibition, including a symposium entitled “The Black Artist in America,” which featured speakers such as Romare Bearden, Sam Gillian Jr., Jacob Lawrence and Hale Woodruff. While most reviews by black visitors showed overwhelming disapproval of the exhibition’s content, some members from the black community appreciated the show’s goal of integrating its local black audience. One visitor, Deborah Willis, describes her experience:

At the age of 21 and never having seen major images of black people in a major museum, I felt great pride in that presentation at the [museum] in New York City. But I also felt conflicted. I wanted to discuss my pride in the exhibition openly with my people but was afraid to do so because of their obvious discontent.\textsuperscript{123}

As exemplified in Willis’s reflection of her experience at the museum, some black visitors appreciated the efforts of major museums in representing black art, although exhibitions such as this did not completely rectify the larger issues of exclusion in these spaces. Despite Schoener’s community-based mission and content, “Harlem On My Mind” attracted mostly negative attention. Nevertheless, cultural critics have noted the exhibition as a pivotal moment in conventional museum practices.

Facing similar demands from local Washington, D.C. black residents, the Smithsonian wanted to create a separate space to serve Washington’s black

\textsuperscript{123} Quoted in Juliet Harris, \textit{Connecting the Three C’s: Collecting, Conservation & Collaboration} (International Review of African American Art, Hampton University Museum, 2007.)
community. The institution’s secretary, Dillon Ripley, decided to establish a storefront community museum that would be easily accessible to its local audience. He wanted to serve “the huge untapped public that has never entered a museum nor enjoyed any of the educational and aesthetic values that museums reflect.”

On September 15, 1967, the Smithsonian opened the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum (ANM). The impoverished neighborhood of Anacostia was predominantly black and residents from the metro area rarely crossed the river to visit this part of town. In creating this new museum as an extension of the Smithsonian, Ripley wanted to avoid the problems encountered by other major museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art by creating a separate museum located in the neighborhood of its intended black audience to make it accessible and foster ownership of its programming. The ANM’s planning derived from a conference sponsored by the Smithsonian and the U.S. Office of Education, aiming “to begin to discover more ways of making more effectual use of the more than 5,000 museums that exist in the United States.” The Smithsonian also held a community meeting where local Anacostia residents were asked to voice what they expected of a neighborhood museum. It was decided that a community-based museum needed to have the following in order to be attractive to its intended audience:

125 In April of 1989, the museum changed its name to the Anacostia Community Museum to “reflect the museum's increased mandate to examine, preserve, and interpret African American history and culture, not only locally and regionally, but nationally and internationally as well.” For more details on the museum’s history see “Anacostia Community Museum,” Smithsonian Institution Archives, accessed on February 28, 2012, http://siarchives.si.edu/history/anacostia-community-museum.
1. It was important to have adequate funding and paid staff.
2. The exhibits should be something special—really unique, not dull and boring.
3. Visitors should be able to come in not only to look and touch but also to do—there must be a chance to become familiar with new skills.
4. There should be exhibits on “our Negro heritage.”
5. There should be space for the display of neighborhood talent and of exhibits produced by neighborhood people.

After discussing these characteristics, Ripley decided that instead of bringing in a trained museum professional, he wanted someone “who knows the community.”

Ripley offered the position of director to John A. Kinard, a local black activist who had no experience running a museum. Before Kinard’s career as the ANM, he was an assistant pastor at the John Wesley African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Washington, D.C. He worked with Operation Crossroads Africa in 1962, and his work as a community organizer began with the local anti-poverty program, in which he made connections with African government agencies. His Pan-African interests shaped the ANM’s programming. The museum mainly focused on issues concerning the immediate black community in Anacostia. One of the earlier exhibitions called “The Rat: Man’s Invited Affliction” exemplified the unconventional display of community concerns and history. Another one of ANM’s first major temporary exhibitions, “This is Africa,” included over two hundred African objects mostly from the Smithsonian’s collection. The Smithsonian had possessed African artifacts since

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the early 1900s, yet these objects were not a part of the permanent collection on display, as discussed further in Chapter Three.

The exact relationship between the new ANM and the MAA is unclear. Yet, the MAA’s mission continued to attract media attention, benefactors, art donations, and museum visitors. While its educational and political mission made it unlike the traditional art museum, the MAA proved able to fulfill a much-needed function as a repository for African art. The collection’s rapid growth led to a major renovation and expansion and to an increase in its academic legitimacy and influence.

**Expanded Space and Academic Influence**

The MAA’s position as the only museum dedicated solely to African art and publicity resulted in a rapid increase in museum visitors. By 1969, the MAA had seen a thirty-three percent increase in visitors since its opening. In 1970, Robbins decided to embark on a large-scale expansion. David Lloyd Kreeger, a local philanthropist, donated funds for the renovation and Robbins commissioned the black architect Robert Nash to renovate and expand the museum. Robbins’s decision to hire a black architect reflected his goal of promoting black pride in every aspect of the museum’s planning.

The architectural plans for the renovations reveal that Robbins envisioned a space similar to a formal art museum (figs. 3 and 4). In order to create room for the museum’s growing collection, Nash designed new additions to the building. He preserved the Douglass house’s original façade instead of renovating and potentially

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destroying the Victorian residence. Nash also renovated the second floor, providing more space for offices and exhibitions. The architectural plans show separate galleries for sculpture, temporary exhibitions, and the permanent collection on the second floor. In addition, there was a lounge by the entrance on the first floor for museum visitors, as well as a lecture hall. The design included a more formal educational component along with the necessary storage and display area for the growing permanent collection.

The construction project closed down the museum for almost a year and cost a reported $400,000. The new museum included twelve galleries, new administrative offices, a lecture hall seating 110 visitors, and a new storage facility. While expanding the main museum building, Robbins also purchased five adjacent buildings.

The MAA’s temporary closing did not stop Robbins from showcasing African art on Capital Hill or expanding its programming. During this period, Robbins continued his fundraising efforts and networking at local events to attract museum patrons. But perhaps his biggest accomplishment during the renovation was his collaboration with the National Portrait Gallery on an exhibition titled “The Language of African Art,” which included over four hundred pieces of African art, more than three hundred of which were on loan from the MAA. In his proposal for the exhibition, Robbins promised that it would “demonstrate that, although different in subject matter and emphasis, traditional African sculpture contains all of the elements

of Western art so familiar to our society.”

The exhibition opened to positive reviews and Robbins’s role was recognized as a positive influence on the programming accompanying the exhibition, which included a children’s gallery.

Encouraged by this success, Robbins held up the MAA as a “prototype” for the creation of cross-cultural communication in other museums, universities, and school systems. While the building was still under renovation, Robbins continued the Frederick Douglass Institute’s public programming that served as a political counterpart to the MAA. He continued programs including student workshops, lectures series, and even consulted on various public projects, including a black history booklet distributed to 10,000 staff members at Washington, D.C. public schools. This programming was designed to deal directly with the occurring African American political movements and promoted the works of prominent African American artists.

As the MAA grew, the field of Black Studies was on the rise across the nation. Partly inspired by the Black Power Movement and responding to black students’ demands for more courses including their history and identity, Black Studies programs began offering courses in African American art, history, and politics. Courses in African Studies formed as a part of many of these programs. The MAA served a new purpose as an institution available to college students, adding to

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134 See Werner and Lemov, “African Art Museum and Douglass Institute Are Booming.”
its development as a research institution. In part, the Frederick Douglass Institute’s objectives also aligned with the goals of these Black Studies programs. One of the institute’s main programs was helping local public schools develop African art and history classes.\textsuperscript{135} The institute’s political objectives were unapologetically publicized and furthered the goals articulated in Robbins’s planning for the MAA. Robbins dedicated the museum’s renovated second floor to African American art. The inclusion of African American paintings signaled a national shift to recognizing these works as worthy of being displayed in major museums. The institute directly promoted the MAA’s ultimate goal as a space that could encourage racial equality and mutual respect.

One of the institute's first major educational programs was a lecture series, “Aspects of Intercultural Understanding” as a part of a Title III project for Washington, D.C. public school system. The series included guest speakers such as Robbins’s longtime friend, Senator S.I. Hayakawa, the African American writer Alex Haley, and the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead.\textsuperscript{136}

As he focused increasingly on African American art, culture, and history, Robbins began purchasing more African American art for the institute. Some of the first exhibitions sponsored by the institute included “Ben Shahn on Human Rights” and the “The Art of Henry Tanner.” The latter exhibition traveled to seven other major American art museums with the support of the Smithsonian Institution’s Travelling Exhibition Service. In an article about the exhibition, Robbins stated that

\textsuperscript{136} Robbins, \textit{Speaking of Introductions}, 181.
his purchase of thirty paintings from Tanner’s son, Jesse, had inspired him to collect
African American art. The MAA’s scholar in residence, Caroll Greene, curated the
traveling exhibition and publicly proclaimed its significance in the context of the
Civil Rights Movement (fig.5):

Tanner earned his reputation in France as an outstanding artist without any
racial considerations. But this exhibition takes on a special importance at this
time—when our society is attempting to rid itself of a ‘conspiracy of silence,’
which has surrounded the contributions of Afro-Americans. \(^\text{137}\)

Robbins’s involvement in planning these exhibitions at the Smithsonian reflected the
MAA’s success in gaining respect as a legitimate museum. Also, his direct
involvement spoke to his new career as an expert in the field of African art history.
Lastly, these high-profile collaborations with outside institutions helped attract
publicity to the MAA and its political mission.

A month before the Museum of African Art’s grand re-opening, the National
Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) granted the museum $1 million to continue
developing public educational programs. A five-year development grant, it was at the
time the largest grant the NEH had given to a single institution. Based on the NEH’s
motto, “Because democracy demands wisdom,”\(^\text{138}\) the grant also signified the MAA’s
growing public recognition as a legitimate academic institution. The grant proved
advantageous when the museum re-opened to positive reviews, which in turn helped
expand its educational programming, attract financial donors, and acquire important
objects for its permanent collection.

\(^{137}\) Meryle Secrest, “Paintings by Black Expatriate,” *The Washington Post*, July 22,
1969, C7.

\(^{138}\) “NEH Overview,” National Endowment for the Humanities, accessed January 8,
In May of 1971, the museum re-opened with a large exhibition featuring the collection of Gaston de Havenon, a businessman born in Tunis who had immigrated to the United States in 1923. De Havenon had already donated the majority of his African sculpture collection to the Natural History Museum in New York City, and Robbins considered it to be one of the top five African art collections in the country. De Havenon’s remaining collection included Bedu masks, plated copper figures from the Kota people of Gabon, and wooden carvings from several African nations.\footnote{Sarah Booth Conroy, “Grand Re-Opening of the African Art Museum,” \textit{The Washington Post}, May 23, 1971, L2.}

The following year, the MAA presented its largest exhibition yet, “African Art in Washington Collections,” which attracted positive press reviews and gained support among the local elite. Drawing on his connections with local African art collectors, Robbins had invited some of Washington’s government officials and members of high society to lend their African art pieces to the exhibition. The blockbuster exhibition featured African art from over one hundred local collectors, including Nancy Hanks, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Mayor Walter Washington, and Representative Thomas S. Foley. In an interview following the exhibition opening, Robbins described its scope as a sign that Washington, D.C. was quickly becoming “a principal world center for the collection and study of African art.”\footnote{Paul Richard, “African Art -- From Everyone,” \textit{The Washington Post}, May 24, 1972, C1.} The exhibition showcased the heightened public interest in collecting and viewing African art, which in turn helped legitimate African art.

In discussing the collectors whose pieces were featured in the exhibition, Robbins estimated that two-thirds of the loans were from government officials, most
of whom had travelled to Africa. The Washington Post reporter Paul Richard suggested that without the deployment of officials to foreign countries there would not have been as much access to or resulting interest in African art. This link to the federal government had undoubtedly occurred to Robbins, who had secured plenty of financial support from federal government programs during this period.

In 1971, the MAA established its library, which Robbins named after Melville Herskovitz, a white cultural anthropologist who had founded the first African Studies program in the United States in 1948. Naming the library after a non-black figure speaks to the museum’s continuous dedication to its integrationist ideology. Although a report on the library’s collection published by the museum in 1975 inflated its size to approximately 10,000 items, Janet Stanley claims that by 1979 the collection more accurately included 2,500 to 3,000 books. The 1975 report lists forty-two patrons, including students, art docents, and schoolteachers, along with their research topics, which gives an idea of how visitors used the museum’s resources. Topics ranged from African art, to history, religion, and fetishism, an indication of the MAA’s role as an authoritative resource on African art, history, and culture. Some of the library’s collection consisted of materials on African American history and culture, but as a part of its later transfer to the Smithsonian such books would be released to other Smithsonian museums, including the Anacostia

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141 Paul Richard, “African Art—From Everyone.”
Museum, the National Museum of American History, and the National Portrait Gallery as they did not fit into the museum’s post-transfer mission.\textsuperscript{144}

One of the MAA’s most significant acquisitions during this period was the collection of photographs by Eliot Elisofon. For many years, Elisofon had worked as a photographer for \textit{LIFE} magazine, meanwhile creating one of the most extensive collections of photographs featuring Africa. The acquisition was not surprising, as Elisofon and Robbins had developed a working relationship in the MAA’s early years. Elisofon had lent Robbins approximately two dozen African sculptures for the museum’s temporary opening exhibition in May of 1964.

Like that of Robbins, Elisofon’s career as an African art expert had begun inadvertently as a hobby. As the first child of Jewish immigrant parents, Elisofon (originally spelled Elicofon) was born in New York City in 1911. Growing up in an impoverished neighborhood in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, Elisofon was exposed by his mother to the arts, music, and literature at a young age. In high school, he began doing photography as a hobby, developing his film in his family’s bathroom. Elisofon worked during high school and saved enough money to attend Fordham University, intending to study medicine. Shortly after graduating, however, he joined a new commercial photography studio at a friend’s suggestion and began his career as a professional photographer.

Elisofon soon developed a reputation as an innovative photographer. In the 1930s he had working relationships with the Museum of Modern Art and several art galleries and periodicals based in New York City. Upon achieving commercial

\textsuperscript{144} Janet Stanley, email message to author, February 3, 2012.
success, Elisofon began documenting poverty in New York City, starting with his campaign “Playgrounds for Manhattan,” which eventually led to commissions across the country. In 1936, he joined the Photo League, a left-wing organization that encouraged him to engage in activism. That same year, a new picture magazine called *LIFE* transformed how America viewed photojournalism. Having joined the magazine in its first year, by 1942 Elisofon had earned a position as a staff photographer with regular photo assignments in Europe during World War II.

In 1947, Elisofon’s first commission to cover African culture introduced him to his new favorite subject. For one of his better-known photo essays, “The Nile,” Elisofon traveled from “Capetown to Cairo,” as he puts it, and began collecting African art. As was the case with Robbins’s development as African art expert, Elisofon’s hobby quickly built his reputation as an expert on African art and culture. He became, as one scholar put it, “one of the century’s major experts and collectors, [as he] began lecturing, publishing, and advocating for the significance of the arts and cultures that flourished [in Africa].”\(^\text{145}\) A large portion of his archives consists of images of African art, especially sculpture. In photographing African sculptures, Elisofon aimed to give a realistic yet aesthetically pleasing image of these pieces. For example, Elisofon describes how he composed one of the images of a Dogon sculpture in the collection acquired by the MAA:

> Four studies were made in an addition to the conventionally lighted full figure: a close-up of the head and shoulders to reveal Dogon convention of balancing head and headdresses against shoulder and breast—this involved the technique of cross-lighting to bring out texture…a silhouette to show

purity of style and form; and two studies of the torso, frontal and profile, lopping off head and feet in order to dramatize the abstract construction of the torso itself.\textsuperscript{146}

Elisofon’s detailed and artistic approach to photographing the Dogon sculpture epitomizes the artistically meticulous process that went into each image. Inspired by Elisofon’s techniques, the MAA exhibitions would later feature similar lighting and detail.

Through his work documenting African art and cultures, Elisofon amassed one of the largest such private collections in the world. Following Elisofon’s death in 1973, Elisofon bequeathed over 150,000 pieces, including photographs, negatives, and film footage to the MAA. The same year, the museum hosted a tribute to the photographer that included some of Elisofon’s closest friends, such as the former \textit{LIFE} editor Ralph Graves, the sculptor and African art enthusiast Chaim Gross, and the African art collector Paul Tishman. Elisofon’s donation of his archive encouraged new connections in the African art-collecting community and further established the MAA’s position as the repository for African art. During this period, the MAA remained the only museum dedicated to African art.

By the mid-1970s, the MAA had acquired over 7,000 objects and continued its successful educational programming, which continued to include school group tours, lectures, and cultural immersion events. Unlike many other art museums, the MAA continued to provide educational programs to local schools. One publicly recognized program sent museum staff to local schools instead of hosting field trips.

to the museum. The museum launched this month-long series at a local school and included activities such as lectures, craft workshops, and lessons on African geography. The program also had African museum staff members lecture on African art, culture, and history. The public school program helped the museum connect with local black working-class children. Although this educational program, among others, received both private and federal funding, the MAA’s dedication to its role as educator cut into the funding available for preserving and expanding its collection. A statement of unaudited income shows that the MAA had a profit margin of only $26,484 in the fiscal year leading up to June 30 of 1972 to roll over for the next year expenditures. Most of its income came from government and private grants, but the museum also sold donated assets in order to sustain the budget.

**Increased Visibility and Support**

In 1973, Robbins finally made his first trip to Africa. An investigation by the *New York Times* had revealed that a statue sacred to the Kom people in Cameroon called the Afo-A-Kom had been stolen from its village in 1966. The investigation tracked the piece to the Aaron Fuhrman Gallery in New York City. Fuhrman claimed to have bought it legally and did not want to return the piece without receiving a payment from the Kom people. Robbins raised the funds to purchase the statue and

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planned to return it himself. 149 Despite his good intentions, the appropriateness of his wish to return the piece was contested at a press conference when the chairman of the Black United Front, Reverend Douglas Moore, exclaimed that the statue ought to be “escorted back to Cameroon by representatives of the Black community…We don’t believe that the Fu[h]rman Gallery did not know this was a stolen sacred piece and I see nowhere in American history that we have been happy to return stolen property.” 150 In response, Robbins stated, as he had to black critics in the past, “I make no apologies for being white…and I have no vested interest in making the trip.” 151 The latter half of his response was most likely not entirely true, as this trip marked the first time Robbins had the funding to travel to Africa. After he returned, publicity surrounding the trip increased the MAA’s national recognition as the premier museum dedicated to African art and contributed to Robbins’s position as a legitimate expert on African art as well.

By 1974, as one of Washington’s newest museums, the MAA had a reported attendance of 55,000 visitors a year, with an estimated additional 100,000 pupils annually attending its many educational programs. 152 One Washington Post article reported a noticeable increase in African art exhibitions in the D.C. area. The article noted the “remarkable total of four shows of African art currently on view in Washington,” at the Renwick Gallery, Corcoran Gallery, National Gallery of Art, and

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150 Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
the Museum of African Art. Booth continues on to say, “These shows recognize the current interest in African art and increase the interest themselves. The MAA had effectively helped to introduce African art as a commercially appealing and legitimate art genre.

Despite the positive reviews the MAA received and the influence it wielded, Robbins complained in a letter to the Post about another article. Robbins expressed his disappointment that despite the aforementioned article about African art in D.C., in a review of local photography exhibits the Post had failed to cover a new MAA exhibition featuring Elisofon’s archive. Robbins endorsed Elisofon’s work, featuring images of Africa, as respectable and legitimate art. He wrote, “Specialists have referred to the Elisofon material as among the most magnificent color photographs ever taken in Africa.” He goes on to describe the exhibition and closes with the hope “that people interested in photography per se, as well as those concerned with African culture, will avail themselves of this rich visual material in our midst.”

Robbins’s letter reveals how despite continuous public support, the MAA still faced obstacles to securing a reputation among cultural critics and academics as a legitimate art museum.

Nevertheless, the MAA’s role as a community-based institution placed it at the forefront of a major trend transforming museums across the country. A Washington Post article, published on June 11, 1972, mentions the MAA alongside the Newark Museum and the Brooklyn Museum for their community outreach. The

article acknowledges that the MAA had triumphed with its controversial mission when “the idea of an ethnic museum seemed far more radical…” The article focused on the new concept of museum programming created to serve the community and quotes Brooklyn Museum director, Henri Ghent, as saying, “Many museums are still making the traditional mistake of formalizing everything. They want to give everyone the same medicine but you can’t do that—different community groups need different treatment.” As the only museum in the country dedicated exclusively to African art and black Americans, the MAA exemplified the new nationwide initiative to attract and support American minority groups. During this period, urban museums faced a new challenge after many white middle-class families began moving out of cities into the suburbs during the late 1960s. To be relevant to the new inner city population, consisting of mostly minorities, the urban museum had to reconfigure traditional educational programming. The Post article also highlights the financial hardships that urban museums were incurring as a result of the shift in their educational programming while continuing to expand their collections.

In 1975, the NEH sponsored several surveys directed at over 1,000 museums nationwide to diagnose and understand the challenges facing museums and their directors. The eventual aim was to propose answers to the challenges facing the American museum. In one survey, twenty-nine percent of museum directors reported having curated special exhibitions to attract African American visitors, with senior citizens listed as the most targeted group at thirty-one percent. Compared to the

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156 Ibid.
“Spanish Americans,” “other minority groups,” and the “economically disadvantaged,” African Americans were the most pursued special interest group by museums. In another survey, however, African Americans were reported as representing only four percent of professional employees in American museums, including approximately two percent of the senior personnel. As stated in the report, “The proportion of blacks and other minority groups in professional positions is below the national proportions of these groups.”

While Robbins prided himself on having a racially diverse staff, it is unclear how much creative or administrative input the black staff members had. Although Robbins worked tirelessly at securing funding, the MAA had difficulty retaining staff members because of poor salaries. The constant staff turnover drove Robbins to rely on himself to raise funds, secure loans and donations of new objects, and create most of the educational programs. He soon earned a reputation as being what some employees considered to be a tough and stubborn boss. In fact, few employees stayed at the MAA for more than two years. With the constant changes in museum staff, no one stayed long enough to partner with or replace Robbins. Thus, Robbins’s vision prevailed as he maintained full control of the museum’s programming. The MAA hardly deviated from its founding mission of being a new type of educational center dedicated to cross-cultural understanding and equality. In a 1977 memo written by

Robbins concerning the museum’s political mission, the sentiment remained, but its rhetoric became more academic and sophisticated. The memo states:

A wide variety of programs are provided by the Museum with a two-fold aim—to imaginatively present a positive view of Africa, replacing myths and misconceptions with information and experiences that lead to a proper understanding and appreciation of an important part of man’s cultural heritage and, in demonstrating the “legitimacy” of traditional African culture as a response to man’s environment, to have it serve as a strong foundation for positive ethnic identity and for respect, by black and white people respectively, in today’s America.\textsuperscript{159}

Although relatively close in spirit to the original mission formulated by Robbins, the less political and more academic tone evident in this revised mission statement speaks to Robbins’s and the museum’s professional transformation.

Despite the constant turnover of staff, Robbins's ambitious fundraising and knack for publicity resulted in an increase in museum visitors and an ever-expanding permanent collection that had soon outgrown its home. Even with persisting financial difficulties, the MAA purchased nine buildings, sixteen garages, and two carriage houses to display and store its permanent collection, library, and the newly acquired Elisofon archives.

The Frederick Douglass building remained central to the MAA’s mission and publicity. The hiring of black museum staff, the establishment of public educational programs, and the purchase of African American paintings reaffirmed Robbins’s socio-political agenda of facilitating cross-cultural communication. The following chapter demonstrates how the museum’s move from a private community-based

\textsuperscript{159} Smithonian Institution Archives, accession 97-076, box 7, “Friends Annual Meeting Memo 1977.”
museum to a public incorporated museum would define a new era and affect changes beyond Robbins’s original intentions.
Chapter Three: Transition to the Smithsonian

Warren is extraordinary. There are very few human beings with his tenacity and stamina. He started this place from scratch. But he had a broad agenda. The word ‘museum’ was not as restrictive to him as it is to me.

–Sylvia Williams, 1987

In this chapter, I discuss the Museum of African Art’s politically neutral approach to its founding mission, undertaken in order to appeal to the Smithsonian Institution’s academic principles. The Smithsonian represented the old-style museum with its lesser emphasis on public educational programs, community-based organization, and its apolitical mission. Once the MAA joined the Smithsonian, it retreated from its role as the “museum as social forum” to more of the “museum as temple.” In the process, the museum lost its immediate appeal and strong connection with its local black audience. Although the MAA’s mission during its campaigning took a more or less politically neutral approach, the allies and strategy behind the campaign hinted at the socio-political value and symbolism that the acquisition held in respect to national black politics, local racial history, and rapidly changing museum ideologies. The tumultuous relationship between Warren Robbins and his replacement as director, Sylvia Williams, illustrates the MAA’s struggle to preserve a community-based museum mission, as opposed to a strategy that focused on a more scholarly agenda.

Campaigning for the Future

Recognizing the MAA’s chronically inadequate funding and the need to enlarge its facilities to house its ever-expanding collection, Robbins began planning for alternative long-term solutions. Despite various grants and private donations, the
museum faced increased difficulty sustaining its funding throughout the 1970s.
Robbins publicized the MAA’s financial hardships and initiated a national fundraising campaign in 1977, hoping to raise $1 million. The campaign received an initial “challenge grant” from the NEH for $225,000. The initial grant’s goal was to encourage, attract and promote private donations that could lead to ongoing relationships with donors.

In an interview promoting the new public fundraising campaign, Robbins stated, “Our problem has been that many people take the museum for granted, assuming that it is in financially sound condition when in fact it is not.” Despite the hope conveyed by this new fundraising effort for the museum’s continued existence, Robbins had begun campaigning years earlier to donate the MAA to the Smithsonian Institution. In 1974, he had allegedly approached the Smithsonian’s secretary, Dillon Ripley, at the opening of the Hirshhorn Museum and asked, “if he wanted another art museum.”

Robbins had not planned originally to donate the MAA to the Smithsonian. His idea to do so stemmed from the financial hardship the museum faced and the symbolic aspect of the acquisition, which would make the MAA the Smithsonian’s first museum dedicated entirely to black art, was a secondary consideration.

Approaching retirement, Robbins had no endowment for the museum to support its

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daily operations, so donating the museum to the Smithsonian would secure its financial future.

Robbins could not have picked a more influential and supportive figure than Dillon Ripley to help his campaign for the MAA’s donation to the Smithsonian. Having begun at the institution in 1964 as the Smithsonian’s eighth secretary, Ripley looked to expand the institution’s influence and educational programming, evidenced in his founding of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum. He believed in the democratization of museums, as expressed through their expanded educational role in their immediate communities. In his introduction to *Museums and Education*, published in 1968, Ripley proposed that the first step in planning future museums and exhibitions should be providing access to a wider audience. He believed, “There should be some way to make museums a wholly natural, delightful part of our society, as natural, easy, and everyday as breathing in and out. There should be some way of refining and analyzing this process so that it can be understood and encouraged.”

Robbins’s and Ripley’s shared belief in the educational role and democratization of the American museum would make for a strong partnership. Yet, in order for the MAA to be considered a premier African art museum, Robbins had to shift his presentation of the museum’s purpose. The MAA had to strengthen its scholarly function, which inadvertently detracted from its community-based educational programming.

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The Evolution of Black Representation at the Smithsonian

The Smithsonian Institution’s founding in 1846 created the standard of academic excellence for the American museum. The institution’s mission statement from its founder, James Smithson, reads, “I then bequeath the whole of my property...to the United States of America, to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an Establishment for the increase & diffusion of knowledge...”163 As a museum dedicated to “the increase and diffusion of knowledge,” it focused on its role as a space for scientific study. Its social role as public educator became secondary. As the only federally supported museum, the Smithsonian came to embody the United States’s civic values in its production of national public memory and dedication to the democratic access to knowledge.164 As described by Lonnie Bunch, Director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Smithsonian is “‘“America’s front porch’… Part of it is, the Smithsonian is a great legitimizer. If other museums see us do it, then they think ‘Hey, we can do that too.’”165

164 Although earlier museums had received federal support, the government founded the Smithsonian Institution in 1846 as “The Nation’s Museum.” Upon his death in 1826, the British nobleman James Smithson left 105,000 pounds to the US government “to found at Washington under the name of Smithsonian Institution an Establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.” However, it was not until almost twenty years after Smithson’s death that his bequest would be realized when law established the museum on August 10, 1846. For more on the history of the Smithsonian Institution see Leonard Carmichael, James Smithson and the Smithsonian, Michigan: Michigan University Press, 2009.); Walter Karp, The Smithsonian Institution: an Establishment for the Increase and Diffusion of Knowledge Among Men (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1965.)
165 Lonnie Bunch, Personal Interview, April 4, 2012.
During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, there was little representation of African Americans at the Smithsonian. Within the Natural History Museum, the skeletal remains of Africans and African Americans were stored and used for comparative race studies. Under the direction of a group of polygeneticists, the Smithsonian followed its European counterparts in displaying different races in a way that illustrated biological differences rather than unity.

In the 1850s, the Smithsonian hired its first African American, Solomon G. Brown, who had been an assistant to Joseph Henry and Samuel Morse in the development of the telegraph. Henry had hired Brown as the clerk in charge of transportation but his role at the Smithsonian exceeded that of his official title. He worked as a public intellectual, often giving speeches to black and, on occasion, white audiences. Although Brown’s contribution to the Smithsonian’s collections was minimal, he served as the leading preservationist of the African American community in Washington during his fifty years at the institution. Outside of his career at the Smithsonian, Brown joined several black literary and historical societies, working on preserving the history of Anacostia, where he lived. Despite the public recognition he received from both black and white supporters, however, Brown was never promoted during his time at the Smithsonian.

It was not until 1922, more than seventy years after the Smithsonian’s founding, that the institution installed a permanent exhibition of African objects. An

166 Faith Ruffins, “Mythos, Memory, and History,” 524-25.
Englishman named Herbert Ward donated his collection to the American institution because, as one observer asserted, he felt “that his trophies, coming from Africa, would be of special interest to the American people, as they are thrown in intimate contact with the Negroes in their daily life.”¹⁶⁸ Although Ward understood the unique history of race relations between black and white Americans, he addressed only the educational value of his donation for white Americans. The assumption that white Americans were the sole museum audience would not change until the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement helped create new cultural dialogues. The 1922 exhibition was introduced to answer African American criticisms of the Smithsonian’s failure to represent their history, but it portrayed Africans as primitive peoples.

In 1929, at the request of a local race relations committee, the Smithsonian presented its first temporary exhibition of African American art in the National Gallery of Art (NGA). The Harmon Foundation featuring contemporary black artists sponsored the exhibition, called “African Negro Artists.” Despite the exhibition’s success, the sponsor’s political intent and climate of strained race relations in Washington were of concern to the Smithsonian staff. In a press release, one of the race committee’s leaders who helped coordinate the show announced, “Here is the field of Negro achievement where no controversial social or political questions are involved and where it is believed that Negroes will be able to make a distinctive

contribution just as they have in the field of music.” As Michèle Gates Moresi, points out, however, the goal of using the Smithsonian’s monumental status to publicize a positive understanding of African American art and culture was inherently political.  

The Smithsonian’s preference for remaining an apolitical site shifted during the Civil Rights Movement. With no permanent museum exhibitions dedicated to African American culture and history, Congressman James Scheuer, a Democratic representative from New York, proposed a Negro History Museum Commission in August of 1965. Similar to Robbins, Scheuer believed the museum could help improve “pride and self-image of Negro Americans by developing a better understanding of the past.” Although, the bill did not pass, in December, perhaps in response to Congressman Scheuer’s proposed bill, the Museum of History and Technology announced the Smithsonian’s first permanent exhibit on Negro history. Two years later, the exhibition “African Backgrounds and Negro Slavery” opened, describing the slave trade and displaying artifacts from African societies, although Michèle Gates Moresi points out that such objects were most likely never actually used by slaves.

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In 1968, the Smithsonian hired Carroll Greene Jr. to be its first historian specializing in African American history. More political exhibitions related to black culture and political movements entered the display cases at the Smithsonian, dealing with themes such as “Human Rights” and “The Right to Vote.” Ripley’s new goals diverged from the Smithsonian’s traditional museum culture as an academic institution dedicated to presenting facts rather than creating a public dialogue. With the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum’s founding and its subsequent success, the Smithsonian looked towards new ways of attracting a more diverse audience onto its main grounds.\(^{172}\)

The increase of black representation in the Smithsonian’s collections signified a change in national historical narratives and perceptions of American identity. The rising presence of Washington’s black population, the increased visibility of black political protests, and the resulting collaboration with local black groups catalyzed the Smithsonian’s changing strategies and mission. The institution began working more seriously towards diversifying its staff, collections, and audiences. This shift also suggests how although financial concern drove Robbins’s decision to donate the MAA to the Smithsonian, the potential symbolic leverage it would lend to the study of African arts and culture was also an important factor.

**Campaign and Compromise**

On May 7, 1976, the MAA’s longtime supporter and former trustee Senator Hubert Humphrey wrote a letter to the Smithsonian’s Board of Regents, most likely at

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\(^{172}\) For further discussion on the representation of African Americans at the Smithsonian Institution see Michèle Gates Moresi, *Exhibiting Race, Creating Nation*, 2003.
Robbins’s request, endorsing the MAA’s transfer. Addressed to Warren Burger, then Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, who served as the board’s chancellor, Humphrey’s letter argues:

> While the Museum may be small in comparison with some of the other divisions of the Smithsonian, its quality and impact have been immense…we wish to do all that we can to encourage this acquisition. We believe that the Regents will do a wise and fruitful thing in accepting the Museum as a gift to the nation.”

Along with his signature, Humphrey provided the signatures of thirty-four other senators who endorsed the proposal, including Senators Hugh Scott, Edward Kennedy, and Robert Taft, Jr. Robbins’ longtime relationship with government officials now proved crucial in having his proposal approved.

By this time, the MAA had already established itself as a museum dedicated to displaying the many arts and cultures of Africa, but also as a new type of community-based American museum that responded to the political, social, and artistic interests of its immediate black audience. As demonstrated by the popularity of exhibitions at the MAA and ANM, local black museum visitors wanted to see more black arts and history on display. The MAA also had one of the most racially diverse staffs in the country, with an estimated forty percent being black, and prided

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174 Ibid.
itself as being a revolutionary museum that appealed to a diverse audience not only through the nature of its collection but also through its educational programming.\textsuperscript{175}

The Smithsonian had already recently absorbed the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York City and had opened several other museums in Washington, including the Hirshhorn Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, and the National Collection of Fine Arts. Congress had received public criticism for its spending on the Smithsonian, hence the main concern for the cost of absorbing the MAA.\textsuperscript{176} The chief question was not the acquisition’s necessity, but, rather, where the museum’s contents could be moved to reduce expenses. The multiple properties Robbins had purchased to house the entire collection were not cost effective.

While Robbins and Ripley agreed on the importance of what the MAA had become, the initial campaign planning meetings revealed that Ripley made clear to Robbins the changes that its mission and programming would have to undergo for its acquisition to be considered by the Smithsonian. In the Smithsonian Board of Regents’ “Report on the Museum of African Art,” which endorsed the MAA’s acquisition and accompanying the Regent’s recommendations to Congress, Robbins’s original mission is nowhere to be found in the formal description of museum. This twenty-five-page document focuses instead on the museum’s academic history. While specific descriptions abound of the museum’s collection, stating, “Nearly all countries of Black Africa are represented in the collection… the great majority of African art

\textsuperscript{175} This was an estimate based on Robbins’s own reporting. See “Raising the Roof for African Art: Warren Robbins Politicking His Museum Into the Smithsonian,” \textit{The Washington Post}, February 5, 1979, B1.

objects are in three-dimensional media (wood, ivory, and stone carving, pottery, metal casting),” the museum’s socio-political purpose is suppressed.\footnote{Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 7053, box two, “Museum of African Art legislation 1977-78.”}

The museum’s mission political reorientation and the emphasis on its scholarly value reflect a strategy that many museums adopt in order to receive public funding. For one, the museum had to be apolitical, since it would now be viewed as a democratic and academically legitimate space. As summarized by Fiona Cameron, “Apoliticality is about the power museums hold as cultural authorities, and underscores institutional legitimacy.”\footnote{Fiona Cameron, “Moral Lessons and Reforming Agendas: History Museums, Science Museums, Contentious Topics and Contemporary Societies,” in Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and Are Changed, ed. Simon J. Knell, Suzanne MacLeod, and Sheila Watson (New York: Routledge, 2007), 332.}

According to Stephen Weil, the obscure \textit{Belmont Report} published by the Association of American Museum (AAM) in 1968 demonstrates this phenomenon. This report urged members to advertise their museums as spaces of scholarly value in order to justify receiving federal funding, yet defined the art museum as a place of leisure or entertainment where visitors do not actually seek to be “improved” but rather come for entertainment purposes to be “refreshed.”\footnote{Stephen E. Weil, “From Being About Something to Being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum,” \textit{Daedalus} 128, no. 3 (July 1, 1999): 235.}

Any museum seeking public funding needed to remain apolitical in order to ensure mass appeal and public funding—it would be considered out of place for it to act as a political educator.

Robbins created an art museum on the premise that art could serve an educational function specific to its political context. The MAA’s original mission
statement explicitly asserted that the museum was a community-based educational facility rather than a space for formal academic study or entertainment. The rewriting of the museum’s mission seems to have been a calculated move by the Board of Regents, whose members understood how to appeal for federal funding. However, I contend that if Robbins had created a museum of African history or culture not specifically focusing on art, perhaps the implicit message of teaching positive multiculturalism could have been more preserved. Rather than being an art museum, creating a history or cultural museum could have offered a more justifiable reason to explore a less restrictive approach to the museum contents and retain its more left-wing Pan-African pedagogy.

Despite having his mission edited out of the proposal in favor of a more academic one, Robbins did not seem to worry that the museum’s essential character would be erased upon its joining the Smithsonian. Robbins had been working closely with Ripley during the campaign and had made it clear to the Board of Regents that he did not want to compromise the museum’s mission. In fact, Robbins may have viewed the proposal as a mere strategy aimed at winning over Congress rather than a permanent sacrifice.

In addition to the MAA’s altered mission, the Board of Regents recommended changes for the museum staff to undergo if the museum joined the Smithsonian. The document states:

Warren Robbins has made clear that his position is considerably flexible as to the specific arrangements that might be made for the Smithsonian’s acquisition of the museum...[also] that as many of the Museum’s staff as may be deemed desirable would be converted to Smithsonian employment; that the Museum would be maintained as an identifiable entity within the
Smithsonian; that its Board of Trustees would be converted into an advisory board (rather than executive) body.\textsuperscript{180}

Although the anticipated changes would transform the museum’s character,
Robbins’s main concern and motive was to assure the museum’s financial security. In the end, the MAA would succumb to the formal museum practices that the Smithsonian followed. Yet despite the alteration of its mission, the museum would serve as a beacon in the field of African studies.

**The Hearing on the Hill**

In order to elucidate the strategies employed by the main actors to pass the bill authorizing the museum’s transfer, I will critically analyze the arguments and themes put forth during the congressional hearing on the petition for the MAA to join the Smithsonian Institution. The hearing took place on April 25, 1978. The two main topics of discussion in the hearing were: 1) Whether to move the museum to another building to save money and 2) whether preserving the MAA’s community-based programming and political mission was desirable. The underlying concern present in the testimonies that follow is that of the MAA losing its unique role that Robbins had created. In addition, the testimony offers a look into how the MAA’s mission was received and how effective Robbins had been in publicizing the importance of such a mission.

The bill, then titled “A bill to authorize the Smithsonian Institution to acquire the Museum of African Art,” was drafted and sponsored by Democratic Senator

\textsuperscript{180} Smithsonian Institution Archives, record unit 7053, box two, folder “Museum of African Art legislation 1977-78.”
Wendell R. Anderson of Minnesota. The bill was introduced on February 7, 1978 and reported to the Committee on Rules and Administration on September 5th of the same year. The bill called for Congress to authorize the Board of Regents at the Smithsonian to acquire all properties belonging to the Museum of African Art. A companion bill was added to establish “a Commission for the Museum of African Art to assist the Board in the operation and development of the Museum.” While the bill did not include a specific budget, the proposed commission would help allocate a budget within the Smithsonian as well as estimate additional fundraising the transfer would require and ensure that all debts on the MAA’s properties were paid off.\(^1\)81

The U.S. Senate’s Committee on Rules and Administration regulates the Smithsonian and presided over the hearing. Almost two hundred years earlier, Thomas Jefferson had proposed that there be a committee that would ensure the uniformity of all proceeding business in the Senate and on April 7, 1789 the first committee members were appointed. With one of its main purposes to administer all business related to the “United States Capital and congressional office buildings, the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution (and the incorporation of similar institutions), and the Botanic Gardens.”\(^2\) At the hearing, the question of what to do with the multiple properties that housed the collection was raised, as maintenance and security would be costly and the buildings were not near the Smithsonian. The

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\(^{1}\)81 An Act to authorize the Smithsonian Institution to acquire the Museum of African Art, and for other purposes, s.2507, 95\(^{th}\) Cong. (1978). http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d095:SN02507:@@@L&summ2=m&

committee’s chairman, the Honorable Clairborne Pell, Democratic Senator from Rhode Island, commented:

I am concerned about the physical aspects of the museum as it is now constituted, and I don’t believe that the combining of a number of row houses to form the museum meets the necessary museum and safety requirements…they are small rooms, they require a lot of guards—making it expensive.183

The five key witnesses at the hearing were Democratic Senator Frank Moss of Utah, Senator Muriel Humphrey, Mayor Walter Washington, Dillon Ripley, and Robbins himself. Although Mrs. Humphrey had not had any desire to go into politics, her husband’s death on January 3, 1978 had left a vacant seat in the Senate, which she was honorably selected to hold until his term ended in January of 1979. Senator Wendell Anderson was the bill’s principal sponsor and would have probably served as the sixth witness on the hearing but is noted as not being present. As the latest chairman of the MAA’s Board of Trustees, Democratic Senator Frank Moss of Utah, had once served as a Senator-regent on the Smithsonian’s Board of Regents and proved to be the most authoritative witness on the basis of this past experience.

Moss opened his testimony by emphasizing the MAA’s cultural and historical significance being located in Washington, D.C., noting, “It is particularly appropriate, too, that it was established here in the capital city of our Nation, which has a great many citizens of African descent. This traces back to their culture and heritage, which is the heritage of all Americans and fills in what for many years had been a great

183 Committee on Rules and Administration, Acquisition of the Museum of African Art by the Smithsonian Institution, 95th Cong., 2nd sess., September 5, 1978, 8.
Although Moss did not explicitly mention the Civil Rights Movement or subsequent movements within the black community, he made it clear that the museum’s significance was tied to the city’s historically oppressed black community, noting, “It is particularly appropriate, too, that [the museum] was established here in the capital city of our Nation which has a great many citizens of African descent.”

In reference to Robbins’s distinct mission of cross-cultural communication, Moss noted how the MAA’s educational programming had “been able to greatly enhance the coming together of our people, [with] understanding between those of different colors who are Americans.” Moss's acknowledgment of racial difference reflects the idea of cultural pluralism that had been embraced as a result of the 1960s and 1970s social movements.

In concluding his statement, Moss pointed out that Congress’s approving the bill would be a political and social statement of its dedication to protecting and enhancing black rights and national civic values. He contended that Congress’s approval would be an extension of “the great social changes made by Congress wherein discrimination is legally and officially banned—now we are all one people—and this fills in the gap, the heritage, for a great many of our citizens.” In relating the MAA’s acquisition to the passing of recent laws against social injustices, Moss incorporated the museum’s historical and political mission into his testimony.

184 Committee on Rules and Administration, Acquisition of the Museum of African Art by the Smithsonian Institution, 95th Cong., 2nd sess., September 5, 1978, 2.
185 Ibid., 2-3.
186 Ibid., 3.
187 Ibid., 3.
Following Moss’s testimony, Mrs. Humphrey spoke, partially on behalf of her deceased husband. Senator Humphrey, who as the former Chairman of the MAA’s Board of Trustees had remained heavily involved in the museum’s fundraising up until his death. He had passed away shortly after drafting the initial letter endorsing the acquisition and Mrs. Humphrey presented another letter he had written in support of the MAA. ¹⁸⁸ Considering herself to be a proud liberal, Mrs. Humphrey had often worked alongside her husband on his various charities and clubs. Her role as a witness in the congressional hearing assured that an outside supporter with some political clout could speak on the late senator’s behalf.

In her opening statement, Mrs. Humphrey emphasized that the MAA’s collection included not only African art but also African American art. In describing why she had co-sponsored the bill, she discussed the political and social relevance of the museum’s collection in terms of “black art.” Mrs. Humphrey also discussed the MAA’s unique educational programming and the symbolism of its location in Frederick Douglass’s old residence. She reconciled the symbolism of the MAA’s location and its mission as follows:

The museum’s location in the home of one of America’s finest black orators and statesmen is a symbol of respect to our black community. The museum provides Americans of every race, age, and walk of life with a rare opportunity for experiencing the realm of traditional African values and the philosophical roots of black culture. ¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Before the MAA joined he Smithsonian there are no formal records that list Board of Trustees members. The inclusion of Senator Hubert Humphrey comes from published reports.

¹⁸⁹ Acquisition of the Museum of African Art, 4-5.
In citing the connection between African American identity and self-pride, Mrs. Humphrey echoed Robbins’s main goal in founding the MAA. She connected black pride to exposure to African history, art, and cultures and described how the MAA encouraged African Americans to learn about Africa’s past in order to inform their own identity and pride. As did her late husband, Mrs. Humphrey strongly believed in the MAA’s mission and did not want Robbins’s vision to be compromised.

Reiterating Robbins’s goals for the MAA, Mrs. Humphrey reasserted his belief “that the museum is a unique and vital educational institution for our country.”

Upon concluding her testimony, Mrs. Humphrey presented a letter of endorsement written by her late husband. In a more detailed account than his initial proposal for the MAA’s acquisition, Humphrey’s letter discussed the museum’s brief history and showed how every decision made by Robbins was connected to its educational mission. Emphasizing a theme repeated throughout the hearing, Mrs. Humphrey closed her testimony by reaffirming the importance of keeping the MAA’s existing location. Mrs. Humphrey and her husband insisted that the museum should remain the Frederick Douglass residence in order to maintain its connection with the local black community and its unique identity.

Mrs. Humphrey pointed to the significance of the MAA’s location, the hiring of the architect Robert Nash, and the purchase of African American paintings as a promotion of black heritage and pride. In discussing the museum’s brief history, Humphrey used this history to discourage moving the MAA to a different site. To support this argument, Humphrey included a list of comments by black local visitors.

190 Ibid., 5.
191 Ibid.
on their positive experiences at the museum. Despite this endorsement, Robbins and Ripley would later oppose Humphrey’s wishes and campaign for moving the MAA to a new site.

The only Republican to serve as witness was Senator S.I. Hayakawa, another former member of the MAA’s Board of Trustees. Despite his rightwing politics, Hayakawa considered himself progressive and was a longtime MAA supporter. Having an African collection of his own, he noted the academic importance of having African art in the Smithsonian.¹⁹²

Senator Hayakawa began his statement by saying, “I would like to speak about [the Museum of African Art] in art terms rather than in ethnic terms, because I have been interested in African art for a long time.” He later added, “The fact that incidentally at the present time it reinforced ethnic identity, black pride, or whatever it is you want to call it, is also a secondary but very, very valuable contribution.”¹⁹³ Hayakawa’s discussing the MAA in terms of its academic relevance introduced a new argument into the hearing that invoked the Smithsonian’s role as educator and national center for scholarly research. Referring to Robbins’s initial display of his

¹⁹² By this period, the Democratic Party had aligned itself with African American interests and was considered a champion of civil rights. With Senator Humphrey’s longtime support and Robbins’s own declaration as a Democrat, it is no surprise that most of the witnesses were members of the Democratic Party. The first time that the Democratic Party directly appealed to the black vote was in the 1948 election in which Harry Truman ran on a pro-black platform in order to beat his Republican opponent, Thomas Dewey. This shift proved successful, and masses of black voters switched to the Democratic Party. Civil rights would be a main platform for subsequent Democratic candidates and this hearing shows one of the many ways in which the Democratic Party supported black issues. For more details on black political culture see Jake M. Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.)

¹⁹³ *Acquisition of the Museum of African Art*, 6.
collection, Hayakawa discussed the influence of African art on European modernism, specifically stating that the art from West Africa “is where some basic ideas of modern art come from.”

Hayakawa then argued that the recent liberation of various African countries created fresh interest in the continent and lent a new significance to the MAA. Although Robbins had never discussed this fact as a main impetus for founding the MAA, it did add to the museum’s political importance. Hayakawa further argued for recognizing the study of African art as its own academic field. In his testimony, Hayakawa discussed the Museum of Primitive Art’s relocation and how its significance was dwarfed when it became a wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Hayakawa continued:

Now if the Museum of African Art were to lose its identity as the result of joining up with the Smithsonian [by moving out of the Frederick Douglass Home], I think that would be a very sad thing…In this way, unlike the Museum of Primitive Art in New York, the Museum of African Art here would not disappear; it would maintain itself a specific separate identity, and at the same time it have the benefit of a larger connection.

Hayakawa argument reiterates that if the MAA could remain institutionally independent from the Smithsonian, it could maintain its political mission and community-based programming.

Next, the fourth witness, Mayor Walter Washington, offered his testimony. The inclusion of Mayor Washington as the only black witness in the congressional hearing helped reiterate, and perhaps legitimize, the symbolic meaning the acquisition would have for the nation’s black population. Having a well-known black political

\[194\] Ibid., 7.
\[195\] Ibid., 8.
figure speak on behalf of the museum’s mission and special meaning to its audience, offered a black supporter’s point of view. He spoke of the MAA’s social importance, saying that its continuation would “accord important recognition to African art [and] enable the community, the Nation and the world to continue to benefit from the existence of the museum’s collection and activities.” 196 Despite the alteration of Robbins’s explicit intention that the museum focus on its local black visitors, the inclusion of Washington’s testimony strategically implied this goal to the ruling committee, by having the newly appointed black mayor speak on behalf of his city’s black majority.

Closing his testimony, Washington stressed that the MAA’s continued location in a residential zone would cause more street traffic in that neighborhood. This concern shifted the second half of the hearing into a new direction. For the rest of the hearing, it seems that the presiding committee members fully supported the bill but that the added cost of maintaining the multiple properties housing the MAA’s collection remained unresolved.

In his testimony, Dillon Ripley stated that he wanted the museum to preserve its unique intimate quality and that it should therefore stay in a small space and remain a “house museum.” 197 However, he also hoped for it to be relocated closer to Capital Hill so that it would be easier to access for international tourists and diplomats. With an undetermined plan and budget, the congressional hearing reserved a four- to five-year period for the Smithsonian Board of Regents to determine where the MAA would be best housed, with the Tariff Commission Building, located on E

196 Ibid., 11.
197 Ibid., 15.
and F streets between 7th and 8th streets, as the primary choice. Both Ripley and Robbins agreed that the museum should be consolidated into one building to save costs but were not eager to let go of the Frederick Douglass residence. At this point in the hearing, it seems to have been understood that the MAA would have to relinquish all its properties once acquired by the Smithsonian, but the Board of Regents would determine the new space and time of relocation once the acquisition was approved.

Robbins, who had not prepared formal testimony, did not mention his goals for the museum as a space for cross-cultural understanding or as one of the only museum dedicated to Washington’s black community. Instead, he and the other key witnesses discussed the museum in terms that were less political and more academic. Robbins proposed that the MAA’s acquisition would “give [the museum] a degree of professionalism and access to resources which would enable us to truly fulfill our goal to become a principal, or the principal, center for African art studies in the world.”\(^{198}\) Although other American museums such as the Brooklyn Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art had wings that included African Art, Robbins once again emphasized that, as the only museum dedicated entirely to the subject the MAA could become the leading institution for the study of African art. In closing his testimony, Robbins offered a list of positive comments from past visitors to show how audiences reacted to the MAA. Despite the uncertainty as to the future MAA location, the U.S. Senate Committee on Rules and Administration passed the bill with endorsement. Finally, on August 13, 1979, the House of Representatives unanimously

\(^{198}\) Ibid., 20.
passed Bill S. 2507, “An Act to authorize the Smithsonian Institution to Acquire the Museum of African Art, and for Other Purposes.”

Although the MAA had become a more academic institution with the expansion of its archival collection and library, the downplaying of the museum’s political function in public discussions speaks to the American museum’s role and traditional expectations as an apolitical educational institution. While the MAA’s appeal to the local community remained and served a positive feature to the Smithsonian’s, the museum’s mission apparently had to appear nonpartisan for the acquisition to succeed. The debate over keeping the MAA in its own building rather than moving elsewhere, hints at the tension between preserving the museum as a non-traditional community-based space and allowing it to become an old-style museum like the Smithsonian. Though the committee did not oppose the museum’s mission proposed in the hearing, the Smithsonian’s acquisition of the MAA would affect changes regardless of where it was housed.

**Tension in the New Temple**

The black community, the national media, and the academic community praised the approval of the MAA’s acquisition by the Smithsonian in 1979. The journalist Sarah Booth Conroy wrote, “This is an amazing achievement because only a few years ago Congress severely criticized the Smithsonian for accepting large properties which would have to be maintained by congressional appropriations.”\(^{199}\) Other news stories concurred, portraying this new stage in the MAA’s existence as a

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symbolic transformation of black arts and cultures into a legitimate and respected field of study.

Upon news that the MAA had joined the Smithsonian, African art historian John Povey noted, “The importance of a museum rests less as a depository of artifacts than as an educational force. Museums, as indeed African studies programs, recognize their duties for outreach, and Warren Robbins's own service has been in the vanguard of this new thrust.”200 At the bill signing on October 5, 1979, President Jimmy Carter acknowledged the bill’s relevance in the context of the civil rights movement. He declared the bill as furthering “an important goal of this administration by providing greater understanding between the people of the United States and the people of Africa for years to come.” At the time of the transfer, the museum was worth an estimated $10 million.201 He went on to discuss the collection’s contents as a part of millions of Americans’ heritage and concluded by saying, “As I sign this bill, I am privileged to guarantee future generations of Americans the opportunity to visit the Museum of African Art and look at, study, and learn from this great collection.”202 This sentiment also resonated with the local black community. As a black man living in Washington D.C. during this moment, Lonnie Bunch remembers:

This was only a decade or so after Anacostia [referring to the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum], so there really was a need to do more than what they were doing with the Anacostia. So, I thought it was an important political

statement for the Smithsonian and I think they knew it was a political statement but they didn’t know how to leverage that and what that meant. But a lot of us in the community knew it was important.203

The new bill was viewed as an extension of the Civil Rights Movement in acknowledging black American heritage and culture as a part of the United States’ identity.

In 1981, the MAA officially became the National Museum of African Art (NMAA). The change in name was not the only major one for the museum during this period. A year later, the Smithsonian appointed Sylvia Williams as the NMAA’s new director. Robbins, having left his post as museum director six months earlier to become the emeritus founder and senior scholar, had been allowed to remain on staff and available for consultation on museum planning. With the additional major appointment of Roy Sieber as the associate director of research, the NMAA’s transformation began.

After a two-year search for a qualified African American art historian with museum experience, Williams’s appointment was met with positive reviews and marked a new direction for the NMAA. A Pennsylvania native, Williams was born in 1936. Her father, Joseph Newton Hill, was one of the first professors in the newly established Afro-American Studies program at Harvard, where he taught African art history.204 In 1957, Williams graduated from Oberlin College with a Bachelor of Arts in art history. Upon graduation, she studied at the School of Library Science in New York while working at the Museum of Modern Art’s library. In 1960, she made her

203 Lonnie Bunch, interview.
204 Peter Mark, former student of Professor Hill, email message to author, February 6, 2012.
first trip to Africa, and in 1961, she worked for a year at the African American
Institute in Lagos, Nigeria. In 1963, she moved to Washington, D.C., where she
worked as a translator for French-speaking dignitaries at the Bureau of Education and
Cultural Affairs, and then worked as a consultant for the International Exchange
Program of the National Assembly for Social Policy and Development in New York
until 1968. In 1973, Williams began working as an assistant curator at the Brooklyn
Museum in the Department of African, Oceanic, and New World Cultures. During
her tenure there, she earned her master’s degree from New York University's Institute
of Fine Arts in 1975.

William’s affiliation with the Smithsonian began in 1974, when she was
awarded a National Gallery of Art travel grant to study private and public African art
collections in Paris, Tervuren, and London. From 1978 until her move to the MAA,
she held the position of Chief Curator of the Brooklyn Museum’s department. The
Smithsonian search committee wanted to have an African American director take
over for Robbins. Although the Smithsonian aimed to diffuse the MAA’s original
political mission, the explicit search for an African American director points to a
political motive towards creating a more diverse staff. With her experience in
curating African art and the respect she earned in the field of African art history, she
was later described as a “many-faceted brilliant lady” and “uncompromising voice for
the art of Africa.”205 Williams was highly qualified to assist in expanding the
museum’s academic programming and its legitimacy as an academic institution
dedicated to the study of African art.

205 “In Memoriam: Sylvia H. Williams, 1936-1996.” African Arts 29, no. 3 (July 1,
Williams’s background at an established institution reflected the old-style museum values that predominated in the Smithsonian’s programming. Her goal was to create a museum that adhered to the institution’s founding mission as a space for academic study. Working to create the nation’s first museum dedicated solely to African art, Williams aspired to establish a prestigious and legitimate collection. The museum’s re-organization of its goals placed the academic interests ahead of its focus on the local audience. Yet, this step had to occur in order for the NMAA to reach its full potential as a successful international museum. Bunch adds:

A part of the challenge has been, that under Sylvia and [her succeeding director] Roslyn [Walker], there was this desire to make it this place of fine art and I am not sure it was connected to Africa, as it needed to be and connected to black Washington. I think it was really about, and I can understand this as a founding director, it was about how to make this legitimate in the eyes of the Smithsonian, in the eyes of the federal government, and in the eyes of other museums.206

Because she was less concerned with politics and more focused on the academic prestige of being the first museum devoted to African art, Williams’s goals and approach contrasted with those of Robbins.

With the help of a generous new budget to expand the NMAA’s permanent collection, Williams moved quickly to revise the museum’s orientation and educational programming. Although the congressional hearing made clear that Congress envisioned that the acquisition would preserve the MAA’s mission, Williams reshaped the mission as soon as she began altering the museum’s community-based educational programming.

206 Lonnie Bunch, interview.
The NMAA presented itself as “the nation’s primary study center for African art.” One of the first major changes was the removal of the museum busing program for liability reasons and the removal musical instruments for students to play with. Instead the publicity materials stressed “collections of aesthetic excellence, and strong research, conservation education, and archival services.” Removed from, yet still implied, in its publications was the museum’s concept as a space for “cross-cultural communication” and cultivation of “black pride.” The active decision to hire a black museum director, while maintaining a traditional formalized museum program transformed the NMAA symbolically, if not practically, into a space for black activism.

Despite her more scholarly treatment of the NMAA and its collection, Williams understood the museum’s unique platform. In an interview about the NMAA and its new status as a part of the Smithsonian, Williams noted, “Black America must devote her attention to the support of cultural institutions.” In the academic community, Williams’s appointment was welcomed as a worthy and beneficial step in the NMAA’s development. After her early death, David C. Driskell summed up her contribution as follows:

She had a passion for collecting for the [museum] the finest masterworks created by artists on the African continent throughout the ages. Few other museums in the world have embraced the full meaning of African art by presenting exhibitions of archeology, the decorative arts, ceramics,

painting, printmaking, photography, and sculpture under one roof. 209

Often regarded as the “founder of the discipline of African art history in the United States,” Roy Sieber was both an obvious and an advantageous choice as the assistant director of research. Born in Shawano, Wisconsin in 1923, Sieber grew up fascinated by museums and made frequent trips to the Field Museum and Art Institute of Chicago. In 1941, Sieber enrolled in the State Teacher’s College of Milwaukee, where he studied art history and studio art, holding a fellowship in the latter. After a year, Sieber joined the army, but he enrolled in college after completing his service in 1949. He began studying printmaking and painting at the University of Iowa in pursuit of his master’s degree. However, after taking a self-described terrible class in ‘primitive’ and prehistoric art, Sieber began studying non-Western art on his own. As Sieber recalled, “It was quite possibly the worst class I ever had in my life. This became in a reverse sort of way a challenge. I started doing serious reading on my own and took some courses in anthropology.” 210

Sieber began teaching non-Western art history courses at the University of Iowa but could never get a specialized African art history class approved. As his interest in African art continued to grow, Sieber faced a setback when his proposed dissertation topic focused solely on African art was rejected. However, Sieber was offered a position curating an African art exhibition at the Field Museum, using the collection of Raymond Wieglus. This opportunity helped Sieber’s dissertation get

approved; as he recalled, “It convinced the head of the department, Lester Longman, that maybe I was serious enough to do a dissertation on the topic.”

In 1957, Sieber earned the first Ph.D. in African art history in the United States. In the course of a long career teaching at Indiana University, he trained a generation of scholars in African art history. As a NMAA staff member, he, like Williams participated in the move away from Robbins’s original intentions for the museum. With formal academic study of African art his priority; educational programming for black Americans received far less emphasis.

Appointed by the Board of Regents and museum’s new Board of Trustees, Williams and Sieber set about building the new museum’s collection and reorganizing its programming. During this transition period, the NMAA adopted what is now its official mission statement: “The Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art fosters the discovery and appreciation of the visual arts of Africa, the cradle of humanity.”

The formal approach to the NMAA’s collection transformed the museum from a forum to a temple. The wording of the new mission implied an emphasis on public educational programming, but in reality did not appeal to the local black community with its more scholarly programming matching the standards of its visiting scholars. Janet Stanley elaborates on Robbins discussion of the museum as a “teaching museum,” as she summarizes:

[Warren] used to say we are an education department with a museum attached. For him, this education and cross-cultural communication idea and philosophy was central and African art was just a vehicle for promoting this

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211 Ibid.
philosophy in Washington D.C. in the 60s...he could have chosen American art but it happened to be African art. Once we became the National Museum for African Art, the art takes center stage, and even though the museum has given a lot of lip service to the [community] education part, under Sylvia, it was a secondary thing.\footnote{Janet Stanley, interview.}

The academic transformation soon created tension between Williams and Robbins, whose role in the museum’s planning began to diminish. Once the bill had passed and the Board of Regents began conducting their staff search, Robbins made it clear that he wanted to stay active in the museum and asked for three major promises: 1) that he would receive a paid sabbatical to write another book, 2) that he would have an office comparable what he had had in the Frederick Douglass building, and 3) that he would be invited to all Board of Trustees meetings.\footnote{Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”}

In June of 1982, Congress approved the construction for the new permanent building to house the NMAA initially approving $36.5 million for the project, and Ripley began the architectural planning. Soon, mounting conflict between Robbins and Williams further pushed Robbins out of the new museum.

Some have said that Williams’s disdain for Robbins began as a personal issue, yet many museum staff members remember the tension stemmed from their differing missions for the museum. Williams would later share in a \textit{Washington Post} article:

\begin{quote}
It was clear the collection needed to be strengthened…It seemed the right way to move was to move more selectively…Warren is extraordinary. There are very few human beings with his tenacity and stamina. He started this place from scratch. But he had a broad agenda. The word ‘museum’ was not as restrictive to him as it is to me.\footnote{Paul Richard, “The Smithsonian Mystery Building,” \textit{Washington Post}, August 30, 1987, G1, G8-G9.}
\end{quote}
Janet Stanley recalls:

In some ways it might have been inevitable that he would clash with whoever followed him as director. He moved into the emeritus status and he was no longer running the show, but in fact they had really quite different visions. She really wanted to turn it into a museum where African art is treated and respected and exhibited as world-class art. And she used to say, ‘We are not the African American center; we are showing African art and we are showing world class art...’ That was her vision: she was very keen on having high quality artwork.\(^{216}\)

Williams’s formal academic background and her experience in more traditional art museums infringed on Robbins’s amateur planning of his community-based museum but added academic prestige that was necessary for the museum to be successful and influential in the academic community.

Although her very hiring was politically symbolic, adding as it did a black and female museum director to the Smithsonian’s staff, Williams did not view the museum as a space for political activism and personal connections with black visitors.\(^{217}\) Under Robbins, the museum had a predominantly black audience. Surely she wanted to appeal to a black audience, but as a major museum director, she sought to attract a wider audience. With the transformation of the museum staff and board of trustees, Robbins’s original mission for the museum was soon gone from all promotional materials and its educational programming. Stanley speculates that:

There are rules and that was an adjustment for him, but I think he was again smart enough to realize that was adjustment he was willing to make to sure

\(^{216}\) Janet Stanley, interview.

\(^{217}\) Following Williams’s term as museum director, the Smithsonian has exclusively hired black female directors. Roslyn Walker (1997-2002), Sharon Patton (2003-2008), and the current director Dr. Johnnetta Cole. The hiring of these directors highlights the Smithsonian’s acknowledgement that the NMAA serves as a chance to foster diversity not just in the museum contents but in the professional leadership as well.
that his museum was going to outlast him…. I don’t know whether he realized the directors that would follow him might have a different vision for the museum and might not run it the way he would have run it and might not adhere to his philosophy, which is exactly what happened. 218

A 1985 publication advertising the educational programs at the NMAA illustrates this shift in focus. Absent from the publication is any discussion of how African art relates to African American identity. Although a “Frederick Douglass Tour” was still being offered, the remaining workshops included African folktales, symbols in African art, and creating African butterfly masks inspired by the Bwa people. Most notably, the brochure does not mention the political mission once included in all published material edited by Robbins. The brochure summarizes the museum as:

…The only museum in the United States devoted solely to the collection, study, and exhibition of African art… The Department of Education and Research conducts and coordinates advanced-level research activity. Workshops, lectures, docent-led tours, films, demonstrations, and outreach programs are the central concern of an active public education staff. 219

This museum statement confirms its priority to be site for academic research began to take precedent over public educational programming and Robbins worried that his goal of working with the local community would soon disappear.

In the end, Williams transformed the small, once struggling museum into an international center for academic study of African art. Elaine Sooy Goodman confirms that Robbins’s did fear that his goals and unique museum mission was being erased as noted in a letter addressed to Dr. Sylvia Boone, professor of African art

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218 Janet Stanley, interview.
history at Yale University and the university’s first black woman given tenure.

Robbins’s had invited her in 1981 to serve as the Assistant Director for Education and Academic Affairs. In the letter he wrote:

I would also hope that your presence would strengthen the Museum’s continuing role in public education on behalf of ever better inter-racial understanding in the United States. As much as we will be increasingly involved with research and academic materials, I want the Museum to continue to differentiate between the educational and the academic so that we will not increase our emphasis on the latter at the expense of the former.220

Robbins’s distinction between the museum’s educational and academic functions, illustrates his preference for the former and his worry that the academic role of the museum would affect the museum’s relationship with its local audience.

After Many years after with the Smithsonian, Robbins finally left.221 Robbins struggled to remain an active role in the museum’s planning. Although the Smithsonian publicly supported and acknowledged his role in founding the museum by awarding Robbins with the Joseph Henry Medal Award in 1983, one of the highest honors given by the institution and, shortly before his death, renaming the library to the Warren M. Robbins Library, internal struggles continued within the museum. In a memo written later by Williams on January 5, 1987, addresses the issues and reasons for Robbins exclusion in publications and meetings. She writes:

I have only three comments, which I think might be helpful in an effort to lessen the tension for all of us although, to some extent, it will probably always exist. They are:

1. I myself thought of suggesting that Warren Robbins’ name as Founder be permanently placed in the Pavilion at an appropriate location. I did not discuss this with you earlier because the entire matter of donor recognition signs is still under discussion.

220 Quoted in Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
221 Exact date of Robbins’s leaving is unknown but occurred sometime before Williams passing in 1996.
2. It may be that Mr. Robbins would like to speak at the inaugural dinner and this would be perfectly acceptable to me. However, the final decision on that matter must of course rest with the Castle. 

In addition, I think it might help if I clarified two other areas of concern to Mr. Robbins:

1. I do not consider it appropriate to have Mr. Robbins’ name mentioned in the development campaign brochure (a) because he is raising funds for another project, (b) the history of fund-raising for this institution has not been good and therefore the use of the name would not assist the campaign in the effort to raise money. I do consider it appropriate that his name be mentioned in the Museum brochure (which is not finished although he seems to think it is) and have added his name to the text. Its omission was an oversight on my part because I did not think the general brochure had to mention any names but have duly noted his concern and am quite willing to comply.

2. Mr. Robbins’ name no longer appears as an academic advisor in the Office of Fellowships and Grants brochure. The deletion was made by Roy Sieber and by me. The basis for the decision was that we could no longer in good conscience continue to list an untrained museum professional and African art scholar as an advisor to pre- and post-doctoral candidates who come to the Museum through the Fellowship program. In essence the decision was simply a matter of credentials and a scholarly institution cannot disregard such a fact.222

According to Mrs. Robbins, the museum more or less forced him out after what he had understood to be a sabbatical:

Well, somebody told me that once he left the museum—he was going on sabbatical—that they were going to get him out. I told him, but he didn’t think it was going to be a problem…And then when he was not permitted to go to the museum and he was not given an office the size he had before, he got a lawyer and he was gonna sue the Smithsonian. He didn’t succeed. But he was very, very bitter and depressed, very, very depressed.223

While it is unknown who initiated and made the final decision to fire Robbins, it is speculated that the Board of Trustees had made the decision in a private meeting months before he left for sabbatical. Upon leaving the museum he had founded in 1964, Robbins continued touring as a lecturer on African art. He continued the Center

222 Quoted in Goodman, “Singing Africa’s Song.”
223 Lydia Robbins, interview.
for Cross-Cultural Communication out of his home, which is still being supported by his widow today, reestablishing it in 1985. In 1987, sponsored by the United Negro College Fund, Robbins toured a series of black institutions, including Hampton University and LeMoyne College. Until his final years, Robbins continued to use African art as a vehicle for change.

A year earlier, the new NMAA officially separated itself from the old museum when it moved into a new multi-million dollar building on the Smithsonian grounds opening on September 28, 1986. The Frederick Douglass residence was sold, along with the other buildings that Robbins had acquired during his tenure. The NMAA’s final transformational stages solidified the new organization and ideology introduced by Williams. This date also marks what the Smithsonian publicizes as the NMAA’s founding, reducing Robbins and the original museum in its official history to a predecessor separate from what the museum is today, and accurately so. Until this thesis project, little has been published about the museum’s early history and how it is couched in black politics, shifting museum practices, and Robbins’s personal drive to facilitate interracial understanding.

The modifications to the NMAA’s mission and educational programming reveal that although the American museum had seen changes in what was expected of it 1960s and 1970s, the traditional museum still triumphed as a more academically legitimate space. With the Smithsonian located in Washington, D.C. as a symbol of American intellect and education, Robbins’s community-based museum and its political mission may have appeared amateurish in comparison to the larger museum’s international peer institutions. The Smithsonian’s removal of Robbins and
abandonment of his political goals for the MAA reflects the final changes that made the NMAA very different from Robbins’s original intention. On the other hand, the Smithsonian’s acquisition of the MAA and subsequent hiring of an African American director demonstrates that the institution did wish achieve greater diversity in its collections and representation of minority groups in its staffing.
Conclusion

*It will be more than a museum, more than an underground complex of steel and granite. It is an idea. An idea that has grown out of a single need – our need to know about art, culture, and peoples that are beyond our immediate horizon...*

– Thomas Lawton, Director of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and Freer Gallery of Art, 1987

The Museum of African Art’s innovative educational programming signified the culmination of changing museum practices and the rising recognition of multiculturalism in the United States. The relocation of the MAA in the aftermath of its acquisition by the Smithsonian witnessed the final evolution in the changing mission of the institution that Warren Robbins had founded more than twenty years earlier. The museum’s internal financial struggles and the criticism it received from various groups highlight the institutional issues that continue to challenge private ethnically-based museums today. Also, as evident in the differing criticisms from the black integrationists and black separatists in Washington, D.C., conflicting interests made it difficult for the museum to meet all expectations of its subject and intended audience. The divergent nature of the criticisms from the museum’s black audience shows how the American museum is limited in representing all minority groups’ interests. With the acquisition by the Smithsonian, Robbins’s belief in the integrationist approach of the Civil Rights Movement trumped the critiques and suggestions by black separatist activists.

Despite these challenges, American minority groups understand the power of the museum to educate and create informed dialogue. In recent years, more American minority groups have been building museums in hopes of teaching others and their own communities about their history, culture, and art. For example, the Smithsonian
Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), projected to open in 2015, has been discussed as a triumph in the preservation and teaching of black history in the United States. The museum’s mission states that it has the “opportunity to help all Americans see just how central African American history is for all of us [using] African American history and culture as a lens into what it means to be an American.”

For many African Americans, having a visible space in Washington, D.C. marks a symbolic moment in the struggle for black equality. Many ethnic groups share this sentiment that the American museum can legitimize them as important parts of U.S. history and culture. As summarized by NMAAHC director, Lonnie Bunch, “I think that what people realize is that museums legitimize your culture. So there's a desire to sort of say our story is important. And a museum is a way to do that. Another reason why, is that of African American history its been twenty years and Chicano studies its been twenty-five years, but you really have generations of good scholarship. So for most museums, especially the Smithsonian, you can’t have a museum without good scholarship.”

The moment Warren Robbins donated the Museum of African Art to the Smithsonian Institution, he risked his political mission of creating an educational institution that responded to its immediate black audience. Sylvia Williams backed away from Robbins’s vision in favor of creating a world-class academic facility capable of competing with peer institutions across the globe. In joining the Smithsonian, the museum acquired a new responsibility as a part of the nation’s

225 Lonnie Bunch, interview.
symbol of American intellectualism, and therefore shifted towards being a site for specialized academic study rather than one that responded to American socio-political movements. Still, this was a significant moment: the opening of the NMAA on the Smithsonian quadrangle—only steps away from the Smithsonian’s main building—announced to a national and international audience the arrival of African art in the United States.

**On the Mall**

The construction of the NMAA’s current building marked the final transformation from its community-based beginnings to its new status as a more traditional museum. Although Williams altered Robbins’s original mission, her improvements to the permanent collection, combined with the NMAA’s move to the Smithsonian site, created an impressive African art museum. The construction project also included the attached Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of Asian art and the coupling of these museums brought a degree of attention to international art that was necessary in the newly acknowledged multicultural America. While the contents of the two museums were historically important, the underground complex designed for these facilities was both controversial and headline-grabbing. Often referred to in the press as simply the “underground museum,” the design for the NMAA was opposed by some for not being prominent enough in the quadrangle scheme and others simply did not want any new buildings on the Mall. In response to the criticisms Robbins was quoted as saying, “it belongs to the Mall, symbolically and because there it could
attract not just 100,000 visitors a year but 1 to 2 million.”

The National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC), Joint Committee on Landmarks and the Committee of 100 on the Federal City were some of the groups opposed to the design but on January 8, 1981, the NCPC approved the $50 million budget for the underground complex. The Smithsonian’s support of these two museums with their monumental architectural designs served as a crucially important moment, academically and publicly, for the study of non-Western art and culture.

The Smithsonian’s main building, designed by the architect James Renwick, has long been affectionately known as the Castle. In 1876, Congress decided to move the artifacts displayed in the Centennial Exposition to the institution, which resulted in the erection of the National Museum Building. The Smithsonian continued to grow with the addition of the Freer Gallery of Art in 1919 and, later, the National Portrait Gallery in 1968. Locating the National Museum of African Art beside the iconic Castle added to the museum’s prestige and solidified the Smithsonian’s new collection of African art’s monumental status.

Before discussion of Robbins’s donation of the MAA had even begun, Secretary Dillon Ripley had already spotted the future location of the museum. During the construction of the Hirshhorn Museum, Ripley had proposed to build a new building on the west side of the Freer Gallery. A few years later, the absorption of the NMAA and Arthur M. Sackler’s collection of East Asian art provided him with a convincing reason to build the new and costly buildings. Although the institution

originally strived to be a space for scientific inquiry, the new additions reveal its goal of providing a space where cultures from around the world can be easily explored. According to Ripley, “Here was the place…to help solve a great human problem, that of getting to know you. Here millions of Americans could come and get to know people from all over the world.” While the NMAA’s mission was diverging from its original political purpose, the Smithsonian aimed to be a site for cross-cultural interaction. This was similar to Robbins’s idea of the museum, although the Smithsonian took a nonpartisan academic approach. As the nation’s museum, it served not only the American public, but also foreign visitors, and it therefore emphasized diversity and tolerance of the United States, an idea akin to Robbins’s original goal for his museum. As exemplified in the conflict between Robbins and Williams’s goals, the Smithsonian aimed to remain apolitical in its mission yet respond to socio-political changes symbolically.

Ripley believed that “By creating such a window on the mall, the Smithsonian has a unique opportunity in these troubled times to reinvigorate its mandate ‘for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.’” Ripley did not immediately go to Congress for financial support, however. Before requesting federal funding, he approached a series of wealthy art patrons including J. Paul Getty, and John Rockefeller and even looked outside the U.S. for funding by approaching a few Saudi millionaires. Not having raised enough private funds to build two separate museums

228 Ibid., 50.
for the new collections, Ripley instead created what would after his death be named the S. Dillon Ripley Center.

Ripley conceived the Smithsonian’s quadrangle plan, a unique concept for a museum complex. As the Secretary Emeritus of the Institution, he eventually raised millions of dollars to the fund the project, designed by Jean Paul Carlhian. Philanthropist Enid A. Haupt donated the funding for the garden and James R. Buckler, the Director of the Office of Horticulture at the time, designed it. Originally, Ripley commissioned Japanese architect Junzo Yoshimura to design the new building additions to surround the garden but after an illness. However, a stroke left him unable to pursue the project in which he had already designed. Ripley then held an open competition with the program previously designed by Yoshimura. Jean Paul Carlhian, a beaux-arts trained architect who had studied under Walter Gropius at Harvard University, became the new head architect. Carlhian was a principal at the design firm Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbott. Robert Hollaran, as project architect, worked very closely with Ripley and other Smithsonian staff members. He recalled, “Most clients don’t check every architectural step, but Smithsonian people are different. Ever[y] curator made it clear to us that his own gallery was the most important one in the building.”229 The one staff member excluded from the planning was Warren Robbins. Mrs. Robbins remembers that he initially did not approve of the underground component:

[When] he went on sabbatical and his assistant director, who was a white woman, Jean Salan, took over, she worked with the architect and the people over at the Castle, and he was left out of all of that. And when he found out it

229 Ibid., 55.
was going to be underground he didn’t like that idea. He said, 'why should the black museum be underground'?\(^{230}\)

The architects’ first challenge was to block the new Forrestal building, completed in 1969 and currently housing the Department of Energy, from visitors inside the quadrangle. The Forrestal Building located across from the Smithsonian on Independence Avenue was described as a “gloomy, monotonous bulk.”\(^{231}\) At the same time, the architects needed to preserve the view of the Castle for those entering from outside the grounds. The resolution was two build two pavilions that would be mostly underground (fig. 6). The architects wanted visitors to follow the garden to the pavilion “and then get underground without the feeling that they are diving into a bunker.” Simultaneously, “Looking toward the garden from Independence Avenue, the pavilions would frame and enhance the view of the Castle, not block it.”\(^{232}\) In the outside garden Carlhian also added a shallow pool with a circular stone island to extend the circular motif of the African building to the west of the quadrangle site.

When it came time to design the specific buildings, the architects wanted to create complementary designs with interiors that captured the spirit of their collections. During the early stages of designing the NMAA building, there was an idea to bring a Moorish influence into the design of the African art pavilion, but that idea was later rejected.\(^{233}\) David Childs, the chairman of the NCPC, told Carlhian “the container of treasures need not necessarily reveal the nature of its contents.”\(^{234}\) This suggestion influenced Carlhian to use less literal references and to think of the two

\(^{230}\) Lydia Robbins, interview.  
\(^{231}\) Parks et. al, 80.  
\(^{232}\) Ibid., 78-80.  
\(^{233}\) Ibid., 72.  
\(^{234}\) Ibid., 84.
pavilions as accents to the already existing buildings. The domes on the NMAA pavilion’s roof are borrowed from the round arches of the Castle, the Arts and Industries Building, and the Freer Gallery (figs. 7-9). The visible connection established through the design references helped make the NMAA a seamless part of the Smithsonian.

At the entrance to the NMAA building, a central spiral staircase connects the round shape of the roof to the stairway. As one descends down the stairs, the space gets darker. The open skylight prevents the visitor from feeling constricted but does remove him or her from the urban surroundings (fig. 12). All of the construction materials from different states tie in different regions. In contrast to the black historical reference of the NMAA’s original building, the Frederick Douglass house, the Smithsonian’s building invokes American greatness and cultural pluralism. For example, the team used granite from a small town in Minnesota for the exterior. For the interior, the architects looked for cool tones that would allow visitors not to feel stuck in a dark mausoleum. The architects also achieved this goal by having the light from the skylight reflected in a pool located at the bottom of the stairwell. In addition to the cool tones, Carlhian added “[huge windows that] would allow people who are not used to going down into the ground to quickly have the chance to look out on a familiar open space, and to see other people across the way also looking out, and so to reestablish the sense of being among fellow humans…”

Some have compared this design with Philip Johnson’s addition to the Museum for Pre-Columbian Art at Dumbarton Oaks and the Kreeger Museum both located in Washington, D.C. (cf. figs. 10 and 11).

Park et al., *A New View from the Castle*, 102.
humanity directly relates to the museum’s mission statement and hints at the human experience the NMAA wishes to symbolically produce (fig. 13).

The design of the new building symbolized the NMAA’s final transition into a more traditional museum. The larger galleries replaced the intimacy and untraditional layout of the Frederick Douglass residence. In the twentieth century, the museum architecture made the space monumental even without the object. The underground design for the NMAA was designed with this understanding that the space itself would be a designation for its unique experience. As explained by Susanna Sirefman, contemporary museum “architecture represents the museum's public image, defines the institution’s relationship to its setting, and constructs the framework of the visitors' experience.”

Using the example of the Guggenheim Bilbao museum, Sirefman suggests that museum design can help rebrand an institution and attract new audiences who might otherwise not come for the contents itself. I argue that the new and unorthodox architectural design elevated the NMAA’s monumental status. As noted by the Smithsonian Secretary, Robert Adam, at the museum’s opening, “the African art collection has a long way to go. The challenge is to build the permanent collection to the quality of the building that surrounds it.”

Providing a novel experience to museum visitors, the architectural design created a lot of media attention and the building itself became a site in itself. While the idea of an


underground museum was untraditional, in other respects the design more closely resembled a traditional museum than that of the Frederick Douglass building, rich as it was in social and political associations.  

Upon its completion, the new building included an art conservation laboratory, a photography studio, a design department, collection storage, and administrative offices, in addition to galleries. The multimillion dollar project marked a milestone in the study of African art history and was widely celebrated in the press. Sylvia Williams summarized the construction of the NMAA building:

The Traditional art of Africa has a remarkable energy—it is language; it conveys ideas. The sculpture served for thousands of years as a means of communication between generations. These objects have been a principal carrier of basic knowledge like the silent, printed symbols on the pages of books. The quadrangle is absolutely unique. It’s never been done before—on this scale, this dimension. It opens a whole new horizon on the continent of Africa and its art.

Williams’s statement reiterates the cultural symbolism that the NMAA and its new home now held. While she notes the importance of teaching Africa to those who may know nothing about the continent and its history, public discussion of the museum remained politically neutral, focusing on its academic purpose. The erasure of the Pan-African community-based approach taken by Robbins helped create a more universally appealing museum that did not promote an overtly progressive agenda.

Notwithstanding the claimed political neutrality of the NMAA’s mission, Smithsonian staff publicly reiterated the symbolic significance of the new building.

Also noted by Thomas Lawton, Director of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and Freer

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240 Park et. al, 10.
Gallery of Art, the NMAA’s twin building, “It will be more than a museum, more than an underground complex of steel and granite. It is an idea. An idea that has grown out of a single need – our need to know about art, culture and peoples that are beyond our immediate horizon…”\textsuperscript{241} The repeated reference by NMAA museum staff to teaching its visitors beyond the horizon, refers to the idea of cross-cultural communication but serves as a more politically ambiguous or neutral approach than that of the early MAA.

Despite Robbins’s initial reaction to the design, he enjoyed the fact that the museum would be accessible to those visiting the Smithsonian. As echoed by the NMAA’s Chief Curator, Philip Ravenhill, “Almost by accident maybe a million people will come through our museum who haven’t even thought of African art and will find it interesting. That’s what I’m waiting for.”\textsuperscript{242} With the potential of reaching an audience that otherwise might not seek out an African art on their own, the move to the Smithsonian provided visibility and institutional support to the NMAA.

**A Symbolic Memory**

The NMAA opened on September 28, 1987 with five major exhibitions: “African Art in the Cycle of Life,” “Patterns of Life: West African Strip-Weaving Traditions,” “Royal Benin Art in the Collection of the National Museum of African Art,” “Objects of Use,” and “The Permanent Collection of the National Museum of African Art.” The goal of these inaugural exhibitions was to show the museum’s

\textsuperscript{241} Park et. al, 16.
permanent collection’s range in geography, styles, and media. Despite the NMAA’s more formal treatment of its mission and contents, the opening, as noted in a positive review in *African Arts*, signaled “something quite fundamental will occur in the relationship of Americans to Africa. Its consequences will be enormous and beneficial in ways that as yet can only be guessed.”243 The symbolic importance of the NMAA’s opening could not be ignored and little public attention was paid to the changes made to Robbins’s vision. Today, Robbins’s is still remembered for his work with the Center for Cross-Cultural Communication. In 1996, University of Michigan, his alma mater, dedicated a building to him named the Robbins Center for Graduate Studies in the School of Art and Design. While a part of his personal collection was donated to the Smithsonian as a part of the MAA’s permanent collection, Robbins kept a portion of his personal collection, which continues to tour the country. In the fall of 2011, the collection was displayed at the site of his first proposed museum site at Howard University.

Mrs. Robbins describes how in his later years Robbins felt completely disconnected from the museum as “in his last year, I was driving the car and he was in the car, we drove past the museum. And he said I don’t even feel like I'm part of that museum. So he felt like he was sort of rejected…”244 In a letter to the editor published in the *Washington Post* in 1996, Robbins is seen correcting a previous *Post* article that stated the museum had been founded in 1979. Defending the museum’s founding, Robbins writes, “it was not established in 1978 but in 1964, being 15 years

244 Lydia Robbins, interview.
old when in 1979 its merger with the Smithsonian was effected (also through congressional legislation, as in the case of the Air and Space Museum).”245 When Barack Obama won the 2008 presidential election, Robbins shared that he would have dedicated an exhibition to Kenyan art in honor of the president elect’s heritage.246 Although the NMAA did not follow Robbins’s unique goals and strategies, some of his ideas including the juxtaposition of European modernist and Africa art influenced some future collectors and museums. Endowed by former MAA donor David Lloyd Kreeger, the Kreeger Museum in Washington, D.C. collection includes modernist art and traditional African art. Although the Kreeger Museum’s collection takes a very different approach then that of the MAA, a recent brochure quotes the late Robbins, stating:

Juxtaposed as [the traditional African objects] are in the Kreeger Museum with outstanding examples of Post-Impressionist and Expressionist art, they provide one more instance of the universality of man’s creative impulses and of the unity of form to be found in the arts of all mankind.247

Until his passing on December 4, 2008, Robbins continued to think about ways in which he would run the museum if given the chance. Until the Smithsonian Institution Archives releases Robbins’s remaining personal papers in 2024 and 2025, more will be revealed about his planning and intentions for the MAA and its acquisition by the Smithsonian.

As announced at the African Studies Association workshop in November of 2011, the NMAA has more recently created projects such as the African advisory

246 Lydia Robbins, interview.
board, a local mural project, and a performing arts program for local African performers established in 2007, returning to the community-based programming established by Robbins. However, these programs are specific to Africans with less Pan-African elements or specific outreach to local African Americans. This was the case, until the most arrival of current director Dr. Johnnetta Cole, who Janet Stanley describes as having “turned things upside down. I think Warren would be very pleased actually because she is very much more into—not being the ‘African American Cultural Center’ necessarily, but definitely reaching out the African American community.”

Yet, even if the mission of the MAA was transformed by Robbins’ successors, his radical vision of community involvement continues to have an influence on other museums. Museums dedicated to American ethnic groups created after the museum’s opening favor the community-based programming model initiated by Robbins over the formal academic treatment that occurred upon joining the Smithsonian. Most of these groups use their collections to teach tolerance, understanding, and to serve as forums for cross-dialogue cultural dialogue. As Bunch hopes to accomplish with the NMAAHC, to create “a really stimulating a kind of dialogue about reconciliation and healing and issues of race and to sort of force Americans to confront their racial past.”

Yet, even if the mission of the MAA was transformed by Robbins’ successors, his radical vision of community involvement continues to have an influence on other museums. Museums dedicated to American ethnic groups created after the museum’s opening favor the community-based programming model initiated by Robbins over the formal academic treatment that occurred upon joining the Smithsonian. Most of these groups use their collections to teach tolerance, understanding, and to serve as forums for cross-dialogue cultural dialogue. As Bunch hopes to accomplish with the NMAAHC, to create “a really stimulating a kind of dialogue about reconciliation and healing and issues of race and to sort of force Americans to confront their racial past.”

The NMAA’s early history under Robbins’s direction speaks to one reason for this trend. The American museum has been proven and embraced as an educational space with the potential to teach positive multiculturalism and to shift political views,

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248 Janet Stanley, interview.
249 Lonnie Bunch, interview.
even if Williams did not explicitly practice this mission once the MAA joined the Smithsonian. As noted by Kenneth Hudson in 1998 for the fiftieth anniversary issue of UNESCO magazine:

The most fundamental change that has affected the museums during the [past] half century...is the now almost universal conviction that they exist in order to serve the public. The old-style museum felt itself under no such obligation. It existed, it had a building, it had collections and a staff to look after them...the museum’s prime responsibility was to its collections, not its visitors.  

Under the influence of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power/Arts Movement, local politics, and shifting museum practices, Robbins created a new museum that was unprecedented in the United States. The MAA successfully embraced its local audience, directly confronted national issues, and challenged established conventions of the American museum. The Smithsonian's acquisition of the Museum of African Art functioned as a symbolic moment in black history, despite the NMAA’s regression to what is considered the “old-style museum.” Robbins’s emphasis on the educational value of the museum space and its capability of teaching positive multicultural values to its audience is now widely accepted as common knowledge and has become a public expectation.

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Illustrations

Figure 1: Frederick Douglass Residence at 316 A Street
©Smithsonian Institution

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©Smithsonian Institution Archives

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Figure 6: National Museum of African Art, Section
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Figure 7: Aerial View of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (left) and the National Museum of African Art (right)
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Figure 8: Aerial View of the National Museum for African Art
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Figure 9: Façade of National Museum of African Art
©Robert C. Lautman Photography, National Building Museum
**Figure 10:** Philip Johnson, Museum for Pre-Columbian Art at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., opened 1963 (left)

**Figure 11:** Philip Johnson, The Kreeger Museum, Washington, D.C., 1963 (right)
©Erich Keel
Source: http://www.kreegermuseum.org/about-us/architecture

**Figure 12:** Central Staircase in the National Museum of African Art (left)
Source: Parks et. al, *A New View from the Castle*, 20

**Figure 13:** Main Entrance to National Museum of African Art (right)
©Robert C. Lautman Photography, National Building Museum
Alyssa Lanz: How did you meet Warren Robbins and get your start at the museum?
Janet Stanley: I joined the Museum in 1979, which is the year the museum was moving from being a private museum to being a part of the Smithsonian. That had already been announced months before it actually happened. I was in the job market in the time and I approached Mr. Robbins, and just wrote him a letter out of the blue, and I said ‘you know that I had this experience…’ and so on and so forth. I had worked in Africa for five years as a librarian and had done African studies and I was interested in this position. I heard that the librarian who had been there was leaving, so I saw vacancy even though no position had been announced. So Mr. Robbins called me in and we had a nice chat to get acquainted chat. Then he said, ‘Well, I don’t early have a job or a position I have to offer positions to people already on the museum staff.’

A couple months later, in July, I got a call from Mr. Robbins who said, “Are you still interested, how soon can you start?” There had been a sudden change in personnel, which had worked out to my advantage. The assistant librarian who had been there before and he had expected to move into the librarian position was negotiating for a larger salary and he was not going to do it. It was still a private museum until the day we moved, so federal/civil service rules didn’t apply and he said either take it or leave it. She left, so he had this vacancy but he also knew he had me standing in the wings. I wasn’t aware of all this until much later, so that’s how it started I started in August of [1979]. Literally one day before the museum officially joined the Smithsonian.

What were your first impressions of Mr. Robbins?
Well, I had never met him before. I had been to the museum back earlier in the [1960s], but I had never met him before, I don’t really recall. I do remember it was a little unusual—it was like six in the evening interview, which is a little unusual, but is not unusual for Mr. Robbins, as I would later discover. It was very informal—it wasn’t really an interview, it was like a ‘get acquainted’ conversation. He had seen my resume, I guess he just wanted to see me and get a sense of who I am, and so on and so forth. I don’t think he talked about the museum or what the museum’s mission was. It was more of an informal conversation—he wasn’t expatiating on his philosophy or his museum theory and so forth. I think he was a person who just liked to size people up and get a sense of the person. We used to joke that Mr. Robbins would look at people in terms of ‘what can you do for my museum: whether can you volunteer or donate money or be an employee or whatever.’ He was always looking at you in terms of ‘how can I use this person in my project,’ which is the museum this sort of lifetime project.

Since you joined the Smithsonian in the middle of the transition, how do you think the original objective for the museum changed during that?
Once we were part of the Smithsonian, we achieved one of the things he wanted and that was perpetuity for the museum. Mr. Robbins was smart enough to realize the
museum, which was his baby, might not survive once he was off the scene because funding is so difficult for unendowed private museums. I think he knew enough about politics and Congress to get accepted to the Smithsonian. He realized once he was part of a big institution, it wasn’t quite the same museum he had founded, but that was a compromise he was perhaps willing to make. Certainly at the time of the transition, his staff were all civil service people and you can’t just run this as a private enterprise you have to go by the rules. There are rules, right? And that was an adjustment for him, but I think he was, again, smart enough to realize that was adjustment he was willing to make to make sure that his museum was going to last going to outlast him. Um, as it turns out, he did have his clashes with the Smithsonian down the road, years down the road, which were not pretty—but at the time of the transition, I think he felt this is good for the future of the museum. I don’t know whether he realized that the directors that would follow him might have a different vision for the museum and might not run it the way he would have run it or might not have adhered to his philosophy, which is exactly what happened. The next director had quite a different philosophy and vision and they didn’t get along, which is not surprising. I’m just sort of speculating here—I think he was pleased he had secured the perpetuity of the museum and that in and of itself is an accomplishment.

*I have been reading a little a bit about Robbins’s relationship with Sylvia Williams in Elaine Goodman’s manuscript. Once Sylvia Williams joined as museum director, how would you describe her relationship with Robbins?*

In some ways it might have been inevitable that he would clash with whoever followed him as director. He moved into the emeritus status and he was no longer running the show, but in fact Sylvia and Warren had really quite different visions. She really wanted to turn it into a museum where African art is treated and respected and exhibited as world-class art. And she used to say, or would have reported to say, but we would say she used to say ‘we are not the African American center, we are showing African art and we are showing world class art on par with art from Asia, from Europe, from Latin America.’ That was her vision. She was very keen on having high quality artwork. She had a good eye, she was very concerned with how objects looked in the galleries, so she was very much hands on in terms of the art that actually went on view. During her tenure here, she did add artworks to the collection that were fine objects and then she used to sort of ‘poo poo’ some of the things that had been added to the collection in earlier years that were referred to as kindling. But in the sense of Warren, he would take in anything because he didn’t want to offend people. He wanted to encourage people to donate and build the collection that way. He didn’t mind taking on mediocre or inferior quality art works if he got a few good pieces. He was a bit more of a wheeler-dealer, so in that sense he wasn’t a purist in the way Sylvia, you might say, was a purist. I would say most museums may take in a mediocre pieces if there is a collector who wants to donate a bunch of objects and you really only want a few and you say we only want these two and they’ll say ‘ah, well I’ll take them all and go somewhere else.’ Warren was the kind of person who would say ‘yeah, we’ll take everything.’ Sylvia was the kind of person who would say ‘no, we just want these two pieces were not interested in any of the other pieces you have’
and if the person walked away, she would just say ‘too bad.’ So that was kind of their different approaches.

The things we acquired during Sylvia's tenure were fine high quality objects and during Warren’s period, when there was no budget, he took a lot of different things of varying quality. Again, in defense of Warren here, in making this comparison between the two: by the time Sylvia came in, we were part of the Smithsonian. We had a regular budget, including a budget for acquisitions of objects. In Warren's time, he had no regular budget. He had to wheel and deal and he had grants and loans and twist members of his family’s arm for money—just to make sure to pay the electricity bill next month. In fairness to him, he just didn’t have the luxury of a federally endowed budget and Sylvia did have that—she didn’t have to scramble to pay the electricity bill. So there was a difference that sometimes people didn't appreciate, that he really had to scarce money to get it together.

One of the things I noticed was that once the museum became a part of the Smithsonian, the educational programming changed in favor of being a more formal academic museum. Would you agree?

I think to a certain extent. [Warren] used to say ‘we are an education department with a museum attached.’ For him, this education and cross-cultural communication idea and philosophy was central and African art was just a vehicle for promoting this philosophy in Washington, D.C. in the [1960s], Civil Rights, the whole era. It was very much a product of that era. He could have chosen something else, like American art, but it happened to be African art. Once we became the National Museum for African Art, then of course the art takes center stage and even though the museum has given a lot of lip service to the education part. Under Sylvia, it really was a secondary thing. We always had an education department, education programming, docents, and etcetera. But you are probably correct. Warren would get an old school bus and go out and bring kids into the museum. Once you are part of the Smithsonian, you don’t do it that way with safety regulations and all kind of things intervene, so we weren’t sending a school bus out to get the kids.

I think its interesting because Warren is quoted to saying that seventy percent Have you noticed a change in the type of audience after the museum joined the Smithsonian?

Was this report a general one?

Yes, but it listed the National Museum of African Art was listed specifically. I am not in the galleries that much, but I think we always had a preponderance of African Americans in the museum—certainly at the old location and here, but I really can’t speak to the different numbers by comparison. Certainly, now it is on our strategic planning to reach out more to these communities and to local schools, not just families, but I don’t know how the numbers compare from [when the museum was located at] A street to here. I don’t know.
What do you think Mr. Robbins would think about the museum today?
I am very sorry that he never met [current museum director] Johnnetta [Cole]. She sort of turned things upside down. I think Warren would be very pleased actually because she is very much more into—not being the ‘African American Cultural Center’ necessarily, but definitely reaching out to the African American community. She is African American and she is very inspiring and a charismatic kind of individual. She gets people excited, gets people quite interested. And she’s generated a lot of interest just in the last two and a half years, to get things going here. A lot more—not just educational things—but performances, parties, anything that is going to get people in and get them interested in Africa.

So, I think Warren would be pleased with that but they never actually met, unfortunately. He knew her and there is a letter he sent to her back in the [1980s] congratulating her on her appointment she received at the time. She was president of Spellman College for a decade and has been in education field, but also has a PhD in anthropology. I think they would have gotten along very well, but their paths never actually crossed.

On that note, how do you think the museum is similar or different than what Robbins had conceived?
It’s much bigger. In some way, the old museum on A Street was kind of a community museum—but it obviously welcomed people from all over the country and beyond. But, I think here the museum is fulfilling, in some degree, its national role and living up to its role representing Africa. Within the Smithsonian Institution there a certain degree of professionalization going on and, of course, that has to meet all the federal requirements. You can’t just hire somebody’s wife to fill in here or there, there’s a professionalization going on. The staff has actually shrunken from what it used to be. [There were] fifty or more people, now we are back down below thirty people. There has been a shrinkage. This is going on all over the Smithsonian, not just this museum, this sort of recasting of the work force. There are a lot of people here now working on the fundraising, public affairs, public relations, development work… we didn’t use to have that back in the old days. We didn’t have to do a lot of private fundraising that we do now in terms of publication, in terms of programming. Certainly, now in terms of efforts to use IT, the Internet, and social media, it is a much professional operation—but there is a certain intimacy and the community feeling that does get lost once you move into this big building. Some say it kinds of like a mausoleum and the other place was a funky little place, but it wasn’t adequate for a proper museum. [The old museum consisted of] old houses that had been converted, so there was a bit of character loss I think.

How is the National Museum of African Art connected to the new National Museum for African American History and Culture? Are you helping with the planning of this museum?
Johnnetta Cole is on the scholarly advisory committee for that museum. She was on that before she became our director. The official line is that the museums will work
together and not in competition, they do have their own areas that they’re looking at. We are Africa, we don’t really do Diaspora and they are Diaspora. Secondly, we are an art museum; the new museum is history and culture—National Museum of History and Culture. I don’t know to what degree they will be doing art exhibitions per se; I think their main emphasis will be history and culture. Remember, if we are talking about African American art that is handled by the American art museum at the Smithsonian and/or the [National] Portrait Art Gallery at the Smithsonian. So, I think the African American museum will have plenty of subjects and projects and territory to keep it busy and won’t have to encroach on African art. So, I think that Johnnetta's position will be that they work in hand in hand. They each have their own territories and maybe they will do some collaborative shows like an exhibition on a particular theme or subject, and there would be a part in their museum and part in ours.

With Johnnetta’s arrival, due to her own history and her own interests, there is more of an openness to things in the Diaspora. Even though the museum does not collect in this area, the Africa Diaspora. Since she’s been here we took the sweet grass basket exhibit, which was about South Carolina basket makers, and one could say that is really a show that should be in the [African American] museum. Again, here as an African collection, we took it. It was very popular and people enjoyed it, so the boundaries are not rigid and even though they may exist in a certain way that doesn’t mean that won’t change down the road. Still, we would not have done a sweet grass exhibition, [Sylvia Williams] would have said that is not what we do, we focus on the continent of Africa not South Carolina. Johnnetta takes a different view on that. Directors have a lot of power within the Smithsonian to set their own agendas in terms of what they want to do and what they want to emphasize. Even though there is a lot of emphasis within the Smithsonian now to collaborate across different units, if you want to do a project or show, this museum will work with that museum and it is encouraged. But in terms of collecting, the museum does not collect works by African American artists or African American artifacts.

*I know that Robbins collected African American art and it was dispersed to several museums at the Smithsonian?*

Yes, the transfer was made after the museum joined the Smithsonian.

*It sounds like Dr. Cole’s mission is more aligned with Mr. Robbins’s vision?*

She might have also seen the wisdom of transferring those paintings by African American artists to the American art museum because that is what they collect and we can focus on what we collect. There were Benin pieces in the Hirshhorn museum, the museum of modern art named after [Joseph Hirshhorn] here at the Smithsonian, but he had some pieces there. So after long negotiations and those pieces were transferred to this museum, which is were they really belonged because that’s what we talk about—we talk about Benin, the Hirshhorn doesn’t talk about it. So, there was a kind of realignment which I think everyone feels was a natural thing to happen once we were all part of the Smithsonian family.
What do you think Mr. Robbins legacy should be today?
I would say, just the fact he founded the museum...at the time, even his own family thought he was absolutely crazy. They were not supportive; it was really his own tenacity. He said, ‘this is what I want to do and by golly I’m going to do it.’ So, I personally give him credit for that kind of tenacity. Without a Mr. Robbins, maybe somebody else would have come along and something similar would have been founded. Who knows—it didn’t happen. But he had this vision and this tenacity, which sometimes worked against him, but in this case it worked for him. This is what he wanted to do and he was going to do it and he was going to engage whatever sort of help he could get to follow him on his mission. So, I don’t think we would be here today without what he did and sticking to what he wanted to do and having the courage to do it. A lot of people have a great idea but then people say ‘No, how are you going to raise the money, how are you going to do this,’ and you say, ‘yeah you’re right.’ He wasn’t that kind of person. He had the courage of his convictions. He may have had second thoughts along the road, too, but I don’t think he showed them very much. I’m sure [Elaine Sooy Goodman’s] manuscript goes into the psychological complexities of Mr. Robbins; He was a complex person who could be difficult. It was that tenacity—he would pursue something and go after it and part of it may have been compensation for his physical deformities or whatever. But I always got along with Mr. Robbins, even though he could be difficult at times. We pretty much over the years kept an open line of conversation and he was the one who hired me, so I was always grateful for that.

I am focusing on black politics in the context of the museum founding. There were a few instances of local black militant activists protesting the museum, was that the case when you joined?
I think that had passed. I think what you’re referring to was in the [1960s]. People were saying ‘why is this white Jewish guy running the museum?’ But he was not daunted by that. He said, ‘African art is a world art it belongs to everybody we all have a lot to learn from it’ and again that is a part of his tenacity. He wasn’t sort of cowed by those people who were pretty frank and outspoken and not very nice. I think he complained in one article in the Washington Post. They were recounting this back and forth between Warren and African American militants. Warren said, ‘I actually sent so and so a copy of my book on African art and they never acknowledged it.’ He always wanted the last word you see.

He really was a product of the [1960s]. That’s part of Warren, where he was coming from. He wanted to create an appreciation for [black] culture. [He thought] ‘Let’s see if we can sit down and talk to each other, develop an appreciation for this culture.’ One of the rooms everybody loved in the old museum—once Sylvia came in, it was dismissed immediately—this juxtaposition room. It would show a piece of African sculpture and then there would be a reproduction and people loved that, people sort of got it. And Warren, he lectured on that all the time for years, but Sylvia just didn’t like it. They used to do something in education, when they brought in school kids they would have musical instruments and bring in a rack of African wrappers and
clothing and the kids would wrap up and play musical instruments and dance. Sylvia took all that away. She wanted the education to focus on the art, moving away from it, ‘we’re not the African cultural center.’ I think now we are sort of moving back to instruments and that—I personally thought *that* was a bit too pure, but Sylvia didn’t like that sort of thing.
Lydia Robbins, Warren Robbins’s Widow and Museum Curator
Personal Interview, November 18, 2011, Washington D.C.

Alyssa Lanz: *How did you first meet Mr. Robbins and what was your role in the museum?*

Lydia Robbins: Well in the end of 1966, the museum had already been open for two years, he opened it in 1964. My role was—I had studied art and art history, but art was my major. So, I thought I was going to be doing exhibit design, but, instead, I did registration, I taught children in the education department, I slept floors, a little bit of everything. That’s how I got started. I worked in registrar, curator of collections, and exhibits. Then, when we became Smithsonian, I went and got my master’s and then I became a curator, one of the curators. We had three or four curators then. I think we had maybe about twenty-five or thirty people in the museum total. So, that’s how I got started. I worked there for twelve years then in August of 1979, we became, I hate to say it, but a bureau of the Smithsonian, then I was curator.

*How would describe Mr. Robbins and his personality?*

I would say he was a—he had a lot of determination. Persistence was his favorite word. He said, “You don’t have to be intelligent you have to be persistent.” So if he needed money for the museum he would raise money. He would go after people and ask them for the money because he had a very good reason for starting the museum. It was right around the time of the Civil Rights Movement. And he had been in Germany for ten years prior to he coming back to Washington. He said he came back because he lost his parking space, but I think that was a joke. [Laughs] While he was in Germany he was a cultural attaché and started a magazine. He worked for Foreign Service, basically he was some who talked about the United States and he was sort of a propagandist, that’s what they do in the state department foreign service. They talk about America and we how do it, etcetera. He met several people, especially when he was a cultural attaché such as Saul Bello, Ben Shahn, Leonard Baskin, architects, Buck Minster Fuller. He kept in touch with them when he came back. He was very good at writing letters to people and keeping in touch with them. He got to know people who had money. He got to know Hubert Humphrey and people in Congress. When he wrote his first book in 1966, he actually distributed it to President Johnson and to several African ambassadors—he was in touch with all of the African ambassadors. When he had an opening, he would invite all of the African ambassadors. He would invite people in Congress, Henry Kissinger, Mrs. Carter, president Cart’s wife, the Washington Redskins, Muhammad Ali was at the museum, Diane Carroll and she came with Congressmen Connors. So, he would have parties at the museum. He had a wedding for Marion Barry.

He was very aggressive and very persistent. And if he was confronted by someone, as he was when he was returning the Afo-A-Kom, he was confronted by this black man who was a minister and he said, "you are a white man and you shouldn’t be returning this it should be a member of the black community.” That was during a press conference and Warren shot back at him and said, “I don’t make apologies for being
white, you don’t have to be an African to study Africa.” He was fearless and he was confronted by black people from time to time because he hired several black people, and if they didn’t like his personality or what he was doing, they would sort of all gang up on him and he would stand up to them. So he was not afraid of that sort of thing. And he had lots of girlfriends, that was a part of his aggression and personality. And he didn’t like to be second-guessed. From time to time, when I was working on an exhibit, we’d be working on it the a night before. Then, he would come over and look at a case I worked on and it looked beautiful, he would say “get another piece in there” and say “don’t second guess me, I’m the director!” That’s what he was, so some people had difficulty with him and I thought he was difficult too, but that was part of who he was and if had been laid back—he wouldn’t have achieved what he achieved.

**What was his personal connection to the Civil Rights Movement and the founding of the museum?**

When he was in Germany, he went to a dealer and bought a few pieces of African art. He went with one time [Senator S.I.] Hayakawa. Bought a few pieces and came back with the pieces and decided he didn’t want to go back to the State department, he wanted to stay here. At that time the civil rights people were very active. And he thought ‘well, I would think it would be a good to start an education facility with a museum attached, so that black people would learn about their heritage and have a sense of pride and white people would understand the black culture.’

**Was this out of the blue?**

No. When he went to college he studied history for his undergraduate and, then, he studied cultural anthropology. And he studied with a man named Leslie White who was his professor at the University of Michigan. Leslie White talked about communication among people of different cultures. If you understand the cultures, you can communicate better. So, he had some secretary that he knew from the state department type letters to people discussing this idea of having an educational facility with a museum attached, so that people would understand the African culture. And he was also fascinated by African art because Picasso and all of those people were influenced by African art. So, in his museum he started out with African art—and then a woman who was a realtor called him up and said “Warren, there is a building over in northeast that belonged to Frederick Douglass. There were two buildings attached one belonged to Douglass and one belonged to his son.” And he thought, ‘Well, I will put that little education institution in that.’ In the meantime his office was down in the basement and he had two people working for him down tin the basement and all he did was type letters to people about the civil rights [movement] and how important it was to spread this information about their culture and all of the great things that they did—the African Americans. So he had a Frederick Douglass room, he borrowed some pieces from the [Frederick Douglass Historical Site in Anacostia] and got some furniture, which was of that period. He had newspaper clippings and photographs of Frederick Douglass. He had that room and a room of African influence on to contemporary art—he always said they would never have had discovered Cubism if it hadn’t been for the African art—even though they denied it
vehemently. And then he had a room of photographs of Africans Americans who were famous. He had a room full of photographs of black people who contributed [to society]. And then he bought a bus and he parked it down the street at the Baptist church and he would pick up the kids if they didn’t have buses.

**It seemed like he felt a strong connection to the black community?**
Yes, he did because they didn’t want a museum here at first. And then there were buses that came to the museum and people didn’t like that. So, he would invite the community to come into the museum and come to the openings, etcetera, and become part of it. A lot of those people were white but they enjoyed it and they thought it was a good idea in the end. So he bought two houses down the street, and then he had the library, the offices, and the archives.

**You touched on a little bit of the protest from the black community, but could you elaborate on the criticism the museum faced?**
I told you about the press conference [reading from notes] held at the museum, when a man named Reverend Douglass Moore, he was chairman of the Black United Front, jumped to his feet and said that the Afo-A-Kom should be returned by a representative of the black community. Well, you probably know that the Afo-A-Kom—the Aaron Fuhrman gallery had it and said he bought it legitimately in Africa, which was probably not true. And he said he would send it back to Africa if he got the $25,000 dollars that he paid for it, so Warren got somebody to pay for it. But anyways, Reverend Moore said “because we don’t believe that the Fuhrman gallery didn’t know this was a stolen sacred piece and I see no where in American history that we have been happy to return stolen property” and Warren said, “I don’t make any apologies for being white and I don’t have a vested interest to make the trip.”

Well, Warren always had several African Americans and he also had Africans working in the educational department on the third floor, they had a huge gallery dedicated to children. And the Africans would talk about Africa and have outfits that the little girls could put on and they had drums and musical instruments so the kids could play. Warren was never concerned about the instruments being damaged because he thought it was more important that they see the instruments. And we didn’t have masterpieces but everything had to be in the correct style so [the children] would know. He also had an assistant director who was black and he went by used his first initial and he was called TJ or something like that, I don’t remember but maybe that is in the book [referring to Elaine Sooy Goodman’s Singing Africa’s Song manuscript]. But he was very smart and very good as the assistant director, but then he became friendly with the woman who would order all of the tools that were needed in the museum to put up exhibits. And Warren—he was a little bit stingy—and Warren would say ‘you worked for the army and you order things by the cases but we are a small museum and I think you're ordering too much.’ So, she got a little angry and she got together with this assistant director and a couple of other people and they confronted him. They backed off eventually, but that was it. He always had a very good relationship with the black community. I am trying to think—first he offered the museum to Howard University and they rejected it. And that was maybe because he
was white. But, there was an African American dancer and he gave this man a lot of sculpture to wear, like masks, and he knew people who going to Howard—there is a man working there now, teaching there now, who used to work at the museum.

The only time he really had a bad time was when the museum was turned over to the Smithsonian and there was a woman there and her name was Sylvia Williams and she was from the Brooklyn museum. And she didn’t like him and I’m not sure exactly why. She thought that he didn’t buy art that were masterpieces. Uh, so of course when she came to the museum they gave her three million dollars and of course he had to raise all of his money…and so he had a totally different philosophy. He would rather buy six pieces for an amount and she wanted something that she thought was a masterpiece. When he had the gallery, he had a lot of color in the gallery but when she got the gallery she liked white walls because she liked the Museum of Modern Art and that kind of thing.

**Where there any specific concerns he expressed about the museum joining the Smithsonian?**

He was very tired by the time; he said he just couldn’t raise money anymore. By that time it was 1979—he was 56, that’s hard to believe.

**Why?**

Because he was so energetic and all of the sudden he just needed to have somebody else run it. I think it was raising the money, etcetera. But, uh, I heard that when he left the Smithsonian there were people at the top who were going to get him out altogether.

**Did he ever give you any insight into the situation at the Smithsonian?**

Well, somebody told me that once he leaves the museum—he was going on sabbatical—that they were going to get him out. I told him, but he didn’t think it was going to be a problem. Then he went on sabbatical and his assistant director—who was a white woman, Jean Salan— took over and she worked with the architect and the people over at the Castle and he was left out of all of that. And when he found out it was going to be underground, he didn’t like that idea. He said ‘why should the black museum be underground.’ And the secretary [Dillon Ripley] said, ‘well, we have the Castle right there and we don’t want to block the view of the Castle and the garden.’ And then when he was not permitted to go to the museum and he was not given an office the size he had before. He got a lawyer and he was gonna sue the Smithsonian. He didn’t succeed. But he was very, very biter and depressed, very, very depressed. And in his last year, I was driving the car and he was in the car, we drove past the museum. And he said I don’t even feel like I’m part of that museum. So he felt like he was sort of rejected and could never—he was upset that they were buying things very expensive and that they were not using it as a teaching museum. And of course Sylvia thought, ‘well he just started a little education institution over on Capitol Hill—I’m the one who started the museum, I’m the first one in the Smithsonian.’
In his later years he started the center and he bought the building next door to their current residence. When his sister died, she left him some money, which he used to purchase the house. So he had the Center for Cross-Cultural education, which is how he started. I was still at the Smithsonian. He had little exhibits at mostly historically black colleges. He would give a lecture called “Unmasking Picasso”—his ideas weren’t always all his own. I continued the Center and we are winding it down now. I gave ninety boxes of his letters to the Smithsonian and we are taking the books and giving them to historically black colleges. First, we gave some to Janet [Stanley] at the [National Museum of African Art] library. Once we wind down totally, we don’t have the Center any longer, I will try to sell some of the sculpture that we have and that money will go back to the Smithsonian under his name to pay for scholarship for people to study under his name.

I read that when President Obama was elected, Mr. Robbins would have had an exhibit dedicated to him?

First of all, he was upset when Barack Obama was elected and he said, “If I were still at the museum, Barack Obama would be coming over.” And yes he was upset that Sylvia started taking African contemporary art, he said—his feeling was ‘contemporary art is similar all over the world and it could go to the Hirshhorn or National [Portrait] Gallery,’ but he wanted to stick to the traditional because that was where the culture came from.

In terms of his legacy today, how do you think he should be remembered?

Well, Warren didn’t want to put his name on the museum like Hirshhorn or Sackler, he does have his name on a plaque going down on the steps. I wanted them to put a little something on the first floor with a little picture and a bio saying he was the founder of the museum. I asked a few people at the museum if it were possible and they said if I gave them ten million dollars, and I was like, “o.k. sure”…and I thought that was not fair to him—I think his name should up on the first floor as you enter and its not a big deal and I think he will be remembered more later on, except for the people who are still alive. I think for instance, when Elaine [Goodman] wrote the book, he said, “you will never sell that book. No one cares who Warren Robbins is.” That’s what he thought, who cares who I am. I am very sad about it, but I am doing what I can—I think that’s why he married me because I was very hard working at the museum and he knew that I would take care of what he would’ve done. So that fellowship will be part of it and I will probably give some money to the University of Michigan because that’s where he met Leslie White and he had a big influence of him.

Are you in contact with Dr. Johnnetta Cole?

Yes. I think she is a wonderful person.

What do you think Warren would have thought of her?

He knew Johnnetta when she was president of Spellman, he wrote her a letter. I found a letter written to her when she was at Spellman congratulating her on her position. He was in contact with all of these people. When she was going to be director he was
alive and he was happy because she was an anthropologist and he thought she would do what he would’ve done. But that she is doing is raising money so I think her assistant director is doing more with shows and things like that. But he liked her a lot and unfortunately she as at Spellman when Sylvia came but if she would have came instead of Sylvie things could have tuned around.

What did his family think of the museum, were they supportive?
Well they were, he had a sister who was a widow and helped him with money. He was the youngest of eleven children and his father was a stockbroker and his mother operated a jewelry store and his sister was married to a businessman and he would hit them up for money and he would make them feel very bad if they didn’t give it to him. At the beginning, his family thought he was a little bit crazy, they thought ‘how are you going to survive.’ But he insisted and he said, “you don’t understand what I am trying to do but you will.” And they did, eventually, they saw what he did and were very proud of him. Not only that, but there were a few people from his childhood who came to the memorial and said that when he was a kid he wasn’t as smart as they were smart, but he ended up doing more than they did. And that is from his personality, which was very determined and persistent and if he had a goal he was going to work toward that goal until he got it and that’s how the museum came about I think.
Lonnie Bunch, Director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture
Personal Interview, April 4, 2012.

Alyssa Lanz: In 1979, the Museum of African Art transferred to the Smithsonian, did you have anything to do with that?
Lonnie Bunch: I didn’t. There were very few black people working in museums. So, there was a woman named Amina Dickerson who worked in African art and she was a friend of mine. We would talk about the politics of that, the museum joining the Smithsonian and whether it as a good thing or a bad thing, so that was my only involvement. Other than the fact they tried to get me to work for them, but I am an historian not an art guy, so I didn’t want to make that link.

What did you think of it?
Well, I think the Smithsonian is the most important cultural center in the United States, if not globally. So to be able to take that Warren Robbins great collection and make it more successful—because I remember going to see it when it was on A street. And even though I liked that it was in Frederick Douglass’s house, I remember thinking it was like a more individual collector. You didn’t get a good interpretation and such. When it became a part of the Smithsonian they were able to get more resources, more staff and they began to do, I thought, really good education programs around the country. So that really helped to get it stabilized. And I think the other thing I thought the Smithsonian is, for lack of a better term, is “America’s front porch” and everybody goes there and I found myself thinking but they didn’t know anything about Africa. So to have that museum, I thought, it was going to be extremely important for the Smithsonian and it’s proven to be.

As someone who was black and living in Washington, D.C. at that time, what did it mean politically to you?
D.C. was, and still to a certain extent, is a segregated city. I went to college there and they even told us, when I was a freshmen or sophomore because we wanted to explore the city, they said to us “Well, there are parts of the city that are dangerous and white folks aren’t used to you being there.” And I remember them telling me that if you were in DuPont Circle and got in trouble, go to the Turkish embassy because they would let you go.

So when the Smithsonian took this, it could have meant that a part of black Washington or an important part to black Washington was suddenly embraced and important to the Smithsonian. This was only a decade or so after Anacostia [referring to the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum], so there really was a need to do more than what they were doing with the Anacostia. So, I thought it was an important political statement for the Smithsonian and I think they knew it was a political statement but they didn’t know how to leverage that and what that meant. But a lot of us in the community knew it was important.

What did you think of Sylvia Williams at the time?
I knew Sylvia a little bit because when I was at the Air and Space Museum, there were so few black people. [Laughs] There was like five of us. I think the challenge of African art being under Sylvia—then the woman who ran it after Sylvia, Roslyn Walker, and now Johnnetta Cole is there. A part of the challenge has been, that under Sylvia and Roslyn there was this desire to make it this place of fine art and I am not sure it was connected to Africa, as it needed to be and connected to black Washington. I think it was really about, and I can understand this as a founding director, it was about how to make this legitimate in the eyes of the Smithsonian, in the eyes of the federal government, and in the eyes of other museums. The key was to make it a museum of the collector. I don’t think that until recently they realized that a part of their strength is using that art as a way of understanding, now, this great Diaspora that has come to the United States in the last thirty years.

Am I being critical? It wouldn’t be the way I did it. But I understood that the most important thing they had to do was prove their legitimacy and that was their decision on how to do it. I might have done it differently, but that was their notion of how to do it.

Why do you think that it’s so important for the NMAAHC to exist today and to be specifically linked with the Smithsonian?

First of all, the link with the Smithsonian is crucial because people who go to the Smithsonian are people who wouldn’t go to this museum at all…I think its also important because what this museum could do is illuminate, or at least shed some light, on other museums doing this kind of work. There’s an array of smaller museums. Some of them are doing o.k. and most are struggling. Part of it is: the Smithsonian is a great legitimizer. If other museums see us do it, then they think ‘Hey, we can do that too.’ If I come into town and go to the local museum, then suddenly the local museum looks better to the local people. So, I want to make sure that everyone benefits from our presence.

Part of what’s so important about this is to recognize that this is not an attempt to create a black museum for black people. I am really not interested in simply creating a place that simply makes us happy. While I want to do that, the truth of the matter is: African American history and culture is too important to be just a story about black America, that it’s the quintessential great American story and that’s what needs to be told and that’s where the Smithsonian provides that platform.

Part of the reason its important to do it now and a part of the Smithsonian is: as you may know, part of greases the skids of museums is money and the Smithsonian is a brand name that allows me to raise more than $100 million because people say, ‘we like what you say and it’s also a part of the Smithsonian, so we can count on it.’

What are the main goals you have for the museum?

Main goals are: 1) to provide a sense of legitimacy that African American culture is everybody’s culture. 2) To ensure the continuation of smaller institutions that care about this culture—not all black [museums], but like the Louisiana State Museum
does great stuff on African American culture and I want to make sure they are doing well too. 3) And then there is a really stimulating kind of dialogue about reconciliation and healing and issues of race and to sort of force Americans to confront their racial past.

Another thing that is really important to me is: to frame the things we do in an international context. Americans don’t do global well. So for them to think about their global connectivity, it’s really important for us to do. Ultimately, my goal is to make a museum that makes America better.

What’s the relationship between your museum and the NMAA?
As you probably know about museums, museums really reflect their leader. This is my third time back at the Smithsonian, so the Smithsonian is the place I care most about. I have really deep roots, long time connections with people. So for me, collaboration in the Smithsonian is as natural as breathing, but for most of the Smithsonian it’s not. So we—African art and I—are doing collecting together. I’m on my way to Angola in two weeks and Johnnetta Cole will come with me and I will be looking for things for my museum and for her museum. We’ve put programs together. So we put together a major conference on the role of—this is a phrase I don’t like but—the role of ‘ethnically specific museums’ today. Looking at Latino, Asian museums and all that, and that came out of a collaboration with African art. So there has to be a close connection, but that is going against the grain at the Smithsonian.

Has there been a lot of resistance to that?
Sure because even though you are the Smithsonian, each museum has to fight for their own budget and visibility. Right now we get a lot of the money, the visibility, so there’s always a little bit of ‘well if you get this, what happens to me?’ So it’s sometimes hard to overcome that.

The second reason is an institutional reason. There was an organization where the directors of each museum every other week museum directors met and every other week they meet with the head of the Smithsonian. So they got rid of that. Somebody destroyed that…a secretary didn’t like it, thought that the directors had too much power. So now there isn’t a mechanism now to encourage collaboration or even sharing info at the Smithsonian, which is why stuff like this is hard to do…

[Johnnetta Cole] has been able to collaborate with me because that’s what I do. But for some other folks—I collaborate with people at the museum of American history because they use to work for me. The leadership of the museum was scared and didn’t want to collaborate with me. But a lot of institutions deal with that.

On that note, do you think that the NMAA should have taken a more Pan-African approach?
You know, now again, I am not an Africanist. But from my vantage point that museum had some opportunities. One, was to recognize that part of what its goal was
to illuminate Africa, not just African art but Africa. I think it could always have a
stronger political sense. Like a lot of people in Congress when they try to test me and
they say ‘well, do you have an agenda,’ I say ‘yeah, I have an agenda. To make
America better.’ You have to have an agenda. And I'm not sure that the Museum of
African Art had that type of agenda.

I would like it also to have more of a connection to the African community in
Washington, D.C. It’s an amazingly different city then when I first moved to D.C….I
told Johnnetta but I am not sure yet, but it didn’t really have a connection with that
local community.

There seems to be a lot more proposals for ethnically based museums today? Why
now?
I think a couple of things. I think that what people realize is that museums legitimize
your culture. So there's a desire to sort of say our story is important. And a museum is
a way to do that. Another reason why, is that of African American history its been
twenty years and Chicano studies its been twenty-five years, but you really have
generations of good scholarship. So for most museums, especially the Smithsonian,
you can’t have a museum without good scholarship. And now there’s a black middle
class that can financially support these types of institutions.

If you notice, most of the institutions that are created, ethnocentric, are really about
saying, ‘we are here to…” My notion is that we are beyond that. I’m not going to
justify why we are here, we’ve been here. My notion is to say, this is now the
challenge to make this everybody’s story. That’s why what I am doing is slightly
different than what others are doing. I think that’s what the Smithsonian should be
doing. They’re all about proving why they are here and why their histories are
important…The hope is that museums can help to grapple with that, I'm not sure
yet…Until four years ago, it was a good time for many of these minority communities
as far as financial growth in their communities. Now the question is: are these
museums sustainable?

Especially the fact that these museums offer more educational programming for
their communities more than other mainstream museums.
Yes, I think that what these institutions did, especially African American but all of
them, is that they cared about these communities when other museums did not. They
cared about an education as a means for uplift when other museums did not. They
cared about the preserving the kind of objects that spoke to everyday life when other
museums did not. So for me, we are trying to catch up with what these institutions
were doing for the last thirty or forty years.

The museum was approved under the George W. Bush administration. What do
you think was the political agenda with that?
I think that part of my strength in getting the museum to where it is, is the fact that
when I walk into Congress they see a Democrat. But I have tried to suggest that it is
bipartisan, I remind them that Bush signed the bill and I have put Laura bush on my
board and Colin Powell. The obvious agenda was the Republican party isn’t just racist dogs but they care about the diversity of America. And I think a part of it is that I have gotten to know George and Laura bush and they were interested in African American history and they didn’t know how far it was going to go, but they were really interested in that. And I think the Republicans need to show that they’re not the party of a certain segment of white America. I don’t know whether they care, but that’s what they need to show.

**What is President Obama’s involvement?**

Yeah, he’s an old friend from Chicago. When I was the president of the Chicago Historical Society, he was state Senator. When he was elected to the senate, he started the same year I came back [to Chicago]. I was commuting because my youngest child was a senior in high school and he was commuting because [First Lady] Michelle didn’t want to move to Washington, D.C., so he and I would commute together sometimes...So my time in Chicago was crucial to building this kind of—well, not that I knew this was all gonna happen but it just all aligned, so that’s been helpful. But if you looked at any of the stuff from the groundbreaking, it was obviously orchestrated to show a diverse America, diverse political issues, and to say that everybody knows that this is their story. Like Governor [Samuel] Brownback [of Kansas, Republican], who is almost more conservative about everything more than I am, and get the blessing of John Lewis, one of the last great icons of the Civil Rights Movement, so that was pretty cool I must admit.

**What are Obama’s thoughts on the new museum?**

Obama has been really supportive. Whenever he talks about his kids, that’s when you really know it means something to him. He talked about what he wants his kids to learn from this museum. When I see Michelle, who I see a lot, she talks about how they are proud. They are supportive indirectly and that helps. How it helps me—part of my job is political, convincing people that I got the clout to do X and Y, so when people see the president is coming, people say that ‘wow! he really does have the clout to do it.’