



# Keep Moving Forward

**Johnnetta Betsch Cole, director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art and a distinguished scholar, educator and humanitarian, delivered the keynote address at the Alliance's 2015 annual meeting in Atlanta. She made the case that museums can and must be of social value by creating change around one of the most critical issues of our time—the issue of diversity. Read her powerful words below.**

Drawing on my roots in a southern black church and my involvement in the civil rights movement, I greet each of you as my sisters and my brothers. Good morning! And if I draw once again on my roots in a southern black church, I would say, "It's a great gettin' up morning!"

I want to thank sister Chair Kaywin Feldman and brother President Ford Bell and the organizers of this year's AAM conference for giving me the honor of offering this keynote address as we gather in a city that is often described as the cradle of the civil rights movement...a movement that called for, struggled for and, indeed, brought about monumental changes in our nation and inspired other movements for freedom and justice in America and around the world. We are in this city called Atlanta, a city that is the birthplace of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr...the man Nina Simone called the "dark prince of peace."

We are in a city called Atlanta that is the home of major institutions that address issues of social justice: the Martin Luther King National Historic Site, the Carter Center and the National Center for Civil and Human Rights.

Because we are in such a city, the theme for this 2015 AAM Annual Meeting is especially appropriate: "The social value of museums:

inspiring change." Over the course of the next few days that we are together, there will be many responses to this theme.

What I have chosen to do in this keynote address is to make the case that our museums can and must be of social value by not only inspiring but creating change around one of the most critical issues of our time—the issue of diversity. For us in the world of museums, that means inspiring and creating far greater diversity in our workforces, our exhibitions, our educational programs and among our visitors.

I want to turn to our colleagues who are here from museums around the world to say this: As I speak about the need for greater diversity in the U.S. museum, please know that I know that your realities may be quite different. I only hope that some of the points I will make will be helpful to you.

I also want to acknowledge the other slant in this talk, and that is that I am drawing most heavily on the question of diversity in art museums. And to my colleagues who work in zoological parks and aquariums, while I will not make specific references to your organizations, please know that I know that you too are wrestling with questions of diversity.

Colleagues, all, I believe that we cannot fully carry out the visions and the missions of our museums—and, indeed, our museums cannot



Johnnetta Betsch Cole delivers the keynote address at the 2015 AAM Annual Meeting & MuseumExpo in Atlanta.

continue to be of social value—if we do not do what is required to have more diversity in who works in our museums, in the work we present in our museums, in the audiences we welcome to our museums and in the philanthropic and board leadership in our museums.

One of my *sheroes*, the late Dr. Maya Angelou, issued a call to all women and men who are parents when she said, “It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength.” In our museums, we have the possibility to teach that same important message.

When we look back at the history of American museums, we see that they were products of and reflections of the political, economic and social times. Back in the day, museums were run by and largely catered to

middle-aged and middle-income and upper-class white folks. And the collections, exhibitions and educational programs reflected what one of my colleagues, Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall at Spelman College, calls the Three Ws: They were largely focused on Western places and ideas, the overwhelming majority of the staff and the visitors were white folks and the exhibitions were largely womanless.

[...] Like all African Americans who grew up in the pre-civil rights days of legal segregation in the South, as a youngster I went to colored schools, used the colored “public” library, only drank from colored water fountains and could only sit in the back of the bus. There were no art galleries or museums where I or any black people could visit. But how fortunate I was to have a mother who had a passion for visual

arts. As we say in the art world, “She had the eye!” And she had the will and the means to adorn our home with reproductions of artworks that, ironically, I would not have seen in museums had I been permitted to visit them. For in our home were reproductions of masterworks of African American artists and books on the art of Henry Tanner, Romare Bearden, Elizabeth Catlett, Jacob Lawrence, Lois Mailou Jones, Charles White, Augusta Savage and Aaron Douglas.

Today, with legalized segregation a thing of the past, I can go to any museum whose entrance fee—if there is one—I can afford. And yet, too often I will not find much in those museums which reflects the history, *herstory*, culture and art of who I am, and [that of] underrepresented people of our country and the world.

Today, from a legal standpoint, every American museum must honor EEO guidelines. In addition, it is the right thing to do to have diversity in our museums’ staff, boards, programs and audiences. It is also the smart thing to do if we want our museums to be vibrant 21st-century places that reflect the diversity of our nation and the world.

A comprehensive look at diversity in our museums would include an assessment of the presence and the absence of the range of underrepresented groups—that is, people whose primary identity is based on their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, nationality, class, physical abilities and disabilities. I have used the term “primary identity” because each of us has multiple identities.

Another of my *sheroes*, Audre Lorde, had a wonderful way of making this point about our multiple identities. I had the privilege and the joy of knowing and learning from Audre Lorde when we both taught at Hunter College. Before she would begin a talk and offer a reading from her work, she would introduce herself by

saying, “I am Audre Lorde, a black woman, feminist, lesbian, professor, poet, mother, warrior!” And then Audre Lorde would say, “Please do not relate to me as if I have but one identity. For I do not wake up in the morning and from 7 a.m. to 8 a.m. I am black, but when 8 a.m. comes, I become a woman, and only for an hour because at 9 a.m., I will be a feminist, only to become a lesbian on the stroke of 10 a.m.”

Let me return to the point that embracing, encouraging and sustaining a diverse workforce in our museums is the right thing to do. That is, there should be an equal opportunity for all qualified people to not only enter the workforce at our museums, but to be welcomed there and supported to advance there.

There is a second reason for having and sustaining a diverse workforce. Namely, it is the smart thing to do. There is a business case for diversity. It says [that] if businesses are to compete effectively in this global economy, they must have within their company employees of diverse backgrounds who will bring different and innovative ideas to the table. It is also my experience that being with people of diverse backgrounds can be and often is intellectually exciting!

This business case for diversity in American companies, and in our museums, rests heavily on demographic realities. Over the past few decades, there have been massive demographic and social shifts. According to U.S. census data, currently 35 percent of all U.S. residents are “minorities.” Demographers have stated that this trend will not only continue but will accelerate well into the next several decades. In the next 30 years, the U.S. will become a “majority minority” country, with white folks no longer in the majority.

The future of American philanthropy, like the future of everything else in the country, will be shaped by increasing racial and ethnic diversity. According to the Minnesota Council on Foundations, “Who donates and what they

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give will be profoundly impacted, and public policy will become more representative of minority communities.”

As Arnold Lehman, the retiring director of the Brooklyn Museum, puts it, “For our museums, diversity is a critical issue” and “the most important book any museum director should read is the U.S. census.”

What is the state of workforce diversity in our American museums? Today, the professional staff at most American museums do not mirror the diversity of American people... In the 241 museums of the Association of Art Museum Directors, fewer than 5 percent have people of color in senior management positions.

[...] Of course, once a museum is successful in recruiting a diverse staff, the question is, “What kind of environment, atmosphere and culture will these diverse colleagues encounter?” I cannot stress enough the importance of an inclusive culture that says in countless ways, “All colleagues from all backgrounds are welcome at this museum table!”

In addition to asking about racial and ethnic diversity among museum staff, we must also ask who visits our museums. While people of color make up over one-third of the American population, according to a National Endowment for Arts report, they make up only 9 percent of museum visitors.

Brother President Ford Bell makes this point: “The big challenge is going to be how museums deal with the increasingly diverse American public, which could be 30 percent or more Hispanic by 2050. If you go to a museum and don’t see anyone who looks like you, from visitors to staff, and the boards are not reflecting the community, you may be less likely to come back, or even to go in the first place.”

Marketing studies affirm the rather obvious fact that African Americans are more likely to attend events that are characterized as “black themed” and events where black people are well represented among performers. Studies of Latino attitudes toward museums show similar results. A report by the Smithsonian American History Museum found second-generation Latinos surveyed had “very strong expectations that museums should include diverse staff, bilingual interpretation, Latino perspectives and some Latino-themed content.”

In Houston, our colleague the late Peter Marzio of the Museum of Fine Arts started a Latin American department in response to the city’s rapidly expanding Latino community. Peter also added several permanent Asian art galleries in response to Houston’s growing and diverse Asian community. And he did not start these exhibitions and programs in some vacuum, but rather by engaging the local community and seeing what they wanted. This has resulted in very strong local support, donations and engagement. As an example, the Korean community donated over \$2 million for a permanent art collection.

I turn now to the situation of those of us who are described in a Native American saying as “holding up half of the sky”...us womenfolk. Where do we stand in terms of women on museum staffs?

Among the museums in the Association of Art Museum Directors, women make up slightly less than 50 percent of the directors. However, of the 243 members of the Association of Art Museum Directors, there are only 5 African American women! It is also important to note that, the larger a museum’s budget, the less likely it is that the director is a woman.

[...] Women lag behind men in directorships held at museums with budgets over \$15 million. We women folks hold only 245 of all art museum directorships, and women earn 71 cents for every dollar earned by male directors.

Calvert Investments discovered that companies whose commitment to diversity was viewed as “robust” were not only at a financial advantage, but were also better positioned to generate long-term shareholder value. In addition, advocacy groups like Catalyst, a nonprofit organization that promotes inclusive workplaces for women, found that Fortune 500 companies with higher percentages of women board members significantly outperformed companies with fewer female members. This is the business case for why promoting diversity and inclusion makes good financial sense! And let us note that women have more philanthropic clout than ever before, consistently outgiving their male counterparts.

I also want to make an observation in terms

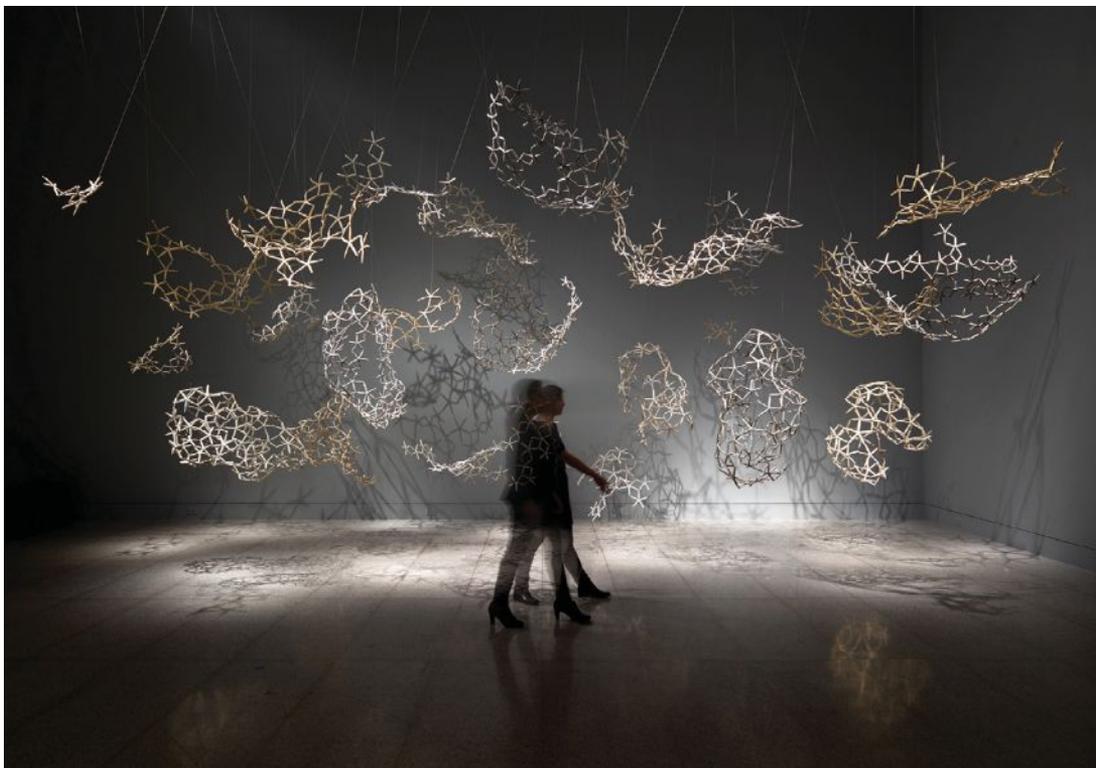
of American museums and LGBTQ communities. Whatever the number of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals there are among museum professionals—such statistics are not available—it is clear that American museums have paid grossly insufficient attention to artworks done by and about individuals of these communities.

The exhibition at the Smithsonian [National] Portrait Gallery “Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture” (November 18, 2011–February 12, 2012) was the first museum exhibition to focus on themes of gender and sexuality in modern American portraiture. As you may recall, there was a major controversy around that exhibition when the Smithsonian removed a 1987 video about the suffering caused by AIDS. At the Smithsonian, we continue to talk about what we have learned from that controversy.

We must also address the question of how inclusive our museums are in terms of

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An image from the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Latin American Art collection.



exhibitions by and about differently abled people. And we must ask ourselves to what extent our museums welcome disabled professional staff, and the extent to which our museums accommodate and welcome people with disabilities.

Finally, in terms of underrepresented groups, I pose this question: How are our museums doing in terms of igniting the interest of the folks that I respectfully, yet playfully, call the “young’uns”? As you know, millennials are quite different from yesterday’s museumgoers in how they see the world, how they engage with technology and how they pursue their interests. It is not being overly dramatic to say that, unless we make changes in our museums that will speak to the patterns and interests of young people, when the middle-age to older folks who are now our core visitors go on off to glory, our museum galleries will be places in which there are a dwindling number of visitors. We all know that our museums must become more technologically savvy if we are to court the millennials, whose electronic devices have become extensions of their bodies.

Not only is reaching out to the millennial generation important for cultivating healthy visitorship, but it is critical for preparing the next generation of donors and trustees. While the baby boomer generation has been the main source of charitable giving and philanthropic leadership for decades, the realities and habits of the millennial generation are not the same as [those of] the current, aging generation.

From a recent TrendsWatch report compiled by our American Alliance of Museums and a recent *New York Times* article, “Wooing a New Generation of Museum Patrons,” we learn this: While charitable giving in the United States has remained stable for the last 40 years, there is reason for concern. Boomers today control 70 percent of the nation’s disposable income. Millennials don’t yet have nearly as much cash on hand. And those who do are increasingly

drawn to social, rather than artistic, causes.

The fiscal reality of the millennial generation is not the same as the reality of older generations. Tax laws are changing and wealth is becoming increasingly concentrated, which will in turn affect the philanthropic habits and the focus on giving of the younger generation. Also, there may just be fewer wealthy patrons and donors, making donor relations and cultivation a more critical and targeted effort.

[...] If your museum is large or small, old or young, famous or not yet famous, the need for seeking and sustaining diversity in your museums and in mine has never been greater. If we are to be relevant in this ever-changing world, to stay artistically and financially viable, all of our museums must boldly—indeed, bodaciously—commit to rethinking about what takes place in our museums, to whom our museums belong and who the colleagues are who have the privilege of telling important stories through the power of science, history, culture and art.

As members of AAM, you, my colleagues, are aware of efforts in this organization to address issues of diversity in our museums. There are also programs initiated by other museum organizations, like AAMD, and by foundations, like Ford and Mellon, to encourage far greater involvement of underrepresented groups in every facet of American museums.

There is no city that is a more appropriate place for us to commit to the task of bringing greater diversity to who works in American museums and to the work that our museums do. And there is no time that is more appropriate for us to carry out this commitment than right now! So, let us heed the counsel of Atlanta’s son, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in terms of how we are to get this critical work done. He said, “If you can’t fly, then run. If you can’t run, then walk; if you can’t walk, then crawl, but whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.”