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A Museum Ahead of Its Time: An Appreciation

Gretchen Jennings

ABSTRACT
I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am. This statement from Kenyan John Mbiti, one of the first post-colonial scholars of African philosophy and religion, provides deep insight into African modes of thought. It is also valid in a universal sense. Indeed, it reflects the theme of this 50th anniversary edition of the journal: our relationships shape who we are. This article explores my experiences between 1978 and 1983 at the Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., where my museum career began. I have come to understand that the museum's prescient vision and practice profoundly influenced my next four decades as a museum professional. I also note the absence of much of this history in the story the museum tells of itself today.

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> I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.
> John S. Mbiti

An acknowledgement of origins

A copy of John Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy*,[1] its broken spine reinforced with masking tape, has been on my bookshelves since I assigned it fifty years ago to my classes at Vanier College in Montreal, Canada. Mbiti's description of a basic value across African[2] cultures has become a world-famous quotation and a motto for the African Diaspora.

This statement, which provides deep insight into African modes of thought, is also universally valid. Indeed, it is another way of expressing the theme of this anniversary issue of the *Journal of Museum Education*. Human relationships (granted, some more than others) shape us indelibly. I have come to see that my five years at Washington D.C.'s Museum of African Art, together with the studies that brought me there, were like an underground river feeding my ensuing decades of work, emerging with full force in the last ten years with the Empathetic Museum project, my blog *Museum Commons*, and my participation in museum movements for social justice.[3]

What I learned at the Museum of African Art – the principles of inclusion, education, and community engagement – became so much a part of me that, until recently, I had forgotten their origins. But, in fact, the museum lived these ideals before the publication of "Excellence and Equity;"[4] before the word "education" gained primacy in the International Council of Museum's (ICOM) definition of "museum;" and just as ICOM was adding "in service to society" (1974) to the definition's text.[5] Before joining the Smithsonian

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Institution in 1981, the Museum of African Art understood its role in ways that were at the time prescient and unusual (and sometimes derided) but that have now become best practices in the field. To the extent that I have played a role in advancing inclusion, education, and community commitment in museums, it is because of my years at African Art.

Background: the museum and how I got there

The Museum of African Art

In 1964, during the American Civil Rights movement, Warren Robbins, a retired Foreign Service officer, founded the Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. He began with pieces purchased while serving in Germany, where he had first encountered the art of Africa, and the collections grew to thousands of objects as well as photographs from the archives of *Life* magazine photographer Eliot Elisofon. The museum occupied an adjoining row of townhouses on Capitol Hill, anchored by a building that once belonged to African-American leader, author, and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. In 1979 it became an official bureau of the Smithsonian Institution, and in 1981 it was renamed the National Museum of African Art. In 1987 the museum joined the Freer-Sackler Gallery in a new underground complex on the National Mall (Figure 1).

Today collections of African objects displayed as art abound; at the time the museum was unusual for its emphasis on an aesthetic perspective.[6] In the majority-African American city of Washington, D.C., its presence was revolutionary, a witness to the cultural heritage of Sub-Saharan Africa, long ignored by the West. Despite criticism of its White founder,[7] the museum became an influential center not only for the D.C. community but also for what became known as the African Diaspora, a movement that documented and promulgated the global political, economic, artistic and social impact of people of African descent throughout history.[8]

My path to the museum

In the 1960s when I was in college, African nations were breaking the bonds of colonialism. Leaders in this effort such as Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya), and Julius Nyerere (Tanzania) were known and admired worldwide. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) was founded in the early 1960s, giving the members a unified voice in world affairs. I met people who had lived and worked in countries like Botswana and Malawi as teachers or Peace Corps volunteers, and their experiences fascinated me. I went to graduate school at Sir George Williams (now Concordia) University in Montreal, and when I saw that their history program included a concentration in the history of Africa, I signed up. I had had enough of Western studies and of histories of "civilization" that excluded much of the world. I was drawn by the opportunity to study and learn from a continent, its cultures, and peoples, about which I – like most Americans – knew almost nothing.

Even though I was studying the history of African nations, the academic world that I entered was almost entirely White and male. White men have dominated anthropology, archaeology, folklore, history, and other areas of African studies since the origin of these fields in the colonial encounter. Africans were seen as useful informants but (except at historically black colleges and universities) not encouraged to become scholars in their

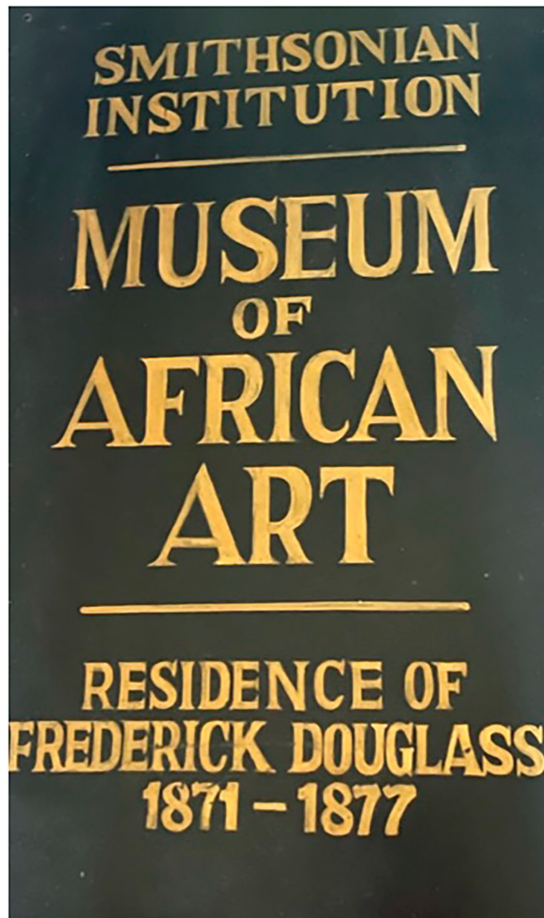

Figure 1. When this temporary sign at the museum door was replaced by an official Smithsonian Institution sign, the museum offered the old sign to the staff in a lottery, which the author won.

own right. Race and gender discrimination at major universities in North America and Great Britain also contributed to the paucity of Black and women scholars. All my professors at Concordia were White men – Canadian, American, and British; I was the only woman student. A recent article, "Race and the Politics of Knowledge Production in African Studies," confirms that this is a continuing issue.[9] I graduated in 1972 with a master's degree in African and European history.

In 1978 I took a leave of absence from Vanier, where I had tenure, to explore job opportunities near my family in the Washington, D.C. area. From a pamphlet published by the American Historical Association on alternative careers for history majors (still available on their website in 2023),[10] I learned about museum work and internships. I discovered that the Museum of African Art, a small private museum on Capitol Hill was soon to join the Smithsonian Institution and that an unpaid internship[11] was available through the Smithsonian office of interns. I applied, was accepted, and began my internship in Fall 1978.

What I did there

I fell in love with museum work, ending my leave of absence to continue at the Museum. I learned the basics of museum education – school tours, training and management of docents, teacher workshops, development of classroom resources, and outreach tours to schools and senior organizations. I had a hand in label writing and exhibition development. My colleagues became dear friends, and I was introduced to the community of museum educators in D.C. and around the country. I was part of an institution that connected with all levels of the D.C. community from kindergarten to Congress. For the first time, I became aware of my identity as a White woman working with Black staff and docents. At the same time, I was encouraged and supported by Black colleagues, in particular by my supervisor Amina Dickerson, and fellow educator Alicia Taylor. I traveled to Senegal, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Kenya, and Egypt on a Smithsonian bursary. I was one of several women who experienced inappropriate language and behavior by a senior White colleague and found no action taken when I reported this to higher Smithsonian authorities. I felt the brunt of a patriarchal administrative structure in my efforts to rise within the museum. In 1983 I moved to an administrative position at the Smithsonian Castle.

Each of these experiences might be its own article. I want, however, to concentrate on the three areas of museum practice at African Art that were ahead of their time and that inspired all my subsequent work.

Inclusion

As my internship project, I was assigned the revitalization and organization of the nascent docent program. Our recruiting resulted in a roughly equal number of Black and White applicants, and this was reflected in our final group of fifty docents. Some were former Peace Corps volunteers or foreign service officers who had worked in African nations. Many simply wanted to learn more about these new nations and their rich traditions and to share their learning with visitors (Figure 2).

Docent training presented its own challenges. With Howard University and Georgetown's School of Foreign Service nearby, we were fortunate to have access to some of the leading Black scholars of African studies, in addition to White scholars, for training sessions. We also made what might appear to be a simple organizational change, combining what had been separate training (Wednesday mornings for weekdays and Wednesday evenings for weekend docents) into a single Wednesday evening class. As a result, I did not have to burden speakers with a morning and evening presentation in one day. But more importantly, this decision eliminated a *de facto* racial division related to socio-economic factors. Weekday docents were mostly White because they were working in the home or retired; weekend docents were mostly Black and employed during the week. In 1989 Kimberle Crenshaw recognized and called out, through her concept of intersectionality, exactly these kinds of conditions wherein a variety of life situations can adversely interact with race, especially in the case of Black women.[12] By eliminating what appeared to be a scheduling problem, but which actually had racial implications, we created a more cohesive and equitable docent organization.

Still, issues such as race, inequity, and colonialism were never far from the surface. At one point, the return of the Benin Bronzes, looted by the British in 1897[13] and in collections all over the world (including ours), arose during a training session. In class, I mentioned

Figure 2. Docents Lee Clark and Henry Elliott, with Director of Education Amina Dickerson, attend a docent training in the collection.

that Greece was still trying to get the Elgin Marbles back from the British Museum. Although I thought I was saying that this problem was shared by other countries, my remark was interpreted as making excuses for the British and was reported to Amina. Called into Amina's office, I was surprised and distressed at the report. Amina was very kind, showing empathy for my reaction as well as explaining the viewpoint of the docents who complained. Race would always inform my role as docent coordinator, I realized then: my race as a White American woman; the Black and White identities of the docents; the content of our work – the art and traditions of varied African cultures, and the common negative stereotypes held by the West. Any one of these is a delicate issue, and all together they require constant awareness and sensitivity. After this incident, I telephoned each docent (of course this was well before computers or email). I apologized for the offense my words had given and asked each person to come to me first with any further complaints about my words or behavior. I came to know that the Black docents in particular appreciated this; it was a step toward earning a trust I realized I could not take for granted. From today's perspective, this illustrates beautifully the insight that impact is often different from intent, a lesson that I had to learn again and again.

Unlike so many museums then and now,[14] African Art employed Black staff in positions of authority (Chief of Operations; Director of Education; curator). Amina, our head of education, was born and bred in D.C. and was deeply connected to the arts community in the region. Our docent corps was representative of the D.C. community of that period. We also benefited from the arrival of African immigrants to the area, including many who came to study at Howard University. Several of our Education Specialists were

Howard students from Ghana. We were able to employ – as visiting artists – weavers, musicians, muralists, and filmmakers who were part of the African Diaspora. At the same time, many in the Black community criticized the involvement of Whites in every part of the museum: administration, staff, volunteers, and visitors. Today works on antiracism and White supremacy[15]; systemic racism,[16] intersectional feminism,[17] and colonialism[18] can assist in analyzing these racial dynamics. At the time, in a *Washington Post* article that explored the racial controversies surrounding African Art, Amina affirmed the museum's existence as a benefit to both the Black and White communities; as a public institution, it was open to all.[19]

No other museum at which I worked over the following four decades had anywhere near the level of diversity of staff and volunteers as African Art. Black colleagues have been critiquing the Whiteness of the field for generations.[20] *Excellence and Equity*, AAM's seminal statement by museum education leaders, called attention to the need for greater diversity over 25 years ago.[21] Scores of articles, conference sessions, resource guides, and keynote lectures[22] have cajoled, questioned, shamed, and instructed the field on the need for what has come to be called DEAI.

During the decades that I worked in mostly White institutions, DEAI was not yet named, yet I was aware of the absence of diversity, equity, and inclusion because I had worked in a place where these were given.[23] During my career I hired and tried to support[24] staff of color; I required and achieved inclusion and representation in any publication, program, or exhibition on which I worked. However, what I came to realize, and what African Art demonstrated, is that it is the essence of a museum itself, its "institutional body language" (explained more fully later) that communicates powerfully that people of color are welcome or not. Despite its White founder and mostly White leadership, African Art's collections and exhibitions, its programming, and especially its inclusive Education Department, attracted Black visitors and volunteers from "from all economic levels within the Black Community – the so-called 'Black Bourgeoisie,' middle and working class and those living on the margins."[25]

DEAI is not something you can tack on with a few programs or a single Board member of color; it has to emanate from the core of the institution, a condition difficult to retrofit if it has not been there from the beginning. Various initiatives such as the Empathetic Museum,[26] Museum as Site for Social Action,[27] and Museums and Race[28] were created precisely to assist museums that wish to take on the difficult work of rebirth and transformation from exclusive to inclusive institutions.

Education

> We are not a museum with an education department; we are an education department that has a museum.
> Warren Robbins, Founder

Today, when the educational role of museums is well established, this statement may not seem remarkable. At the Museum's founding in the 1960s, however, the word "education" had only recently become part of the International Council of Museums (ICOM)'s definition of "museum."[29] Over the decades, as reflected in the evolution and growth of this journal, an expanding body of research has explored learning in informal settings,

age-appropriate learning, constructivism, museum teaching, meaning-making, experience design, and hands-on learning – museum education in all its complexities.

While I was part of the museum's education department, we had little of this theory to inform our practice. What we did have was a clear and coherent mission: to build understanding and combat racism by highlighting the artistic traditions, philosophies, and ways of life of the peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa. At the time natural history and anthropology museums, not art museums, displayed materials from Sub-Saharan Africa.

We were attuned to the many stereotypes held by Westerners about Africa and Africans; we were careful about language that carried negative connotations. We decried the exoticism depicted in text and images in the popular press.[30] Our interpretive practice under Amina walked a fine line between anthropological and aesthetic exhibition formats. Our collections were displayed and described as art, but because the masks and sculptures were so unfamiliar (and sometimes off-putting) to American visitors, they were accompanied by photos and text connecting viewers with the daily life, celebrations, and ceremonies that gave the objects meaning. Nudity has long been a feature of Western art, but the exposed breasts and genitals of African sculpture, viewed through Western misinterpretation, seemed strange and foreign to many. We used photography, storytelling, music, hands-on workshops, dance, and foodways to build connections between visitors and the tangible and intangible heritage represented in our collections. When in later years I became project director for the exhibitions *Psychology: Understanding Ourselves, Understanding Each Other* and *Invention at Play*, it was to these multifaceted exhibition and programming techniques that I returned. Both exhibitions won awards for exhibition excellence from the American Alliance of Museums (Figure 3).

Joining the Smithsonian forced us to change our interpretive approaches significantly. New leadership appointed by the Smithsonian aimed to bring the museum on par with important art collections such as those of the National Gallery of Art or the Freer-Sackler Museum of Asian Art, soon to be our neighbor on the National Mall. Our collection would be exhibited using best curatorial practice for *objets d'art*. Photographs and contextual labels disappeared in favor of a more spare, purely aesthetic manner of display. A new head of Education now occupied Amina's office, a White Africanist who had chaired the Museum's Department of Higher Education, overseeing graduate courses and the museum's archives. Amina was moved to an office in the attic. The staff were angry about her treatment. We were powerless to intervene, and Amina had other plans. She was soon recruited by an African-American museum in Philadelphia and has gone on to a distinguished career as a museum and philanthropic leader, coach, and consultant in Chicago.

Community engagement

In 2013, I began writing in my blog about institutional empathy in museums. Over the next several years I developed with colleagues a community of practice, a blog, and widely distributed resources such as the Empathetic Museum Maturity Model.[31]

Once again, it is only recently that I have realized the impact of the Museum of African Art on the original idea of the Empathetic Museum. Three key aspects of its Maturity Model are:

Figure 3. The museum offered hands-on workshops for families on weekends and for school groups on weekdays. Here children and family members dip wooden stamps into paint containers to reproduce Adinkra symbols on paper. Adinkra symbols relate to sayings and aphorisms in the Akan culture in Ghana. They can decorate clothing and paper as well as providing forms for gold weights.

Civic Vision: How the museum expresses empathy externally through its civic role.
Institutional Body Language: How the museum embodies empathy through staffing, policies, workplace culture, and structure.
Community Resonance: How the museum values, relates to, and serves its diverse communities.

The "institutional body language" of the museum as it existed on Capitol Hill said "Come in. This is your museum," to almost every aspect of the DMV (D.C., Maryland, and Virginia) community. Today's concept of a "Director of Diversity" was unnecessary. The public-facing education staff and volunteers, the exhibitions and programs, the

Figure 4. Board and staff members, docents, and guest musicians gather in the museum courtyard for a celebration. Education Director Amina Dickerson is kneeling second from right. The walls of the courtyard were painted In traditional murals by Ndebele women from Zimbabwe, where houses are often decorated with this art.

educational materials – even the gift shop – reinforced this message, despite the White leadership.

Public and private school groups visited. The D.C. government, the Peace Corps, philanthropic organizations, Congressional offices, and embassies of African nations hosted receptions in our galleries. Well-known Black artists such as Lois Mailou Jones, Pierre Noel, Skunder Boghossian, and members of AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) were frequent visitors. The Board included Frances Humphrey Howard (the sister of noted Democrat Hubert Humphrey) and prominent African-American artist and professor David Driskell. Our programs celebrating Kwanzaa, African folktales, dance, music, and textile arts attracted broad, diverse audiences. We were a civic and cultural player in the DMV (Figure 4).

While the outward image of the museum was one of inclusion and diversity, the skeletal structure and the locus of power remained White and to some extent male, although several White women held positions of authority. As described in the Education section above, when the staff was absorbed into the Smithsonian, the Education Department was reorganized under one head, a White man who had advanced academic credentials but no background in museum education or strong links to the D.C. community. In interviews with a number of museum staff from that period, including Amina, it is clear that a system that was White and patriarchal enabled this shift in power and influence

at the museum. This was complicated by the fact that the new Director was an African American woman who had her own vision for the museum's future that in large measure mirrored established norms for the display of African art. In my view as the museum's reputation as a collection of fine art has waxed, its role as an "anchor institution"[32] in the community has waned. These two roles are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but in this case, the first has taken priority.

Hindsight is still not 20/20

As I read increasingly about the necessary decolonization of museums, I ask myself, how it is that I took so much that was positive from what was an inherently colonial project? The disagreements about whether we should have displayed our collection as aesthetic or ethnographic objects stemmed from Western, not African categories. My colleagues and I did not pause to reflect on how the objects were acquired, on the violence and predation that brought at least some of them to our basement storage rooms or gallery cases. Certainly, there were voices such as those of W.E.B. DuBois and Aimé Césaire who for years had called out the violence and theft.[33] We weren't paying much attention at the time to these more sinister realities. Today, many institutions, including the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, are working with museums in Nigeria to return the Bronzes and other objects of questionable provenance.[34] These returned objects, however, do not absolve Western museums from the original act of theft. "A major risk in those dialogues … is that the contemporary rhetoric of 'decolonizing' museums is an attempt at the cancellation of debts that arise from the colonial past."[35] A priority for African Art and like museums must be a broader and more generous understanding of how this debt can be acknowledged and redressed on a continuing basis.

Despite my unquestioning view of the collections, and of the colonial nature of the act of collecting itself, I discovered beauty and wisdom in the study, interpretation, and exhibition of the tangible and intangible heritage of Africa. The offerings of the museum addressed a burgeoning interest in the traditions and cultures of that continent. Within that framework, admittedly narrower than that of today, I experienced and absorbed enlightened and progressive levels of inclusion, educational focus, and community engagement. These values have guided my life's work, even as they have emerged as important elements of museum practice today.

A museum ahead of its time: forgotten when the time has come

The definitive history of the Museum of African Art has yet to be written. When it is, there should be as much if not more attention paid to its Capitol Hill years as to its installation on the National Mall. The museum's origins may appear to be simply a continuation of the White, colonial domination of Sub-Saharan Africa's cultural heritage. This article asserts that this is not the whole story. The museum's intentionally anti-racist, inclusive, multidimensional approaches created in the service of education and community are as relevant today as they were when developed during the racial turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s.

As the museum has told its own story so far, it has neglected the diverse and forward-looking education department described above. Its website features its past directors as

well as celebrities associated with the museum, but it gives short shrift to the substantial contributions of the education department.[36] The 50th anniversary celebrations in 2014–2015 did not include any of the education staff from Capitol Hill. Is this erasure intentional? The result of unconscious bias? Or just the human tendency to forget? It's hard to say. At this writing, the museum is searching for a new director and working to replace many positions lost in the pandemic. What better time to explore and apply in the twenty-first century those visions and values that made the museum such a vibrant center in the 20th?

Notes

1. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 117.
2. As noted in Faloyin and Narisetti, *Africa Is Not a Country*. Wherever possible in this article, I write of particular countries or cultures, but at times, because of the widespread use of the generic term, I am less specific than I would like to be.
3. Jennings and Jones-Rizzi, "Museums, White Privilege, and Diversity,", 66–7.
4. American Alliance of Museums, *Excellence and Equity*, 15.
5. International Council of Museums, Development of the Museum Definition according to ICOM Statutes (1946–2001), 2001.
6. Lemov and Warner, "African Art Museum and Douglass Center Are Booming."
7. Holley, "Museum of African Art Founder Warren Robbins."
8. Personal conversation with Amina Dickerson, May 30, 2023.
9. Kothar, "Race and the Politics of Knowledge Production in African Studies."
10. American Historical Association. Careers for Students of History.
11. I was not at the time aware of the ways in which unpaid internships privileged those of us who could accept them. I worked as an intern coordinator and supervisor for many years. I believe that unpaid internships, especially if awarded with academic credit, can work for some. But in general, I agree with the position of the Museum Workers Speak movement in its campaign for paid internships.
12. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 139–67.
13. Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 3.
14. Sweeney, Harkins and Dressel. *Art Museum Staff 2022 Demographic Survey*.
15. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*.
16. Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.
17. Crenshaw, Ibid.
18. Hicks, Ibid.
19. Gilliam, "Amina Dickerson's Journey to the Museum of African Art. Amina Dickerson."
20. Kinard, "Intermediaries between Museums and Communities."
21. AAM, Excellence and Equity, 15.
22. Coles, "AAM General Session Keynote Address."
23. Physical accessibility was not a given at the museum on Capitol Hill. There was an elevator, but the entry stairways and the steps between the adjoined buildings, where the floors were not at the same level from townhouse to townhouse, would not have been accessible by wheelchair. I am sure that lighting, text, and other aspects of our exhibitions would not always have complied with the Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990.
24. At the time I believed that I was always supportive of Black employees and colleagues. Today, especially with the insights provided by such works as Taylor's "The Burden We Carry" I see that I did not always understand their trauma or its causes, and I regret my part in their suffering.
25. Personal communication with Amina Dickerson, May 30. 2023.
26. Empathetic Museum. www.empatheticmuseum.com

27. Callihan et al, *MASSAction Tool Kit*.
28. Museums and Race, https://museumsandrace.org, 2015.
29. ICOM, Ibid.
30. Goldberg, "For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist."
31. Jennings et al. "Empathetic Museum Maturity Model."
32. Lord and Blankenberg, *Cities, Museums, and Soft Power*, 20–2.
33. Hicks, Brutish Museums, xi.
34. Smithsonian Institution, "Smithsonian Institution Returns 29 Bronzes to the National Commission for Museums and Monuments in Nigeria."
35. Hicks, Brutish Museums, 19.
36. The National Museum of African Art Marks its 50th Anniversary in 2014 with Year of Exhibitions and Programs https://africa.si.edu/50years/

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About the author

Gretchen Jennings has worked in and with museums for over 40 years, beginning as Docent Coordinator at the Museum of African Art in 1978, She was a project director on traveling exhibitions Psychology and Invention at Play, both of which received AAM awards of excellence. She was editor in chief of The Journal of Museum Education in the 1990s and Exhibition 2007-14. Her blog is Museum Commons www.museumcommons.com. She is a founder of the Empathetic Museum project www.empatheticmuseum.com, and a member of the MASSAction initiative. She can be contacted at gretchenjennings934@gmail.com.

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