

Lonnie Bunch, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution

Statement on the future museum

[a transcription of [Secretary Bunch's pre-recorded opening statement](#) for the Future Museum Symposium 2023]

Hello. Thank you and welcome to this important symposium.

What a terrific opportunity to exchange ideas about how we can integrate technology into our cultural institutions. When I first began work on creating the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, I knew it had to be a museum with technology at its heart. When it opened in 2016, digital technology was embedded in its DNA. Initiatives like the Center for the Digitization and Curation of African-American History were crucial in allowing the museum to preserve and share African-American history and culture. When I was hired to lead the Smithsonian's many museums, research centers, libraries, and educational entities, I knew we had to make our collections more widely available. That is why we launched Smithsonian Open Access: more than 4 million digital objects in our collections free for anyone to download, share, and reuse however they would like. And when the world faced the challenge of the covid-19 pandemic, I knew our collective ability to adapt both at the Smithsonian and at museums throughout the world would rely heavily on our ability to be more technologically adept in everything we do.

Frankly, some in the field were skeptical of the need to do things differently even as recently as early 2020. At the time, a survey showed that only about 40 percent of art museum directors thought it was "highly important" to provide a virtual experience for people who couldn't visit in person. By 2021, the pandemic showed how untenable that position was and 92 percent of art museums were offering digital programming. For a profession often slow to change, I am encouraged by the way so many cultural institutions creatively embraced technology to serve our audiences and to reach more people... to help change the notion of what a museum is. Whether addressing social or racial injustices, or talking candidly about how climate change affects our shared future, in many ways the future museum is already here. And while it's not the only tool at our disposal, technologies are helping museums expand our research, increase our relevance, and maximize our impact on our communities and on the world.

When I think of technology's potential to transform museums, I first think about its capacity to reach more people. For millions, going to a museum is too far away, or too expensive, or too inconvenient, but by bringing educational resources to homes and classrooms everywhere cultural institutions can lower that barrier and let the wonders of museums touch many more lives. The pandemic brought into focus how relevant museums are and technology has helped cultural institutions pivot to serve communities more effectively and more efficiently. For instance, the curators of Toronto's walkthrough exhibition of projected immersive Van Gogh artworks adapted to circumstances. They modified it into an experience where people can drive among the massive projections from the safety of their cars.

One of the most impressive ways technology makes an impact is the way it fosters inclusivity and accessibility. Tools like virtual and augmented reality, 3D printing, and interactive displays can help engage traditionally underserved populations and to accommodate neurodiverse people or those with physical challenges. The 'See Me at the Smithsonian' virtual interactive program encourages adults with dementia allowing them to socialize with others and spend time with loved ones while experiencing our museum's science, art, history, and culture.

As I assess the state of the world, this is not a moment to do things if they've been done before. It's an opportunity to try better ways. I believe the successful museums in the years ahead will be more than community centers. But they will be central to their communities, embracing an entrepreneurial spirit, being more nimble, creating new viewing and learning experiences. These are all part of the new museum. We can uphold the traditions of museums while expanding our missions and our vision. We should strengthen our outreach to find new, more diverse audiences and we must help our citizens, our communities, and our countries do better... live up to their ideals.

Embracing the digital experience does not mean abandoning the traditional strengths of our organization. As a historian, I appreciate that there is no substitute for seeing the real thing: the iconic artifacts that mark turning points in history or the priceless works of art that stir the soul. But with creative people, inspiring artifacts, and thought-provoking programs, technology can help museums trend the boundaries of their walls. There is much to think about. We, as museums, are the glue that holds countries together. But to be that glue, we have to be innovative, we have to embrace technology, and we have to create a social mission of helping to make our world better.

Thank you so much.