



## **BMA Receives \$150,000 Grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to Launch Community-Focused Research Initiative**

**For media in Baltimore**  
**Anne Brown**  
410-274-9907  
abrown@artbma.org

**For media outside Baltimore**  
**Alina E. Sumajin**  
PAVE Communications  
& Consulting  
646-369-2050  
alina@paveconsult.com

[Announces new staff and steering committee to support the expansive initiative to reimagine the structure and function of a museum](#)

BALTIMORE, MD (September 13, 2021)—The Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) announced today that it has received \$150,000 from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to support a multi-year research and planning project. Referred to as the Mellon Initiative, the project aims to reimagine the structure and function of a museum, considering what form a museum would take if an institution was reconceived from scratch. The Mellon Initiative furthers the vision adopted by the BMA in its 2018 strategic plan, which placed at its core a reevaluation of the museum's exhibitions, acquisitions, public programming, staff and board, and other operations through the lens of equity and diversity.

To support the implementation of the initiative, the BMA has hired Keondra Prier as its Mellon Initiative Project Manager. Prier, who has previously held senior positions in education at the Brooklyn Museum and Walters Art Museum, will work with Gamyne Guillotte, the BMA's Chief Education Officer, along with other senior leadership at the museum. The BMA has also established an eight-member steering committee of local and regional leaders and stakeholders who work across art and culture, civic services, education, community organizing, and the law to advise BMA staff, review their progress, and help shape the initiative. The group includes Zoë Charlton, George Ciscle, Omar Eaton-Martínez, Adam Holofcener, Kennedy McDaniel, Antoinette Peele, Jessica Solomon, and Lu Zhang. Additional biographic information on Prier and the committee members follows below.

In the coming months, the BMA will engage artists, community leaders, program partners, and its many constituents in a series of surveys and small group sessions to foster dialogue about both the BMA as an institution—the ways in which it is succeeding and the ways in which it can better serve and reflect its community—and more broadly about the role of a museum and the requirements it needs to fulfill to truly be situated within the cultural and social fabric of its city. These conversations will help the BMA to plan a multi-day public convening in spring 2022 to collectively imagine new institutional models. In its first phase, the Mellon Initiative will result in the articulation of new museum structures and approaches. Additional phases of the project will be announced once the research phase is completed.

“Through the Mellon Initiative, we’re seeking to engage the critical conversations, debates, and creative imaginings about the future that are happening in museums. Many art museums are grappling with issues both inherited and novel to their place and time, and often those debates happen within the walls of the institution, out of the view of the many publics that museums serve,” said Gamynne Guillotte, the BMA’s Chief Education Officer. “We hope that the organizations with whom we collaborate, the audiences we engage, the artists we exhibit and collect, and interested stakeholders can explore the challenges that face art museums and help us collectively envision new ways of being together with people, ideas, and art.”

The concept for the Mellon Initiative emerged through ongoing conversations within the BMA’s senior leadership team about evolving museum practices across programs and operations. The group frequently returned to questions about the contrast in repairing existing systems and creating the museum model anew. The initiative is grounded in and expands upon core questions about defining real and meaningful change within the museum context and whether it can be achieved only by fully recreating the structures and priorities that underpin museum work.

“The entrenched systems upon which museums were built and continue to exist today are not suited to actualizing change, in part because they are not designed to listen to, connect with, and engage communities. As a result, museums are failing to embrace, reflect, and serve a diverse public,” said Christopher Bedford, the BMA’s Dorothy Wagner Wallis Director. “In 2018, the BMA committed to an honest evaluation of its own practices and, over the course of the past several years, we have made strides in shifting our presenting and collecting strategies, as well as the makeup of and investment in our staff, board, and audiences. We recognize, though, we have not achieved the radical change that we know to be necessary. The Mellon Initiative is an exciting opportunity to further our vision by asking and exploring challenging questions in service to creating a better, equitable, and more thoughtful museum. We are grateful to the Mellon Foundation in supporting us in this effort and very much look forward to what will result.”

The Mellon Initiative builds on prior community-focused projects and launches, including the 2019 opening of the BMA’s branch location at Lexington Market, a longstanding and active gathering place in Baltimore. The branch location offers a wide range of public programs and participatory art activities, increasing access to museum events by operating at a cultural and social crossroads. In May 2020, the museum launched *BMA Salon* and *BMA Screening Room*, two digital platforms through which a selection of local artists, collectives, and galleries could present work and engage new audiences. In addition to supporting visibility, the BMA provided stipends for all who participated.

Other equity-driven initiatives at the BMA include *2020 Vision*, through which the museum acquired 65 works by women artists and presented 25 exhibitions on the achievements of women artists and leaders, as well as the museum’s ongoing emphasis on diversifying its collection with works by women and artists of color and offering a more expansive narration of art history through exhibitions and programs. In 2020, the BMA also committed to the *Endowment for the Future*, an ambitious financial plan that emphasizes investments in staff, DEAI initiatives, and further increases in access to the museum.

## **Keondra Prier**

Keondra Prier is a museum educator and organizer interested in the intersection of critical pedagogy, museum studies, and institutional change. Prior to joining the BMA, she worked at the Walters Art Museum as the Manager of School Programs and at the Brooklyn Museum of Art as a Senior Museum Educator, both positions where she advocated for a more equitable museum for staff, students, teachers, and the community. Prier is currently participating in McKinsey Black Leadership Academy's Management Accelerator program and in fall 2022 she will begin her studies at the University of Delaware in Sociocultural and Community-Based Approaches to Research and Education.

## **Steering Committee Members**

**Zoë Charlton:** Charlton creates figure drawings, collages, installations, and animations that depict her subject's relationship with their world by combining images of culturally loaded objects and landscapes with undressed bodies. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (AR), Studio Museum of Harlem (NY), and Zacheta National Gallery of Art (Poland), among others. She is a recipient of a Pollock-Krasner grant (2012) and a Rubys Grant (2014) and her work is in the collections of The Phillips Collection (DC), Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (AR), Birmingham Museum of Art (AL), and Studio Museum in Harlem (NY). Charlton is a Professor in the Department of Art at American University in Washington, DC. She holds a seat on the Maryland State Arts Council, is a board member for the Washington Project for the Arts (DC), and is co-founder of 'sindikit, a collaborative, research-centered art initiative.

**George Ciscle:** Ciscle mounted groundbreaking exhibitions and taught courses in the fine arts and humanities for close to 50 years. He was the founder and director of the George Ciscle Gallery and The Contemporary, an "un-museum" that challenged existing conventions for exhibiting art in temporary non-traditional sites. From 1997-2017, he served as Curator-in-Residence at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), consulting on the development of community-based and public programming that explored new models for connecting art, artists, and audiences. He introduced and taught MICA's Exhibition Development Seminar until 2008 and from 2011-16 founded and directed the MFA in Curatorial Practice.

**Omar Eaton-Martínez:** Eaton-Martínez leads the Prince George's County Parks & Recreation Historical Resources, which include historical house museums, an aviation museum, the Black History Program, and archaeological parks. In 2019, he was selected to be an American Alliance of Museums Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Senior Fellow. Eaton-Martínez is the national board chair for Museum Hue, an arts and humanities organization committed to the advancement of people of color in the field, and he is on the steering committee for Museums and Race: Transformation and Justice, a movement to challenge institutional policies and systems that perpetuate oppressions in museums. He has also contributed to the Museum as Site for Social Action project, which seeks to align museums with more inclusive practices. Eaton-Martínez has worked at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, National Park Service, the Office of the National Museum of the American Latino Commission, and NASA.

**Adam Holofcener:** Holofcener is the Executive Director of Maryland Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts, a non-profit organization that provides pro bono legal services and education to Maryland-based artists and arts organizations. In his legal practice, Holofcener counsels artists and musicians on matters of copyright, trademark, contract, business entity formation, constitutional law, and other issues. He teaches a seminar on Art and Media Law at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law. They are also a practicing musician and sound artist.

**Kennedy McDaniel:** McDaniel is a multi-disciplinary creative driven by empathy and equity. She studied dance at the Baltimore School for the Arts and later received her B.A. in Africana Studies from Johns Hopkins University. For the past two years, she has been engaging with the community at the Greenmount West Community Center, where she serves as Social Media and Grant Writing Manager, bringing in hundreds of new supporters and thousands of dollars in grant funding. She established BLACCINE in 2016, a self-care zine for Black folks with an emphasis on Black women. In 2020-21, she served on the Steering Committee for the National Agenda for Black Girls, where she worked with 100 other Black folks across the nation to establish and sustain an advocacy network by and for Black girls and gender-expansive youth.

**Antoinette Peele:** Peele has been involved with the Baltimore Museum of Art for over 20 years as an active member and current chair of the Joshua Johnson Council, one of the oldest African-American museum support groups in the country, as well as serving on the museum's acquisitions committee and participating in the docent training program. Her professional career includes over 20 years of information technology experience in the public and private sectors, managing multi-million dollar projects for state and local governments and supporting the top staffing company in the world delivering web services to its global clients. In 2007 she started her independent consulting practice, In4structures, to support organizations in need of a change agent to drive transitions to modernized solutions focusing on governance and oversight of the application life cycle.

**Jessica Solomon:** Solomon is the Principal & Founder of Art in Praxis, an organization that fosters creative approaches to system-level change in arts and culture, social justice, and philanthropic spaces. Previously, as Vice President of the Robert W. Deutsch Foundation (RWD), Solomon sharpened the institution's place-based arts and culture grantmaking strategy, led organizational change initiatives, and grew RWD's philanthropic footprint to drive more equitable impact. She is a proud contributor to *Animating Democracy's Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change*, a resource for evaluating the social impact of the arts, and *We Inspire Me: Cultivate Your Creative Crew to Work, Play, and Make* by Andrea Pippins.

**Lu Zhang:** Zhang is a multi-disciplinary artist, researcher, and organizer whose projects take various forms—including books, drawings, installations, interventions, and an institute. Zhang has collaborated with PressPress to produce publications and the George Peabody Library to launch a studio residency program. She is the founder of the Institute for Expanded Research, which activates sites and leverages resources to produce and present projects in collaboration with artists. As Initiatives Director of United

States Artists, Zhang advises field partners, designs programs, and conducts research to expand support for artists. Previously, she served as Deputy Director of The Contemporary, a nomadic non-collecting museum in Baltimore.

### **The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is the nation's largest supporter of the arts and humanities. Since 1969, the Foundation has been guided by its core belief that the humanities and arts are essential to human understanding. The Foundation believes that the arts and humanities are where we express our complex humanity, and that everyone deserves the beauty, transcendence, and freedom that can be found there. Through their grants, they seek to build just communities enriched by meaning and empowered by critical thinking, where ideas and imagination can thrive.

### **Baltimore Museum of Art**

Founded in 1914, the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) inspires people of all ages and backgrounds through exhibitions, programs, and collections that tell an expansive story of art—challenging long-held narratives and embracing new voices. Our outstanding collection of more than 95,000 objects spans many eras and cultures and includes the world's largest public holding of works by Henri Matisse; one of the nation's finest collections of prints, drawings, and photographs; and a rapidly growing number of works by contemporary artists of diverse backgrounds. The museum is also distinguished by a neoclassical building designed by American architect John Russell Pope and two beautifully landscaped gardens featuring an array of modern and contemporary sculpture. The BMA is located three miles north of the Inner Harbor, adjacent to the main campus of Johns Hopkins University, and has a community branch at Lexington Market. General admission is free so that everyone can enjoy the power of art.

### **Visitor Information**

General admission to the BMA is free. The BMA is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Timed reservations, face masks, and answering two questions about COVID-19 exposure are required for all visitors. The Sculpture Gardens are open Wednesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to dusk. The museum and gardens are closed New Year's Day, Juneteenth, July 4, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day. The BMA is located at 10 Art Museum Drive, three miles north of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. For general museum information, call 443-573-1700 or visit [artbma.org](http://artbma.org).

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