

MoAD reopens with big changes and big plans

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IMAGE 1 OF 5

Ever Fonseca's "Family on the Pond" (2000) is among the new art that will be at the Museum of the African Diaspora.

Visitors to the refurbished **Museum of the African Diaspora**, which reopens this week after six months of construction and other changes, will know immediately that a new chapter has arrived for the 9-year-old institution. It begins just inside the front door.

What was once a cramped, constricted entryway has been opened out, as part of a \$1.3 million project by the San Francisco architecture and design firm **Gensler**, into an inviting multipurpose space that takes full advantage of natural light from the building's glass facade on Mission Street near Third. Banks of interactive tablets, common-area seating near the windows, a large video screen and a reconceived gift shop share the museum's light and airy street level.

An L-shaped hallway that connects to the adjacent St. Regis Hotel has been repurposed as the Emerging Artists Gallery. A new glass door to the hotel will afford glimpses of the art on display and invite lobby strollers to enter

from that side and explore.

More dramatic changes are apparent on the museum's second floor. Two time-worn "permanent" exhibits — the "Celebration Circle" and "Slavery Passages" oral history piece — have been removed in favor of two new galleries, a refreshed performance and lecture salon with a new glass wall, and a snug 28-seat theater for film and video programs.

Long-term thinking

Important as these structural changes may be, they are emblematic of some deeper long-term thinking. Under Executive Director [Linda Harrison](#), who has been on the job for about a year, MoAD hopes to assert itself with more wide-ranging and vital programming. Central to that initiative is the museum's new status as a Smithsonian Affiliate. Partnering with the powerful Washington, D.C., institution will give MoAD access to the Smithsonian's enormous resources and expertise. Benefits include touring exhibitions, object loans, and visiting scholars and speakers.

The advantages are mutual. "We're very interested in having a presence with this museum in San Francisco," said [Laura Hansen](#), national outreach manager for Smithsonian Affiliations. The 196 affiliates include the [Blackhawk Museum](#) in Danville, the [Chabot Space and Science Center](#) in Oakland and the [Mexican Museum](#) in San Francisco. Affiliates pay \$3,000 to the Smithsonian to participate.

Hansen mentioned one Smithsonian venture that may make a showing at MoAD. "The Will to Adorn" is an ongoing project on African American dress and identity.

While this new arrangement, forged over the summer, promises to bolster MoAD, Harrison and her staff have no intention of becoming simply a venue for touring shows. One of the relaunched museum's first two shows, "[Lava Thomas: Beyond](#)," showcases a Bay Area artist. The other, "Drapetomania," originated at Harvard, surveys the origins and influence of the 1970s and '80s Afro-Cuban Grupo Antillano. MoAD will partner with the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) on a 2015 show, "Portraits and Other Likenesses From SFMOMA."

Harrison, a Chicago native with a long business background but no prior museum experience, sees her role as one of forging a clear and pervasive identity for MoAD. "Everything we do," she said, "whether it's our exhibitions, our public programs or how we share our knowledge with educators, has to be done through a lens that's provocative and relevant.

"As a museum we're competing with all sorts of entertainment. We've got to be able to shift and engage with people in a variety of ways."

Six directors

Know-how and carry-through will be important for a museum that has had six directors (including interims) since opening less than a decade ago and struggled to attract visitors. As a midsize museum, with an annual budget of around \$2.3 million, MoAD achieved a modest annual attendance of 30,000, in the most recent figures.

Harrison would like to grow the budget to \$3 million to \$5 million and increase attendance to 50,000 to 60,000. Another long-term audience-development goal is free admission.

Educated at Chicago's **Loyola University**, Harrison began as a sales rep and rose to high-level management positions at Eastman Kodak, Pfizer and Sotheby's international realty division. "When you are a very large corporation," she said, "you have to be flexible, entrepreneurial and able to pivot quickly. I think those qualities are important to nonprofits as well."

'Out of the box'

Harrison, 62, cheerfully described herself as "an out-of-the-box candidate" for the MoAD position. She moved to San Francisco several years ago and has served on several nonprofit boards, including that of Frameline, which mounts the San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival.

That experience may be as important as Harrison's business acumen. Frameline underwent leadership and board changes during her tenure. Now she's a new leader charged with revitalizing MoAD as its 10th anniversary approaches.

Becoming more vibrant

"I want to use what I know to support and help this museum that I adore and that welcomes everyone in," she said. "That means establishing our personality, becoming more vibrant and connecting with people in a personal way."

Drawn from the museum's archives, the first show in the new Emerging Artists Gallery captures Harrison's game plan as well as anything. The theme, she said, is "finding the 'I' in Diaspora."

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The Museum of the African Diaspora reopens Wednesday, Dec. 3. The first two exhibitions are "Lava Thomas: Beyond" (through April 5) and "Drapetomania: Grupo Antillano and the Art of Afro-Cuba" (through Jan. 4). \$10. 685 Mission St., S.F. (415) 358-7200. www.moadsf.org.