Opening Remarks for Global Consortium for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage
October 21, 2019
Ring Auditorium, Washington DC

Good morning!

On behalf of the Steering Committee of this year's meeting, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to the Global Consortium for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage. I am Michael Atwood Mason, director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, and we at Smithsonian are thrilled to be co-hosting you at this meeting with our friends and colleagues from Yale University.

As we begin this important conversation about the cultural heritage, I would like to acknowledge that this meeting is being held on the traditional lands of the Piscataway People, and I pay my respect to their elders, both past and present. Their relationship with the land west of the Chesapeake Bay continues today. I would also like to acknowledge with respect the other native, First-Nations, and Indigenous people present here today.

You see, history matters. Culture matters. Cultural heritage matters, and its preservation is one the grand challenges of the early 21st century. Here at the Smithsonian, I lead our efforts to promote greater understanding and sustainability of intangible cultural heritage across the United States and around the world. In this role, I am often asked to explain why cultural heritage matters and how preservation makes a difference in the life of communities. Like many of you, I am asked almost everyday to make a case for the public value of the work to which we have all dedicated our lives.

Some of us speak of preservation, some of safeguarding, and some of sustainability. But whatever language you use, we recognize the legitimate and important distinctions they imply. And we recognize that we are all allies in an international movement to ensure that the cultural heritage we preserve reflects the diversity of our histories and our world.

When asked about the value of cultural heritage, I respond with some version of the key ideas laid out in the Global Consortium's recent think-piece, available online:

Cultural heritage is the sum of human creativity and expression. Across time and space, people have created artifacts and performances during their lives. Famous artists and architects have created grand works, but cultural heritage does not emerge solely from professional artists. Nor does it live only in galleries and museums, and other formally recognized cultural institutions. Rather, cultural expression lives within and around us all.

Cultural heritage fuels discovery. Preservation and conservation require new techniques and technologies, and they demand human skill. Cultural heritage inspires new analytical insights and critical reflections, and the application of science to innovation that lead to novel interpretations and uses, products, and services.

Cultural heritage inspires cultural creatives of different kinds. Artists and performers in search of new creative forms of all kinds have sought inspiration from cultural heritage. Whether incorporating ancient motifs in a new building design, writing a new poem about a heritage site, or riffing off a fairy tale to plot a new novel, cultural heritage fuels creativity.

Cultural heritage captures the spirit of the time. Intangible cultural heritage is a uniquely powerful tool for capturing this zeitgeist, it expresses human aspirations, it empowers civic expression, and it speaks to a hopeful future. Individuals use intangible cultural forms to comment on what is happening around them.

Cultural heritage embodies the identity of communities. It makes visible histories, belief systems, values, traditions, and lifestyles. It speaks as much of the future as it does of the past, and therefore it can unite people or separate them. Hidden histories, dark heritage, and sites of conscience complicate these identities. Cultural heritage is frequently contested, reflecting larger social tensions.

Cultural heritage produces economic benefits for communities. The creative industries and cultural tourism create economic opportunities. Whether caring for a heritage site, developing tourist experiences, or marketing products with an explicit link to heritage, this sector has tremendous potential for innovation.

Cultural heritage supports the physical well-being of communities. Participating in community arts and speaking heritage languages provide documented health benefits and a range of social benefits.

Culture heritage is a human right connected to free expression and the participation in cultural life of their communities. Cultural heritage provides critical information about the past. Communities preserve cultural heritage to remind themselves of their origins, their histories, and their identities in the present, as a resource in the present and their way forward into the future**.**

If we agree that cultural heritage generates important public value for society, we must also ask how we can ensure that this value is shared equitably with individuals, organizations, and communities. We know that some histories and some artistic forms have long garnered greater attention in documentation, collections, and presentation. We know that many of us long avoided the difficult but critical conversations around dark heritage.

We must ask how we can democratize cultural heritage. How can we ensure the participation of diverse people and communities in every step of the heritage process of selection, preservation, and presentation? How can we ensure that we are documenting and sharing local legacies as well as national narratives? How can we guarantee that the ranks of the cultural heritage professions are as diverse as the world's population?

Sadly, these are not new questions. In 1967, the Smithsonian launched the Anacostia Community Museum and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival similarly focused on community, participation, and expression. In 1990, the Rockefeller Foundation and Smithsonian collaborated on a conference that explored the complex and compelling relationships between museums and communities. In 1999, Stuart Hall gave the keynote at a national conference 'Whose Heritage? The Impact of Cultural Diversity on Britain's Living Heritage.' Since that time, many new museums that reflect the values and preserve the stories of diverse communities have been developed, usually in response to traumatic historical events. The current international dialogue about the restitution of African cultural heritage promises to have broad-reaching effects.

Still the question remains: **How can we help transform our corners of cultural heritage practice to be more equitable and more democratic?**

Let me close with a personal experience. In 2013, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival produced One World, Many Voices, a ten-day program that explored language diversity as a critical aspect of our shared cultural heritage. Among eighteen language communities, we featured members of the Hawai'ian language community, including Earl Kawa'a. At the closing ceremony, he spoke passionately to the audience about his vision of cultural heritage. "You have to know your language and your culture to know who you are, and you have to know who you are to know where you are going."

It is my hope that these meetings will help each us develop a clearer idea of who we are as field and where we are going.

I would like to thank the other members of the Steering Committee:

- Ziad Al-Saad, Yarmouk University, Jordan
- Tor Brostrom, Uppsala University, Sweden
- May Cassar, University College London, United Kingdom
- Donald Filer, Yale University, United States
- Isabelle McGinn, University of Pretoria, South Africa
- Marisol Richter, Universidad de los Andes, Chile
- Anupam Sah, Art Conservation Practitioner, Strategist and Educator, India

Furthermore, I would like to give my heartfelt thank the team at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, especially Logan Clark and Hannah Grantham. You may have met them as you registered this morning. With humor, grace, and hard work, they made this meeting a reality. Logan, Hannah, thank you!

Now it is my pleasure to introduce Susan Gibbons, the Vice Provost for Collections and Scholarly Communication at Yale University. Susan holds MLS and M.A. degrees in history from Indiana University, a professional MBA from the University of Massachusetts, and a doctorate in higher education administration from the University of Rochester. She became Yale's University Librarian in 2011 and joined the Provost's office in 2015.

###

Now it is my pleasure to introduce Gus Casely-Hayford, the director of the National Museum of African Art. Gus earned his doctorate in African history at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. He is a fellow of the Cultural Institute at King's College London, a trustee of the National Trust (the U.K.'s largest heritage organization), a member of the Blue Plaque Group and a Clore Fellow. He also sits on the board of the Caine Prize for African Writing.

###