

Dear Fellow AAAM Members,

Two days after the 2016 election, I penned a letter to the Executive Committee and Board of AAAM expressing my belief that the overarching purpose and role of African American museums had just been catapulted to an ever more critical level. It read in part:

*"As of Tuesday night our world has changed. In many ways this is a world already seen by those who came before us, whose stories we present within our walls... This new reality is going to require our leadership as institutions and we are going to be looked upon to serve as vanguards of resistance, education and the preservation of our collective legacy... The power of our institutions as an organized force can have a great and positive impact, but we must move swiftly and build as strong a network as possible for our communities."*

Indeed, there is an immediate opportunity and moral imperative to begin to organize around the issues of education, policy and equity in funding in the government and private sectors, including safety and security funds. These are issues that affect every arts and culture institution, every museum, but especially our culturally specific institutions whether they be African-American, Islamic, Hispanic, LGBTQ, Native American or otherwise. These efforts must be undertaken at the local, state and national levels and include the advancement of educational policy initiatives requiring the teaching of African American and other cultural history. Unfortunately, the African-American narrative in particular has been told in either incomplete or wholly inaccurate ways for far too long, through lenses that do not belong to us and often do not seek to support our culture. As seen through the widely acclaimed feature film, "Hidden Figures," we know that there are many other hidden histories, facts and evidence that prove up a different reality than the stories others present about us as a people, and on the nightly news. While black Americans have and will continue to bear the brunt of racism and discrimination, and the actions and policies that accompany them, we are certainly no longer alone.

Now more than ever, education must be at the forefront of our mission. This same responsibility should be shared not only by culturally specific institutions -- but by all museums and arts & culture organizations. In times of turmoil, citizens take refuge in the arts and in our learning environments. Artists of all kinds tap into their creativity to give us images, words, music and movement that can help shelter the soul, soothe the psyche and give us all hope.

As in other trying times throughout history, we must now lean on the most human qualities we possess, even as it seems that many of us would be turned back in time and denied our full measure of humanity. As cultural institutions, we must hold fast to our purpose and our mission to educate the public in ways that address the needs of our own communities as well as others. Our primary goal should be to provide open and safe places for dialogue and artistic expression to all people -- a neutral, authentic and apolitical



territory as it were. Only through the enlightenment and awareness provided by organizations such as ours can we move towards equality, and under our institutions' umbrellas that give shelter to ideas and the factual reporting of our history, we can work to cultivate a just and peaceful America.

I would urge all AAAM members to attend Museum Advocacy Day in Washington, DC, on February 27-28, 2017, and to transcend today's politics by coming together to address issues that affect all people. Those of us who depend on government funding to carry out our work face an uncertain future. However, we cannot be deterred and must find strength in numbers and a unity of purpose. For those of you who wish to form committees or advocacy groups along community or organizational lines, I encourage you to do so. Museums in different cities, states and regions will face different challenges and policies affecting their day to day reality. I hope that during the Museum Advocacy Day events we will connect with one another and create networks of communication and support that can benefit us as a whole. We should freely engage in collaborative programs and exhibits, and write joint grant applications with partner institutions and affinity groups, as well as with organizations with which we haven't partnered before but with whom we can build new alliances. I would further encourage those of us who are in philanthropic organizations - regardless of your giving profile - to open a dialogue with potential grantees that you may not have traditionally supported in the past, and find new paths to connectivity.

If our AAAM institutions as well as all others will take up this call, I believe that we can move beyond divisive rhetoric, violence and political rancor, even though it will be an ongoing struggle. No one person or group has all the answers, but the communication of truth must be our collective goal. America, even with its faults, remains the greatest nation on earth. History has taught us that the American spirit is indomitable, and can overcome any challenge. In the words of Dr. King, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

I thank you for your attention and hope that with the strength that comes from many, we can become a unified force that sustains and inspires our communities as well as our individual institutions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Perri', followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Perri L. Irmer  
President & CEO