


**The Smithsonian Institution Council Report:
Partnerships among Smithsonian Art Museums**

 Smithsonian Institution

Office of Policy and Analysis

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PARTNERSHIPS AMONG SMITHSONIAN ART MUSEUMS

Smithsonian museums have extensive resources including vast collections, staff expertise, valuable research, and varied facilities. Museums have the potential to maximize the impact of their resources by partnering in meaningful ways with other museums. Partnerships can provide greater visibility, more visitors, increased financial support, critical acclaim, and richer experiences for the public, among other benefits. When museums partner under the auspices of a larger organization like the Smithsonian Institution, the enhanced impact produced by partnerships can benefit not only the individual museums, but the whole as well.

Smithsonian art museums rarely partner among themselves to create exhibitions, programs, or other public offerings that draw audiences. Staff at the museums are better able to articulate the obstacles to partnerships than the benefits of working together. The yearly “Art Night on the Mall” is the most often referenced collaboration, as it is one of the few instances available for discussion.

This paper on the current status of and interest in partnerships among Smithsonian art museums is based on discussions with staff at the Arthur M. Sackler and Freer Galleries (FSG), the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (HMSG), the National Museum of African Art (NMAfA), the National Portrait Gallery (NPG), and the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM). Statements included here reflect comments and examples provided by staff and are not based on views held by the Office of Policy and Analysis.

I. Staff at the art museums have difficulty conceptualizing partnerships with each other.

- Exhibitions are generally planned out too far in advance to collaborate on exhibitions or on topics of shared interest.

Museums agree that they should capitalize on coincidental similarities. Thus, museum staff need to be aware of the upcoming schedules at the other Smithsonian museums so they can plan programs, marketing, etc. together early in the process. However, when plans are shared in advance, museums do not adjust their schedules and activities to permit productive partnering.

- At the Mall art museums, staff believe partnerships would be most effective when creating programs and not exhibitions.
- Interest in partnering varies across museums.

Not everyone bought into the plans for “Art Night on the Mall.”

NMAfA and FSG staff communicate a certain degree of interest in collaborations, and say they can imagine situations where collaboration would be productive.

HMSG perceives it is unique, and consequently it expresses a desire to do its own thing rather than to work together with other SI museums.

SAAM expresses an interest in participating in “Art Night” programming, but maintains that the off-Mall location (and closure for renovations) makes it difficult.

- Staff wonder which museum would serve as the principal venue for a collaborative “product.” That is, they think about benefits for themselves only, rather than for the International Art Museum Division or the Smithsonian Institution as a whole.
- Staff wonder how willing the public is to visit more than one small art museum in a day, especially if a partnership involves delivery of a program or exhibition at multiple sites. After tourists have seen NMNH, NMAH, and NASM, how many will visit the smaller museums?
- There is consensus that collaboration should revolve around the subject matter and not happen just for the sake of collaboration. Ideas are the root of collaboration.
- The most productive partnerships do not involve other SI museums. Many exhibitions, staff say, are the result of partnerships with other museums (for loans and expertise) rather than with other SI museums.

II. Difficulties pertaining to leadership hinder partnerships

- The museums are not clear on expectations held by the Directorate of the International Art Museums Division (IAMD). Staff feel that IAMD leadership needs to set goals, expectations, and ground rules for collaborative programs.
- IAMD lent little support to make the multi-venue “Art Night” happen.
- IAMD did not coordinate “Art Night” programming and marketing efforts to present a unified message to the public.

III. Uneven resource distributions across the Mall art museums make for a rich museum/poor museum mentality.

- Some museums have endowments and special funds and others do not. Museums have different staffing levels to carry out joint programming and other collaborations. Some feel resentment toward others with respect to resources. These feelings discourage collaboration.

IV. The allocation of program-specific central funds is not understood by the museums.

- In the case of “Art Night,” IAMD funds suddenly appeared once the summer had begun and were spent on additional print and radio advertising. Some believe that the funds could have been put to better use in a way to benefit all the museums (i.e., for programming), while others believe they could have been used to level the playing field from the start.