

Mellon grant will add three new positions and two courses for deep dive into African art

Ryan Hansen

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A general view from Gibson Square Park shows the entrance to the Stanley Museum of Art, Tuesday, Aug. 23, 2022, on the University of Iowa campus in Iowa City, Iowa. *Joseph Cress/Iowa City Press Citizen*

A startlingly discovery of stolen art has spawned a new initiative and a significant grant.

The University of Iowa's Stanley Museum of Art is creating three new positions to study the origins of their African art collection thanks to a \$400,000, two-year grant.

The grant is from the Mellon Foundation, named for famed art collector and philanthropist Andrew Mellon. The foundation is the country's most prominent financial backer of arts and humanities programs, Stanley director Lauren Lessing told the Press-Citizen.

The three new positions will assist in understanding the museum's African art collection, with a special focus on ensuring that the artifacts were not stolen or looted by colonizers, Lessing said.

A full-time Mellon Curatorial Fellow, as well as a part-time graduate assistant and a part-time curatorial assistant, will focus on researching the origins of the university's African art collections and who the owners were. The museum's Curator of African Art, Cory Gundlach, will supervise the positions.

The work will be accompanied by a retrospective catalog that reflects the origins of the artifacts as well as an exhibition of the entire African art collection.

"We want to make sure that we're not holding work in our collection that may have been unethically or illegally removed from its place of origin," Lessing said.

Lessing has researched the provenance of art at the Art Institute in Chicago.

The Illinois museum discovered that Nazis had looted some of the facility's art during World War II. After the painting was returned to the original owners' descendants, the museum tried to analyze the rest of the collection for stolen pieces.

Provenance research includes the study of historical records, including estate records and auction sales partnered with journal entries, diaries, letters, and notes, Lessing said.



A general view of the lobby looking towards Gibson Square Park is seen Tuesday, Aug. 23, 2022, at the Stanley Museum of Art on the University of Iowa campus in Iowa City, Iowa. *Joseph Cress/Iowa City Press Citizen*

Local museum discovers stolen art

Gundlach, who will lead the newly-funded team of three, conducted provenance research that revealed how some of the UI museum's African art had been stolen.

Lessing then informed university leadership and a few of the museum's donors of what she called the museum's past "mistake" and began working to correct it.

Those pieces are being returned to their home.

"I'm honored and excited to work for a university art museum that prioritizes sustained research on the ethical status of historical objects in its permanent collection and that is committed to using that research to manifest social justice," Gundlach said in a statement provided to the Press-Citizen.

Lessing emphasized that most of the collection was legally or morally obtained. Still, provenance research is important because it provides deeper insight and gives the museum a richer, more complete story to tell.

“They have these biographies that begin when they're created, continue through the early years of their use, and then as culture changes, as people move from place to place, as colonization and urbanization and modernization have transformed countries in Africa, those artworks move,” Lessing said. “So those stories are really important for us to know and to teach.”

The three new Mellon-funded researchers will lay the foundation for similar provenance research of the museum’s collection of indigenous art from across the Americas. Lessing said most of it is from Peru, Bolivia, and parts of ancient-time Mexico.



Kathryn Reuter, academic outreach coordinator, center, is interviewed by Zachary Oren Smith of Iowa Public Radio as they discuss the “Homecoming” exhibition, which comprises a series of installations are seen Tuesday, Aug. 23, 2022, at the Stanley Museum of Art on the University of Iowa campus in Iowa City, Iowa. *Joseph Cress/Iowa City Press Citizen*

\$400K grant will create new UI courses

The Mellon Foundation grant will fund the creation of two courses at the UI focused on African art and museum studies. One of the courses will be co-taught by UI and Indiana University art museum staff with plans for students to travel to each school.

Gundlach and Allison Martino, IU's Eskenazi Museum of Art Curator of the Arts of Africa, will co-teach the course.

"The University of Iowa and our African Studies program really gave birth to the program at Indiana University," Lessing said. "Our collections and our programs remain very closely linked."

The lecture will take place over Zoom, along with an in-person lab at each school, Lessing said.

The second course will focus on the history of African art. Gundlach will lead the class, drawing from the provenance research.

Ryan Hansen covers local government and crime for the Press-Citizen. He can be reached at rhansen@press-citizen.com or on Twitter @ryanhansen01.