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Art Gallery of Ontario announces new department of Arts of Global Africa and the Diaspora

Led by AGO curator Dr. Julie Crooks, and supported by a dedicated community group, the department will connect visitors to the arts of Africa and its diaspora

TORONTO —Today the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) announces the establishment of a new Department of Arts of Global Africa and the Diaspora, which will focus on expanding both the museum’s collections and its exhibitions and programs of historic, modern and contemporary art from Africa and the African diaspora. The Department will be led by Dr. Julie Crooks, formerly the AGO’s Associate Curator of Photography; her new title is Curator, Arts of Global Africa and the Diaspora. Simultaneously, a new support group, Friends of Global Africa and the Diaspora has been formed with the dual goals of supporting the Department’s work in this area, as well as creating a more dynamic forum for community voices.

The creation of this new Department expands and formalizes work that has been underway at the AGO for several years. For example, in 2019 the museum was able—with strong community support—to acquire [The Montgomery Collection of Caribbean Photographs](#), a singular collection of more than 3,500 historical images from islands including Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad. Perhaps the largest collection of such images, this incredible visual record contains studio portraits, landscapes and tourist views. The AGO has also significantly expanded its holdings of photographs by African and diasporic artists, including artworks by Malick Sidibe and Paul Kodjo. These recent acquisitions will feature prominently in the upcoming Collection-based exhibitions, [Documents, 1960s – 1970s](#) and [Dawoud Bey, John Edmonds and Wardell Milan](#).

“Engaging with the art of Global Africa must be central to any program that presents a global view of visual culture, because its multiple histories and influences intersect, deepen, and complicate in so many ways our understanding of Western and Contemporary Art. This new department brings together curators and educators from inside and outside the building, supported by the community, to help us tell these stories,” says Stephan Jost, Michael and Sonja Koerner Director, and CEO of the AGO. “The museum must be flexible and responsive if we are to better reflect where we live. This is the next step forward for the AGO, building on the 2017 creation of a Department of Indigenous & Canadian Art.”

Community involvement has been critical to the creation of this new department. Working collaboratively with community members, donors, curators and educators, the new Department will coordinate research and exhibitions that highlight the impact of African art, art histories and

migrations, past and present. Friends of Global Africa and the Diaspora will be co-chaired by Liza Mauer and Dr. Liza Murrell.

An active member of the AGO Board of Trustees since 2016, Liza Mauer has been foundational to this new initiative. AGO Foundation Board of Trustees member Dr. Liza Murrell, and her husband Dr. Frederick Murrell were instrumental in helping to secure the Montgomery Collection, along with generous support from 27 donors, many of whom are from Black and Caribbean communities.

“I am committed to supporting the AGO in its vision toward a more inclusive and equitable institution,” says Dr. Liza Murrell. “Through FGAD, Julie, Liza and I hope to engage new members and expand the overall AGO community.”

“Liza and I are delighted to partner with Julie on this important initiative at the AGO,” added Liza Mauer. “Beyond bringing great art to the Gallery we are excited to create an ecosystem where artists, curators, students and community members can engage in a deep conversation about Global African art.”

Dr. Julie Crooks, the new Curator Arts of Global Africa and the Diaspora, joined the AGO in 2017. She holds a PhD from the Department of History of Art and Archaeology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, UK. Since joining the AGO, she has curated a number of significant exhibitions, including *Free Black North* (2017), *Mickalene Thomas: Femmes Noires* (2018), and presentations from the AGO Collection such as *Photography, 1920s–1940s: Women in Focus* (2019–2020). She has actively participated in bringing works by Black artists into the AGO’s collection, including Dawoud Bey, Paul Kodjo, Ming Smith, Malick Sidibé, and David Zapparoli, and most notably the Montgomery Collection of Caribbean Photographs, acquired in 2019. The Montgomery Collection of Caribbean Photographs will form the core of a major exhibition, to be presented next summer, curated by Dr. Crooks.

“Global Africa and the Diaspora touches on much of what we do at the AGO. The opportunity to work collaboratively and cross-departmentally to explore the tremendous influence of African and Black artists and cultures, and to promote and share these histories, is very exciting” says Crooks. “However, connecting visitors to these histories is essential work that cannot happen without input and support from the community, and I am grateful for the support from co-chairs Dr. Liza Murrell and Liza Mauer, as well as the entire Friends of Global Africa and the Diaspora group.”

ABOUT THE AGO

Located in Toronto, the Art Gallery of Ontario is one of the largest art museums in North America, attracting approximately one million visitors annually. The AGO Collection of more than 105,000 works of art ranges from cutting-edge contemporary art to significant works by



Indigenous and Canadian artists and European masterpieces. The AGO presents wide-ranging exhibitions and programs, including solo exhibitions and acquisitions by diverse and underrepresented artists from around the world. In 2019, the AGO launched a bold new initiative designed to make the museum even more welcoming and accessible with the introduction of free admission for anyone 25 years and under and a \$35 annual pass. Visit AGO.ca to learn more.

The AGO is funded in part by the Ontario Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries. Additional operating support is received from the City of Toronto, the Canada Council for the Arts and generous contributions from AGO Members, donors and private-sector partners.

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