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Museums

'The Smithsonian can do more and should do more,' says advocate for a Latino museum

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Since curator Taína Caragol joined the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in 2013, the Latino arts specialist has produced shows on contemporary Latinx portraiture and on labor leader and activist Dolores Huerta, and has contributed Latinx works to broader exhibitions. She's also helped the gallery to acquire 170 works by Latino artists or featuring prominent Latino subjects, including "Hamilton" creator Lin-Manuel Miranda and author Sandra Cisneros.

Caragol is one of 10 Latino curators spread across nine Smithsonian museums who are working to build the institution's diversity and make its Latino visitors feel welcome. Although they work individually, they have collectively increased the institution's Latino presence, Caragol says.

"There has been a noticeable increase in representation. Latinx artists are showing up in every exhibition, in the permanent collection," Caragol said. "The profile of the country is visible throughout our galleries. I use deliberately the word profile, as in likeness and portrait. The National Portrait Gallery represents the history of the country through portraiture. It represents the face of the country. When I arrived here five years ago, the representation of Latino people and artists was minimal. That has massively changed."

The [Smithsonian Latino Center](#) — created in 1997 to promote Latino contributions to arts, culture and science — has been praised for its exhibitions and research, as well as its mentoring programs. Earlier this year, the American Alliance of Museums honored it with a national award. But its success does not eclipse the Smithsonian's overall failure to improve its Latino representation, according to a critical report from UCLA's Latino Policy & Politics Initiative. Released on Sept. 10, "[Invisible No](#)

More,” found the Smithsonian has failed to act on most of the recommendations made in a 1994 report, including working with Congress to launch a new Latino museum.

“It proves from a neutral outside voice that the Smithsonian is not living up to its commitments,” said Estuardo Rodriguez, executive director of the Friends of the American Latino Museum, an advocacy group that raises money and awareness for a future stand-alone facility. “The Smithsonian can do more and should do more, but it will only be remedied by a museum.”

Smithsonian officials disagree, saying that the UCLA researchers overlooked the depth and success of their integrated approach.

“You need people in place to drive research, build collections, inform digital content and mentor upcoming museum professionals,” Smithsonian Latino Center Director Eduardo Díaz said. “We decided that’s how we’d move the needle.”

The report highlights the tension surrounding the proposed museum and the complicated process of making it a reality. Like two ethnic-focused Smithsonian branches — the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of African American History and Culture — the American Latino museum requires political capital to get an authorizing bill through Congress. And it needs deep-pocketed donors to match federal funds. The African American Museum had civil rights icon John Lewis and Hollywood’s Oprah Winfrey in its corner, and it still took almost 30 years to finish.

“We don’t have an Oprah, but there’s Eva Longoria and Emilio Estefan,” Rodriguez said, “and Fortune 500 companies that supported the African American Museum are calling and saying, ‘How’s it going?’”

The answer is painfully slow. Originally proposed during the design phase of the National Museum of the American Indian, the Latino effort was squeezed out by the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which was authorized by Congress in 2003. The African American effort benefited from the momentum of the American Indian Museum, but the Latino museum — and the proposed Women’s History Museum — have failed to gain traction from the African American Museum’s early success.

Advocates blame the Smithsonian, and they say the UCLA report backs them up. The report finds a lack of Latino representation on the Smithsonian’s leadership, including its governing board; decreased funding when measured as a percentage of the Smithsonian’s federal budget; and a lack of accountability for its programs. It has also failed to work with Congress to make a museum a reality.

“Just as . . . the largest minority in the country comes to the table, (the Smithsonian) says ‘We can’t do

that anymore, we're going to try something new, to integrate you across the institution,' ” Chon Noriega, one of the report's authors, said. “That should be happening anyway. That shouldn't be the compromise.”

Smithsonian officials acknowledge that they have much to accomplish in increasing the percentage of Latino employees. But they dispute several of the report's conclusions. The institution spends more than \$2.5 million on the Latino Center and its programs, more than double the figure in the report. Latino representation in executive positions is better than the report acknowledges and better than many of its peers. The governing board is appointed by Congress, so it's unfair to hold the Smithsonian responsible for its makeup.

“It didn't go deep enough into the essence of what we do,” Díaz added. “Collections are up, exhibitions are more frequent, publications have increased, the quality of educational programs has improved.”

Still, a Latino museum is not a priority. Smithsonian Secretary David J. Skorton has said the institution struggles to maintain the 12 million square feet of space under its care. A 2016 report found its maintenance backlog to be at least \$785 million. And once the African American Museum opened, Smithsonian leaders turned their attention to the National Air and Space Museum and its seven-year, \$1 billion renovation.

Air and Space is one of the most-visited museums in the world, and it drives attendance to other Smithsonian branches. The upgrades to the 40-year-old building — including replacing its stone exterior — will be completed in sections to avoid its closing. The Smithsonian is asking Congress to provide more than \$670 million in support.

Rodriguez and other museum advocates are frustrated by Skorton's lack of interest and the often-mentioned advice that they wait for the Democrats to retake Congress. There will never be a time when budgets aren't tight or the right leaders are in place, Rodriguez said.

“We have demonstrated to Congress that we as a community have the money,” Rodriguez said. “Corporate America doesn't need to get their arms twisted. They want to be on the right side of history.”

Members of Congress who support the current bill — a bipartisan group that includes 12 senators and 45 House members — see the UCLA report as evidence that the Smithsonian needs to be held accountable. The Smithsonian's “continued failure to make progress on these key goals underscores the Institution's lack of commitment to the Latino community,” said Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.), Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) and Rep. José E. Serrano (D-N.Y.) in a joint statement. “We urge our colleagues in Congress to join us in supporting the National Museum of the American Latino Act

to quickly pass and begin the process of establishing a new museum on the Mall.”

The Smithsonian will follow the model of the African American Museum by opening a permanent space for Latino exhibitions in the National Museum of American History, a Smithsonian spokeswoman said. The opening date is years away.

“Hopefully that comes to fruition, but it’s not enough,” Rodriguez said.



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