Introducing the next Director of the Weisman Art Museum

From: Executive Vice President and Provost Rachel Croson <noreply@umn.edu>  
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Dear Weisman Art Museum Staff and Advisory Board:

I am delighted to announce that Alejandra Peña-Gutiérrez will be the next director of the University of Minnesota Weisman Art Museum (WAM), effective November 29. An internationally accomplished museum leader and accomplished arts professional, Peña currently is executive director of Museo de Arte de Ponce in Puerto Rico and formerly was deputy director-general of artistic heritage in Mexico City’s Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes. In her new leadership role at the University of Minnesota, Peña will provide strategic vision, artistic direction, and executive and administrative leadership for the Weisman to build on its rich legacy, collections, and unique strengths—further advancing its excellence and impact as a teaching museum integrally linked with the University’s mission of education, discovery, and public engagement.

Peña brings to the Weisman an educational background in architecture and art history and nearly three decades of experience as an innovative and collaborative leader, curator, and educator in internationally prominent museums, cultural institutions, and arts professional organizations. Since 2013, she has led the Museo de Arte de Ponce, one of the largest art museums in the Caribbean and an institution renowned for its expansive collection of European and Puerto Rican Art. She has collaborated broadly to reinvigorate the museum as a vital hub for the local community as well as a globally engaged museum—developing a panoply of new cultural and educational programs, exhibitions featuring regional and global artists from diverse cultures, and varied outreach and service partnerships.

More broadly, she has strengthened the Museo de Arte museum financially, operationally, and programmatically even in the face of extraordinary challenges including a devastating hurricane and a major earthquake. Leaning into challenge and crisis, she developed reconstruction plans for the damaged museum building, led successful fundraising, and took museum programs creatively to the streets, dovetailing arts activities with disaster recovery work and deepening the museum’s community relevance and engagement. In 2021, the museum was awarded the U.S. National Medal for Museum and Library Service, the nation’s highest honor given to museums and libraries that make exceptional contributions to their communities.
Peña has an architecture degree as well as a master’s degree in art history from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, where she has also taught. Before moving to Puerto Rico to lead the Museo de Arte de Ponce starting in 2013), she was deputy director-general of artistic heritage in Mexico City’s Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, an umbrella entity for 18 notable museums, where she had responsibility for long-term planning, activities, and budgeting for the curatorial, education, registrar, conservation, and archive and library departments. She has been a thought leader in the arts sphere in the U.S. and globally, leading webinars on the future of museums, on museum engagement, and on managing crises for the International Council of Museums (ICOM). She serves on the ICOM U.S. board, co-chairs its Programming Committee, and is also a member of the Association of Art Museum Directors.

As director of the Weisman, reporting to the executive vice president and provost, Peña will oversee the WAM collaborative staff team and all operations and activities of the museum, including leadership for collections and exhibitions, in collaboration with the Weisman’s curatorial staff; and leadership and oversight for activities spanning campus and community engagement, development and fundraising, communications and marketing, registrar, retail functions, and capital resources—not least the Weisman’s iconic Frank Gehry building on the Mississippi River. She will lead high-priority work to develop innovative academic collaborations across the University, working with colleges and centers to respond to teaching, research, and engagement priorities while also working to deepen engagement with diverse voices and communities, particularly those that have been historically underrepresented in museums. She will collaborate as well to strengthen collaborations with arts and cultural leaders across the University and in the vibrant cultural landscape of the Twin Cities.

Peña’s appointment is the culmination of our national search for an experienced, visionary, and collaborative leader to succeed Lyndel King. King retired in 2020 after serving as director for four decades, during which she oversaw the growth of the Weisman into a world-class teaching museum and vital cultural institution for the University and Twin Cities. The search for her successor began in early 2020 before being paused during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic. I thank Karen Hanson, emerita executive vice president and provost, for providing expert interim leadership for WAM during the completion of the search and for working with the WAM senior staff team and Peña to ensure a successful transition at the end of November.

Please join me in welcoming Alejandra Peña. Her appointment is important for the University of Minnesota and important for the Weisman as a dynamically engaged teaching museum that is one of the University’s and the region’s greatest cultural and educational assets. I am confident that Alejandra’s exceptional experience and strengths will further advance the excellence of the Weisman.

I also want to extend my appreciation to the search committee for its exceptional work, with a special thanks to committee cochairs Professor Thomas Fisher and Regent Emerita Patricia Simmons. I also thank the WAM staff and advisory board, members of the University community, and all stakeholders of the Weisman who took the time to meet our outstanding candidate finalists and provide invaluable feedback on this important search.

Sincerely yours,

Rachel T.A. Croson
Executive Vice President and Provost

This email was sent to the WAM staff, WAM advisory board, and the WAM director search committee by the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost, 234 Morrill Hall, 100 Church St. SE, Minneapolis, MN, 55455, USA. The University of Minnesota is an equal opportunity educator and employer.