



BMA Announces Rhea L. Combs and Ellen McBreen as Recipients of Two Major Curatorial Fellowships

[Combs joins as Senior Fellow in Contemporary and Global Art and McBreen as the Ruth R. Marder Center for Matisse Studies Fellow](#)

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BALTIMORE, MD (January 15, 2026)—The Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) today announced two significant fellowship appointments, to support research, explore exhibition and publication subjects, and imagine new curatorial frameworks. Dr. Rhea L. Combs will take the role of Senior Fellow in Contemporary and Global Art, an independent two-year fellowship at the museum, and Dr. Ellen McBreen will serve as the second Ruth R. Marder Center for Matisse Studies Fellow. The two positions reflect the BMA's commitment to new scholarship within the field and to offering curators and scholars unrestricted opportunities to pursue new ideas and approaches that enhance our understanding and connections to art.

"We are thrilled to welcome Rhea and Ellen as fellows at the BMA, as part of our vision to support new expansive scholarship in the histories of art and to create the space necessary to envision the future of museum work," said Asma Naeem, the museum's Dorothy Wagner Wallis Director. "The BMA has long been committed to innovation, experimentation, and to upending convention in service to our communities. Providing these fellowships extends those institutional priorities and reflects our deep interest in advancing critical conversations through different collaborations and methodologies. I look forward to the rich dialogues and opportunities that emerge through these fellowships, and to learning from Rhea and Ellen as brilliant scholars."

Senior Fellow in Contemporary and Global Art

Dr. Rhea L. Combs will start in her new role as Senior Fellow in Contemporary and Global Art on February 17, 2026. The two-year, independent fellowship emphasizes the future of curatorial practice and considers new models for the study and presentation of art that are rooted in cultural equity, global collaboration, and the unique qualities of contemporary practice to advance meaningful change within the field and beyond. Within her work, Combs will focus on opportunities to amplify historically marginalized voices, international cultural exchange, and community engagement.

The fellowship is designed to evolve in response to direct dialogue and collaboration with artists, collectives, and institutions in the U.S, Canada, Europe, and across the African diaspora. Given the intentionally responsive nature of the fellowship, it may culminate in the development of a book, an international cultural convening, or a range of exhibition concepts. The fellowship is generously funded by the Ford Foundation and The Hearthland Foundation, as part of each foundation's own investments in cultivating visionary leaders and supporting cultural production.

Combs has dedicated her career to exploring how visual culture can shape our shared history. An award-winning curator, she brings more than two decades of curatorial and museum experience to her new fellowship. Most recently, Combs served as the Director of Curatorial Affairs and Chief Curator at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery (2021–2026). In this role, she led the museum’s curatorial and conservation teams, guided the acquisitions and exhibitions strategy, shepherded high-profile portrait commissions, and helped raise more than \$3.5M for a range of projects. Among her recent curatorial projects are *American Winners: Athletes and Entertainers that Helped Shape the Nation* (2025) and *This Morning, This Evening, So Soon: James Baldwin and the Voices of Queer Resistance* (2024–2025), in collaboration with author and curator Hilton Als. She also co-curated *Regeneration: Black Cinema, 1898–1971*, which was presented at the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures and traveled to the Detroit Institute of the Arts (2022–2024).

Previously, Combs was the Senior Curator of Photography and Film and the founding director of the Earl W. and Amanda Stafford Center for African American Media Arts (CAAMA) at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture. There, her work centered on Black visual traditions, cultural memory, and representation through photography and film. She was instrumental in building one of the most comprehensive collections of African American visual culture in the nation and curated numerous exhibitions, including *Now Showing: African American Movie Posters* (2019–21) and *Represent: Hip Hop Photography* (2018–2019), among others.

Combs’s writings have appeared in numerous publications and exhibition catalogues, including for the publication accompanying *Amy Sherard: American Sublime*. She has served on art juries, given numerous public presentations throughout the country including at Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and Metropolitan Museum of Art, and independently curated exhibitions nationally and internationally, including at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and ICA London. Additionally, Combs has experience as an administrator in higher education and taught courses in visual culture, American studies, film and gender at Emory University, Lewis & Clark College, and Chicago State University. She holds a PhD in American Studies from Emory University, an MA from Cornell University, and a BA from Howard University.

Ruth R. Marder Center for Matisse Studies Fellow

Dr. Ellen McBreen began her new role as a Fellow at the BMA’s Ruth R. Marder Center for Matisse Studies in the fall of 2025. The two-year fellowship invites curators, researchers, and scholars to engage with the museum’s extensive holdings of modern icon Henri Matisse. The BMA is home to more than 1,600 objects by the artist, making it the largest public collection of his work in the world. The collection has been built through the support of private benefactors and in recent years through close collaboration with the artist’s family. In 2021, the BMA opened the Ruth R. Marder Center for Matisse Studies to advance new scholarship and public engagement with the artist’s enduring legacy. The inaugural visiting fellowship was held by curator and scholar Dr. Denise Murrell, whose research is culminating with the opening of *Matisse and Martinique: Portraits and Poetry* on March 18, 2026, an exhibition that she is guest curating.

During her fellowship, McBreen will be working closely with Katy Rothkopf, the BMA's Anne and Ben Cone Director of The Ruth R. Marder Matisse Center, on researching and contributing an essay to the catalog for a forthcoming major Matisse exhibition. McBreen's past work, exploring how art shapes points of contact across cultural boundaries, real or imagined, will bring new perspectives to Matisse scholarship.

McBreen's research focuses on 19th- and 20th-century art, design, and visual culture in Europe as well as 20th-century art in the U.S. She is professor of History of Art at Wheaton College, Massachusetts, where she teaches courses in modern and contemporary art. She also recently served as the Director of the Wheaton Institute for the Interdisciplinary Humanities (2022–2024). She has written and presented extensively on Matisse. Her recent book credits include *Henri Matisse* (2025), a comprehensive monograph co-authored with Claudine Grammont, and *Matisse's Sculpture: The Pinup and the Primitive* (2014). In 2017, McBreen co-curated *Matisse in the Studio* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and Royal Academy of Arts, London. She penned two chapters and co-edited the accompanying catalog of the same name. Her essays on other aspects of the artist's practice have appeared in exhibition catalogs for the Fondation Beyeler, Musée Matisse Nice, Saint Louis Art Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Kunsthaus Zürich.

McBreen has been an invited speaker at the Barnes Foundation, Bruce Museum, Guggenheim Museum, and RISD Museum, among others. Her other area of scholarly focus is the European avant-garde's reception and understanding of African material culture, which she explored as co-curator for the exhibition *Migrating Objects: Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas in the Peggy Guggenheim Collection* (2020) in Venice. She holds a PhD and MA from New York University and a BA from Harvard University.

Baltimore Museum of Art

Founded in 1914, the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) inspires people of all ages and backgrounds through exhibitions, programs, and collections that tell an expansive story of art—challenging long-held narratives and embracing new voices. Our outstanding collection of more than 97,000 objects spans many eras and cultures and includes the world's largest public holding of works by Henri Matisse; one of the nation's finest collections of prints, drawings, and photographs; and a rapidly growing number of works by contemporary artists of diverse backgrounds. The Museum is also distinguished by a neoclassical building designed by American architect John Russell Pope and two beautifully landscaped gardens featuring an array of modern and contemporary sculpture. The BMA is located three miles north of the Inner Harbor, adjacent to the main campus of Johns Hopkins University, and has a community branch at Lexington Market. General admission is free so that everyone can enjoy the power of art.

Visitor Information

General admission to the BMA is free. The BMA is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., with extended hours on Thursdays until 9 p.m. The Sculpture Gardens are open Wednesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to dusk. The Museum and gardens are closed New Year's Day, Juneteenth, July 4, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day. The BMA is located at 10 Art Museum Drive, three miles north of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. For general information, call 443-573-1700 or visit artbma.org.

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