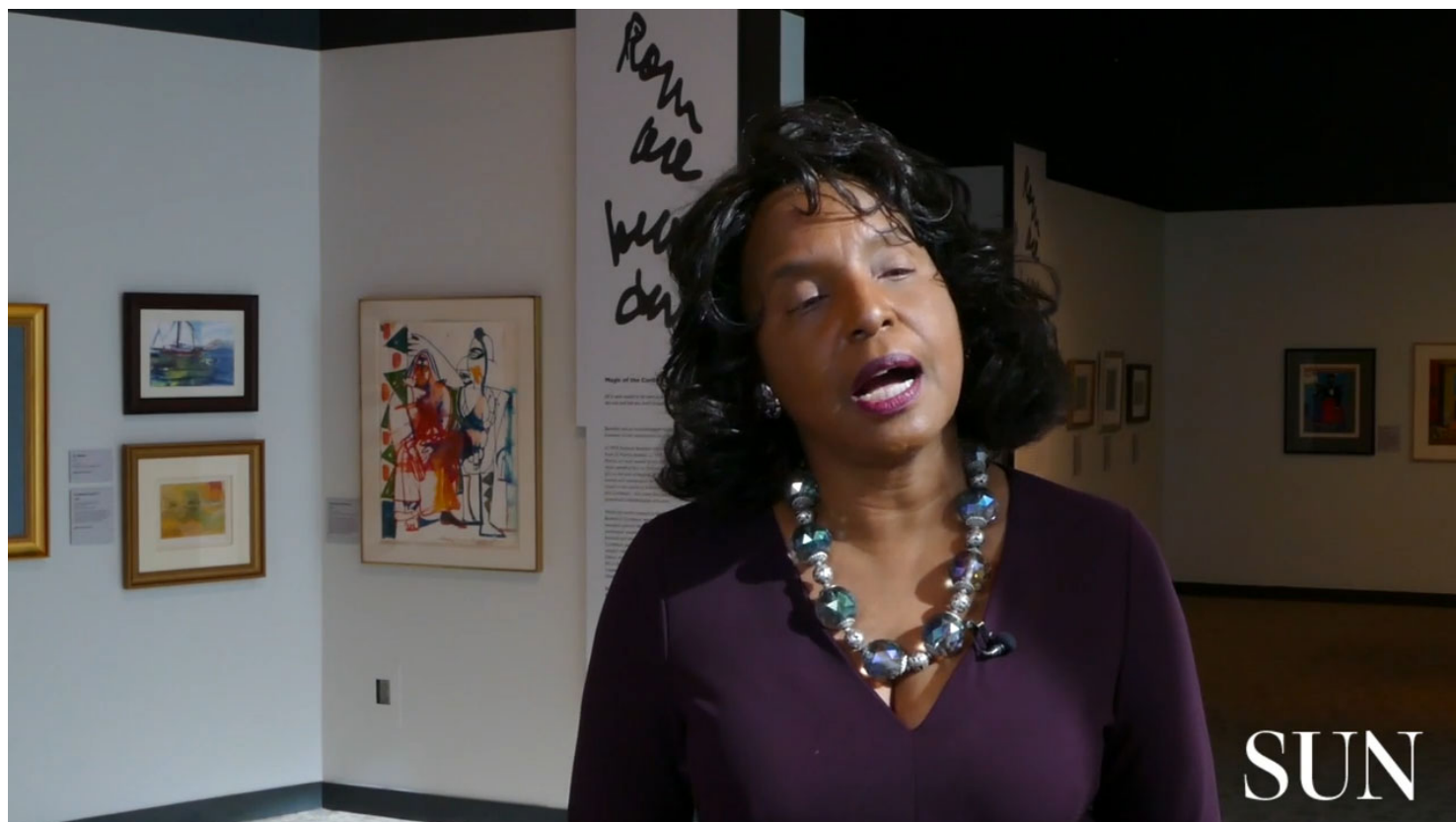


How Wanda Draper turned around the Reginald F. Lewis Museum in just two years



Under the stewardship of Wanda Q. Draper, the once-ailing Reginald Lewis Museum has begun showing signs of renewed vigor. (Kenneth K. Lam/Baltimore Sun video)



By **Mary Carole McCauley**
The Baltimore Sun

NOVEMBER 19, 2018, 3:15 PM

The sumptuous new Romare Bearden exhibit at Maryland's largest African-American museum contains nearly five dozen collages, paintings and prints that any institution would be proud to display.

Visitors to the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture wander from one eye-catching canvas to another, each completely different stylistically from anything else in the gallery.

“Romare Bearden: Visionary Artist” doesn’t look as though it was put together on a shoestring budget — but it was. The exhibit that opened earlier this month doesn’t give the impression of having come together on the fly — in a matter of months, instead of over the three years that’s standard for most museum art exhibits — but it did.

This show is the most recent example of what executive director Wanda Q. Draper has accomplished in the two years since taking the Lewis' helm. Under her stewardship, this once-ailing museum has begun showing signs of renewed vigor.

"This has been a real turn-around story," said Drew Hawkins, the former managing director of Morgan Stanley Wealth Management and a new museum board member recruited by Draper.

"Wanda came in with a vision," Hawkins said. "She knew what had to be done. She leveraged her Rolodex and her relationships to get the support she needed. She wasn't afraid to make difficult decisions regarding staff and programming. And in fairly short order, the museum has begun operating in a much more fiscally responsible manner."

When Draper began her new job in September 2016, the museum was mounting exhibits it couldn't afford and that few people came to see. There were no curbs on staff expenditures because departments effectively operated without budgets.

"There was a number," Draper said, "but no one knew what it was. People didn't know how much money they had to spend during the year."

Year after year, the museum failed to raise the \$2 million required by its founding agreement with the state. Taxpayers kicked in an additional \$880,000 over two years to make up the difference.

"There was no evaluation of outcomes," Draper said. "There is now."

Though Draper can point to many accomplishments during the past two years, there's no question as to her most significant achievement. For the first time since 2008 and just the second time in the museum's 13-year history, the Lewis fulfilled the state requirement that it generate \$2 million in revenues each year, or half the institution's operating budget.

David Taft Terry, the Lewis' executive director from 2006 to 2011, said that the 2008 financial crisis made it difficult to meet that mandate.

"The great recession hit," said Terry, now an assistant history professor at Morgan State University.

"Fundraising is always hard for cultural nonprofits. The recession made it harder still.

"I'm happy to hear that they're turning the corner. They're a wonderful institution that should be supported."

A. Skipp Sanders became executive director upon Terry's departure. Sanders, who retired in 2016, could not immediately be reached for comment.

Other key metrics have begun moving in the right direction, though the growth is less dramatic. Total attendance has begun inching up, driven by an increase in student visits. That's important; the Lewis' focus on education is why it, unlike most other Maryland arts organizations, has the status of a quasi-state agency.

In addition, the Lewis has begun making its first tentative forays into serving an online audience. When a major website redesign is unveiled Dec. 1, the public will be able to browse about 500 of the roughly 10,000 artworks and historic artifacts in the museum's collection from their home computers or smartphones.

There's room for improvement, of course. Neither attendance nor student visits yet come close to the goals that Draper has set of 60,000 museum guests each year, including 20,000 pupils.

But state legislators charged with overseeing the Lewis' performance are thrilled.

"When Wanda took over, I told her what was at stake and what we expected to happen," said Democratic lawmaker Adrienne A. Jones, Speaker Pro Tem of the [Maryland House of Delegates](#). Jones chairs the House Education and Economic Development Subcommittee which holds biennial public hearings on the museum's finances.

"Not only did Wanda do as we asked by making the [financial] match, she surpassed it — and she did it in a short period of time. In my experience, that is very, very rare. It has been a tremendous turn-around."

Draper said she's benefited from decades of experience working in communications for such organizations as the National Aquarium and WBAL-TV. These jobs honed her business and leadership skills in both the nonprofit and corporate circles.

"I cut my teeth in a world that measures time in 10-second increments," she said of her years in television. "The nonprofit world doesn't do that. Because I don't come from the museum world I don't have a museum mindset. I have a manage-the-bottom-line, get-it-done mindset."

Though she hasn't spent her career working for museums, Draper is deeply knowledgeable about the Lewis' history. As a founding board member, she helped plan every aspect of the institution-in-progress for five years, from selecting the parcel where the facility would be built to generating monies needed to acquire the permanent collection.

Elizabeth Merritt, vice president for strategic foresight for the American Alliance of Museums, said it's "becoming increasingly common" for museums to recruit leaders with non-traditional backgrounds who have limited or no experience working in the field. She said outsiders were more likely to succeed when, like Draper, they either have previous familiarity with nonprofits or come into a mid-level position and work their way up.

"Museums are increasingly looking for people with diverse perspectives," Merritt said. "They often have experience and skills in areas such as fundraising or community engagement that intersect with the museum's goals."

Draper's efforts to turn around the Lewis might have been necessary and long overdue, but they haven't been pain-free. In late 2017 and early 2018, Draper cut \$374,000 from the budget by eliminating nine jobs. Five positions were vacant, but four staff members (including some in high-visibility posts) were shown the door.

But Draper also has brought in fresh talent.

One chief hire was Jackie Copeland, who has worked at museums (most recently the Walters Art Museum) for three decades. Now, Copeland is the Lewis' director of education and visitor services and serves unofficially as Draper's second in command. Another crucial addition was Alexis Davis, the museum's director of finance and administration. Davis already was familiar with the Lewis' fiscal woes when she joined the institution; she previously worked as an accountant for the Cross Keys firm that prepares the museum's annual audit.

Draper said their strengths and varied backgrounds complement one another.

"Having people like Jackie and Alexis on the team keeps me focused," Draper said. "I understand the whole management piece. I get it. They can put it into the perspective of this industry."

It was Copeland who came up with the idea for "Maryland Collects," an annual series of high-quality, low-cost exhibits. Instead of leasing artworks from other museums — an expensive process that typically takes years — Copeland borrows artworks by modern masters owned by well-heeled local residents.

"Historically, when we brought in big traveling shows, we lost money," Hawkins said. "We'd write a check for \$300,000 or \$400,000 without having a corporate sponsor to underwrite it, and then we wouldn't make enough from admissions to break even."

In contrast, the budget for the Bearden exhibit — Maryland Collects' second installment — barely busted five figures.

"Our costs are limited to making sure that the artworks are transported properly and are insured properly while they're in our care," Hawkins said.

Of necessity, these shows lack some traditional bells and whistles. For instance, the Bearden show isn't accompanied by a catalog — a costly, labor-intensive publication geared more toward art historians than the general public.

But "Romare Bearden: Visionary Artist" isn't merely a random grouping of artworks. The exhibition presents a clear and well-articulated point of view.

The man seemingly never did the same thing twice. But whatever he turned his hand to, he did exceptionally well. The canvases range from Cubism-inspired abstraction to social realism to epic themes inspired by the Bible and Greek mythology.

Nor were Bearden's gifts limited to the visual arts. When he wasn't creating collages, he was writing songs. One 1954 tune — composed with Larry Douglas and Fred Norman — is the jazz classic, "Seabreeze."

Though he wasn't born here, Bearden spent time in Baltimore. He was the Baltimore AFRO American Newspaper's cartoonist from 1935-37 and also designed the huge Venetian glass mural in the Upton/Avenue

Market Metro Station.

What kind of a mind can pull off all of that?

It seems fitting that the works of an artist who experimented as incessantly as Bearden did are being showcased by a museum that's reinventing itself.

"We have amassed an amazing exhibit," Draper said.

"Many of these pieces haven't been shown in public before or have been shown infrequently. Once this exhibit closes, these artworks will return to the individual donors. You'll never see this show anywhere else. If you want to see it, you have to see it here."

Baltimore Sun reporter Brittany Britto contributed to this article.

By the numbers

Talk about strength in numbers. In her first two years as director of the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture, Wanda Draper has improved a number of key metrics, like attendance and revenue. The list below compares data from the 2015-16 fiscal year (which ended three months before Draper became executive director) to the 2017-18 fiscal year that wrapped up June 30.

Revenue: Up 340 percent, from \$473,490 to \$2,083,500.

Attendance: Up 5.7 percent, from 45,032 to 47,580.

Student visits: Up 39.5 percent, from 5,129 to 7,154

Social media likes and followers: Up 22 percent from 10,720 to 13,085

If you go

"Romare Bearden: Visionary Artist" runs through March 3, 2019 at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture, 830 E. Pratt St. \$6-\$8. For details, visit lewismuseum.org or call [443-263-1800](tel:443-263-1800).

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