

Spotlight on Curatorial Fellow

Zhariah

Since August 2023, our 2023–24 curatorial fellow Zhariah Peaks has worked on projects with curatorial and education staff for *Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage, Southern/Modern, Monument and Myths: The America of Sculptors Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French*, the forthcoming exhibition *Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: Behold*, and more. Zhariah sat down with Interpretation Director Meagan Rust to share more about her time at the Frist.

MR: You’ve recently graduated from University of Tennessee at Martin, majoring in history. What inspired you to apply for a fellowship at an art museum?

ZP: During my undergraduate career, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my history degree. It seemed as though the only option was becoming a professor, which wasn’t my calling. I have always been a creative person and lover of the arts but shied away from embracing that part of myself in pursuit of a more “stable” career path. It wasn’t until my senior year that I realized a career in art curation could marry my love for the arts and passion for education. The Frist was the first art museum I can remember going to, and the positive impact it’s had on the Middle Tennessee area is overwhelming. When I stumbled upon the fellowship, it only felt right to apply, and I was eager to learn the inner workings of an art museum.

MR: How would you describe your experience here at the Frist so far?

ZP: It’s truly been amazing. I was very nervous coming into the fellowship, given my lack of art-historical background, and I suffered from a bit of imposter’s syndrome, but everyone was very welcoming and eager to indulge my many questions. I’ve learned so much so far and have gained an even greater appreciation for all that art museums do for their communities.

MR: What has been your favorite project you’ve worked on?

ZP: *Southern/Modern* was the first exhibition I was really able to help with, so it will always have a special place in my heart. It’s an amazing exhibition and incredibly moving. My contributions were in the Jim Crow and Segregation section, where I got to interview local artists and educators about their thoughts on the matter as well as offer some of my own in a video that’s displayed in the gallery.

MR: What has surprised you about the fellowship?

ZP: What continues to shock me about the behind-the-scenes of art museums and curation is just how far into the future exhibitions and programs have to be planned. I expected curators to be just brainstorming shows at most a year or so in advance, but I’m actively helping with projects scheduled as far as 2026! At the same time, when a new exhibition installation is coming up, you have to jog your memory about pieces you’ve likely haven’t seen or thought about in months because, in your mind, you’ve already moved on to the next exhibition you’re planning for three years from now.

Curators seem to have a very strange relationship with time that I find challenging but fascinating, and again it really makes me have a greater appreciation for all the effort art museums make to bring art to the people.

MR: What’s next for you?

ZP: This fellowship took place during a gap year I decided to take between undergrad and grad school, which is the next step for me. I’ve applied to several art history and curatorial programs across the country. Acceptance letters are starting to roll in, and it’s starting to hit me that I’ll be leaving Tennessee long term for the first time in my life, which is exciting but also very nerve-wracking. Even though I’ve lived in Murfreesboro most of my life, I have never ventured far into Nashville on my own, so I’m scrambling to experience as much of it as I can before I move. As for what will happen directly after this fellowship ends, I hope to pursue another museum internship over the summer and then hit the ground running on my graduate career. I will always be thankful for the Frist for being the first stepping block on this journey and will definitely be coming back to visit regularly.

Peaks