

REMARKS

49th American Institute for Conservation Annual Meeting Keynote

Kelsey Coates, NEH Chief of Staff

Thank you, Adam, for your reflections on *Held in Trust* and the importance of preservation and conservation to NEH's work, and thank you, Peggy, for the warm introduction and welcome.

My name is Kelsey Coates, and I am chief of staff of the National Endowment for the Humanities. I am delighted to have a few minutes to share more about some of the strategic directions for NEH in the coming years under the Biden-Harris administration, including the *A More Perfect Union* initiative, which commemorates the upcoming 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

At NEH, we see so much alignment across the Endowment's priorities and the work that you all do in your professions, day in and day out, as well as the contributions of *Held in Trust* to the future of this field.

Under the Biden-Harris Administration, NEH will be prioritizing five key pillars across the agency.

The first and second pillars are advancing racial equity and confronting the climate crisis –both through the humanities programs we support and the policies we enact to ensure our programs are equitable and sustainable.

This follows President Biden's executive orders calling for a whole of government approach to rooting out structural racism and systemic barriers to equity, inclusion, and access in the federal government as well as the threat of climate change.

Held in Trust is also addressing these issues through strategic directions that will explore climate change and environmental sustainability as well as diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, including: social and environmental justice.

Held in Trust's strategic focuses on philosophy and ethics in conservation theory and practice, and on education, training, and leadership are also closely aligned with NEH's pillar of advancing racial equity. Working toward diversity in leadership is a long process that must start in educational programs and recruitment. The future of conservation practice and theory must also appropriately value and center DEAI principles and the cultural heritage of diverse populations. This will no doubt take time, discussion, reflection, and effort, and for this reason, we are glad that *Held in Trust* is making space for these collaborative and important deliberations.

The work of *Held in Trust* is examining the current state and future directions of this field regarding climate change, environmental sustainability, collection care and management, preventative conservation, science and research, and digital preservation –which are all likely to make important contributions to both prolonging the useful life of collections and reducing the environmental impact of doing so.

Preservation professionals are also leaders in disaster preparedness, mitigation, and response– a role that is increasingly important as our climate changes and the incidences of natural disasters trends toward being more frequent and more severe.

The third Biden-Harris Administration pillar for NEH is restoring America’s standing in the world through international programs and engagements that champion the nation’s excellence in the humanities to global audiences.

Conservation and preservation of cultural heritage are particularly international fields, and several of the focus areas for *Held in Trust* have the potential to ensure that the United States continues to be an international leader in this work.

The fourth Biden-Harris Administration pillar is combatting the dual COVID-19 and economic crises and their devastating impacts on the cultural sector. At NEH we are implementing the American Rescue Plan, through which we will be distributing more than \$129 million in emergency relief to educational and cultural institutions nationwide. As we pivot from recovery to resilience, we will also explore capacity building programs that strengthen institutions’ abilities to weather future economic or public health crises.

While it is a bit less direct, the impetus for the *Held in Trust* project has been to set a vision for a thriving and sustainable field of preservation and conservation nationwide, which includes its recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our fifth Biden-Harris Administration pillar is strengthening our democracy through the humanities. Of course, in many ways, this is NEH’s founding mandate. We have long supported programs that strengthen Americans’ knowledge of and commitment to the country’s principles of constitutional governance and democracy, but we’ll be seeking opportunities to increase this work, because, as President Biden said in his recent joint address, the question of whether our democracy will long endure is both ancient and urgent.

Through our *A More Perfect Union* initiative, NEH supports projects that explore, reflect on, and tell the stories of our democracy and quest for a more just, inclusive, and sustainable society. *Held in Trust* is a standout project under the *A More Perfect Union* umbrella because it examines the intersection of cultural heritage preservation with issues of urgent importance to our democracy, including sustainability, social and racial justice, equity and diversity, climate change, and environmental resource preservation.

NEH is proud to support the *Held in Trust* project. Thank you so much for having me today. I welcome questions you might have for me, as I know will Acting Chair Adam

Wolfson. Before the floor is opened for questions, though, I will turn to Pamela Hatchfield to provide some further details on the workings and specifics of this important initiative.

These remarks were given at the AIC and SPNHC Joint Virtual Annual Meeting on May 10, 2021, and a recording can be found at: https://youtu.be/iwkTpytgM_4