

# New Directions for the Smithsonian

*Anthropologist Robert McCormick Adams wants the "nation's attic" to become a national center of intellectual leadership*

The Smithsonian Institution may turn Washington, D.C., into an Athenian capital if Robert McCormick Adams succeeds in promoting the multitude of ideas he brings with him to his new job as director. An anthropologist and archeologist from the University of Chicago, Adams last fall succeeded S. Dillon Ripley, the ornithologist who has shaped the institution over the past 20 years.

High expectations attend the Adams tenure, which involves the oversight of 5400 employees at 13 museums, 5 research facilities and a zoo. He was reportedly the first choice among 300 persons considered for the job. He almost didn't take it, being happily settled in Chicago where his wife, Ruth Adams, was editor of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*. But the Adamses, adventure-some types, "decided to land on a new continent and burn the boats."

Ripley presided over a period of extraordinary expansion for the Smithsonian, culminating in the \$75-million Quadrangle complex, to open next spring, which will contain the Arthur M. Sackler collection of Asian art, a new museum of African art, and an International Center. There is more construction on the books, but Adams makes it clear that his main goal for the institution is the intangible one of enhanced scientific and intellectual visibility.

Adams, 58, has the easy and unaffected manner of a man on whom fortune has smiled. Born into a prominent Chicago family, he gadded about for a while in his youth until a field expedition to Iraq catalyzed his desire to become a scholar. His entire career up to now has been at the University of Chicago, where he most recently served as provost. He is primarily known for his work uncovering ancient cities and agricultural systems in Mesopotamia (now Iraq), which is now out of bounds for political reasons. But he is known as a humanist with broad intellectual interests as well as a scientist. Some have even called him a Renaissance man, a rubric he is too modest to embrace. (Asked who he thought were Renaissance men these days, his immediate response was to name three physicists—Philip Morison, Freeman Dyson, and Gerald Holton.)

It is already clear that Adams is offering a different style of leadership from Ripley's. Ripley had a somewhat para-

doxical public image. On the one hand he was seen as aloof and patrician, the center of an elitist ruling cadre of Yale graduates. On the other, he is credited with transforming the Smithsonian from a musty accumulation of museums to a vibrant educational enterprise that included such innovations as an annual folklife festival on the Mall and the highly successful *Smithsonian* magazine.

Adams conducts business in a much more relaxed and accessible fashion. But he makes it clear that while reaching the people is important, his chief concern is with enhancing the intellectual and scientific viability of the institution. For



Constance Holden

## **Smithsonian director Adams**

*A lifelong Chicagoan, Adams is much impressed with the abundance of talent in the Washington area and wants the Smithsonian to find new ways to harness it.*

example, he finds himself "actively uneasy" over the inclusion of what has been called "TV trivia" (such as "Dallas" star Larry Hagman's hat) in the collections. He worries about a society that is "no longer capable of distinguishing between media hype and intrinsic value." [He says this is not a reference to the paper airplane flown on the shuttle by Senator Jake Garn (R-Utah), which was presented to the National Air and Space Museum.]

"If I had my druthers," says Adams,

"I would like to succeed in making the Smithsonian an important point of articulation in American intellectual and scientific life . . . to make this place widely seen by intellectuals as a place relevant to them." To this end, "I think it needs more of the truly fundamental research that is on the furthest frontiers of knowledge." This does not mean getting into high energy physics. But it does mean that there is "somewhat too narrow a disciplinary frame of reference around here" and not enough interdisciplinary, intermuseum and interinstitutional activity.

Specifics have not yet been spelled out, but Adams hopes to develop a variety of mechanisms to get the institution more into the scientific mainstream. These include fellowships, exchange programs, faculty-sharing, and collaborative research for a "movement back and forth of people and ideas and students and research materials." Much of this, he says, can be done through trades and exchanges that do not require additional funds.

Noting that the competitive grant process that rules university research tends to move it "into relatively narrow areas," Adams sees the Smithsonian as in a unique position to serve "the broad and symmetrical development of science" by filling in the gaps and acting as a "balance wheel, keeping alive fields that are relatively quiet." Adams is particularly concerned about the fate of systematic biology, which he is not alone in perceiving to be "in retreat" at most universities.

International science is another key Adams interest. Promptly upon taking office, he established a new Directorate of International Relations, headed by John Reinhardt, assistant secretary for history and art. There is a large class of complex, interdisciplinary problems that are "not easily within reach of other American institutions," says Adams, who believes that "we have no mechanisms in place whereby as a country we can respond to major scientific needs and opportunities of a previously unrecognized kind." Tropical deforestation, seen by many scientists as the number one global environmental problem, is a primary case in point. Global climate change is another. The directorate has not yet come up with a strategy. But

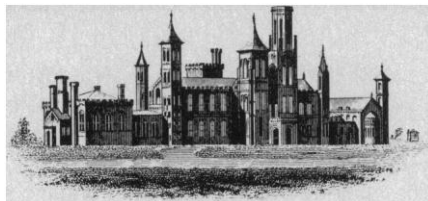
Adams believes the Smithsonian is in a unique position to formulate an overall vision and stimulate work where there are gaps—operations which “in another world one might have imagined Unesco doing.”

“The Smithsonian by its nature is geared for the long term,” observes Adams, and should be doing long-term things everyone else is too busy or strapped to do. One such project, in which the Museum of Natural History would like to assume leadership, is a biological survey of the entire United States. “There are almost no thorough surveys,” says Adams.

One of Adams’ long-term goals in the international realm is the establishment of a “museum of the Americas” at the Smithsonian. He professes himself to be concerned about “the lack of any full recognition [among Americans] of hemispheric partnership” and the multiethnic nature of the United States. He hopes the 1992 celebration of the Columbus quinqucentennial will bring the New World more into the American consciousness, but he warns that it is a “very charged issue.” According to Adams, the prevailing view is that we will be celebrating the discovery of the New World. But an alternate view, pressed by the indigenismo movement in Latin America, perceives the anniversary as one of the invasion of the Americas. Accommodating these perspectives, celebrating the pluralistic nature of the hemisphere, and giving due glory to the roles of Italy and Spain, will require some finesse. If things are properly handled, says Adams, out of it all “might come a larger role in Washington for the New World.”

Adams, who has a strong sociological streak, also wants the Smithsonian to play a role in interpreting the information revolution. His earliest new museum priority is a Museum of the Information Age. We have a responsibility, he says, to explore the broad impacts on culture—including perception (the perception of time, for example), learning, cognition, and decision-making, and how people and institutions organize themselves—wrought by the technology revolution. He sees the museum’s exhibits covering everything from “philosophy and linguistics to banking and information retrieval systems.” The first step will be a major exhibit on the subject at the National Museum of American History.

Of all the ideas and plans jostling for attention in Adams’ head, the one that causes him to wax particularly enthusiastic has to do with harnessing the intel-



*The castle on the Mall.*

lectual energy that abounds in the Washington, D.C., area. “There are a hell of a lot of bright folks around here,” says Adams. “I’ve been thinking about that, but I haven’t quite figured out what to do.” He is much impressed, for example, with the abundance of highly trained social scientists “embedded” in the federal bureaucracy. There are people at all levels “who know how the decision-making process works. . . . We can say more things about how the system works than was ever possible before.” Yet, there is “sort of a wall between empirical

social science and government,” which prevents this knowledge from being spread and used. We know “a fair amount on the nature of American society, but really very little on how institutions work,” says Adams. Academic disciplines are slow to recognize the importance of this knowledge, and little of it makes its way into academic journals.

Adams believes that the main obstacle to this kind of institutional analysis is not the lack of funding sources, but the “lack of a few role models,” who could turn out a few papers and “begin to set a direction.”

Adams has prepared a full agenda for himself. He is hoping for a \$12-million increase in the \$312-million budget of the Smithsonian next year but he recognizes that “horizons are clearly more constrained for the foreseeable future. There are going to be very tough questions of priority that have to be resolved here in this office.”—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

## IOM Elects New Members

The Institute of Medicine has elected 29 new active members and five new senior members. This brings the total active membership to 461 and the total senior membership to 213. The new active members are as follows:

**S. James Adelstein**, dean for academic programs, Harvard Medical School; **D. Bernard Amos**, microbiology and immunology, Duke University Medical Center; **David Axelrod**, commissioner of health, New York State Department of Health; **Kathryn E. Barnard**, parent and child nursing, University of Washington, Seattle; **Stanley Baum**, radiology, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine; **Roscoe O. Brady**, developmental and metabolic neurology branch, National Institute of Neurological and Communicative Disorders and Stroke; **Gert H. Brieger**, Institute of the History of Medicine, The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine; **Vincent T. DeVita, Jr.**, director, National Cancer Institute; **John W. Eckstein**, internal medicine, University of Iowa College of Medicine; **Willard Gaylin**, president, Institute of Society, Ethics, and the Life Sciences.

**John P. Geyman**, family medicine, University of Washington School of Medicine, Seattle; **Frederick K. Goodwin**, intramural research, National Institute of Mental Health; **Thomas F. Hornbein**, anesthesiology, University of Washington School of Medicine, Seattle; **Robert B. Jaffe**, obstetrics, gynecology, and reproductive sciences, University of California School of Medicine, San Francisco; **William N. Kelley**, internal medicine, University of Michigan Medical Center, Ann Arbor; **Richard J. Kitz**, anesthetist-in-chief, Massachusetts General Hospital; **Donald A. B. Lindberg**, director, National Library of Medicine;

**Harald Loe**, director, National Institute of Dental Research; **Harold S. Luft**, Institute for Health Policy Studies, University of California School of Medicine, San Francisco; **James O. Mason**, director, Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta.

**W. Eugene Mayberry**, laboratory medicine, Mayo Medical School, Rochester, Minn.; **Beverlee A. Myers**, School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles; **Elena O. Nightingale**, child development center, Georgetown Medical Center, Washington, D.C.; **Fred Plum**, neurology, Cornell University Medical College; **Janet D. Rowley**, medicine, Pritzker School of Medicine, University of Chicago; **Francis H. Ruddle**, biology, Yale University; **Walter O. Spitzer**, epidemiology and biostatistics, McGill University, Montreal; **Joseph W. St. Geme, Jr.**, dean, School of Medicine, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, Denver; **Bruce C. Vladeck**, president, United Hospital Fund of New York.

The new senior members are:

**Stefan S. Fajans**, internal medicine, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor; **Frank Falkner**, social and administrative health sciences, University of California, Berkeley; **Bernard Fisher**, surgery, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine; **Jerome Gross**, medicine, Harvard Medical School; **George G. Reader**, public health, Cornell University Medical College.