

AUTRY MUSEUM

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W. Richard West, Jr., President and CEO of the Autry Museum, Announces Future Retirement; Stephen Aron to Be Appointed as Successor

Current President to Remain at Helm Through June 2021 to
Guide Museum During Coronavirus Pandemic

Leading UCLA Professor and Institute Director to Serve as President After Former
Smithsonian Founder's Defining Eight-Year Tenure at the Autry

Image: Photo of W. Richard West, Jr., President and CEO of the Autry Museum.

Los Angeles, CA (September 8, 2020)—The [Autry Museum of the American West](#) announced today that current President and CEO, **W. Richard West, Jr.** (Southern Cheyenne), will retire in June 2021, with UCLA professor **Stephen Aron** becoming President and CEO at that time.

At the request of the Autry's Board of Trustees, West will stay with the Autry until next summer to ensure a smooth transition through what is expected to be the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, the Autry has been able to adapt successfully to the hard realities of the current crisis while creating a robust and imaginative programming presence for the public virtually. Highlights have included the "[Collecting Community](#)

[History Initiative: The West During COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter Protests](#),” a project by Associate Curator **Tyree Boyd-Pates** that collects and preserves posters and other ephemera from the current moment.

Appointed in 2012, and previously a Native rights lawyer and Founding Director and Director Emeritus of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, D.C., West was essentially recruited out of retirement and to Los Angeles by the Autry’s Board of Trustees. Over the past eight years, West expanded the museum’s team with nationally recognized and diverse new hires, led a successful campaign that has raised over \$70 million, and firmly placed the Autry on the map as a culturally relevant destination.



Images: (Left to right) *Route 66: The Road and the Romance*, 2014. • *Coyote Leaves the Res: The Art of Harry Fonseca*, 2019.

During West’s tenure, the Autry has produced numerous successful exhibitions—including *Empire and Liberty*, *Play!*, *Route 66*, *LA RAZA*, and *The Art of Harry Fonseca*—along with acclaimed public programs such as [Native Voices](#), its resident theatre company. He oversaw the construction of the Autry’s Resources Center, a state-of-the-art collections, research, and education facility in Burbank, as well as a process with the National Trust for Historic Preservation to find a sustainable future for the historic Southwest Museum of the American Indian. His successor, Stephen Aron—who in addition to serving as Professor of History at the University of California, Los Angeles, was also the Founding Executive Director and (then) Chair of the Institute for the Study of the American West at the Autry—will continue the trajectory that West has set.

“In all truth, Rick West breathed new life into this institution,” said **David Cartwright**, Chair of the Autry Board of Trustees. “When he arrived in 2012, he brought with him a clear vision for success and the abundant leadership skills to go with it. Thanks to his unique experience founding and then running the Smithsonian’s NMAI—not to mention his background as an attorney, and as the son of a prominent Native contemporary artist to boot—Rick proved to have the foresight and acumen necessary for the museum to flourish. I am grateful that the Autry is on such spectacular footing for the next chapter of its story. On that note, I am very excited to have Stephen Aron rejoin the team, and look forward to experiencing his vision for the Autry.”



Image: Photo of Stephen Aron.

A past president of the Western History Association, Stephen Aron has been on the UCLA faculty since 1996. For many of those years, he held a concurrent appointment as Executive Director of the Institute for the Study of the American West and then Chair of Western History at the Autry Museum. “I’ve spent more than three decades researching and writing about the confluences and confrontations of peoples and cultures that shaped the history of North American frontiers and borderlands, but it was my time at the Autry that truly transformed how I think and teach about the American West,” commented Aron. “At the Autry, I learned the power of arts and objects, the joy of collaborations, and the imperative of public history. I’m so honored now to rejoin the Autry family, and I’m excited to embrace the challenge of making our museum matter more to more people.”

Aron most recently teamed up with the Autry on its “Collecting Community History Initiative: The West During COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter Protests,” partnering on a grant for the initiative from the UCLA History Department’s Luskin Center for History and Policy. “That project speaks so powerfully for the museum’s mission, and the grant will help the Autry collect the stories of all peoples and connect the present with past pandemics and protests. The Collecting Community History Initiative exemplifies the ways in which Rick West and the Autry staff have tackled the diversity and complexity of the American West, blazing a trail that I intend to follow,” explained Aron.

In his final year before he retires, West, who will be named President Emeritus and Ambassador, Native Communities, will host a series of capstone events that draw on his tenure as a museum director in Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles, and his background as a Southern Cheyenne peace chief and son of a Native contemporary artist. These events will reflect upon current trends in museology, how cultural institutions can best survive during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and broader considerations for presenting history in a divided society.

“My life as a museum director has been a double-rainbow—leading not one but two world-class cultural institutions,” said West. “I am honored to have made the journey to Los Angeles to lead the Autry. We have vastly expanded notions of the importance and relevance of the American West in this nation’s vibrant and complex arts and culture tapestry. This event series offers a unique opportunity to reflect on what it has meant to

me, especially as a Native person, to lead both. I will be able to leave with a welcome level of comfort, knowing the museum will be in the good hands of Steve Aron. I cannot wait to see the bold new directions he will take this institution that we both love.”

West, by dint of his future role at the Autry, will also help ensure that the museum’s strong ties to the Native community continue to grow. “Our relationship with a great number of tribes, both local and national, have improved immeasurably thanks to Rick and his profile, as well as our work toward fulfilling our obligations under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act,” said **Marshall McKay**, Yocha Dehe Wintun, Tribal Elder and Autry Museum Chair Emeritus. “Rick’s personal background as a citizen of a Native nation and his experience founding and running the NMAI, and his years of good work at the Autry, have all resulted in meaningful events, programs, and exhibitions by and for the Native community. We look forward to continuing and building upon this progress, both with Rick in his new role, as well as with Steve’s knowledge, thanks in large part to his scholarship, of important issues to our community.”



Image: Resources Center rendering.

The Autry Museum was co-founded in 1988 by Jackie and Gene Autry and Joanne and Monte Hale, and has grown to encompass a broad and inclusive representation of art, artifacts, cultural materials, and library holdings. The Autry’s collections of more than 600,000 objects, historic and cultural materials, and art reflect the interconnectedness of peoples and communities in the American West. From inception, the museum was intended as a place for deep cultural exploration—epitomized by West’s tenure and Aron’s future presidency.

“I deeply appreciate everything Rick West has done for the Autry during his tenure. I know Gene would be proud of the Museum and all that has been accomplished,” said **Jackie Autry**, Founding Chair and Life Trustee. “I especially want to thank Rick for ensuring the stability and survival of the Museum during the challenging times brought about by the pandemic, and for his willingness to ensure a smooth turnover to Steve Aron, who will be taking over as President of the Autry Museum. Steve has a long association with the Autry. As a highly-respected student and scholar of the American West, I know he will guide the Autry ably in the years to come.”

Bio – W. Richard West, Jr.

W. Richard West Jr. is the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Autry Museum of the American West. He is responsible for all operations at the Autry from collections development and financial sustainability to institutional growth and visitor experience. He oversees a team of 180 professionals and 300 volunteers, all dedicated to the Autry's core mission. West has devoted his professional life and much of his personal life to working in the national and international museum communities, and with American Indians on cultural, educational, legal, and governmental issues. West is also the Founding Director and Director Emeritus of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, where he served as Director from 1990-2007.

West practiced law at the Indian-owned Albuquerque, New Mexico, law firm of Gover, Stetson, Williams & West, P.C. (1988-1990). He also was an associate attorney and then partner in the Washington, D.C., office of Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson (1973-1988). He served as counsel to numerous American Indian tribes, communities, and organizations. In that capacity, he represented clients before federal, state and tribal courts, various executive departments of the federal government, and the Congress.

West's current board affiliations and memberships include: International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (2007-present); ICOM-US National Committee (2015-present); Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (2015-present). He also has served on the boards of trustees of the Ford Foundation, Stanford University, and the Kaiser Family Foundation.

He served as chair of the board for the American Alliance of Museums, the nation's only national membership organization representing all types of museums and museum professionals, from 1998-2000. From 1992-1995 and 1997-1998, he served as member-at-large of the Alliance's board of directors and in 1995-1996 as vice chair of the board of directors. West also was a member-at-large (2004-2007) and Vice President (2007-2010) of the International Council of Museums.

West, who grew up in Muskogee, Oklahoma, was born in San Bernardino, California, the son of American Indian master artist, the late Walter Richard West Sr., and Maribelle McCrea West. He earned a bachelor's degree (major in American history) magna cum laude in 1965 and graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Redlands in California. He also received a master's degree in American history from Harvard University in 1968. West graduated from the Stanford University School of Law with a doctorate of jurisprudence degree in 1971, where he also was the recipient of the Hilmer Oehlmann Jr. Prize for excellence in legal writing and served as an editor and note editor of the *Stanford Law Review*.

West is a citizen of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes. He also is a member of the

Southern Cheyenne Society of Peace Chiefs. He is married to Mary Beth West, who retired from the U.S. Department of State in 2005. They have two adult children, Amy and Ben, and two grandchildren, Oliver and Finnian.

Bio – Stephen Aron

An east coast native, **Stephen Aron** received his B.A. summa cum laude at Amherst College (1982) and M.A. (1986) and Ph.D. (1990) at the University of California, Berkeley, where his interests focused on colonial British America and the Early American Republic. After graduating from Berkeley, Aron accepted an appointment at Princeton University. Ironically, it was after moving back east that Aron first taught the history of the American West and came to embrace it as his primary field. Returning to the West Coast in 1996 and joining the History Department at UCLA, Aron has taught the subject about which he is so passionate to thousands of undergraduates and lectured about it at universities and museums around the nation and the world. He has also supervised 20 doctoral dissertations and served on 27 other doctoral committees. The author of *How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (1996); *American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State* (2006); and *The American West: A Very Short Introduction* (2015); and the co-author of *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World from the Beginnings of Humankind to the Present* (2017, 5th edition), Aron is currently completing *Can We All Get Along: An Alternative History of the American Frontier*. His scholarship, which includes scores of articles and chapters, has earned several prizes, been recognized by his election to the Society of American Historians and as President of the Western History, and by his appointment to the Peter and Margaret D'Angelo Chair in the Humanities at St. John's University.

Aron's formal affiliation with the Autry began in 2002, when UCLA allowed him to split his appointment and become Executive Director of the Autry's newly-created Institute for the Study of the American West. In that position, Aron oversaw the Autry's libraries, research, publications, programs, and education departments. He also served as the editor of its *Convergence* magazine. After returning full-time to UCLA, Aron served a term as the chair of the history department. During his tenure, he secured several major gifts for the department, including one that established its Luskin Center for History and Policy.

Aron is married to Amy Green, who is the co-owner of Silverlake Conservation. They have two adult children, Daniel Henry (named for the principal figures in Aron's first book) and Jack.

IMAGES AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

About the Autry Museum of the American West

The Autry is a museum dedicated to exploring and sharing the stories, experiences, and perceptions of the diverse peoples of the American West, connecting the past to the

present to inspire our shared future. The museum presents a wide range of exhibitions and public programs—including lectures, film, theatre, festivals, family events, and music—and performs scholarship, research, and educational outreach. The Autry’s collection of more than 500,000 pieces of art and artifacts includes the Southwest Museum of the American Indian Collection, one of the largest and most significant in the United States. Visit TheAutry.org for more information.