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Pittock Mansion CEO recognized with the most prestigious national award for distinguished service to Museums

The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) announced that it has selected Paula Gangopadhyay (pronounced Gango-pad-yay), CEO of Pittock Mansion, for the 2026 Distinguished Service Award—the most prestigious award for individuals in the US museum profession. This award recognizes an individual’s significant and sustained contributions to the museum field over a career of 20+ years. The award honors those who exemplify the leadership and service to which the field aspires.

The award is presented by the AAM Board of Directors based on an individual’s cumulative contributions to their institution, the museum profession, and the museum community at large—including their work to innovate, enrich, and expand how museums in the United States serve their communities.

“As a member of the Board of the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), I am thrilled to celebrate Paula Gangopadhyay as our recipient of the 2026 Distinguished Service Award,” said Carole Carnow, Chair of AAM’s Awards Committee. “This singular honor celebrates a museum professional who has demonstrated extraordinary commitment to the Museum field matched by exemplary achievement. Paula’s distinguished career encompasses museum leadership, education and public service in some of the highest offices in our industry. She is an innovator who has broken new ground and is also an accomplished problem solver, who led our field through the multiple challenges of the Covid 19 pandemic. On behalf of the Board of AAM I congratulate Paula and thank her for her many contributions, and her impact that will be felt for generations to come.”

Gangopadhyay was recognized Wednesday during the 2026 AAM Annual Meeting & Museum Expo, the world’s largest museum conference, taking place May 20-23, in Philadelphia.

“It is an incredible honor to be recognized by the AAM Board of Directors with the Distinguished Service Award, especially during the nation’s 250th anniversary year,” said Gangopadhyay. “I am deeply touched and humbled. My work is not over yet, and I hope to inspire the next generation of museum leaders with lessons learned from my own journey.”

Paula Gangopadhyay is widely recognized across the cultural, government, and philanthropic sectors for her innovative leadership and transformative impact on museums and education. Over a career spanning more than three decades, she has championed innovation, access, lifelong learning, and community engagement, inspiring museums nationwide to reimagine their role in the communities they serve.

Gangopadhyay is among the few museum leaders to receive two distinguished federal appointments. President Barack Obama appointed her to serve on the Board of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) from 2012 to 2015. She later served as Deputy Director of the Office of Museum Services and Senior Advisor to the Director at IMLS from 2016-2021.

Her other recognitions include the Michael Faraday Science Communicator Award from the National Science Teachers Association, which is a distinguished award presented to an individual who has made extraordinary contributions to science communication, the Michigan Informal Science Educator Award, and the Edison Award for Innovation in Education.

Gangopadhyay began her career in Michigan in the early 1990s and gained recognition for her community mobilization work with the Commission for Lansing Schools Success, a mayoral public school reform initiative, and with her innovative literacy initiatives later at the Public Museum of Grand Rapids.

As Chief Learning Officer at The Henry Ford (2008-2015), Gangopadhyay became nationally recognized for inspiring young people to “think and act like innovators.” She earned commendation from policy advisors at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy for her Innovation 101 curriculum which juxtaposed current-day innovators with Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Rosa Parks, and the Wright Brothers. She received a special invitation to the Clinton Global Initiative and represented The Henry Ford to make a national commitment to inspire innovative thinking in the K-12 sector.

She made significant contributions to the museum field during her five-year term at the Institute of Museum and Library (IMLS), the primary source of federal funding for the museum sector which represents approximately 30,000 museums. During her tenure, she helped launch two new IMLS grant programs, *Museums Empowered* and *Inspire Grants for Small Museums*, which are continuing to help museums. During her time at IMLS, AAM’s Museum Assessment Program (MAP) was strengthened and the Museums for All access program for EBT card holders, in collaboration with the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM), was expanded to demonstrate exponential growth. During the pandemic, Gangopadhyay strongly championed the cause for museums and even encouraged the six regional museum associations to come together for the first time and create a common digital platform to provide technology training and tools for museum professionals. As Senior Advisor to the Director of IMLS, she also laid the groundwork for the museum sector’s first national survey of museum data through a comprehensive needs assessment and gap analysis.

Gangopadhyay currently serves as CEO of Pittock Mansion, where her “Pittock 2.0” vision is transforming the Portland icon and historic house museum into a vibrant, relevant, and dynamic cultural destination.

Gangopadhyay has delivered keynote addresses at numerous national and international conferences, including those hosted by Pearson Education, the Ontario Museum Association, and the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries. She collaborated with AAM’s Center for the Future of Museums to host the organization’s first symposium exploring the role of museums in education. She was also invited by the Government of India to lead a workshop on teaching innovation for staff representing 60 science centers

within the National Council of Science Museums.

She holds a master's degree in history from Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore, India, a certificate in archival, museum, and editing studies from Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA and an Education Policy Fellowship from the Institute for Educational Leadership.

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