

NATIONAL CENTER OF AFRO-AMERICAN ARTISTS

MEDIA CONTACT: John Michael Kennedy, jmk@jmkpr.com
781-620-1761 or 212-842-1752 (cell)

BOSTON'S NATIONAL CENTER OF AFRO-AMERICAN ARTISTS ANNOUNCES LEADERSHIP TRANSITION

Akiba Abaka is appointed Interim Executive Director, succeeding longtime Center leader, artistic mentor, and visual arts champion Edmund Barry Gaither.

BOSTON, Mass. – September 25, 2025 – The board of the **National Center of Afro-American Artists (NCAAA)**, Boston's premier institution for preserving, presenting and celebrating Black and African diasporic arts and culture, has announced the appointment of **Akiba Abaka** as **Interim Executive Director**.

Abaka, who stepped into the role on a part-time basis earlier this summer, succeeds the Center's legendary leader **Edmund Barry Gaither**, who joined the Center in 1969 as its museum director. Under Gaither's stewardship, the NCAAA grew into a cultural pillar, championing Black and African-American artists in Boston and beyond. Gaither's work continued the legacy of **Dr. Elma Ina Lewis**, a visionary of arts education and cultural preservation in Boston, and the Center's founding leader.



The Center comprises performing, visual and arts teaching components, featuring many educational and community programs, as well as the annual production of Langston Hughes' "Black Nativity." Soon to produce its 55th run of performances in December (tickets available [here](#)), NCAAA's "Black Nativity" is the longest-running production of the work around the world.

"This is a pivotal and celebratory moment for the NCAAA," says Board Chair **Dr. Kafi Meadows**. "The board unanimously expressed confidence in Akiba's leadership after witnessing her comprehensive vision, and her ability to mobilize support since joining us in April. Her tireless efforts to forge partnerships and build momentum showed us she is the leader we need at this moment. We are eternally grateful to Barry, whose decades of leadership solidified the Center's place as a beacon for Black culture and creativity. His impact is incalculable; his legacy will continue to guide us." Meadows says the board plans to make Abaka's role permanent after a fundraising campaign. Gaither retains an emeritus leadership title with the Center.

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Photo this page: Akiba Abaka. Photo by Craig Bailey/Perspective Photo



"The NCAAA represents more than institutional legacy — it's the living laboratory for cultural liberation that Dr. Lewis envisioned," Abaka says. "Under Mr. Gaither's extraordinary stewardship, the organization was Boston's sanctuary where global Black culture breathes, creates and transforms. I step into this role

understanding that we're not just preserving the past but also building the infrastructure of Black joy, Black genius, and Black futurity. The work Miss Lewis began is unfinished; we're scaling that vision to serve Roxbury and the world."

Gaither says "I dedicated my life to the NCAAA and to the work of Black artists because I believe deeply in the power of art to affirm the dignity, creativity and contributions of Black people everywhere. It has been my life's honor to build on the foundation laid by my friend Elma Lewis, and to foster a home here for Black artists.

"It's exciting to me that Akiba steps into this role; her passion, perseverance and commitment to art and culture reminds me so much of Ms. Lewis," Gaither says. "Akiba brings the professional experience, institutional knowledge and strategic vision necessary to move NCAAA forward. Her track record in arts leadership and her deep understanding of our mission positions her well to guide the Center to its next chapter."

The Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists is located at 300 Walnut Avenue in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood. Visiting hours are Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays from 1 to 5 p.m. Admission is free; group tours are available upon request. Center and Museum information is available at ncaaa.org, by phone at 617-442-8614 and at info@ncaaa.org. More information on NCAAA's history and programs can be found at ncaaa.org.

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ABOUT AKIBA ABAKA

Akiba Abaka is a pioneering arts leader, producer and educator with more than two decades of experience advancing cultural equity through the arts. She holds an MFA in Theatre Education and Applied Theatre from Emerson College, a degree in psychology from UMass Boston, and she is a distinguished graduate of LeadBoston. Abaka's mentorship by Pulitzer Prize winner August Wilson at Boston's Huntington Theatre shaped her approach to using theatre as a catalyst for civic transformation.

Abaka's institutional leadership includes Creative Producer at ArtsEmerson, where she led a five-year, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation-funded audience-building initiative. She founded and was Producing Artistic Director of the Up You Mighty Race company, which produced

theater based on African Diasporic narratives and won her the 2009 Independent Reviewers of New England Award for Best Director. As Co-Artistic Director of Akiba Abaka Arts & Entertainment, Inc., Abaka established the first international theater residency at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica, and created The Multiple Ports System™, an innovative process for developing work by Black playwrights.

Recognized as a Difference Maker by the Boston Branch of the NAACP, and honored with the John Andrew Ross Award for Distinguished Director, Abaka's artistic leadership bridges cultural preservation with community transformation. Currently as Vice President of the Roxbury Cultural District, Abaka continues her commitment to community revitalization through strategic cultural programming.

ABOUT BARRY GAITHER

Edmund Barry Gaither has been among the nation's most respected voices in African and African-American art for more than five decades. Born in South Carolina, he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Morehouse College and did graduate study in art history at Brown University. Since 1969, Gaither has served as Director and Curator of the Museum of the NCAAA and was a Special Consultant at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where he curated ten groundbreaking exhibitions including the landmark show "Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston."

Gaither developed the Museum of the NCAAA, from its concept to being a repository of more than 3,000 objects. He pioneered African American art courses at Harvard, Wellesley College, the Massachusetts College of Art, and Spelman College. Working closely with Dr. Elma Ina Lewis, he helped NCAAA establish a national and international presence through collaborations in Africa, the Caribbean, and throughout the U.S. A co-founder and first President of the Association of African American Museums, Gaither headed the national committee that commissioned a bust of Martin Luther King, Jr. for the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., and served on President George W. Bush's Advisory Board on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Gaither's research has taken him across continents from Africa to Russia, building bridges between American and global African diasporic communities. Currently, he continues his curatorial work through the City of Boston's "UnMonument" initiative, creating public conversations around monuments and memorials in Roxbury, while fostering community dialogue about public art and shared heritage.

ABOUT NCAAA

Founded in 1968 by Dr. Elma Ina Lewis, the National Center of Afro-American Artists is dedicated to preserving and fostering the cultural arts heritage of Black people worldwide. From its base at the historic Abbotsford Mansion in Roxbury, the Center presents exhibitions, performances and educational programs that uplift African diasporic culture and celebrate Black artistic excellence. NCAAA houses a permanent collection of significant works by Black artists, and serves as a hub for community engagement, education and cultural pride. As the longest-standing Black cultural arts institution in New England, NCAAA is distinguished by the quality and scope of its work, sustaining a legacy of celebrating the world heritage of Black

people – with excellence in the arts and community cultural development as its enduring hallmark.

The Museum of the NCAAA

The Museum of the NCAAA preserves and fosters the cultural arts heritage of Black people worldwide. It presents exhibitions, performances and educational programs, and holds a permanent collection that includes a 17th-century illuminated Ethiopian manuscript of the *Miracles of Mary*, and works by Charles White, Romare Bearden, Elizabeth Catlett and Jacob Lawrence.

The Museum houses the installation *ASPELTA: A Nubian King's Burial Chamber*, which brings to life the legacy of King Aspelta, who ruled late in the 25th (Nubian) dynasty, a period during which black kings governed all of Egypt and Nubia. *ASPELTA* features 2,600-year-old art and artifacts. It recreates the interior of the King's burial chamber, his coffin and his sarcophagus – the original of which is the largest such piece recovered intact from the Nile Valley. *ASPELTA* was developed in close collaboration with the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The Museum's exhibitions have toured internationally. It has hosted major shows from Africa and the Caribbean. Currently, it houses the exhibition *Cancel Violence Pt. 1*, which uses art and dialogue from eight artists to confront the roots of violence in Black and brown communities, and to imagine paths to healing, wholeness and social transformation. A virtual tour of Black artist-created murals in Boston comprises the Museum's second part of the *Cancel Violence* initiative, supported by the City of Boston and Mellon Foundation.

Each summer, NCAAA hosts outdoor programs on the green at Abbotsford Mansion, from the Juneteenth Emancipation Observance and late-summer "Big Head" Community Festival to the community ritual *Putting Your Touch on Greatness* that honors John Wilson's monumental sculpture *Eternal Presence*, which figured prominently in the 2024/25 exhibition *John W. Wilson: Witnessing Humanity* organized by MFA, Boston and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

NCAAA Music Division

NCAAA's music division produces the annual staging of Langston Hughes' seminal creative music-play *Black Nativity*, a beloved Boston tradition entering its 55th season. Beyond *Black Nativity*, the Center has presented a rich roster of music, dance and theater greats including Max Roach, Duke Ellington, Olatunji, Talley Beatty, Ruby Dee and others.

MEDIA CONTACT

For interviews, photo assets or more information, reach **John Michael Kennedy** at jmk@jmkpr.com, 781-620-1761 (o) or 212-842-1752 (cell/text).

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COMMUNITY LEADERS RESPOND

Cultural and business leaders around the region have offered thoughts on Mr. Gaither's and Ms. Abaka's impact on Boston, and her new role at NCAAA.

- “Barry Gaither is a phenomenal man, a one-of-a-kind. During his decades at NCAAA, he has given us more than exhibitions, he has given us vision, history and soul. Barry’s knowledge of the arts, both visual and performing, is encyclopedic; he speaks with eloquence, grace and a rare ability to draw us into deeper understanding. His presence and participation have culturally elevated many. Barry has shared his wisdom, generosity, and the spirit of belonging. His legacy is indelible, and his friendship unforgettable. I congratulate him on this new chapter.” **Jumaada A. K. Henry Smith, J.D., Chairwoman, Boston Juneteenth Committee**

- “I’ve known Akiba Abaka for many years, and as the Founder of *ArtsEmerson: The World on Stage*, I benefited from her work as a Creative Producer and community activator. Akiba has the soul of an artist, and the vision and skill of a seasoned administrator – both of which will power forward the distinct work of the NCAAA” – **Robert Orchard, Founder and Creative Consultant, ArtsEmerson**

- “The appointment of Akiba Abaka is an exciting and inspiring moment in the Center’s history – and in Boston’s cultural landscape, where the Center has long served as a home for Black excellence in the arts. Elma Lewis would be overjoyed—she would surely recognize in Akiba many of her own qualities: tenacity, influence, relevance and deep connection to community. I have known Akiba for more than 30 years and have witnessed her applying her creative expertise to a wide range of ventures. She is a true builder of cultural institutions, diverse audiences and enduring partnerships. She is the one we’ve been waiting for to take NCAAA into its next chapter.” – **Ekua Holmes, award-winning illustrator and multi-media artist**

- “The NCAAA has long been a cornerstone of Boston’s cultural landscape, with traditions like ‘Black Nativity’ shaping the city’s artistic identity and bringing communities together year after year. Akiba is uniquely prepared to carry the legacy forward. She is a visionary leader whose work spans theater, performance and community engagement—building programs, like ArtsEmerson’s play reading series, that continue to thrive long after her tenure. As a connector and bridge-builder, Akiba understands the creative pulse of artists and the needs of audiences, making her an inspired choice to guide NCAAA at this pivotal moment.” – **Catherine Peterson, Executive Director, ArtsBoston**

- “Akiba Abaka has a real reverence for, and complete comprehension of, the legacy of Elma Lewis, paired with a capacity for original, innovative thinking and strategy. She’s a visionary when it comes to the sort of deep community engagement that Ms. Lewis brought to the city, as we saw in her work at ArtsEmerson. The programs she developed there drove transformational engagement and positioned the organization in a powerful relationship with communities of Greater Boston. I’ve no doubt she will do the same for NCAAA. This organization has been in Akiba’s blood from the get-go. It’s a great way to follow Mr. Gaither’s long career.” – **David Dower, Executive Director, Club Fugazi (San Francisco) and former Artistic Director, ArtsEmerson**