National Portrait Gallery

Director Announces Plan to Retire

Marc Pachter, director of the National Portrait Gallery, announced yesterday that he will retire Oct. 1, 2007. His departure will mark the end of a 33-year career at the Smithsonian Institution, where he held a number of positions that include chief historian and assistant director at the Portrait Gallery, acting director of the National Museum of American History, deputy assistant secretary for external affairs and chair of the Smithsonian’s 150th anniversary celebration in 1996.

Pachter, 63, oversaw the reopening of the National Portrait Gallery, part of the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture, last July after an extensive six-year renovation. The Portrait Gallery more than doubled the size of its “America’s Presidents” exhibition; established permanent galleries for portraits from the worlds of sports and entertainment; and changed virtually every exhibition and label in the museum.

“It was a great privilege to serve under four Smithsonian Secretaries in my 33-year career,” Pachter said. “This Institution is one of the greatest creations of American values and imagination. To end my career involved in the renewal of a phenomenal building and the rebirth of the National Portrait Gallery is the greatest privilege of all.”

“For decades, Marc Pachter has been an invaluable asset to the Smithsonian in many ways: as a museum director, scholar, author, educator and interviewer. He’s done it all. He’s greatly expanded the cultural life of the nation’s capital and the country,” said Lawrence M. Small, Secretary of the Smithsonian. “His accomplishments are vast because his talents are so varied. He’s a leader and a colleague who will be greatly missed and we all wish him well in his future endeavors.”

Joining the Portrait Gallery staff in 1974 as its chief historian and assistant director, Pachter began a program called Living Self Portraits in which he interviewed well-known personalities, including Washington Post president and publisher Katharine Graham. The program later became a series of sold-out programs for the Smithsonian Resident Associate Program featuring interviews with writer and former Ambassador to Italy Clare Boothe Luce, author Tom Wolfe, tennis player Billie Jean King, TV news anchor Walter Cronkite and former chief executive officer of the Walt Disney Company Michael Eisner. Earlier in his career at the Portrait Gallery,
he organized the first national conference on the art of biography, which resulted in the book “Telling Lives: The Biographer’s Art.”

Pachter left the Portrait Gallery for 10 years (1990-2000) to hold several key positions in the Smithsonian’s central administration, including deputy assistant secretary for external affairs and counselor to then-Secretary Michael Heyman. Pachter was given the Secretary’s Gold Medal for Exceptional Service in 1999 for “his role as the organizer and chair of the Smithsonian’s 150th anniversary celebration and visionary advocate of an electronic communications strategy to expand the Smithsonian’s national and general reach.” Pachter returned to the Portrait Gallery to become its director in July 2000.

In 2002, Pachter secured the famous Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington, known as the “Lansdowne” portrait, with a $30 million donation from the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation of Las Vegas. In recent years, he established an awards program to honor the American presidency, created the first national portrait competition (the winners’ entries were part of the inaugural exhibitions when the museum reopened), changed the museum’s mission to permit portraits of living people; and presided over the reinstallation of the entire gallery.

While serving as acting director of the National Museum of American History, Pachter was involved in the creation of a sensitive exhibition about Sept. 11 (“September 11: Bearing Witness to History”) that opened one year after the attack. During his year at the museum (2001-2002), he continued to serve as director of the National Portrait Gallery.

“Marc’s absence will be conspicuous come next fall when he leaves us,” said Under Secretary for Art Ned Rifkin. “His luminous presence, his creative ingenuity, and his generosity toward his colleagues and peers at the Smithsonian and elsewhere, have established him as one of the lights in our organization. It is with great personal regret that I anticipate his retirement and I know that his legacy both at the Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian will live on.”

Pachter graduated summa cum laude from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1964. He later became a Woodrow Wilson fellow at Harvard University, where he taught colonial history while conducting research on American intellectual cultural history. He was born in New York, but grew up in Los Angeles.

He has edited several books, including “Abroad in America: Visitors to the New Nation,” “Champions of American Sport” and he served as the illustrations editor of “Documentary History of the Supreme Court”; in addition, he is the contributing editor for the scholarly journal Biography. He has lectured extensively throughout the United States and abroad.

Pachter lives in Northwest Washington.

A nationwide search for a new director will be headed by the Smithsonian’s Under Secretary for Art Ned Rifkin.