

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian  
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Lanre Bakare  
30 June 2021

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## V&A East director to cycle to 250 London schools to encourage pupil visits

Gus Casely-Hayford vows to make youth-focused venue opening in 2025 accessible to all



Image: The director of V&A East, Gus Casely-Hayford, flanked by prints from Jamie Hawkesworth's Preston Bus Station series (left) and Portrait of Melissa Thompson by Kehinde Wiley. Both artworks were newly acquired for the museum. Photograph: PA

Young people will be encouraged to make the new V&A East space their own by its director, who plans to cycle to every school in the four London boroughs that surround the venue.

Gus Casely-Hayford said he wanted the museum, which will open in 2025, to be accessible to all and has committed to personally visit schools in Waltham Forest, Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Newham to ensure young people knew the space in the 2012 Olympic Park in Stratford, east London, was for them.

"I'm going to begin next year by getting out there on my bicycle and I will visit every single one of the more than 250 schools – every single one of them," he said. "I want to be telling them that this is your national collection. It belongs to you. The narratives that wrapped around it they should be yours."

At a presentation at the same complex where the museum will eventually reside, Casely-Hayford laid out a vision for a youth-focused institution that had acquired work by Kehinde Wiley and which would feature 70,000 sq ft of exhibition space once completed.

He said the new space would be underpinned by values of "equity, empathy, openness and sustainability", adding that V&A East would focus on championing underrepresented movements and voices.

V&A East will open in 2025 rather than 2023, after being pushed back by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the V&A East Storehouse, which is part of the museum, will open as expected in 2024. The new venue will be made up of the Storehouse space, which is a huge open store featuring items from the collection, and the new O'Donnell + Tuomey-designed museum space that is under construction after several delays.

Casely-Hayford, who moved back from the US where he was director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art in Washington DC, did not rule out including contested artefacts in the collection of 250,000 items to be housed on the site. The director said it was important to deal with "our complex past".

"I want to offer people something that gives a wider context of what Britain's history is, so that it cannot believe in this kind of very kind of singular, narrow British history. It's a complex, dynamic, contested complex history," he said. The director added that he did not think his vision for an open and honest discussion of culture and heritage was at odds with fears that the government wanted to "airbrush" UK history.

"We have a duty to reflect history through a lens that offers a range of different kinds of interpretation that is complex and rich," Casely-Hayford said. "We have a duty to give people the space within which they can have the debates about our past and about our heritage." The storehouse was described by the V&A's deputy director and chief operating officer, Tim Reeve, as potentially "one of the most magical public spaces in the museum's world", which will act as a "constantly changing display case cum museum logistics hub".

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The presentation will be “non-linear” with historic objects sitting alongside contemporary works that can be linked, despite coming from different periods and geographical locations. There will also be two collection galleries, with items including costumes worn by Leigh Bowery, clothes by Vivienne Westwood and furniture created by Charles and Ray Eames.

Casely-Hayford said success would not be measured by footfall but by the quality of interactions local people have with the museum, and that the expectation was that 1 million, mostly UK-based people, would visit the space each year.