

IN BLACK&WHITE: Interpreting African American Culture in Contemporary Museums

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IN BLACK & WHITE:

Interpreting African American Culture in Contemporary Museums

BY LONNIE G. BUNCH



The family of Herman F. and Josephine Lepeon Kenney, Geneva, New York, 1930.
Photo courtesy of John W. Kenney.

In the late 1970s, the National Air & Space Museum (NASM) was embroiled in a minor controversy about race. African American veterans of World War II, especially members of the all black fighter squadrons known as the Tuskegee Airmen (so named because they received their aviation training on the campus of Tuskegee Institute), voiced their concerns that the National Air & Space Museum intentionally underplayed the important contributions of black aviators in the Second World War. Soon a few members of Congress, most notably Senator Ted Kennedy, inquired about the role of African American history at the Smithsonian Institution. One of the ways that NASM responded to these public and congressional inquiries was to ask several African American staff members to allow their likenesses to grace

mannequins that would be placed in the museum in order to increase "the black presence." Ultimately, these figures were positioned in airplanes or exhibit settings that were so high or far removed that the only way the public could view this increased presence was by scanning the outer reaches of the museum using binoculars purchased in the gift shop.

Clearly in today's museums, African American history is no longer at the fringe of the profession. For those who study or are interested in the African American past, there have been many imaginative exhibitions that have stretched the interpretive parameters and challenged the tenor and color of the museum profession's historical presentations. The past decade has been a period of growth, excitement and possibility. Museums as diverse as the National Museum of American History, the Museum of the Confederacy, the Oakland Museum and the Henry Ford Museum, have wres-

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tled creatively with African American subject matter. Of even greater import and instruction is the array of smaller institutions like the Please Touch Museum in Philadelphia, the Geneva (New York) Historical Society, and the Northern California Center for African American History & Culture, which have sought to give local meaning to the issues of race in America.

As a consequence of these activities, the public has experienced exhibitions that explored African American migration from the south to the north, slavery, Africanisms in American culture, representations of race in American art, urbanization and community development, and the intersection of race and gender. The research and exhibition of African American life in museums has contributed a vibrancy and relevance that has invigorated many of the nation's cultural institutions, and sparked useful collaborations between museums and communities. As a colleague recently stated, "Museums have done a good job when it comes to African American history." To some, the line from the 1970s commercial, "You've come a long way baby," captures the sense of accomplishment and completion felt by many public historians.

While there have been great changes in whom and what museums interpret, it is much too soon to be satisfied with the profession's efforts in exploring African American culture. Often the rhetoric of change fails to match the realities of everyday life in museums. My major concern is that museums are too often crafting exhibitions that simply say, "African Americans were here too," rather than examining the complexities, interactions and difficulties of race in America. In essence, much of what institutions create today is better suited to the world of forty years ago when blacks, in the words of novelist Ralph Ellison, "were invisible men and women," and whites needed to be reminded that African American history and culture mattered. Presentations for the 1990s need to better reflect the clashes, compromises, broken alliances, failed expectations and contested terrain that shape the perspectives of today's audiences.

Yet there is no denying that more historical institutions have embraced the opportunity to explore the African American past than ever before. Much of this new openness stems from broader cultural and societal concerns that have influenced and shaped the museum profession. The struggles of the Civil Rights and "Black Power" movements in

the years since the end of the World War II seared the issues of race and justice into the nation's consciousness and made the African American experience more immediate, more visible, and more important to America's museums.

Despite an uneasy marriage between museums and academic scholarship, the relationship has provided museum curators and directors with new tools, new challenges, and new possibilities. Especially important was the impact of the "New Social History," with its clarion call to explore America's diverse past "from the bottom up." As a generation of scholars trained in the "New Social History" in the 1960s and 1970s entered the museum field, they brought new questions and interests that stimulated research, collecting, and exhibitions in African American history from the perspective of that community.

The shifting demographics of many communities served by museums also ensured that, in the words of singer Sam Cooke, "a change is going to come." As cities and suburbs evolved as a result of migration and flight, many institutions realized that they had to become more responsive to the needs of their African American neighbors, especially if they were to remain vibrant museums. At times, the new African American political leadership demanded greater accountability: If museums were to utilize public funding, then their programs, exhibitions, and collections must reflect the diversity of the region.

An important and often unacknowledged contributor to this increased African American presence was the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). At a time when the Endowments are under attack for being either superfluous or partisan, it is important to remember that the National Endowment for the Humanities has been a pivotal funding agent for America's museums of history for nearly three decades. By awarding support to institutions that explored and exhibited the black past, the NEH both helped to legitimize and to encourage the place of African American history in museums.

Ultimately, cultural institutions began to embrace the African American past once they realized what the university community has known for decades: that African American history is a vibrant, stimulating field with broad popular appeal that illuminates many aspects of American history.

Despite this decade or so of substantial

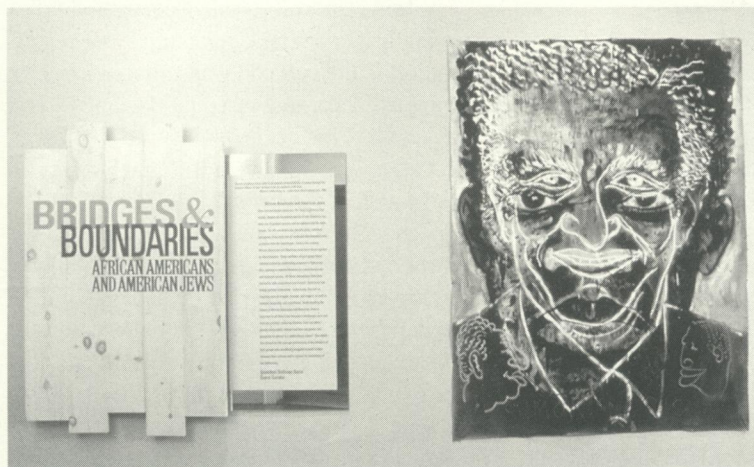


Mannequin of an African American aviator at the National Air & Space Museum. Photo courtesy of the National Air & Space Museum.

progress and change, there is a need to move the presentation of African American history in America's museums to a higher interpretive level. A level that embraces a more holistic and diverse view of the African American experience, that recognizes the need for new paradigms and alternative structures that shape both the products and process of exploring the black past in museums, and that makes the African American past meaningful and useable for all Americans. What follows are several issues and suggestions that I think will enhance the ability of public historians to explore and to make accessible the African American past.

RESISTING MONOLITHIC DEPICTIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE

When one reads African American literature, whether it is the urban poetry of Langston Hughes, the rich depictions of racial joys and sorrows in the work of Maya



From the 1992 exhibit "Bridges and Boundaries: African Americans and American Jews" at The Jewish Museum, New York, New York. Photo courtesy of The Jewish Museum and Gretchen S. Sorin.

Angelou, or the contemporary musings about love and commitment of Terry McMillan, one is struck by the richness of the mosaic of African American life. In this literature, one is introduced to a black world that abounds with differences based on class, region, gender, color, political perspective, and education. Yet far too often most museum exhibitions fail to convey this rich diversity or explore the meaning of these differences for the audience.

Usually the prism through which an exhibition explores the black community is that of the middle class. While the black middle class is central to understanding much about black life and aspirations, simply depicting that history obscures the full range of African American experiences. Because the middle class has traditionally been a small segment of the African American community, it is essential that institutions expand both the subjects and the perspectives of their public pre-

sentations. By resisting this rush to monolithic depictions of the past, museums can help visitors better understand the conflicts, negotiations, and shifting coalitions that have historically comprised most black communities. By choosing subjects for exhibition such as labor practices, gender roles, burial practices, and storefront religions, cultural institutions are more likely to provide a richer, more complex, and more complete lens into the African American past.

TRANSCENDING THE ROSY GLOW OF THE PAST

Carter G. Woodson, an African American scholar who is best remembered for the creation of Black History Month, was once asked why he became a historian. He replied that "the only reason that I do history is to make America better." If museums are to follow the words of Woodson, it is important that the profession avoid romanticizing the past, especially African American history. Often exhibitions about race exude the rosy glow of the past. The African American community is depicted as comprising upwardly mobile heroes, to whom racism and discrimination were simply obstacles to overcome. While that scenario did occur, it was the exception and not the rule during much of America's history.

What is needed is a commitment to explore the full range of African American experiences, including the difficult, controversial and ambiguous episodes. It is essential that the harsh realities of black life are

seen side-by-side with achievements and victorious struggles. The Valentine Museum and the Museum of the Confederacy, both in Richmond, Virginia, provide good examples of the presentation of slavery and race relations in the urban south. Visitors are offered a richly nuanced history that is replete with great joy and great sorrow, and all that is in between — in essence, the stuff of real history. Few institutions, however, are as willing to exhibit the difficult aspects of the African American past. Fewer still wrestle effectively with issues of violence, riots, lynching, and the devastating effects of generations of poverty and discrimination. I am not arguing that museums focus only on the harsh or the unpleasant, or depict African Americans as simple victims of history. But I do feel that museums must do a better job of mirroring the willingness of academic scholarship to examine the complexities and ambiguities of black life.

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THE NEED FOR NEW PARADIGMS

The interpretation of African American history in many cultural institutions is shoehorned into the usual museum structures, interpretive devices and modes of presentation, crafted by traditionally trained staff that is usually less than diverse. While this formula has produced important exhibitions, it is now appropriate that museums rethink and expand these

traditional paradigms in order to convey the full complexity and richness of black life. For example, some museums have already begun to shift their

involvement with African American communities into a new paradigm that recognizes the importance of developing long-term and mutually reciprocal relationships. Movement in this direction is crucial because it is not easy to tell an evocative and nuanced history without the knowledge and respect of the living African American community. This paradigm of shared responsibility recognizes the difficulties and the benefits of community influence in the development of exhibitions, programs and collections. This is not to suggest that curators abrogate their

scholarly and professional obligations. Rather that they embrace a new way of thinking that accepts the notion that strong exhibitions often grow out of balancing the tensions between community memory and academic history.

But new community-museum paradigms are not enough. Interpreting African American history — in fact exploring all of the American past — can

Interpreting African American history — in fact exploring all of the American past — can benefit greatly from the creation of an internal environment that encourages innovation, creativity and respect for differing cultural perspectives.

benefit greatly from the creation of an internal environment that encourages innovation, creativity, and respect for differing cultural perspectives. Interpreting African American history in new ways could mean an explicitly interdisciplinary approach to the past that enriches the traditional processes and visions of historians by adding folklorists, artists, ethno-musicologists, and archaeologists. Though museums have long expressed interest in an interdisciplinary approach, the actual implementation of this partnership has been too sporadic and uneven.

Even more important is the willingness of the cultural entities to stretch the parameters of traditional museum interpretation. Experimenting with content, manipulating the role and use of objects, marrying new technologies with the established interpretive devices, and expanding visual opportunities can lead to exhibitions, such as Fred Wilson's "Mining the Museum" at the Maryland Historical Society in 1993, that provide insights, engagement, learning, and real understanding about the importance and the centrality of race in American culture.

IN SEARCH OF A "NEW INTEGRATION"

In 1896, the United States Supreme Court heard a case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, pertaining to a Louisiana law that required racially segregated railroad facilities. The Court ruled that segregation of the railroad was constitutional as long as "separate but equal" facilities were available. This decision ensured that "segregation was the law of the land" throughout much of the twentieth century.

While this decision was ultimately overturned in 1954, legally ending segregation in America, the doctrine of "separate but equal" is very much alive in many cultural institutions. Far too frequently, African American history is segregated from the "other" history that museums explore. African American history is often interpret-

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ed by staff, and seen by visitors, as an interesting and occasionally instructive episode that has limited meaning for most non-African Americans. This is not to demean the efforts of museums. Clearly, it is important that museums continue to craft exhibitions that explore specific aspects of black culture and history. There is always a need for exhibitions that explore the history of the African American in Cleveland, or the African American image in advertising. But these depictions only convey part, albeit a significant part, of the story of the African American past.

What is needed is a new synthesis, a "new integration" that encourages visitors to see that exploring issues of race generally, and African American history specifically, is essential to their understanding of American history. It is useful that museums convey both the importance of race in American history and the fact that race does not simply mean "people of color." At a time when racial concerns influence our perceptions on everything from the current political debates, to the O.J. Simpson trial, to the state of popular music, museums can perform a valuable

service by demonstrating how issues of race have touched, shaped, and informed, historically, the experience of all Americans. Though a bit overstated, the words that graced billboards mounted throughout Los Angeles by the California Afro American Museum in the late 1980s illustrate this point: "Our history makes American history complete."

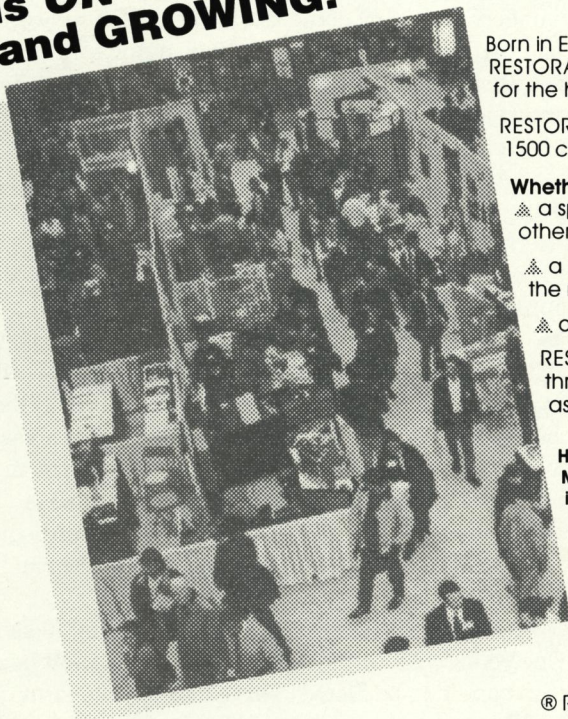
The key to this "new integration" is the creation of exhibitions that reflect the interaction among African Americans and the broader society. These presentations would explore the clashes, conflicts, compromises, and cultural borrowing that is at the core of the American past. By examining how various peoples have struggled and negotiated throughout history, these exhibits can better contextualize the contemporary situations of museum visitors. It is surprising how few effective exhibition models exist. The best of these models is the 1992 exhibition, "Bridges and Boundaries: African Americans & American Jews," curated by Gretchen S. Sorin for The Jewish Museum in New York, New York. This exhibition, by examining the shifting sentiments and interaction between African Americans and

American Jews during the twentieth century, demonstrates that in spite of conceptual challenges and inter-community tensions, the audience is treated to a richer, more complex and ultimately more satisfying history.

There are many challenges to crafting effective exhibitions that explore African American culture. Not the least of which is the many different meanings that Americans can glean from that experience. The museum profession has made great strides in the last decade. If we can continue to take risks, explore difficult questions, and create a more inclusive understanding of the American past, then the museum profession can truly become, in the words of John Cotton Dana, the pioneering early twentieth century director of the Newark Museum, "places of value and of service to the communities in which we live." →

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