

HYPERALLERGIC

The Smithsonian's African American Museum Tells the Myriad Stories of Black Heroism

Being among such a dizzying selection of uplifting stories, you cannot avoid the conclusion that America would not be what it is without all the people represented here.

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National Museum of African American History and Culture – Smithsonian (all photos courtesy of the Smithsonian)

At the newly opened National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., there is a section on the top floor designated the “Culture Galleries,” which presents examples of African American contributions to visual art, music, dance, spoken word poetry, and other performance. The area detailing the history of the African people brought to these shores who eventually went on to

create unique ways of living here is located below street level, at the foundation of the building. In the middle, the layout includes a floor of “Community Galleries,” which display exhibits on sports, military experience, faith, formal education, and examples of different residential neighborhoods with majority black populations. Other floors contain a library, classrooms, a family history center with resources for conducting research, a theater, a café, and, of course, a gift shop.



A view of the lobby from near the entrance



At the entrance to the “Culture Galleries”

This design is not naïve. The arrangement tacitly asks visitors to understand African American culture as one that is founded upon its history, and generated by it. The implicit construction of this story of culture is elaborated and deepened by the wall texts and multimedia presentations in the “Culture” section. In total, the materials convey the argument that African American culture is a series of remarkably inventive moves to make, you might say, “sumpin outta nuthin.” If you’ve lived in this country for a while, you have heard or seen evidence of this alchemy historically enacted: black soldiers distinguishing themselves in battle despite being treated as second-class citizens by their home nation; black athletes demolishing previously held records in amateur and professional arenas despite the public will being largely marshaled against them; black students finding a way to receive a public education on par with that of whites by undoing a long-standing Supreme Court decision that had installed and defended an inherently discriminatory system. The phrase “making a way out of no way,” as one of the exhibits proclaims, is an epigram that holds in tension the contravening themes of black life: Black folks are being systematically held back, cheated, and erased, but black folks gonna triumph anyway.



In the "Community Galleries"

This may seem like an exceptional position to occupy within the larger scheme of American culture. The contradictory character has the benefit of allowing the articulation of two very different tracks of political thought — one that emphasizes the resilience of black folks in the face of what sometimes seems to be an unending list of systemic privations, and the other that emphasizes our brilliance. (This contrary posture has also produced some ridiculous contortions in the American heroic imagination, concocting such figures as the magical negro to put this brilliance back into the service of whites.) But then, this is an elaboration of the *American* story, too: the ability to win despite extreme circumstances, to be persecuted and hated and rejected and yet still thrive, to wrest from the clutches of a harsh, relentlessly competitive world one's manifest destiny, to make a way in the wilderness when it seems there's no way to be found. There is much in the African American formula that is absolutely American.



The sports section of the “Community Galleries”

I think it’s this emphasis on heroism that makes the museum so wildly popular. In order to handle the deluge of people who wanted to visit upon NMAAHC’s opening, it had to install a system of timed passes, which were soon all claimed for months into the future. (As of this writing in the beginning of January, tickets are not available until May.) There is a queue to get in even with passes in hand, and there are queues for most everything inside as well: to walk the below-ground history section, to speak to someone at the information desk, to make purchases from or even enter the gift store, to speak to an invigilator on any floor, to use the restroom. I was genuinely surprised that non-black people were present in such startling numbers. I had managed to assume that mostly black people would be interested in the African American story. My editor laughed when I admitted this, saying, “Yes, I hear a lot of people who aren’t Jews have been to the Holocaust Museum.” He is perfectly right.



The sports section of the “Community Galleries”

But whereas visiting the Holocaust Museum is an invitation to empathic humanity and ethical awareness, at the NMAAHC we want to see the triumphs — all of us do. We want Serena and Venus Williams working themselves up from Compton to the top of the professional tennis world, with Arthur Ashe preceding them. Everyone crowds around the displays about Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, and Michael Jordan, still amazed by their otherworldly talents. There are far too many musicians to list, much less to fully appreciate, but among them, of course, are Prince, Stevie Wonder, Parliament, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, Roberta Flack, Ella Fitzgerald, and Nina Simone. Being among such a dizzying selection of uplifting stories, you cannot avoid the conclusion that America would not be what it is without all the people represented here. It would be a shadow, bereft of body, color, and light. To honestly see America, you have to regard black folks, because we made it.



The African American military experience section of the Community Galleries

It almost seems unnecessary to say that the NMAAHC building is outstanding in its design. It is markedly contemporary, clearly distinguished from the neoclassical design trend that shaped so many of the other museums on the Mall. The “corona” exterior alone makes it so. This feature consists of 3,600 bronze cast-aluminum panels (weighing a total of 230 tons), giving the building itself a skin that is sun-browned and dappled. It is a tiered structure with sharp corners pointed upward, suggesting a kind of non-Western crown. In other words, this architectural feature tells the same story as the objects and dioramas, the wall texts and multimedia displays: In spite of, or partly because of, the enormous pressures intended to subjugate and demean black people, we invented a culture to sustain us, and developed economic engines and civic organizations that are key to imagining a position beyond simple survival.



A view of the corona from the inside

As James Baldwin said, “All you are ever told in this country about being black is that it is a terrible, terrible thing to be. Now, in order to survive this, you have to really dig down into yourself and recreate yourself, really, according to no image which yet exists in America.” This nation needed this museum more than it may have realized. It showcases that image of self-recreation in the stark and compelling ways black people have brought it to life. We all need to see where this ethos of self-reinvention springs from, what it can produce in triumph and in catastrophe. However, the museum won’t, it *cannot* hold out the possibility of reimagining a different story (one that doesn’t begin in persecution and oppression) but rather holds visitors in thrall to this, just as it holds the figure of the black person in that contradictory pose from which we can’t seem to escape.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture is a Smithsonian Institution that was established in December 2003. The museum is located at 1400 Constitution Ave on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. President Barack Obama helped to inaugurate the institution in September of this year.