

# WE ARE STILL HERE: Bringing History to the Public in Turbulent Times

Rather than retreat from the public in the midst of a global pandemic and far reaching protests for social justice, Southern California's historic sites and museums have directly addressed our historic moment, offering innovative programming in novel formats. The *Southern California Quarterly* is showcasing a sample of these efforts in a new feature: *We are Still Here: Bringing History to the Public in Turbulent Times*

## CALIFORNIA AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM

Founded in 1977, the California African American Museum has a long and rich history. The first African American museum of art, history, and culture fully supported by a state, CAAM was the direct result of a sustained, multiyear campaign of activism undertaken by visionary founders and community members. Its creation was an early and tangible recognition by the State of California of the critically important role African Americans have played in the American West's cultural, economic, and political development.

CAAM sits among the many major institutions transforming Exposition Park and South Los Angeles, including the California Science Center, the Natural History Museum, and the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, currently under construction. The Museum's permanent collection houses 4,000 objects that span landscape painting and portraiture, modern and contemporary art, historical objects and print materials, and mixed-media artworks. Though the collection emphasizes objects pertinent to California and the American West, it also houses a growing collection of artworks from the African

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diaspora as well as important works by African Americans from across the United States. CAAM has a strong mandate to support the work of under-represented artists of color and to think expansively about the way African American artists have contributed to American culture and the world at large.

Since April, the California African American museum has provided online programming and will continue to do so in 2021. Among its offerings this Fall were conversations with Alicia Garza, co-founder of Black Lives Matter, as well as artists and graphic designers exploring documentation as a value-driven process. CAAM has provided resources for book lovers to consider James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and other titles, and curated talks about the life and times of Roman Bearden and Ming Smith's



poetic and experiential images. The museum even organized a virtual family dance class lead by the Debbie Allen Dance Academy. To celebrate 2021 Martin Luther King Day, CAAM plans an immersive virtual festival for the community. Expect vibrant programs and activities for all ages, including a panel about Black workers and social justice, a family storytime and poetry workshop, and more.

*Stacey Ravel Abarbanel, Marketing/Communications Consultant, California African American Museum, Allison in conversation with Stacey, Exposition Park*

#### LANTERMAN HOUSE

The Lanterman House is a small historic house museum located in La Cañada Flintridge, at the westernmost end of the 2 (or Frank

Lanterman) Freeway. About 2,200 visitors a year visit the house for docent-led tours or to attend one of our community events. When the state and county shut down indoor operations at museums in March, we had to quickly brainstorm what we could do, with our small staff and limited budget.

We particularly wanted to offer resources to our local school children. We designed a Virtual History Internship program for students in grades nine through twelve. We created a simple online application form, advertised the program on social media, and a few weeks later, eleven local students had signed up!

The program, which was conducted 100% remotely, trained the interns to conduct oral history interviews. Interns attended Zoom meetings, in which our archivist guided them in research methods, interview techniques, how to process and preserve interviews, and



legal and ethical guidelines. Each intern then chose a member of the community to interview and used a free recording app on their cell-phone to record the conversation.

The Lanterman House Archives will preserve the digital oral histories as part of its Oral History Collection. The interviews are currently being added to the California Revealed database as well, a nice benefit to both researchers and our interns' résumés!

The most beneficial aspect of the program, however, is the goodwill it sparked within our community. It proved to be a bridge between generations, as the young interviewed our elder residents, and introduced us to several life-long residents with whom the Lanterman House had never connected. Whether conducted in-person or online, the program is here to stay, and we are busy planning for next summer's group of interviews.

For our younger visitors, particularly the local third-grade classrooms that cap their year with a visit to the Lanterman House, we also created online educational offerings. We added several activities for children to our website and turned our third-grade local history slideshow into a narrated video presentation, through PowerPoint. This is easily done, and for fun, we had the family dog “narrate” the slideshow. We used an app called Talkr to animate a photo of a dog and added the voiceover.

In addition to our digital and virtual offerings, we were eager to create a safe in-person visitor experience. As soon as museums could resume outdoor activities, we launched a socially-distanced *Outside-In* tour of the Lanterman House. The Lanterman House was designed to take advantage of the fine California climate and features thirty-two sets of French doors and thirty-two sets of French windows, all of which allow a fine view into the interior of the residence. Visitors, guided by a docent, stroll around the patio and peek inside. The tour is best offered during the evening hours when the interior literally glows and provides a beautiful sight for visitors.

Developing the tour and training docents to lead it have proved challenging, especially as the guidelines currently don’t allow for any volunteers over the age of 65. We had to move some of our interior displays so that they could be viewed from the windows and do a lot of cleaning near doors and windows that aren’t usually opened. To be in compliance with reopening guidelines, we set up a third-party online ticket reservation system and limited the tour to a single household of no more than six people. Everyone is required to wear masks, even while outside, and we disinfect frequently touched surfaces between visitors.

The result is a fresh new tour that allows visitors to experience the house in a way that the family who lived here did. While we are looking forward to reopening for inside visitors one day, this tour will probably remain as a special offering

*Laura Verlaque, Executive Director, Lanterman Historical Museum Foundation, La Cañada Flintridge*

## HOMESTEAD MUSEUM

When safer at home orders were implemented in March 2020, the paid staff of the Homestead Museum was full of questions. What

could we do from home? How were we going to take care of the historic site? How were we going to communicate with volunteers? What resources did we need to do our work? How were we going to balance our professional and personal lives?

Quickly, though, we started answering questions and doing things we never imagined. Technology helped us facilitate staff and visitor interactions. For work groups that thrived on personal interaction, we leaned heavily on Zoom. For those who worked more independently, other systems were established. We made a point to check in with collaborators and community partners. “How are you?” is a question we asked and answered a lot.



To keep some pre-pandemic normalcy, we continued sending out a monthly electronic newsletter to our volunteers and, while we couldn't have in-person meetings as we did occasionally through the year, we scheduled virtual meetings. Near daily posts about objects, people, and places associated with the history of greater LA between 1830 and 1930 continued on our blog.

And while we cancelled or postponed events, we quickly pivoted to presenting many of these online. Our *Female Justice* series, exploring the role that a woman's reputation plays in the judicial system, was the first to go virtual in April thanks to a staff member who was accustomed to streaming video games! We looked to the expertise of

other staff members who could present workshops on genealogy and preservation. And when we had to cancel our *Ticket to the Twenties* festival, our most popular program, we presented a talk focusing on images of 1920s Los Angeles from our collection. We were fascinated to find that while some existing visitors followed us online, we also gained new attendees from places including Ohio, Illinois, New York, and even Scotland. These programs were recorded and can now be accessed on our growing YouTube channel. Once we go back to in-person programming, we plan to continue recording as many programs as possible. We also realized that by using this technology we can engage collaborators in places farther away, something we didn't think possible before due to budgetary constraints.

Then came the new projects and programming, things we never foresaw doing before the pandemic. Directly influenced by the circumstances caused by COVID-19, we created a new series for the blog called *From the Homestead Kitchen* as a way to share historical content about food, cooking, health, technology, and more, but with the wants and needs of people under quarantine or various restrictions in mind. In October, we made an escape room where players were recruited to help undo a diabolical time trap set in La Casa Nueva, our 1920s Spanish Colonial Revival home. And in November we debuted *Everything but the Turkey*, where members of the staff recreated and tasted seven dishes from a 1929 Thanksgiving menu.

4<sup>th</sup>-grade teachers and students were another group we looked to serve. Knowing we didn't have the resources to create virtual tools to go along with all of our school programs, we zeroed in on grade 4 because that's when California history is a focus. We made existing worksheets fillable for use in virtual classrooms and created an interactive timeline with embedded images, videos, and quizzes to support the curriculum. Additionally, we created an interactive Zoom component where a museum teacher meets with classes to explore the question of "How did Los Angeles change over time?" as groups analyze historic images.

Lastly, we've continued to engage with the public on social media and have tried to share content that focuses on our mission, refers to current events, and provides a respite from the current uncertainties of life.

Moving forward, there is no returning to much that we thought was "normal," nor should there be. We embrace the opportunity to

mix things we've done in the past with new projects and collaborations and to continue to reflect on ways that history can inform the future.

*Alexandra Rasic, Programs and Audience Engagement Director, Homestead Museum, City of Industry*

## GAMBLE HOUSE

Like most other museums, we were stunned in March when it became necessary for The Gamble House to close for all tours and programs due to the pandemic. We immediately knew we had to quickly come up with ways to engage the public and stay connected with our dedicated volunteers. Creating a virtual tour, something we had planned to add



## THE GAMBLE HOUSE ARCHITECTURE AS A FINE ART

in the future, quickly moved to the top of the “to do” list. Working with a local photographer, we created an interactive virtual tour that allows the public to explore the house in detail and find new reasons to return for docent-led tours when we re-open in the future. The virtual tour has proven to be a valuable learning tool, allowing us to continue our adult and junior docent training programs. We also hope to begin offering docent and curator led virtual tours by reservation to private groups and universities in the near future.

We have created a lineup of rich online programming that includes lectures, curator chats and virtual arts programs. The 2020 Sidney D. Gamble Lecture Series launched via Zoom in September

with a lecture by Gamble House Executive Director/CEO Ted Bosley, entitled “Two Sides of the Pacific: Japan and the Architecture of Greene & Greene.” Upcoming online programs include a lecture by author and historian Bob Batchelor, “Rookwood: The Rediscovery and Revival of an American Icon,” as well as a virtual holiday event and a number of soon-to-be announced author discussions. Moving event programming online has allowed us to partner with local organizations such as Lineage Dance Company and Pasadena Heritage and to create new relationships with like-minded organizations such as The Driehaus Museum Chicago, thereby expanding our reach and introducing The Gamble House to new audiences. A list of upcoming events with descriptions and ticketing information can be found at <https://gamblehouse.org/upcoming-events/>.

“Gardens & Gables: Exploring the Gamble House Outdoors,” a new one-hour tour of the Gamble House grounds and exterior, was developed to explore the context and history of the house through the gardens and terraces while reducing the risk of exposure to COVID-19 for our guests and docents. We have also added new dates for our popular Greene & Greene Neighborhood Walking Tour, a guided tour of the historic Arroyo Terrace neighborhood and a perfect companion to the new Gardens & Gables tour. Both tours have proven popular and we hope to keep them as part of our tour schedule, adding depth to our list of public and specialty tours when we reopen in the future.

*Sheryl Scott, Director of Communications, The Gamble House Conservancy, Pasadena*