Museum and Exhibit Reviews

The American public increasingly receives its history from images. Thus it is incumbent upon public historians to understand the strategies by which images and artifacts convey history in exhibits and to encourage a conversation about language and methodology among the diverse cultural workers who create, use, and review these productions. The purpose of The Public Historian’s museum and exhibit review section is to discuss issues of historical exposition, presentation, and understanding through exhibits mounted in the United States and abroad. Our aim is to provide an ongoing assessment of the public’s interest in history while examining exhibits designed to influence or deepen their understanding.

We seek to review a broad range of exhibits, including those directed to a large public audience, those that employ new or unique strategies of presentation or perception, and those that embody particularly popular or representative views of history. Occasionally, the exhibit review section will publish thematic or comparative essays that consider geographic regions, special-interest audiences, or methodological dilemmas in historical discussion or understanding.

Reviewers will assess the scholarly content of the exhibit; the extent, variety, and appropriateness of the objects displayed; the function of design in the exhibit; and issues of funding and institutional support. We welcome suggestions for museums and exhibits to review.

L.J.

The Reginald Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture, Baltimore, Maryland. Sandy Bellamy, executive director; David Taft Terry, director of collections and exhibitions.

Growing up in Maryland and in the Baltimore public school system during the 1950s and 60s, I often heard the state slogan that described Maryland as “America in Miniature.” Teachers went on to talk about the geographic diversity of Maryland, the urban and rural communities, and the various ethnic groups that made Maryland an example of America’s “melting pot,” which now seems ironic, considering the segregated early education I received. Even though I attended all-black elementary and junior high schools, which displayed greater appreciation and transmission of African American culture, I don’t actually remember learning much about the African American experience beyond “Negro History Week” and occasional references to the more
current events of the civil rights era. Moreover, my recently integrated, predominantly white high school completely overlooked African American history, avoided current events involving race, and was hardly appreciative of African American culture. Indeed, Maryland was America in miniature with polarized and adversarial ethnic and racial communities that did not “melt” and with racial attitudes and actions that relegated African Americans, their history, and their culture to second-class status.

The Reginald Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture promises to change those attitudes and actions and break down the barriers between racial and ethnic groups by educating people about the active role that Maryland African Americans have played in the development of the state, nation, and world. In an exciting way, the museum has partnered with the Maryland State Department of Education to develop and incorporate an African American curriculum directly into the state’s larger social studies curriculum. Beyond providing primary resources and helping to develop lesson plans, the museum will be linked directly to students through distance learning, outreach programs, and of course class visits. An ambitious goal is for all school children in Maryland to make at least one visit to the museum, a visit that will be well worth their while, because the museum delivers. It is well thought out from the futuristic design of the building to the selection of pictures and artifacts on display to the tone of the stories the museum tells.

The museum places the African American experience within historical, local, national, and global contexts, but perhaps more importantly, the museum takes visitors into the daily lives of ordinary people, providing a personal view of the joys and pains and the struggles and triumphs of the human spirit. The museum conveys a certain spirituality and pride that resonates on the faces of its visitors. That sense of spirituality begins with the most striking feature of the building itself, a huge “Red Wall of Freedom” that is as tall as the building and extends from the outside into the interior. Rather than impede, the wall inspires, serving more as a monument than an obstacle to overcome, and symbolizing how dreams can be accomplished though hard work and determination. The museum experience continues on the second floor, where visitors view an informative short film that provides a historical overview of black Marylanders from slavery through Jim Crow segregation and civil rights to the present. The film also introduces the themes of the permanent exhibits located on the third floor: Things Hold, Lines Connect: African American Families and Communities in Maryland; The Strength of the Mind: Black Art and Intellect; and Building Maryland, Building America: Labor and the Black Experience.

Also on the second floor is A Slave Ship Speaks: The Wreck of the Henrietta Marie, a traveling exhibit of artifacts from a salvaged slaver that sank off the coast of Florida in 1699 and a fitting first exhibit for a space dedicated to traveling and temporary displays. The exhibit, like the museum in general, offers all of the modern technology of the information age. There are interactive videos and audios with plenty of touch screens, buttons, knobs, and headphones that lead to a wealth of information. Indeed, the overwhelming
strength of the exhibit, like the museum in general, is the information that visitors receive about history and culture. Visitors learn about West African kingdoms and empires before the slave trade as well as all aspects of the transatlantic slave trade, from the routes the slavers took to the design of the ships to the make-up of the crews with audios based on first-hand accounts. They learn about the London investors, the goods used for trade (including a display of an English pewter factory), the slave economy, slavery in Africa, and slave resistance and abolition. Throughout, visitors view an assortment of artifacts salvaged from the wreck, including shackles, chains, eating utensils, a cook stove, firearms, and so forth, all with informative commentary. The central and most moving feature of the exhibit is a re-creation of the ship’s “cargo” hold with faceless forms of Africans that convey unimaginable suffering. In total, the exhibit informs, dismays, and brings into focus the horrors of the Middle Passage and the question of people’s inhumanity to people.

The third floor is dedicated to the museum’s permanent exhibits and is divided into the three themes noted in the introductory film. Though separate, the exhibits merge to make a seamless whole. Viewing the exhibits is like taking a stroll through a living history with glimpses into the scrapbooks, photo albums, diaries, and work ledgers of black Marylanders, both famous and ordinary. Indeed, the museum offers a collage of images and faces, young faces, old faces, crying faces, laughing faces, working faces, and faces of determination. Each section opens with a closed-caption video, and each utilizes various media to tell its stories. The Things Hold, Lines Connect: African American Families and Communities in Maryland exhibit chronicles African American history from slavery to freedom, juxtaposing the local and the national. Visitors learn about the creation of local black communities around the state and the role of black Marylanders and African Americans in general in the Underground Railroad, the Great Migration, the nation’s wars, the civil rights movement, local and national politics, and so much more. Visitors can sit in a re-creation of an urban church and view a video on the importance of the black church and religion or listen to a barbershop conversation on the state of life. The lynching display is both moving and disturbing and conveys the sense of isolation and despair that victims must have faced.

The Building Maryland, Building America: Labor and the Black Experience exhibit highlights the various occupations of black Marylanders and is an exercise in material culture with many examples of the tools, equipment, and clothing particular to different trades and industries. Visitors walk into the tobacco plantations of Southern Maryland and the iron works to the North where slave men and women labored in a restrictive society. They travel to the coal mines of Western Maryland, the maritime and seafood industries along Maryland’s Eastern Shore, the aircraft industry in Central Maryland, and the various service industries and professional occupations that helped build Maryland’s urban communities. The final exhibit, The Strength of the Mind: Black Art and Intellect, highlights the vibrant aesthetic and intellectual contributions of the African American community. Observing the displays and video
of the commerce and nightlife of Baltimore’s famed Pennsylvania Avenue is like taking a swing dance into a jazzy past. There are also displays and videos on the performing arts with an emphasis on youth and plenty of poetry, music, paintings, and sculptures by Maryland artists. The exhibit also emphasizes education, and visitors can sit in a recreation of a rural schoolhouse and view a video on the struggle against segregated education and the importance of education in the black community.

The museum is a collaboration and a dream of various segments of the Maryland community, and while it is dedicated to the history and culture of black Marylanders, it is significant for all Americans. If a measure of a museum is how much time you need to see everything coupled with how much time you want to spend to see everything, then the Reginald Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture gets high a grade for both. There is a lot to see and do. As a professor of African American history, I could easily teach my courses in the museum and have a wealth of primary source materials at my fingertips, and with all of this, the museum has room to grow. I was never convinced of Maryland as America in miniature, but the museum has convinced me that at the least Maryland is “African America in Miniature.”

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In 1986, E. L. Doctorow wrote: “We have had the bomb on our mind since 1945. It was first our weaponry and then our diplomacy and now it’s our economy. . . . The great golem we have made against our enemies is our culture, our bomb culture—its logic, its faith, its vision.” The recently opened Atomic Testing Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada confirms Doctorow’s observation. It also reminds one of how nuclear weapons permeated all aspects of society during the Cold War, when American citizens and their government accepted—at times even welcomed—the explosion of hundreds of nuclear weapons within their own homeland. By presenting the science and spectacle of nuclear weapons testing, the Atomic Testing Museum tells visitors of the price these activities had for Americans.

The Atomic Testing Museum is located just off the Las Vegas Strip, some seventy miles from the 1,375 square miles of the Nevada Test Site (NTS) where the United States conducted hundreds of atmospheric and underground tests during the Cold War. Dedicated in February 2005, the museum is operated by the Nevada Test Site Historical Foundation, which was founded in 1998 “for the purpose of preserving and interpreting” the history of the NTS. The museum was financed with public funds as well as private donations and is a member of the Smithsonian Institution Affiliates Program.