

***PLENTY GOOD ROOM:
AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUMS
AT THE MILLENNIUM***

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ABSTRACT: Research into the history and status of African American museums begins with a definition and brief history of museums, a discussion of museology, a canvas of the Black museum movement, art world racism and future challenges. This background information will inform Humanities Center discussions of approaches to examining the history and underlying philosophy of African American museums, as well as evaluating their educative or political or social role.

DRAFT: PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE.

Growing up a fourth generation Washingtonian during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1960s, I developed a passionate affinity for Black culture and heritage. I knew from an early age that I wanted to be a Black cultural worker. I pursued a Black Studies undergraduate curriculum and thoroughly enjoyed the Black Aesthetic Movement of the 1970s and 1980s. African American Studies librarianship is my career choice. My family history, educational efforts, personal hobbies and research interests are a reflection of this quest. The opportunity to research African American museums at the turn of the century is a largess for which I am truly grateful.

As this is the midway point of my research project, this paper should be treated as a work in progress. Its arrangement reflects my structural approach to investigating the recent history and current status of African American museums. After a brief history of museums and museology, the paper will chronicle the Black Museum Movement of the second half of the twentieth century. With a discussion of new museum initiatives and art world racism, the future of African American museums may be conjectured.

Museum Studies and Black Studies are still quite young, both dating back to the 1960s. Paradigms in both fields are evolving. My challenge is to syncretize applications from both fields in an investigation of African American museums. Discussions derived from information on these pages will inform the second half of this research effort.

DEFINING MUSEUMS

The term ‘museum’ derives from the Greek mouseion, a place of contemplation or a seat of the Muses. The Romans used the term to describe a place of philosophical discussion. By the seventeenth century, ‘museum’ was used to describe collections of curiosities, and by the eighteenth century the term had come to mean an institution set up to preserve and display a collection owned by and open to the public. Since the eighteenth century, ‘museum’ has come to mean a building used for the storage and exhibition of objects relating to the cultural heritage rather than the collection itself.

The most widely accepted current definition of a museum is that incorporated in the Statutes of the International Council of Museums (ICOM)¹ and adopted at the Eleventh General Assembly of ICOM in Copenhagen in 1974 (and in 1987). This defines a museum as:

A non-profitmaking, permanent institution, in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves,

¹ Founded in 1947, ICOM is an independent professional organization that provides a forum for more than 7000 members in 119 countries through its committees, publications, and activities. Working closely with UNESCO and other world organizations, its mission is to develop new museums and to forge links between existing ones through the national governing committees that are responsible to the parent body. A general meeting of ICOM is held in a different country every three years, and some 20 international committees meet in the intervening years.

researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment.²

The definition used by the American Association of Museums (founded in 1906) included botanical gardens, zoological parks, aquaria, planetaria, historical societies, and historic houses and sites. These definitions relate to museums that are public institutions, supported from public funds. More recently the emphasis on the building has become less dominant with the advent of open-air museums, 'ecomuseums' comprising series of buildings as well as objects, and virtual museums.

BRIEF HISTORY OF MUSEUMS

The museum most frequently cited as the forerunner of the present-day museum was the museum at Alexandria, founded c.290 BC by Ptolemy I. Soter as an institute for advanced research and populated by scholars from the whole of the Greek East and supported later by Roman Emperors.³ While there is little doubt that the Alexandrian Museum contained some objects and that it was associated with a botanical and zoological park, its primary function was as a center for philosophical learning. We also have descriptions of collecting in Classical Antiquity, in Islam and in the Orient. The

² ICOM Statutes. Online. Available: <http://www.icom.org/statutes.html>

³ The state-supported community of scholars included apartments, a dining hall, lecture hall, cloister, botanical garden, zoological park, astronomical observatory, and library. Objects such as surgical and astronomical instruments, animal hides, elephant tusks, statues, and portrait busts were also housed there and used for teaching. The museum and most of its library were destroyed about AD 270 during civil disturbances.

"Museum," *Microsoft® Encarta® 98 Encyclopedia*. © 1993-1997.

history of European collecting, revived during the Renaissance, is well documented. Such an appraisal of collecting by sub-Saharan African peoples is cursory at best. The acquisition of private collections by corporate bodies with the intention of making them available to the public began in the sixteenth century. England's first public museum was the Ashmolean Museum at the University of Oxford, which opened in 1683. It was followed by the British Museum, opened in 1759 by the British government to house the collections of Sir Hans Sloane, Sir Robert Cotton and Robert Harley, the Earl of Oxford. Royal collections formed the basis of many public museums in Europe. The Musée du Louvre in Paris came into being following the French Revolution in 1789 and the creation of the Republic in 1792. The museum was based on the confiscated and nationalized royal collections which were made accessible to the public with the opening of the Louvre in 1793. Among other museums founded in the Age of Enlightenment were the National Museum in Naples (1738); the Uffizi in Florence (1743); the Museo Sacro (1756) and the Museo Pio Clementino (1770-74), parts of the Vatican Museum complex; and the National Science Museum in Madrid (1771). Royal collections were opened to public view in Vienna (1700), Dresden, Germany (1746), and at the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg (1765).

It was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that the role of museums in contributing to national consciousness began to be recognized in Europe. For example, the national museum in Budapest opened in 1802 and was financed from money raised by voluntary taxes, and a museum in Prague, founded in 1818 specifically to foster cultural identity and the study of Czech and Slovak peoples. Learned and scientific societies were another major influence in museum development. The

ownership of many of these collections was transferred to public bodies from the nineteenth century onwards.

In the United States, the early museums tended to be either society museums like the Charleston Museum of the Charleston Library Society of South Carolina, which began collecting in 1773, or private museums like Charles Willson Peale's Museum in Philadelphia, opened in 1786. The origins of the United States National Museum can be traced to the bequest of James Smithson (1765-1829), 'to the United States of America, to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.'⁴ In 1846, the U. S. Senate approved an Act establishing the Smithsonian Institution, which included the Smithson material. The United States National Museum was not formally established by Congress until 1870, although collections had been displayed in 'the Castle', the Smithsonian building, since 1858.

By the late nineteenth century, there were very few museums outside Europe and the United States. The influence of the major colonial powers led to some expansion of museums in their territories. The South African Museum in Cape Town, begun in 1825, is recorded as the first museum in sub-Saharan Africa. In Africa, before the emergence of public museums, the various religious shrines found in different communities acted as repositories for religious objects and in some cases, for other cultural objects as well.⁵

⁴ "Smithsonian Institution," Microsoft® Encarta® 98. © 1999 Microsoft Corporation.

⁵ Okita, S. I. O. "A Temple or a forum: the quest for an African Museum." IN Afigbo, A. E. and S.I.O. Okita. The museum and nation building. (Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria: New Africa Pub. Co., 1985): 65.

MUSEUM STUDIES

The study of museums is relatively recent, dating back to the establishment of university departments in this field in the 1960s. Museum studies can be defined as the study of all aspects of the theory and practice of the museum operation. Museology, museum science, is the branch of knowledge concerned with the study of the purposes and organization of museums. It has to do with the study of the history and background of museums, their role in society, specific systems for research, conservation, education and organization, relationship with the physical environment, and the classification of different kinds of museums. Museography is the body of techniques related to museology. It covers methods and practices in the operation of museums.⁶

Museology, as a relatively new discipline, historically has not been seen as a theoretical or humanistic discipline.⁷ Yet, museums are more than places of study, or education or entertainment. The very act of collecting has a political or ideological or aesthetic dimension that cannot be overlooked. Changing paradigms in museum studies and in Black studies can inform the current study of African American museums. The organization of the research project will attempt to detail the history and purpose of African American museums, their architecture and design, the collections, research efforts, preservation, presentation, and cultural and educational activities. The project

⁶ ICOM Statutes. Online. Available: <http://www.icom.org/statutes.html>

⁷ Hudson, Kenneth. Museums of Influence. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 3.

will look at the different types of museum, association activities, interpretation and communication, management, and their protection of the cultural heritage.

HISTORY OF BLACK ART COLLECTIONS

Prior to 1950, historically Black universities and libraries were the major repositories of African American art and culture in the United States. Hampton University in Hampton, VA, boasts the largest (more than 9,500 objects) and oldest (established 1894) institutional collection. In 1967 the Harmon Foundation, an organization committed to recognizing and encouraging African American achievement, donated nearly half of its holdings to Hampton. The art collections at Howard University, in Washington, D.C., and Fisk University, in Nashville, TN, began in the early 1930s. In 1955 Howard's museum was expanded by the acquisition of a collection of paintings and African sculptures of their philosopher and critic Alain Locke. Fisk houses a large number of murals, paintings, and graphic works by Aaron Douglas, who taught there from 1937 to 1966. Works by African American artists also make up a significant part of the Art and Artifact Collection at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (established in 1926). The Schomburg Center accepted a large body of works from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1940s.

The following institutions have been collecting African American art long before it became valuable to mainstream collectors: The Museum of North Carolina Central University, the James E. Lewis Museum at Morgan State University, the I.P. Stanback Museum and Planetarium at South Carolina State University, Spelman College, Clark Atlanta University, the Diggs Gallery of Winston-Salem State University, and the

African American Museum in Dallas.⁸ Black communities supported independent museums for brief periods from the 1920s forward. Besides serving as places of worship, Black churches have also facilitated the exhibition of African America's cultural heritage. Black artists often exhibited their work in the dining halls of the churches because the public art museums and private galleries were closed to them.

There are several museums devoted exclusively to African American art, but with works by over 100 African American artists, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art (NMAA) in Washington, D.C., is the most expansive collection of African American art in the United States.⁹ Chicago's South Side Community Art Center is the only Depression era WPA art facility still in existence. The Du Sable Museum in Chicago, IL was established in 1961 and is the home of the Palmer C. Hayden Collection and Archives. Since its birth in 1975, the Museum of African American Art in Los Angeles, California, has built up a collection of more than 800 works from the WPA period (1935-1943) and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. After serving African American artists for years by providing them with working and exhibition space, places such as the National Center for African American Artists and the Studio Museum in Harlem began their permanent collections in 1978 and 1982, respectively.

⁸ Taha, Halima. Collecting African American art: works on paper and canvas. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1998): 92.

⁹ Perry, Regina A. Free within Ourselves: African American Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art. (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1992): 12.

Large Black-owned companies have also become important patrons and collectors of African American art. In 1949, to celebrate the dedication of a new building, the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company of Los Angeles commissioned American artists Charles Alston and Hale Woodruff to paint two murals documenting the history of Blacks in California. John H. Johnson, publisher of Ebony and Jet magazines, the Chicago-based Johnson Publishing Company, possesses a large number of works by African American artists. Herman J. Russell Construction Co., Inc. has excellent corporate art collection in Atlanta.

Private collections of African American art are numerous. Many of these collections, such as those of Richard V. Clarke and Walter and June Christmas, also include African and Caribbean art. John and Vivian Hewitt have amassed a comprehensive body of 20th-century artwork since they began collecting in 1949. Begun in the 1970s, the Walter Evans collection of African American art is particularly strong in 19th-century landscape paintings as well as works executed during the WPA period. Dancers Geoffrey Holder and Carmen de Lavallade collect art from Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. Contemporarily, major collectors include entertainer and philanthropists William H. and Camille O. Cosby, media mogul Oprah Winfrey, and Professor David Driskell.

THE BLACK MUSEUM MOVEMENT 1950-1980

History museums are vital to the process of generating and maintaining collective memory. Collective memory is the summation of remembrances most useful to particular social groups, including families, ethnic groups, social classes and even

nations. Such groups support collective memory because it helps them to retain their identities and to function more successfully in the larger society. Black museums have chronicled the tragedies and triumphs of African Americans. As repositories of African American history, culture and art, Black museums offer a window on the African Diaspora and Blacks' subsequent struggle for freedom.

In the 1940s, Dr. Margaret Burroughs and several Chicagoans gathered to form the National Negro Museum and Historical Foundation.¹⁰ While that effort did not last, in 1961 Margaret and Charles Burroughs (educators and fine artists in their own right) established the Ebony Museum of Negro History and Art in their Chicago home. As "Ebony" was a trademarked name of the Johnson Publishing Company, the museum founders sought to honor the city's first permanent settler, Jean Baptiste Pointe Du Sable. The DuSable Museum of African American History, Inc., opened at 3806 South Indiana Avenue, across the street from the Southside Community Art Center.

The San Francisco African-American Historical and Cultural Society was founded in 1955 by the merging of two history clubs. Cleveland's African American Museum was established in 1956 to correct omissions in Black history. Thirty-four Detroit residents, led by obstetrician Dr. Charles H. Wright founded the Museum of African American History in 1965. The Junior Council of the Museum of Modern Art, later the Studio Museum in Harlem, found working space for artists in a rented loft in 1967. That same year, the Smithsonian Institution set up a satellite museum in a theater in Anacostia, one of Washington's African American neighborhoods. Their goal was to

¹⁰ Feldman, Eugene Pieter. The birth and the building of the DuSable Museum. ([Chicago]: DuSable Museum Press, 1981): 13.

bring exhibition space into neighborhoods and familiarize residents with museums in the hope that they would then patronize the larger Smithsonian facilities.

The 1960s, with the push for civil rights, saw the widespread establishment of Black history as a scholarly discipline and the redefinition of a Black aesthetic in the framework of Pan Africanism. The rapid growth of African American museums in the 1970s paralleled the interest in Black Studies. Northwestern University alum Margaret Walker Alexander noted in her keynote address at the Conference to Assess the State of Black Arts and Letters in the United States (Chicago 1972),

“We can be eternally grateful for the revolutionary decade of the 60’s for a cultural re-awakening to the worth of our heritage, and the great potential of our peoples’ destiny. What we inherit from the civil rights movement and the black revolution of racial consciousness are gems of inestimable worth. They have given us renewed pride and dignity and a greater sense of manhood and womanhood. They have moved us one step closer toward emancipation of mind and spirit. For we no longer possess a mass slave mentality. Culturally we have watched a renaissance of the arts mushrooming across the length and breadth of this land. We have been inspired by all our martyred men. Medgar, Malcolm, and Martin...”¹¹

The country’s celebration of its Bicentennial prompted many individuals and groups to save their special history before it was lost. Federal funds were available for the interpretation of American history. African Americans encouraged local and national institutions to document and recognize their contributions to the nation. The National Afro-American Museum and Culture Center in Wilberforce, OH was the outgrowth of a congressional commission that was financed by state funds for construction and exhibits. This federal museum, a joint project of the state of Ohio and the federal government, was

organized in 1972 and opened its newly constructed building in 1988. The California Afro-American Museum was chartered by the state in 1977 and became a part of the state budget in 1981. It is the only state chartered and funded museum in the country.

Institutions emerging during the 1970s include:

1970 African American Museum of Nassau County (Hempstead, NY)

1971 Black American West Museum and Heritage Center (Denver, CO)

1974 Museum of African American Life and Culture (Dallas, TX)

1974 Rhode Island Black Heritage Society (Providence, RI)

1975 Museum of African American Art (Tampa, FL)

1976 Afro-American Historical & Cultural Museum (Philadelphia, PA)

1976 Great Plains Black Museum (Omaha, NB)

1979 Black Fashion Museum (New York City, NY)

1979 Delta Blues Museum (Clarksdale, MS)

1979 George Washington Carver Museum (Austin, TX)

1979 Mary McLeod Bethune Museum and Archives (Washington, D.C.)

A NEW GENERATION: BLACK MUSEUMS, 1980-1990

The expansion of Black museums in the economically deprived 1980s was fueled by a growing sophistication in fund-raising and public finance skills partly tied to the growth of minority political power. The Anacostia Museum, the California Museum of

¹¹ Alexander, Margaret Walker. "Agenda for action: Black art and letters, 1972" IN The

Afro-American History and Culture, the Philadelphia Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art and the National Afro-American Museum and Culture Center were expanded, restored, and renovated. Black elected officials fully supported public funding efforts for design and expansion. John Fleming, of Boston's Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, felt that the initiative had come from the Black community, spurred by a growing need to replenish knowledge about Black History.

“I think there is a ground swell of interest from black people... The more they see, the more they want to see. People are taking an interest in their own history and culture. We know that the white-dominated museums do very little exhibiting black culture, and even when they do, it is usually once a year.”¹²

Agreeing with Fleming, Anacostia's John Kinard stated:

“Those [museums] that have lasted and those that are coming on stream are responding to a modern day cultural imperative. Blacks sense a need to complete their life cycle. For a long time, education was our main kingdom – the route to liberation. Then the political kingdom, then the social. Now is the cultural kingdom. Culture embraces religion, lifestyle, heritage and all the questions that have to do with being. So, we are saying who we are. We used to go and say, We need this. Now we are saying, What can we do for ourselves? The museums are responding to this need to define ourselves.”¹³

The end of the 1980s witnessed a Black cultural renaissance. Perhaps sparked by Black postmodernist discourse, there was a flourishing of cultural expression and exchanges. Atlanta launched a biennial National Black Arts

Ebony Handbook. (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1974): 434

¹² Trescott, Jacqueline. “Museums on the move.” American Visions 1 (March/April 1986): 26.

¹³ Ibid. 26-27.

Festival. The National Black Theater Festival in Winston-Salem is a benchmark in dramatic history. Toronto's Caribbeana, Detroit's African World Festival, New York's Harlem Week, and Chicago's African Festival of the Arts are few of numerous community gatherings. Museums were strong participants, if not organizers of major programs and festivals. Museums opening in the 1980s include:

1980 Booker-Thomas Museum (Lexington, KY)

1983 Chattanooga Afro-American Heritage Museum & Research Center (TN)

1983 Great Blacks in Wax Museum (Baltimore, MD)

1985 Avery Normal Institute (Charleston, SC)

1985 Harriet Tubman Historical and Cultural Museum (Macon, GA)

1988 America's Black Holocaust Museum (Milwaukee, WI)

1988 Motown Historical Museum

The assortment of African American museums established in the 1990s is impressive. Several initiatives document, showcase and re-create the era of the Civil Rights Movement. The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute opened its doors in 1992. Dedicated to the legacy of social change and the fight for civil rights at both national and international levels, the research facility and museum symbolize a commitment to the past and education for the future. The Lorraine Motel, site of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is now the National Civil Rights Museum. Room 306 has been meticulously preserved. The Brown family, of the historic Supreme Court decision *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education*, is advancing plans to create a museum

documenting school segregation and integration. Plans are underway by the Sit In Movement, Inc. to create a museum at the site of the 1960 sit-in demonstration at the Greensboro, NC Woolworth's.

In 1991, the Museum of African American Art opened in Tampa, FL, to showcase the Barnett-Aden Collection. The Oklahoma Museum of African American Art is a response to the public desire for cultural representations. Kansas City's (MO) 18th and Vine Historic District revitalized the area and presented new museums. The Black Archives of Mid-America, the National Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, and the Kansas City Jazz Museum, which opened with 2,000 items on display and a new jazz club called the Blue Room, are central attractions. The Eubie Blake Museum and Cultural Center opened in Baltimore in 1993. Maryland's Benjamin Banneker Historical Park and Museum is representative of efforts to reclaim and restore Black historic sites. Arizona's African American museum efforts include the Fort Huachuca Museum and the Carver/Phoenix Union High Schools Museum and Cultural Center.

The country's first African American children's museum, the Bronzeville Children's Museum, opened in a very busy shopping mall on the Southside of Chicago. Designed for children ages 3-11, it is an important effort to acquaint very young children with the history and accomplishments of people of African descent. Two new waxworks museums were founded, the African American Wax Museum in New York City and the Black World History Wax Museum in St. Louis.

FIASCO ON THE MALL

Tom Mack, president of a Washington D.C. tour bus company, Tourmobile, was the chairman of the National Council for Education and Economic Development (NCEED).

Mack founded NCEED in 1984 for the purpose of establishing a federally supported African American museum on the Mall. Mack enlisted the support of the late Congressman Mickey Leland (D-TX) and other members of the Congressional Black Caucus to begin fashioning legislation to create an African American museum in 1985. Leland had sponsored House Joint Resolution 666, which expressed a Sense of Congress that an African American Heritage Museum should be built to recognize the heritage and accomplishments of all African Americans. This passed into law on October 21, 1986.

When Rep. John Lewis (D-GA) joined the museum effort, he introduced H.R. 1570 that authorized the establishment of the National African American Heritage Memorial Museum. This legislation contained a provision calling for the establishment of a National Trust for African American Museums. This controversial addition was seen as a threat to the entire national African American museum effort. Unable to reach agreement on this particular matter, Rep. Leland, with the support of Tom Mack, introduced his own bill without a National Trust provision. Leland was tragically killed in a plane crash in Ethiopia in August 1989. The following month, it was H.R. 1570 that was before Bill Clay, Chairman of the House Administration Subcommittee on Libraries and Memorials.

The national museum effort had been debated in the African American community. Disagreements between Rep. Lewis and Tom Mack delayed the legislation. Mr. Mack felt that the Smithsonian “cannot and will not handle African-American history the way a responsible group of African-American scholars, historians and educators can.”¹⁴ Mack wanted a separate board of directors that was majority Black. Howard Dodson, chief of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, felt that the

Smithsonian's position and reputation would enhance the museum's credibility. Some feared that such a project might take away from local African American museums searching for donors of artifacts.

In 1988 Rep. Lewis and Sen. Paul Simon (D-IL) sponsored legislation (H. R. 5305) calling for the formation of a museum dedicated to African Americans as a bureau of the Smithsonian Institution. A blue ribbon panel to study proposals for a new African American Heritage Museum on the Mall was named by the Smithsonian. Dr. Mary Schmidt-Campbell, then commissioner of cultural affairs for New York City, was chair of the 22 member advisory board. Members of the African American Institutional Study Advisory Committee¹⁵ included:

Joy Austin, president of the African American Museums Association

Thomas Battle, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University

Lerone Bennett, historian and executive editor of Ebony magazine

Donald Bogle, film historian

Elizabeth Broun, director of the National Museum of American History

Spencer Crew, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

Howard Dodson, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

David Driskell, Department of Art, University of Maryland

Samella Lewis, Editor, International Review of African American Art

James Mayo, Anacostia Museum, Smithsonian Institution

¹⁴ Guilford, LeGina. "Black Museum Raises Debate." Black Enterprise 22.9 (April 1992) 19.

¹⁵ Smithsonian Institution. African American Institutional Study. Final report of the African American Institutional Study. Compiled by Claudine Brown, committee members, Mary Schmidt Campbell... [Et al.]. Washington, D.C.: African American Institutional Study, Smithsonian Institution, 1991.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian
Institution

A.B. Spellman, director of the National Endowment for the Arts expansion arts program

Cornel West, professor of religion and director of the Afro-American Studies program at
Princeton University

Deborah Willis, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

The Committee was to submit its final report to Smithsonian chief Robert McCormick Adams in February of 1991 after meeting on four occasions to explore planning and developing the museum. The proposal submitted called for establishment of the museum in the East Hall of the Arts and Industries Building on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., with a board structure modeled on the National Museum of the American Indian. The African American Museums Association was disappointed by the institutional study. Again the debate over the governance of a National Trust was at the center of their concerns. The House of Representatives unanimously passed legislation to authorize a National African American Museum at the Smithsonian Institution on June 29, 1993.

At the end of the 103rd Congress, Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC) single handedly killed the bill authorizing the establishment of the National African-American Museum (H.R. 277, S.877). The project had strong support from both parties in the House. Sen. Helms was the lone senator who publicly opposed the creation of the museum. Over a 19-month period, Helms raised detailed questions about the museum's mission, staffing requirements and funding. Helms delayed a vote on the bill in the Senate rules and administration committee for months before it was approved on June 9, 1994. Then he

planned to offer some fifteen amendments, which would have kept it in debate in the Senate for months.

Helms objected to the museum on financial and policy grounds. He wanted no federal support for the museum, deferring to the \$4.6 trillion national debt. Helms responded to the internal debate in the African American community by asking, “How will the Smithsonian deal with requests by other groups – e.g., the nation of Islam, or other black separatist groups – who may desire to participate in the museum’s planning, operations, programs or activities?”¹⁶ The Smithsonian responded that the museum was “committed to telling the whole story of African-American history,” but that Smithsonian curators will have the “final say.”¹⁷ Helms also felt that other minority groups would want their own museums if the African American Museum were authorized. Sen. Helms’ reputation of opposing pro-Black legislation added to the dispute. It also appeared to be his political retaliation against another sponsor of the bill, Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun (D-IL). The African American senator led a successful effort to kill a Helms measure to grant the Daughters of the Confederacy a patent for a Confederate flag insignia. The African American Museum legislation never reached the Senate floor.

The board of regents of the Smithsonian supported the museum and established task force committees for long range planning in 1992. A Collections Identification Project began in 1991. On February 1, 1995, Rep. Lewis and 52 co-sponsors introduced authorizing legislation for the proposed museum (H.R.786) to both chambers of the 104th Congress. The bill was referred to the House Transportation and Infrastructure

¹⁶ Rosenberger, Jack. “Helms blocks African-American Museum” Art in America 82 (December 1994): 27.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Committee. In 1995 the Museum Project became the Center for African American History and Culture, administratively a part of the Smithsonian's Anacostia Museum. It continues to mount exhibits and programs in the Arts and Industries Building. As it was not the first effort to include an African American museum on the mall, it will probably come before Congress again.

ART WORLD RACISM

Fred Wilson's installation piece, "Guarded View," may be the most prophetic comment on racism in American museums. In 1991, he displayed four Black, featureless mannequins dressed in the security uniforms of four New York City museums. In our nation's premiere museums, frequently the only African Americans there are guards and housekeeping staff. Wilson takes social justice as his subject and museology as his medium.¹⁸ He created the award winning installation, "Mining the Museum," sponsored by the Museum for the Contemporary Arts in Baltimore in 1992. The installation used artifacts found at the Maryland Historical Society to explore the ways in which the Historical Society defined itself and Maryland's history by excluding the experience of African Americans in the state. Wilson juxtaposed seemingly unrelated objects to reinforce his point of how museums consciously or unwittingly reinforce racist beliefs and behavior. For example, in an exhibit case displaying 19th-century silver work, he included a set of slave shackles crafted at the same time.

¹⁸ Stein, Judith E. "Sins of omission." *Art in America* 81.10 (October 1993): 110.

Howardena Pindell's view on racism in the art world certainly applies to the experiences of African American artists and museums.

“There is a closed circle which links museums, galleries, auction houses, collectors, critics, and art magazines. The institutions which were opened to address the needs of artists of color, because of the racial bias which closed them out of the primary network, are rarely if ever permitted to enter this closed circuit, thus closing access routes to broader documentation of artists of colors' activities and achievements.”¹⁹

The 1999 Statistical Abstract of the United States counts more than 5.5 million “museums, historical sites and similar institutions”²⁰. Their sales, revenue, receipts, and shipments are more than \$6.5 billion, with an annual payroll of \$1.8 billion for 91 million employees. There is a need to investigate how these statistics are reflected the African American community. There need be more discussions on affirmative action, cultural diversity, and the need for culturally or racially specific museums.²¹ A rethinking and a reorientation of major institutions might transform them from bastions defending and reinforcing the values and vision of the white world into institutions that reflect and celebrate the reality of America today.

African American museum founders sought to create institutions that centered on their communities' experiences. Edmund Barry Gaither notes,

¹⁹ Pindell, Howardena. “Art world racism: a documentation.” New Art Examiner 16.7 (March 1989): 32.

²⁰ Statistical Abstract of the United States. Online. Available: <http://www.census.gov/prod/99pubs/99statab/sec27.pdf> 11 November 1999.

²¹ Kurin, Richard. “Our society does not need culturally or racially specific museums.” CMS Bulletin 1.1 (May 1993): 4 pages. Online. Available: <http://www.si.edu/cms/bull/may93/kurin.htm> 11 November 1999, and Brown, Claudine. “Community focused museums: reflecting the reality of a plurality.” CMS Bulletin 1.2 (October 1993): 3 pages. Online. Available: <http://www.si.edu/cms/bull/oct93/brown.htm> 11 November 1999.

“The close relationship between African American museums and their communities permits the museums to validate the communities’ experiences. For this reason, the museums’ programs often have a familiarity and a truthfulness that cause the communities to feel a strong bond of kinship with the institutions. Using both conventional and new program formats, these museums provide exciting models for forging community-museum marriages.”²²

RESEARCH ON AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUMS

Continuing their institution building tradition, Dr. Margaret Burroughs and Dr. Charles Wright began a series of conferences for Black museums. The National Association of Museums and Cultural Organizations was an outgrowth of those first meetings. In 1975, it became the Black Museums Conference. With funding from the National Museum Act/ Smithsonian Institution, a series of meetings at six Black museums laid the groundwork for another organization. The African American Museums Association (AAMA) was formed, in Detroit in February 1978, to encourage and strengthen Black museums and to facilitate networking among them.

AAMA was headquartered at the National Center for Artists in Boston. The AAMA hired its first full time executive director, Joy Ford Austin, and relocated to the Mary Mcleod Bethune Museum and Archives in 1980. The AAMA had difficult times at the beginning of the decade, with staffing problems and tax concerns. Closing its Washington D.C. office, the organization moved to the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, OH. Rebuilding its infrastructure, the group was renamed the Association of African American Museums in 1998. American Visions is

²² Gaither, Edmund Barry. “Hey! That’s mine”: thoughts on pluralism and American Museums.” IN Museums and communities: the politics of public culture. Edited by Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992): 62.

the official magazine of the Association of African American Museums. The Association also produces *Scrip*, a quarterly publication for its membership.

While this examination is of a relatively small number of institutions, data on African American museums and historical organizations is very incomplete. Nor is there actual data detailing the dispersal of African and African American artifacts and collections housed in miscellaneous museums, historical societies, libraries, and archives. Guides to African American museums are found in reference sources, such as the *Directory of Afro-American Resources*,²³ *Handbook of Black Librarianship*,²⁴ and Black heritage sites²⁵. Black guide books, travel brochures, regional magazines, and the Black Press prominently and frequently feature African American museums in their publications

In 1986-87, the African American Museums Association, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, surveyed its 99 institutional members to ascertain a profile of Black museums. With 52 respondents, Black museums tended to be history museums (42%), ethnic cultural centers (19%), art museums (15%), and historic houses or sites (13%). They were located in cities (89%), primarily in the East (82.6), with most in the Northeast (58%). Their annual budgets ranged from \$2,000-\$1,300,00, with a mean of \$208, 763 (28% had less than \$50,00; 23% had \$50,000-\$100,00; 26% had \$100,000-\$250,00; and 23% had over \$250,00). Their dependence on funding was at 47%, with individual gifts, donations and businesses contributing under %10.

²³ Race Relations Information Center. *Directory of Afro-American resources*. Edited by Walter Schatz. New York, R. R. Bowker Co., [1970].

²⁴ *Handbook of Black librarianship*. Compiled and edited by E. J. Josey and Ann Allen Shockley. Littleton: Libraries Unlimited, inc., 1977.

Personnel and physical plant costs consumed the bulk of funds, leaving little for acquisition, exhibitions, preservation, and cataloging. Most Black museums have a sales shop (52%). The average staff size was seven with 88% of the institutions reporting unfilled positions. The typical building space was approximately 10,500 square feet.²⁶

The study found that collections at Black museums consisted of photographs, books and manuscripts, paintings, wooden sculptural objects, and textiles. Most of the museums produced new and temporary exhibits on a fairly frequent basis. Few institutions pursued traveling exhibits. Only one institution, the Studio Museum of Harlem, was accredited (13% had sought accreditation). Many museums existed on a month-to-month basis without a formal plan for all or most of the current year (29%), with 70% lacking a five-year plan. Survey respondents prioritized their needs as fund-raising, more paid staff, physical plant concerns, collections preservation, staff training and collections acquisitions. Recommendations from the survey set an agenda for the African American Museums Association. The AAMA wanted to continue to be a resource, a service organization, a linking mechanism, and a representative and lobbying force.

The Ford Foundation initiated a survey of Black and Hispanic art museums in 1986. Twenty-nine respondents gave a snapshot of funding, collections, staffing, and facilities.²⁷ The site visits are a model for possible field reports for this project. With a

²⁵ Curtis, Nancy C. Black heritage sites: an African American odyssey and finder's guide. Chicago: American Library Association, 1996.

²⁶ Profiles of Black museums: a survey commissioned by the African American Museums Association. (Washington, D.C.: African American Museums Association and American Association for State and Local History, 1988): xiii-xv.

²⁷ Ardali, Azade. Black and Hispanic art museums: a vibrant cultural resource. New York: Ford Foundation, 1989.

primarily Midwestern focus, African American museums in Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Hampton, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Memphis, New York City, Washington D.C., and Wilberforce will be approached. A possible survey on the Internet may contribute to this discussion.

NEW CHALLENGES: CULTURAL TOURISM, PRESERVATION & FUNDING

In the early 1990s, the Small Business Association commissioned case studies of communities that were reaching out to African Americans in the tourism industry. The Clinton administration, under the direction of the late Commerce Secretary Ron Brown, aggressively supported multicultural tourism as an engine of minority economic development. Multicultural tourism means visiting museums, sites and events significant to minority groups in America. Creating tourist attractions that highlight minority cultures can strengthen the U.S. economy by increasing tourism and bring tourist dollars to minority entrepreneurs and communities. The Black Tourism Network, the Greater New Orleans Black Tourism Network, and Chicago's Black Metropolis Convention and Tourism Council are among the new proactive agencies that promote African American museums, historic sites, and community activities.

Many mainstream institutions heeded the changing demographics that predict a fast growing minority community. A survey of recent museum and tourism statistics may reveal the condition of these trends. The American Association of Museums' 1999 initiatives includes an encouragement to members to be inclusive and to collaborate with

and participate in their communities.²⁸ An assessment of the new initiatives and their impact on African American museums is warranted.

Modeled after the Save America's Treasures, Save Our African American Heritage Sites is a new program to heighten awareness of significant symbols of Black heritage that are threatened by neglect, deterioration, lack of funding and public awareness. In November 1999, Pathfinders Travel magazine began a six-city tour to save historic sites such as the Paul Robeson House, the Black Cowboy Museum, and the Maryland Museum of African Art. With deteriorating physical plants and concern for museum collections, African American institutions face tremendous conservation efforts.

The infrastructure of African American museums is fragile. There is a great need for institutional development is needed to keep pace with the growing needs of expansion and operations. Enhancing legislative, foundation, and corporate relations might help for institutions in economically fragile communities. The burgeoning Black middle class could be reintroduced to Black philanthropic traditions. Fiduciary management in small organizations is a challenge.

BLACK TO THE FUTURE

To become museums of influence, African American museums must break new ground in such an original way that others are compelled to follow their example. This calls for people of exceptional vision and originality of mind to develop new ideas. Because most African American museums were established after 1960, they are still at

²⁸ "AAM Annual Report." American Association of Museums. Online. Available:

the outset of their development and are freer to evolve new of different institutional forms. An exploration of African American museums for the new century must address organizational and staffing issues; growing pains and founder's syndrome; continuing education; and, applications of technology and a 'digital divide.'

As Afigbo stated, "there is a need to come together with counterparts from other parts of the Diaspora to consider seriously the question of evolving an African museum practice."²⁹ Black museums must continue to collect widely and dig deeply offering historic realism in their interpretations of the Black experience. Strategic planning and assessment, and perhaps truth and reconciliation should inform their agendas. African American museums' expansive mandates challenge them engage their limited resources as ingeniously as possible in reflecting Black cultural legacies.

<http://www.aam-us.org/index.htm>

²⁹ Afigbo, A. E. The museum and nation building. (Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria: New Africa Pub. Co., 1985): 53

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