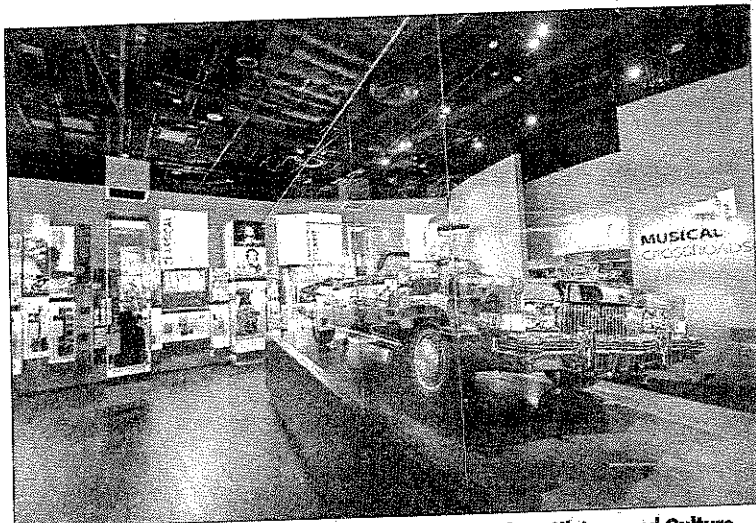


VIEW

African-American museum is powerful but could be more

Philip Kennicott
Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Thirteen years after it was authorized, and more than a century after the idea for a museum on the subject devoted to the African-American experience was first broached, the Smithsonian is opening a museum unlike any of its others. But visitors to the new National Museum of African American History and Culture will have to learn how to use it. It offers a state-of-the-art museum experience, full of multimedia displays, spectacularly over-scaled objects, and lots of photography, film and recorded sound. But it is not an easy museum to navigate, and the history it tells often feels disconnected and episodic. The museum, housed in a visually striking, metal-clad



In a gallery at the National Museum of African American History and Culture devoted to music, visitors are greeted by rock 'n' roll icon Chuck Berry's red Cadillac. Visitors will find the museum not only dense and teeming with information, but at times overwhelming. JAH CHIKWENDIU/THE WASHINGTON POST

building near the base of the Washington Monument, is a 21st-century mash-up of

two 19th-century ideas: The encyclopedic history museum and the memorial. It has a

factual narrative it must tell, a story spanning some 600 years of brutal displacement, cruel enslavement, and frequent disappointment along the long march to freedom. But it is also a memorial to the resilience of African-Americans, and the culture they created. The tone, throughout, is a shifting mix of sadness and celebration.

But covering more than a half-millennium of history while also celebrating the rich legacy of African-American cultural contributions is a lot to accomplish, even in a 400,000-square-foot building.

Visitors will find it not only dense and teeming with information, but at times overwhelming. History has been mostly relegated to a large, subterranean chamber, where small

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galleries are connected by ramps leading up from the lowest level, devoted to the origins of the Atlantic slave trade, the colonial era, the antebellum south, the Civil War and its immediate aftermath. The celebration is mostly on the top two public floors, with exhibitions devoted to sport, the military, music, film, theater and television. To see the entire museum in one visit involves multiple elevators, ramps and escalators.

But it also requires pacing. The walls are covered with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of short text panels. Words are sometimes screened onto glass, making them hard to read. Objects are frequently small, and it isn't always easy to find the descriptive information that explains them. The aesthetic is one of density, overlap and collage, as if the designers want to hypnotize rather than clarify and teach.

After descending three levels, visitors emerge in low-slung dark galleries devoted to some of the most excruciating chapters in African-American history: the emergence of the Atlantic slave trade and the perpetual violence and indignity of bondage. But these early galleries feel rather bloodless and dispassionate, especially compared with upper-level rooms that deal with Jim Crow, segregation and the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and '60s.

That is largely because this museum, like most well-funded museums that aim at a popular audience today, is so dependent on multimedia that it can't help but sleight history before the age of film and recorded sound. The information is all there, but it is largely present through prints docu-

storytelling relies more on moving images, there is the illusion that history has come alive. Nuance is conveyed by real people, telling their stories in their own words. In a digital age, this is inevitably more gripping than studying a bill of sale for human chattel or a rendering of a slave ship.

Objects themselves compete with the visual distraction, and it is easy to pass them by, in favor of large screens showing films devoted to Reconstruction or the student civil rights movement. Even the largest objects — a guard tower from the Angola Prison in Louisiana or a segregation era Southern Railway car — don't carry much useful information; they are visually dramatic, but don't reward study.

None of this will be new to anyone who has spent time in history museums in the past quarter century. The NMAAHC hired Ralph Appelbaum Associates, a New York-based design firm, to create its exhibitions, and it clearly wanted exactly what it got: An immersive experience aimed at the cellphone-video-iPad generation. This kind of museum design is premised on an assumption that museums are in the remedial history teaching business, compensating for a failure of education, and a broad social disinterest in the longer arc of the past.

That may have made Appelbaum's approach particularly appealing to NMAAHC curators who are dealing not just with the general historical illiteracy of most Americans, but the particular ignorance — sometimes willful — of African-American history. At every turn, even for those who think they know the broad outlines of the narrative, there are powerful, bracing facts: The average life of a slave shipped to an early colonial sugar plantation was just

When the English outlawed slavery, they paid \$2.4 billion in reparations, not to those who were enslaved, but to the owners who were dispossessed of human chattel.

These flash-card facts are balanced by one of the museum's central and most reassuring themes, that culture is persistent, people survived, built connections and created a rich diaspora of new meanings.

This message is both true in a limited sense, and strategically useful. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, self-serving and racist scholars played down the survival of African heritage among slaves, and depicted slavery as a genocidal annihilation of culture — which meant that African-Americans in a sense had no culture and no history. Later scholars contested that, and this museum is a fruit of that argument. There is indeed a robust, rich, fascinating history, and powerful threads connect the African-American experience to the earliest days of their arrival here, and their past in Africa.

This narrative of survival and cultural flourishing is an essential counterpoint to the painful facts of the past, but it threatens to become generic, a "happy ending" motif in the feel-good vein of Hollywood. In a film devoted to the black experience in this country's military, the narrator explains that after heroic service in World War I, many African-Americans returned to a country beset by race riots. But, we are reassured, despite this adversity, "African-Americans continued to build vibrant neighborhoods."

It's not that this is wrong, but it feels like history processed by a film director who has made a too-jarring cut from one scene to another. Modern museums aren't just repositories of mate-

TOO CONTINUED. THE RESULT, strangely enough, is that the true misery of much of the African-American experience is better communicated through fiction, by writers such as Toni Morrison, Edward Jones, Richard Wright or Frederick Douglass.

Was it possible to make the museum any other way? Perhaps. On the fourth floor, set apart from exhibitions on entertainment, music and cultural folkways, are a set of galleries devoted to the visual arts. Here, the cacophony ceases. The battle-of-the-bands chaos of the music galleries, where soprano Leontyne Price struggles to be heard over Michael Jackson, goes silent. Visitors can focus on the art itself.

The sense of the room is contemplation, and respect for the legacy of African-American painters and sculptors. It will be for many visitors an oasis.

But museums feel obligated to compete for visitors in a world saturated with entertainment. That may be the sad paradox of this museum, which took so long to create, and only came to be against the greatest of obstacles. It arrived too late to have the dignity and serenity of museums from which African-Americans were excluded in the last century. Its collection came together long after many of the essential objects had disappeared, or became too expensive even for a Smithsonian franchise.

And it opened in an age when many museum professionals have lost faith in the object, and turn to media as a substitute or surrogate.

So visitors who want to walk away with more than a general sense that they have stewed for a few hours in a sea of information, light, sound and noise, will have to strategize to make the most of the experience.