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2018
TRAVEL GUIDE
FALL

art OF artifacts

With curator Patrina Chatman as your guide, learn the history behind (and the work that goes into) exhibitions at Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History.



PATRINA CHATMAN
Curator of collections
and exhibitions

The extensive museum, founded by a Detroit physician, houses 35,000 pieces documenting the depth of African-American history and culture.

Q Charles H. Wright delivered 7,000 babies in the Detroit area. Why did he start a museum?

A He was a man of the world. He traveled to Africa and realized that after colonialism, many ethnic groups were working to preserve their culture by finding it and properly storing it, so they would be able to pass it down. He understood that was important.

He felt African-Americans needed museums to help not only tell the story but also preserve that history for posterity. What originally started out of his office more than 50 years ago eventually grew and became the museum we're sitting in today.

Q How do you decide what's significant to African-American history?

A We consider how we will use it and what story it tells. What is its purpose, how is it going to impact people, how is it going to help this community grow and how will it educate?

Q Which exhibit is your favorite?

A And Still We Rise: Our Journey Through African American History and Culture (the museum's 22,000-square-foot, interactive

*And Still We Rise:
Our Journey Through
African American
History and Culture*

core exhibit, which occupies 20 galleries). It's an immersive kind of exhibition, and as you go through, we take you from the beginning of humankind all the way up to President Obama.

We started from the beginning of humankind because our history didn't start with slavery. There were histories and cultures prior to that time period, so that's where we started. The exhibit covers 3.2 million years of African and African-American history. We're the only museum to do that.

Q What do you as a curator look for when choosing a piece for the collection?

A I look for items that follow my personal motto: Dispel myths, tell truths.

Q What's more fun, hunting for acquisitions or opening an exhibit?

A The hunt for acquisitions. Absolutely.

Q Which item in the collection is outstanding but sometimes overlooked?

A The gas mask patented by Garrett Morgan. (It served as a blueprint for World War I combat models; Morgan also invented a traffic signal that's on display.) The gas mask looks like something from another world. I chose it because of its looks but also because an African-American inventor created it. What many people don't know is that he often had to present it through a white person in order for people to want to purchase it.

Q What's the oldest artifact in the collection?

A If not the oldest, one of the most important ones is the collection of manumission papers (issued when a slave was freed) in our archives.

Q You get a lot of tours from police cadets and officers, don't you? What draws them?

A I think they're trying to learn how to get along with different ethnic groups in the community, how to reach out and understand culturally and historically what has gone on in the community so they can relate better to the people they serve. It's a good thing, because they can see what kind of impact they can have by knowing the history better.

ENGAGING HISTORY

The museum interprets serious cultural topics in creative and hands-on ways.

STAINED-GLASS GALLERY

Stories in Stained Glass depicts musicians, dancers and freedom advocates with striking works by artist Samuel A. Hodge.

PERFORMANCE ART

Detroit Performs! uses a photo montage to honor entertainers with ties to the Motor City, including blues legend John Lee Hooker and soul music icon Aretha Franklin.

THE ALPHABET

The 26 interactive stations in A is for Africa form a hands-on alphabet that introduces young people to African history and culture.

HUSTLE FOR HISTORY

Do it—learn to dance the hustle (a 1970s disco craze). The museum offers lessons every Sunday (\$7 for nonmembers).

TOUCHSCREEN VIDEO WALL

Inspiring Minds: African Americans in Science and Technology includes a multiscreen, tappable video time line.



PHOTOGRAPH: E.E. BERGER