

ART

Inside America's New African-American Museum

By Kelly Crow

If you're thinking about visiting Washington's National Museum of African American History and Culture that opens Sept. 24, make plans—for after Thanksgiving. The newest museum on the National Mall is stirring such a fever that when free timed tickets were offered up on its website earlier this month, more than a half-million were claimed in a couple of hours.

In what's shaping up to be the marquee event of the fall art season, the Smithsonian Institution is making final preparations to open an eight-story, \$540 million museum on the last five acres available on the Mall, in the shadow of the Washington Monument. The night before the museum opens to the public, music producer Quincy Jones will host an invitation-only gala at the Kennedy Center. The next morning, at least 20,000 people, including Oprah Winfrey and Samuel L. Jackson, are expected to attend President Barack Obama's dedication ceremony.

Los Angeles radiologist Joy Simmons, who is known for her collection of African-American art, is flying in for the whole week with some friends. "Everyone I know is really jazzed about seeing it," said Dr. Simmons, who has opening-day tickets. "It's life-changing for me."

Tanzanian-born architect David Adjaye designed the museum's tiered exterior to look like a bronze, filigreed crown, a shiny counterpart to the chalky marble behemoths that make up the bulk of the Smithsonian's 19 museums on the Mall and beyond. Inside, the exhibit areas are bifurcated, with several subterranean levels offering a haunting history of slavery, segregation and African Americans' fight for civil rights. Sweeping staircases and ramps zigzag throughout these lower levels, a move partly aimed at preventing crowds from clogging around elevator banks or getting lost in what still might feel like a cavernous expanse. Upstairs, cheerier galleries showcase the artistic, pop-culture and military accomplishments of black Americans.



Inside the National Museum of African American History & Culture *PHOTO: ALAN KARCHMER/NMAAHC*

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re-foot museum feels outside: Director Lonnie Bunch said the museum is bracing for 10,000 visitors a day; by contrast, New York's Met Breuer museum got 1,500 daily visitors during its first four months earlier this year. Some of the highlights in the Smithsonian museum's permanent collection can be touted in tonnage—from a segregated, 1920s railway car (80 tons) to a Depression-era Angola Prison watchtower (18 tons). There are two cabins in the history galleries to show how people lived before and after emancipation. And dangling over it all like a mobile is a blue-and-yellow airplane used by the Tuskegee Institute to train black pilots during World War II.

The museum has amassed these pieces, and roughly 37,000 more, over the course of a decade, a breakneck pace for an institution as deliberate as the Smithsonian—but on par with the global museum-building boom going on in China and the Arabian Peninsula. Unlike Qatar, however, the African-American museum couldn't rely on oil-rich rulers to foot the bill. Congress agreed to pay

for half the \$540 million, but the rest of the funding—and at least 65% of its collection—came from donations. In 2008, a few dozen pieces were also crowdsourced at “Antiques Roadshow”-style events in cities like Wichita, Kan., and Indianapolis, where the museum and curators invited the public to bring family heirlooms. Some were given tips on how to protect their pieces and others were encouraged to give historic artifacts to their local museums—or the Smithsonian, said Rex Ellis, the museum’s associate director of curatorial affairs. Thousands of small, one-time gifts of \$1,000 or less also bolstered the fundraising efforts, the museum said. Jerome Grant, chef of the museum’s Sweet Home Café, said his father, an Air Force retiree in Fort Washington, Md., mailed the museum a check for \$100.

Highlights from the National Museum of African American History and Culture »

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture amassed 37,000 objects over the past decade to form its permanent collection. It will be free when it opens to the public on Sept. 24. Here is a closer look at a few highlights



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The museum can trace its roots to 1914 when black Civil War veterans first asked Congress to build a museum to chronicle the saga of African Americans. The request languished for decades until historians took up the cause in the late 1980s. In 2003, an act of Congress ordered the Smithsonian to establish the country’s only national museum dedicated to documenting African-American history and culture. It now joins the Smithsonian’s national museums for American history, Native American history, air and space and modern and contemporary art on the Mall.

Mr. Bunch said time will tell if the result measures up to global expectations. “A lot of Americans understand our history first in terms of African-American culture,” he said, “so how can we take their experiences and help everyone better understand what it means to be American?”



A view from the National Museum of African American History & Culture *PHOTO: ALAN KARCHMER/NMAAHC*

Before the crowds descend, here's an insider peek at the highlights and sleeper hits of the collection, what to order in the museum café (hint: Son of a Gun stew) and other related exhibits on view in the nation's capital this fall.

The Collection: Historic and Contemporary Art

When the new museum hired chief curator Jacquelyn Days Serwer from the now-defunct Corcoran Gallery of Art a decade ago, her marching orders were deceptively simple: Build a collection, from scratch, capable of capturing the

historic and contemporary sweep of art created by African Americans. Oh, and do so with a slice of the museum-wide acquisitions budget of roughly \$2 million.

Top pieces by black artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat were already selling for millions at the time. “We could have spent our entire budget on a single piece of art,” Ms. Serwer said.

There are currently no Basquiats in the permanent collection. Instead, Ms. Serwer scoured art history—and the storerooms of willing collectors—and uncovered examples by lesser-known but still historically significant black American artists from as early as 1807 to now. The 3,000 paintings, sculptures and drawings they’ve amassed offer an eclectic, surprising survey of art by African Americans peppered with some names that aren’t instantly recognizable, yet.



Joshua Johnson, ‘Portrait of John Westwood,’ ca. 1807-1808 PHOTO: JOSHUA JOHNSON/NMAAHC

The earliest artist to show up in the museum’s 4,500-square-foot Visual Arts Gallery is Joshua Johnson, the Baltimore-area son of an unnamed slave

woman and a white man named George Johnson. Joshua Johnson went on to enjoy a rare career as a self-taught portrait painter, and the new museum will

display his 1807 portrait of a Baltimore stagecoach manufacturer, “John Westwood.”

Another early revival is William Harper, who worked as a janitor at the Art Institute of Chicago in the late 1800s to earn money to attend classes there, later graduating with honors. He spent years painting landscapes in Paris and Cornwall, England, and after he died of tuberculosis in 1910 at age 36, the Art Institute gave him a solo show, unusual for an African-American painter at the time. The museum plans to show Harper’s untitled French countryside scene from 1905.



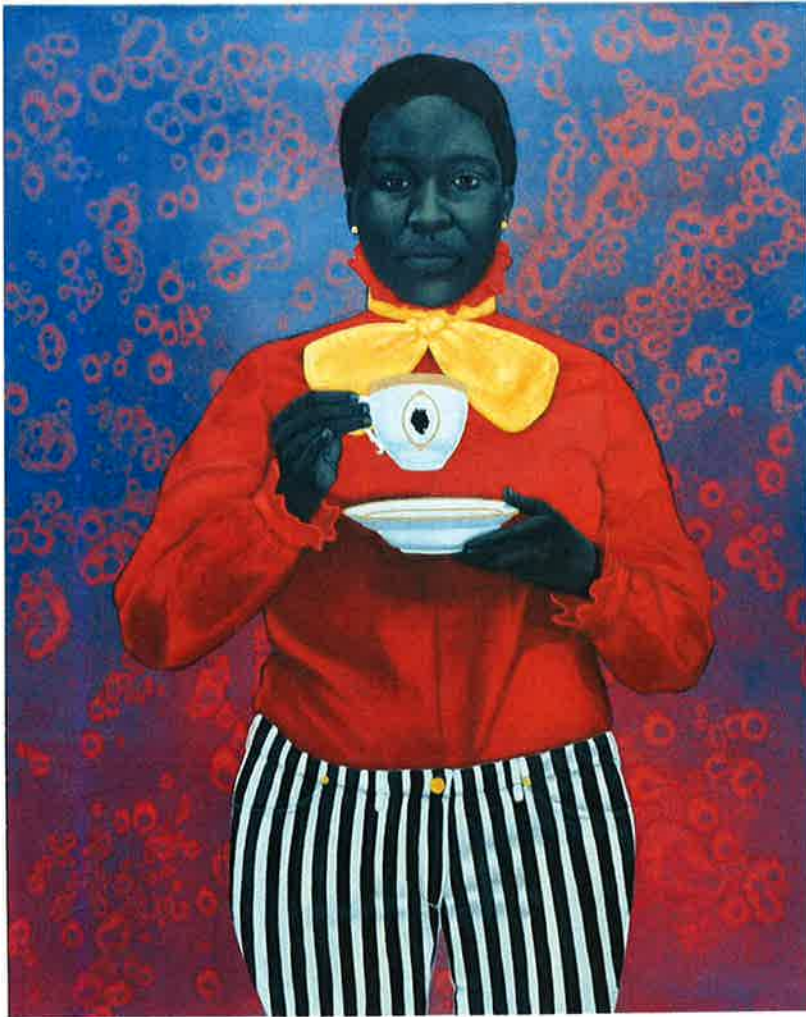
William A. Harper, 'Untitled (French Landscape),' 1905 PHOTO: WILLIAM A. HARPER/NMAAHC

Another artist who could get a boost is Edward Clark, an abstract New York painter who started experimenting by taking his canvases out of their traditional rectangular stretcher bars and forming them into oval shapes in the 1950s—a decade before Ellsworth Kelly gained international stardom for doing something similar. Ms. Serwer’s colleague, curator Tuliza Fleming, said it took her a year before Mr. Clark was willing to part with one of his “Big Egg” paintings, but the 1968 version the museum now owns “looks like it was painted last week, it’s so fresh,” she said.

Women also turn up in greater numbers in the visual-arts area, including Thelma Johnson Streat, who assisted Mexican muralist Diego Rivera but also painted on her own, and Mavis Pusey, known for her geometrical abstracts from the late 1960s.

Among contemporary artists, watch out for Amy Sherald, a Baltimore painter whose 2012 portrait of a vibrantly adorned woman, “Grand Dame Queenie,” will likely be a gallery showstopper.

The



Amy Sherald, ‘Grand Dame Queenie,’ 2012 PHOTO: AMY SHERALD/MONIQUE MELOCHE GALLERY

Collection: History of Slavery

“Slavery is invisible in most of our national museums,” said curator Nancy Bercaw. “Nobody has really told it in a human way, from their perspective.”

Of the dozen exhibits crisscrossing the African-American museum, curators said one of the most challenging issues was how to present slavery. The experience starts in an elevator whose glass walls are rimmed with stickered numbers representing a trail backward in time—from the present to 1400—as it descends 90 feet below street level. The time warp is reinforced by music clips that start with Aretha Franklin and end with Ghanaian music.

Next, there's a look at life in Europe and Africa before the advent of the transatlantic slave trade. Visitors can then walk into a gut punch of a gallery with wooden floors and tar-black walls evoking the Middle Passage ships that uprooted and sold at least 11 million Africans into slavery for four centuries. Rusted shackles that once bound adults and children are displayed alongside a quartet of iron planks that acted as stabilizing weights for a Portuguese slave ship that wrecked on its way to Brazil in the 1700s. Of the 500 slaves on board, only 212 survived, the museum said. (The wreckage was discovered two years ago.)



On Jan. 20, 1840, a slaveowner in Germantown, Ky., paid for this broadside advertisement offering \$1,000 for the capture and return of four enslaved people known only as George, Jefferson, Esther and Amanda. Their fates are unknown. *PHOTO: NMAAHC*

The museum said it took cues from the nearby Holocaust Museum and the National Sept. 11 Memorial and Museum in laying out the “Slavery and Freedom” section so that it felt immersive but not literal in an artificial way. “It didn’t feel like it would be honoring the people by trying to recreate it,” said Ms. Bercaw, a

former history and Southern-studies professor at the University of Mississippi who joined the museum as a curator and helped organize the galleries on slavery with a curator colleague, Mary Elliott.

Additional areas look at how slavery fueled an economic boom across the Western world, not just the southern U.S. states, and how slaves across the country agitated for freedom alongside soldiers in the Revolutionary War and beyond. Expect crowds to huddle around a crinkled Bible carried by Nat Turner, a slave who mounted a rebellion in Virginia in 1831, as well as a lace shawl given by Queen Victoria to abolitionist icon Harriet Tubman.

Ms. Bercaw suggests also keeping an eye out for a smaller, unassuming gem: A tin wallet that once held papers issued by a Loudon County, Va., courthouse confirming that a black man named Joseph Trammell was free. The repercussions of losing the fragile papers inside would have been “profound” for Mr. Trammell, she added. He held onto them—and his great-great-great granddaughter, Elaine Thompson, donated them to the museum.

The Food



Sweet Home Cafe Executive Chef Jerome Grant PHOTO: STEPHEN VOSS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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ks, the Mall has long been a dining wasteland. But in 2004, the National Museum of the American Indian opened a café called Mitsitam, which translates to “let’s eat” in the native language of the Piscataway tribe. Suddenly, 2,000 tourists a day were filing in to eat cedar-plank salmon and buffalo burgers.

Lonnie Bunch, a former longtime curator at the Smithsonian's American history museum who is now helming the new African-American museum, enlisted Mitsitam's executive chef, Jerome Grant of Restaurant Associates, to help launch the new Sweet Home Café.

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Mr. Grant, who grew up in the Washington area, said he wants to show that black cooks were innovating dishes throughout the country, not just in the signature South. Sure, there will be buttermilk fried chicken and catfish po'boys, but Mr. Grant also plans

to serve an oyster pan roast and a Caribbean-style pepper pot stew that are popular in the Boston-to-Philadelphia region. The pepper pot features pork, beef, cinnamon, cloves and molasses.

Mr. Grant and a colleague, Albert Lukas, have also researched dishes that black chuckwagon cooks often served cowboys on the Western range, including pan-roasted rainbow trout with cornbread and mustard-green stuffing. Mr. Lukas said a dish that proved popular in early tastings was the Son of a Gun Stew, which features braised short ribs, turnips, corn, barley and sundried tomatoes. In areas where beef was plentiful—at least the leftover bits that butchers didn't want—but refrigeration was non-existent, cooks had to get creative.

"We're not just a café; we're another exhibit," Mr. Grant said. "To me, it's about showing people's migration in the U.S., and for a long time, the ones doing most of the cooking anywhere were black."

So far, the café plans to feature 50 menu items daily for lunch, with meals likely to cost anywhere from \$8 to \$15 per person. The café seats a maximum of 400 people.

The Neighbors

Plenty of other institutions citywide are opening exhibits or hosting events whose themes or artists dovetail nicely with the African-American museum. Rising-star artist Theaster Gates will unveil a new, four-part performance, "Processions," whose cast includes local track athletes, at the Hirshhorn Museum on Sept. 21. The American Indian museum reinstalled in June a show it created in 2010 called "IndiVisible: African-Native American Lives in the



Shrimp and grits, served at the Sweet Home Cafe *PHOTO: STEPHEN VOSS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Americas,” which explores the lives of African-American people who also claim ties to Native tribes. The show is up until Sept. 30.

John Gray, director of the National Museum of American History, said his institution already brims with historical objects that relate to African Americans—from slave-era shackles to Duke Ellington’s music stand—but on Wednesday the museum opened a new display in its business history section called “Black Main Street: Funding Civil Rights in Jim Crow America.”

“The new building is a beauty, but with all those crowds, we’re hoping to get a boost” in attendance, Mr. Gray said.

The Anacostia Community Museum in Washington, which was the Smithsonian’s go-to venue for shows about the African-American experience until the new museum came along, is also preparing for the new arrival. Anacostia’s deputy director Sharon Reinckens said her museum has tweaked its mission to focus primarily on big-city issues, from gentrification to urban ecology. Currently, it’s showing “Twelve Years that Shook and Shaped Washington: 1963-1975,” which explores a politically potent era when white flight spurred people to pejoratively call Washington “Chocolate City.” It’s also extended “From the Permanent Collection, the Artists of the Spiral Collective, 1963-65,” a show that looks at a group of African-American artists who became icons, like collage artist Romare Bearden.

On Sept. 25, the National Gallery of Art will discuss San Francisco collector Pamela Joyner’s collection of African-American art, a talk led by the collector



From 'IndiVisible: African-Native American Lives in the Americas' at the American Indian Museum. A Comanche family, early 1900s *PHOTO: SAM DEVENNEY*

and a pair of New York artists she collects, Leonardo Drew and Jennie C. Jones. Five days later, the National Gallery will also try to capitalize on the crowds when it reopens its renovated and expanded East Building, a move that will give curators an additional 12,250 square feet of gallery space to showcase its lauded modern-art collection. (It owns more Mark Rothkos than any other institution.) The project includes renovated skylit tower galleries and a new rooftop terrace, which is topped by Katharina Fritsch's uber-blue rooster sculpture, "Hahn/Cock," on longterm loan from the Glenstone Museum.

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Sept. 14, 2016 2:18 p.m. ET