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African-American History Seen Through an African-American Lens

By James Estrin Dec. 19, 2017 [Comment](#)

Rhea Combs is the curator of photography and film at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., which opened in 2016. She talked about the museum's photography collection with James Estrin. The conversation has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Q.

What is the photography collection at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture?

A.

It is African-American history seen through the African-American lens, and that is so varied. It is also broad in terms of the quality of the photograph. Some would be gallery worthy and then some are gallery worthy for your family reunion.

I think it's really about creating this wonderful array of images that reflect the idiosyncratic nature of human beings. We really are trying to flatten the understanding of what is valuable enough to be kept in perpetuity. And for that reason, it has these iconic moments that people can immediately connect with.

I often am drawn to those photographs that people are surprised would be inside a museum, because it feels so familiar to them, like what they see in their house. And that to me, creates an empathetic, visceral reaction because you see yourself reflected in this and you can make these sensory and emotional connections.

With some things that feel too defined or orchestrated or beautiful, there can be a sense of a distance. But when you see something that feels and looks familiar, you immediately are engaging in a way that you may not otherwise.

So there is a sense of looking for things that will inspire you from an aspirational standpoint, but also inspire you from a familiar standpoint.

Q.

How are you building the collection?

A.

Having the largess, generosity and the trust of people like the visitors that are coming through here has been important, because they'll send a note or a donation form, saying, "I have this." It literally has been a community effort. There have also been collectors of photographs of African-Americans who have been gathering and researching material over time.

Q.

There is a democratic nature to this collection.

A.

There tends to be this impression that museums will bestow or inform what is worthy of being preserved and collected. And that's often a very elitist trajectory. This is a way of saying, "No, you're worthy of having your material preserved." I think that's a very different approach to what traditional museums, especially art museums, have done.

Q.

What has the role of photography been in the African-American community?

A.

Frederick Douglass talked poetically about the power of the image and how it can stand as a marker of your citizenship, and your presence. African-Americans were termed three-fifths of a person — and that was "an advancement," considering we were slaves and then in chattel slavery. There were so many opportunities structurally to render us invisible.

The moment that you have commercial photography in this country there's emancipation and you can now use photography as a subversive act. And the power of this photography is that you're able to counterbalance these larger mainstream notions of either you're not worthy of citizenship, or you're not worthy of being photographed as a human being. And then, one is able to then turn that on its head and say: "No, in fact we are, and we're able to create thriving businesses doing it. We have enough means to actually get our image photographed and we have the wherewithal to showcase in many instances the clothes that we have designed and tailored. And we have the opportunity to demonstrate that we are educated and we have a whole community." So it allowed people to document the formal and informal institutions that were established.

Photography was speaking to and empowering African-American communities, but it was also creating a moment whereby the larger mainstream society had to recognize and confront that this group of citizens existed.

Q.
In what period of time?

A.
I'm thinking around the late 1800s to 1910, that moment where we have a lot of these early Victorian era photographs of people posed with such dignity and poise.

If those photos are in a studio window and I am walking past them, as an African-American, there is a sense of pride because I see someone who either I'm aspiring to be or I'm glad to know that they, too, have overcome and survived and persisted and resisted.

It also allows people from other communities who may have stereotypical understandings of African-Americans to realize there was a whole other reality that was taking place as well.

And you have to keep in mind that this is also when you have a popular culture, with these racist stereotypes of pickaninnies and mammies and these tropes of what blackness is. That's why I feel as though these community and studio photographs become a sort of subversive act with this sense of empowerment.

Q.
And a lot of that is the black studio photographers because they're documenting the black communities.

A.
Exactly. You have J.P. Ball, who was an itinerant photographer in Virginia and then Cincinnati, but he ended up moving to Montana, where apparently there was a tremendous, vibrant African-American community in the late 1800s. And he ended up through photography getting a prominent place within that community, and he was also a local politician. He used his photography to speak out against a lynching that took place, and then he pretty much got ran out of Montana.

That is an example of the ways in which black photographers in the late 19th century and early 20th century were using their art as a form of social justice, and that justice may have been literally a studio portrait that reinforced a valor and a dignity and subverted predisposed prejudices, but then it could also be documenting the social injustices.

Henry Clay Anderson is another example. In the mid 20th century, he was documenting social injustice and then using the power of the black press to disseminate that information to the larger black community.

Q.
What is your mission photographically?

A.
I have many jobs. I am curator of photography and film. But I also head up the Earl W. and Amanda Stafford Center for African-American Media Arts— whose mission is to create a pioneering innovative space for serious inquiry and exploration of photography from the beginning through contemporary work.

We are able to explore the history and culture of African-Americans through innovative programming, through robust collecting as well as creating exhibition spaces. We're also doing outreach through community curation projects, starting with Baltimore.

Q.

How will you be working with African-American image-makers?

A.

The plan is to have fellowships and research opportunities to come here for a while, perhaps a year, and engage with our collections, either through creating special exhibitions or creating a 21st-century post-modern story with our material.

Q.

How do you view your collecting of film?

A.

We have a program called the Great Migration home movie project, where people set up an appointment, bring their 8 or 16 millimeter films that are collecting dust or deteriorating in their basements or attics, and we preserve it and then give them a digital copy. What we're collecting so far has been home movies from the '40s through the '80s.

Q.

Home movies from the South and in the North?

A.

Yes, and even the West, because we are a national museum.

It keeps me on my toes and it keeps us very, very busy, but it's quite exciting because you are sharing the knowledge of some of these people who did not make the history books and helping to re-insert them into the canon or expand the ways in which we understand the canon.

These are ways in which we can expand people's understandings about these very important principles of liberty and democracy and justice and what it means to be American, by understanding the ways in which there are distinctions but also so many similarities. It's really only through that understanding of these similarities that we can recognize our humanity.

A parade from the 1950s of a historically black college in Mississippi is going to ring true to a majorette in Florida today.

Q.

Can you describe the current exhibition, "Everyday Beauty?"

A.

It's looking at a span of 100 years starting in the 1870s — five years after emancipation — up until the 1970s, with these watershed moments within American history and African-American cultural experiences.

Through everyday vernacular photography, we can see extraordinary things, we can see extraordinary people, we can see extraordinary occasions made out of these everyday moments. It will run until the end of February of 2018.

Q.
Any favorites in the show?

A.
There's one by Louis Draper of Fannie Lou Hamer and her husband, Percy. They met on the plantation where she was a sharecropper and he had a sort of administrative role. He supported her through her activist work, and then they ended up adopting two children. Who has ever seen a photograph with both of them?

Q.
How many items do you have in the photo collection?

A.
Over 15,000.

Q.
That's a big collection.

A.
I'm really thrilled to say that our director, Lonnie Bunch, really believes in photography. He's a historian of the 19th century, and he understands the value and the power of photography, and made a strong commitment to it.

Q.
In addition to studio photographers in the current exhibition, you also have what you call community photographers.

A.
There have been all of these regional community photographers who really did become the eyes and ears and the mouthpiece for the community — like Lloyd Yearwood, who was Malcolm X's personal photographer. So there are 40 years of photos of Harlem that he had taken, mainly focusing on the religious community. We acquired a whole section on the black Jewish community, and then he also worked with the Muslim community.

Q.
Many of the photographers in the exhibition were relatively unknown outside their communities. In the mass media, we more often saw those communities photographed by outsiders.

A.
Diverse perspectives, along with diverse backgrounds, will ultimately improve the way that we understand and create a more just society. I think the value of photography and the value of even art in history is it

helps us to better understand where we came from, who we are fundamentally and how we can move forward. If you have only a very one note outside perspective, then you're pretty much determining what you think is beautiful, what you think is valuable, what you think is significant enough that you record it in history.

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