

Museums Collect Protest Signs to Preserve History in Real Time

Curators surveyed the area outside the White House on Wednesday for artifacts that will help record the emotional turmoil.



By **Graham Bowley**

Published June 10, 2020 Updated June 11, 2020, 12:49 p.m. ET

History — painful, at times angry, history — unfolded outside the White House in the past week and curators from the Smithsonian Institution toured the area on Wednesday to begin collecting the art, signs, photographs and other artifacts that multiplied there during the recent protests over George Floyd’s death.

The nine curators from three Smithsonian museums spoke to protesters close to the security fence erected near Lafayette Square and later took away some of the signs that were being displayed.

“It is critical that we collect so this moment does not get lost,” said Aaron Bryant, a curator at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. “We talk to people so we don’t forget their stories. History is happening right before us.”

Gone are the days when museums only sifted through the remnants of what survived from events that occurred generations ago. This effort was part of the new initiative, practiced by many museums, to collect historical artifacts in real time.

After the protests began, the fence erected to block protesters in front of the White House became a tableau calling out racism and honoring victims.

“I can’t breathe.” “Silence is not the answer.” “Defund the Police,” “Justice 4 George.”

Mr. Bryant said he and other curators inspected signs and banners now on a construction wall near the fence, and protest signs beyond the immediate fence area as well, including boarded-up office windows that had been painted on. “I was captivated by the artwork that was on the boards,” he said.

The curators noted the names of artists and photographers, and identified objects that might be important to preserve. “If we don’t collect this stuff, who knows what happens to it,” Mr. Bryant said.

Would you like recommendations for more stories like this?

Yes

The African American museum is working in coalition with the National Museum of American History and the Anacostia Community Museum which also had curators surveying the Lafayette Square area on Wednesday. The National Museum of American History said in a statement that it “recognizes that we are in a transformative time in the United States. We are listening to communities. We will document this important moment responsibly and respectfully through a variety of objects and stories from Washington, D.C. and across the nation.”

Mr. Bryant said he had collected two signs held by a young group of protesters from Salisbury, Md. — a mother, daughter, son and one of their friends. He said he could not be more specific because the objects have to be processed to determine whether they will officially join the museum’s collection.

Portions of the security fence itself were not collected. But Mr. Bryant said that other museums might look to take parts of it.

The scope of what some museums now call “rapid response collecting” has expanded significantly in recent years. Curators often mingle with crowds, scoop up fliers and ask people to part with signs, or perhaps a piece of clothing. Such collecting has taken place at demonstrations around the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore in 2015, and during the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Mo., after the death of Michael Brown.

The Orange County Regional History Center in Orlando, Fla., which collected artifacts surrounding the 2016 shooting at the Pulse nightclub, said it had already collected hundreds of photographs, media posts, videos and articles about the recent Black Lives Matter protests.

Correction: June 11, 2020

An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that the National Park Service owned the security fence erected near Lafayette Square.

Graham Bowley is an investigative reporter on the Culture Desk. He also reported for The Times from Afghanistan in 2012. He is the author of the book “No Way Down: Life and Death on K2.” @Graham_Bowley · Facebook