

Fauci Is Giving His Coronavirus Model to the Smithsonian

Dr. Anthony S. Fauci's donation of his 3-D virus model to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History comes as museums are working to document the Covid-19 era.



By Allyson Waller

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A piece of personal pandemic history belonging to the nation's top infectious disease expert has found a new home at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, presented his three-dimensional model of the coronavirus to the museum's national medicine and science collections on Tuesday at a ceremony that was conducted by videoconference.

"I wanted to pick something that was really meaningful to me and important because I used it so often," Dr. Fauci said in an interview on Wednesday about his decision to give the model to the museum.

The model, which he said was made with a 3-D printer at the National Institutes of Health, is a blue sphere studded with spikes replicating the spiked proteins that can latch onto cells in our airways, allowing the virus to slip inside. Dr. Fauci said he had often used it as a visual aid when briefing members of Congress and former President Donald J. Trump about the virus.

"It's a really phenomenally graphic way to get people to understand," he said.

Dr. Fauci announced the donation and showed off the model as he was being awarded the museum's Great Americans medal on Tuesday for his leadership of the nation's Covid-19 response and his contributions to the fights against other infectious diseases, such as AIDS.

The National Museum of American History said its curators had been collecting items from the pandemic for a future exhibition, called "In Sickness and in Health," that will examine "more than 200 years of medicine in the U.S. including Covid-19." The museum has also been accepting digital submissions from the public through the platform "Stories of 2020."

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The spread of the coronavirus has presented an opportunity for museums and institutions across the country to document a pandemic as it is happening. Many have done the same with the protests against racial injustice that played out across much of the country last year.

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Dr. Fauci's coronavirus model could be used for research or in educational exhibits, said Diane Wendt, a curator in the medicine and science division of the National Museum of American History.

Ms. Wendt said it might still be too early to gauge which objects will be the most important or meaningful, and which ones will best tell the story of this pandemic. But she said the responses the museum had received from the public suggest that the materials they would like to see curated and preserved include personal protective equipment like masks and the journals and holiday cards people have kept that show a slice of pandemic life.

“Certainly, as historians, I think we probably joke that we really like things that are at least 50 years old — like, ‘We’re OK, we’re looking at this at a safe distance,’ so to speak,” Ms. Wendt said. “But at the same time we obviously have to acknowledge that we have a responsibility. History is being made every day.”

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Dr. Fauci said he could see himself donating other items to museums and institutions in the future, whether from his time managing the country's response to the coronavirus pandemic or from his leadership of federal efforts to combat H.I.V., SARS, the 2009 swine flu pandemic, MERS and Ebola.

"I think when you reach a certain stage you have things that are more valuable to the general public than they are to you keeping them," he said.

During the influenza pandemic of 1918, "visualizing the virus was not something that was even possible," Ms. Wendt said, making Dr. Fauci's donation noteworthy.

He echoed that view, saying that the tools for fighting the coronavirus pandemic, including visual modeling and, more recently, safe and effective vaccines, are significant developments that are bringing the nation closer to getting the virus under control.

"We cannot claim victory prematurely," he said of the pandemic. "But I think it will be important for the Smithsonian to chronicle this."