Guest Essay

Effective Exhibitions Should Be Imbued With Passion

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Exhibitions are the souls of museums. Effective ones can teach, engage, and change perspectives. Truly exceptional exhibitions leave visitors thinking about what they have experienced for years to come. The people who come up with compelling ways to present scholarly, esoteric, and complex material must be equal parts engineer, artist, educator, and magician. Like any creative endeavor, it is hard to pinpoint the alchemy that causes mosaics of images, words, artifacts, and ideas to coalesce into something special, but in my experience, their common element is the passion behind them.

One of the best examples of this came from my mentor and colleague, Spencer Crew, who was one of my inspirations during the development of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). His *Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration 1915–1940* (fig. 1) at the National Museum of American History (NMAH) chronicled the culture-changing northward exodus of millions of African Americans that began during World War I. Despite a dearth of the era's artifacts available to him, he and a dedicated team evoked the details of African American life with mannequins and set design. It proved to me that with enough determination, creativity, and passion for the subject, you can breathe life into any exhibition.

Curators, historians, and other museum professionals must embrace our roles as interpreters of the past and stewards of the public trust. Too many expect us to be impartial observers of history, merely presenting the facts. The most powerful exhibitions humanize their topics and make them relatable and relevant. They say something. That can only be done by taking a point of view, especially potent when backed up by solid scholarship and a devotion to the subject.

I was struck by the way San Francisco's Legion of Honor museum juxtaposed new works by the Kenyan American artist Wangechi Mutu with classical pieces like Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker*, challenging the notion that traditional Western art is inherently superior. I was moved by Alabama's National Memorial for Peace and Justice and its Legacy Museum, a heartbreaking but vital reminder of the nation's terrible history of lynching. And I was proud of the response to NMAH's exhibit I helped acquire, a section of the Greensboro, North Carolina, Woolworth's lunch counter (fig. 2) where four young college students – who came to be known

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Fig. 1. *Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration, 1915–1940.*

Fig. 2. *Greensboro Lunch Counter.*

Fig. 3. *The First Ladies.*

as the Greensboro Four – sat to protest segregation, helping spark the Civil Rights Movement.

These exhibitions all reflect a very specific viewpoint and take a stance on issues of justice, equality, and race. They also share a timeless relevance, something we wanted to achieve when I oversaw NMAH's redesign of the exhibition of First Ladies' dresses that had originated in 1914 in the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building. Before the mid-1990s, the exhibition had focused primarily on the fashion. We wanted to reframe the attire of these remarkable women as something more, exploring gender roles and power dynamics that played out on the largest stage and making the exhibition as much about what the First Ladies had accomplished as what they wore (fig. 3, p. 17).

When an exhibition is rife with passion, visitors can sense that and respond in kind. One of the most emotional exhibitions I have ever been involved with is NMAAHC's display of the casket of Emmett Till, the young man whose racist murder in 1955 inspired so many leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, including the Greensboro Four. I came to know his mother, Mamie Till Mobley, when I got her blessing to tell her son's story in the museum. She told me she expected us to carry the burden of history and the weight of memory, no matter how painful. By entrusting us with her son's memory, she gave the museum one of its most powerful opportunities to help visitors learn, heal, and grow together.

Soon after the National Museum of African American History and Culture opened, I witnessed that potential in action. As is often the case, a young Black woman was overcome with emotion as she took in this powerful exhibition. An older white man approached and asked if he could cry with her. After a moment, she agreed and they locked arms, tears flowing in silent anguish for the senseless murder of a child decades before. The power and promise of an effective exhibition, one driven by a passion to share a personally meaningful story, are incomparable. When we tap into that passion and pair it with creativity, vision, and scrupulous honesty, we can bring something into the world that enriches society and inspires people to embrace their shared humanity. ▮

Lonnie G. Bunch III is the 14th Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. He assumed his position June 16, 2019. As Secretary, he oversees 21 museums, 21 libraries, the National Zoo, numerous research centers, and several education units and centers. Two new museums – the National Museum of the American Latino and the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum – are in development. Bunch was the founding director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture and is the first historian to be Secretary of the Institution. In 2021, he received France's highest award, The Legion of Honor.