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BOOKS & ARTSEXHIBITION REVIEW

Refueled, the National Air and Space Museum Takes Off

The Smithsonian museum's newly renovated west wing features eight exhibition spaces that tell a stirring, diverse American story of ingenuity and the enduring thrill of flight



The 1903 Wright Flyer

PHOTO: JIM PRESTON/SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM

By *Edward Rothstein* [Follow](#)

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The Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum—one of the most popular museums in the nation—reopened its west wing last month, four years into a seven-year renovation that is costing roughly \$1 billion. Just eight of the 23 exhibition spaces are complete; the rest will be unveiled a few years hence. But even this portion requires a day to carefully absorb and offers more than most museums could hope for. Here is the 1903 Wright Brothers Flyer that lifted off at Kitty Hawk, N.C., mounted at eye level so you can see just how daring the pilot had to be, lying between wooden-framed strips of cloth. Here, too, is the Columbia, the command module of Apollo 11, mounted in a vitrine you can walk around to get a sense of the astronauts' confinement. There are 50 interactive exhibits (with 50 more to come) that let you piece together various flying cars on a touchscreen or sample early popular songs inspired by the "aeroplane." The exhibitions combine a hobbyist's passion with a professional's acumen, providing enough of an aerial tour so we can glimpse the scale of the skyscape and space-scape the museum is offering up for the next generation.

The museum stripped its building down to the steel girders and reconstructed it with new ventilation, heating systems and lighting. A cafeteria has been added. And there will be a new learning center for schools. But the museum also makes clear that its mission is fundamentally unchanged: Two immense murals commissioned for its opening in 1976 are remounted in the entrance hall. One offers a vista of cumulonimbus clouds billowing into the sky in the aftermath of a storm in the American Southwest—Eric Sloane’s “Earth Flight Environment.” The other, “The Space Mural: A Cosmic View” by Robert T. McCall, centers the history of the cosmos on an astronaut planting the American flag on the moon. At the museum’s founding, the murals declared a confident belief in an America at home in air and space.

We are living in very different times now. Actually, we were living in very different times even then, since the museum’s debut was one of the bright spots in a desultory era just before the bicentennial. But the moon landings were still in recent memory, and the museum fulfilled the murals’ promise. It clocked some 350 million visits before the renovations began. The same inspirational appeal is aimed for in the new spaces.

The museum also makes it clear that this is an American story. What is different now are efforts to explore more diverse aspects of the history. Mounted as if flying out of the “Environment” mural, for example, is a homemade airplane, the Loving WR-3 (1968), built by Neal V. Loving, a black aviation pioneer who was kept out of segregated civil air patrols during World War II and started his own patrol, training black pilots. In 1944, he lost his legs in a glider crash but continued to fly, designing a plane with folding wings so it could be towed by car to the airport.



The Apollo 11 Command Module

PHOTO: JIM PRESTON/SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM

A similar approach to inclusion is taken throughout, accompanied by a strong populist thread that runs through the history of flight. In the gallery “Thomas W. Haas We All Fly,” we not only see flying boats and delivery drones, but a lawn chair that lifted Larry Walters 16,000 feet into Los Angeles International Airport’s controlled airspace in 1982 with the aid of 42 helium balloons; he shot them out with a BB gun to control his descent. The intention is to celebrate a universal human impulse, which is why so many sci-fi artifacts are also shown here, including an 11-foot-long studio model of the original USS Enterprise from “Star Trek,” given pride of place in the entrance hall. Such imagined craft give way in one gallery to machines that don’t fly at all but go very fast: the “Nation of Speed” gallery, which showcases Mario Andretti’s Brawner-Ford “Hawk” racing car, Evel Knievel’s Harley-Davidson XR-750 and a clever Evel Knievel pinball challenge to get the ball to leap from one ramp to another.

There is some pandering in this, but it is amusing. The “One World Connected” gallery, which combines the effects of worldwide communications with global ecological issues, seems least coherent.



View inside the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum

PHOTO: JIM PRESTON/SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM

But such valleys are more than compensated for by the peaks attained, particularly in the central historical explorations of American flight. The venture to the moon is given context and elaboration in “Destination Moon.” And one of the most compelling galleries remains the one devoted to the Wright Brothers. There were no great technological achievements involved or advanced materials developed. No great fortune or elaborate experimental apparatus was required. Using the simplest of materials, the two bicycle makers, whose lives are described, set up a wind-tunnel for tests and created features we are led to understand: the ability to twist the box shaped by the wings, the addition of a kite-sized frame to control pitch, and a movable rudder. And after many failures and alterations, it worked.

This museum is a more complicated contraption, but it works too.

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