



Office of Public Affairs

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**Press Preview: Thursday, May 5, 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.**

### **Smithsonian Exhibition Celebrates African American Film**

“Close Up in Black: African American Film Posters,” an exhibition that recounts the extraordinary story of black film history through the exquisite graphic art of the American movie poster, concludes a two-and-a-half-year, national tour at the Smithsonian Institution’s International Gallery in Washington, D.C. It will be on view from May 7 through July 28. The exhibition is a project of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), in collaboration with the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Through visually engaging posters from the Edward Mapp Collection in the academy’s Margaret Herrick Library, “Close-Up in Black” chronicles the journey of American actors, directors, writers, designers, camera crews, technicians and graphic artists who fell in love with a medium and brought their talents to its service. Because many of these artists lived during and through times of social, political and cultural segregation, “Close Up in Black” illuminates the journey of a nation as well as an art form. The posters in the exhibition, originally designed for promotion and publicity, reveal the opulent energy and glamour of the movies, even as they reveal our cultural history.

Early portrayals of African Americans on film often reinforced minstrel stage stereotypes and racially biased perceptions. Addressing the dearth of positive images, “race movies” of the 1920s and 1930s offered African American performers the opportunity to star in Westerns, comedies, musicals, mysteries, melodramas and crime stories. These films allowed African Americans to see themselves woven into the national popular mythology and provided messages of racial uplift.

After World War II, film studios began to create “message movies” dealing with issues of racism and anti-Semitism. Produced in the 1950s and early 1960s, some of these films became vehicles for the metaphor of American justice.

The 1970s brought an explosion of films echoing the intense political, social and cultural energy of the time. Among these movies were ones with an ostentatious bravado. Termed

“blaxploitation” movies, these films were created primarily by Hollywood mainstream film studios. Yet, they, along with others of the period, reflected the film industry’s attempts to deal with the changing roles of African Americans in society.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a new generation of filmmakers came to the forefront — some working within the extant structure of the industry, others continuing the creative tradition of independent film. During this period, African Americans became involved in all aspects of film production. As writers, producers, directors, actors, designers, composers and technicians, their influence is evidenced by the expanded scope and breadth of today’s African American cinema depictions.

The exhibition will be presented in conjunction with a series of free public education events, ranging from screenings of newly made prints of vintage films like “The Negro Soldier” (1944) to an on-stage chat between father and son filmmakers Melvin and Mario Van Peebles. The Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery will present hands-on programming for families and children. More details will be forthcoming.

The Washington, D.C., showing of “Close Up in Black” was made possible by the generous support of The Nathan Cummings Foundation and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

The International Gallery is open every day, except Dec. 25, from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Patrons can enter The International Gallery from the copper-domed kiosk of the S. Dillon Ripley Center on Jefferson Drive between the Castle and the Freer Gallery of Art.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, a professional honorary organization of more than 6,000 motion picture professionals, was founded to advance the arts and sciences of motion pictures; foster cooperation among creative leaders for cultural, educational and technological progress; recognize outstanding achievements; cooperate on technical research and improvement of methods and equipment; provide a common forum and meeting ground for various branches and crafts; represent the viewpoint of actual creators of the motion picture; and foster educational activities between the professional community and the public.

Created in 1967, The Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture grew from an experiment in community outreach to a national resource devoted to exploring and documenting the African American experience, through exhibitions, symposia and Web-based education. Its collection of more than 6,000 archival objects dates to the early 1800s and focuses on fine art, church history and African American popular culture. Information is available at [www.anacostia.si.edu](http://www.anacostia.si.edu).

SITES has been sharing the wealth of Smithsonian collections and research programs with millions of people outside Washington, D.C., for more than 50 years. SITES connects Americans to their shared cultural heritage through a wide range of exhibitions about art, science and history, which are shown wherever people live, work and play. For more information, including exhibition descriptions and tour schedules, visit [www.sites.si.edu](http://www.sites.si.edu).

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