



Office of Public Affairs

Dec. 3, 2003

Media only: Fleur Paysour (202) 610-3290
paysourf@am.si.edu

Public only: (202) 357-2700

**Anacostia Museum And Center
for African American History and Culture
opens Church Hats Exhibition**

Faith and fashion come together in a stylish photography exhibition, *Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats*, opening Dec. 12 at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture. The exhibit showcases 30 black-and-white photographs drawn from the best-selling book by the same name and will be on view through Feb. 29, 2004. The Washington exhibition coincides with the Arena Stage presentation of "Crowns," a gospel-fueled musical based on the book and exhibition. Produced and directed by actress Regina Taylor, it runs from Dec. 12 through Feb. 14 in the Kreeger Theater, www.arenastage.org



For "Crowns," the exhibit, and its companion book, (Doubleday, \$27.50) photographer Michael Cunningham has teamed with journalist and author Craig Marberry to explore the rich and cherished tradition of wearing hats to worship because it is socially, culturally and biblically correct.

"When the Apostle Paul wrote an open letter to the Corinthians (I Corinthians, II: 5) decreeing that a woman cover her head when at worship to symbolize her obedience to God and the church hierarchy, he could not have imagined the flamboyance with which African American women would comply," Marberry says.

“For generations, black women have interpreted Apostle Paul’s edict with boundless passion and singular flair, wearing platter hats, lampshade hats, why’d-you-have-to-sit-in-front-of-me hats. These captivating hats are a peculiar convergence of faith and fashion that keeps the Sabbath both holy and glamorous.”

Cunningham’s photographs appear with text written by Marberry and drawn from interviews with hundreds of women offering vivid commentary on hats -- why they wear them, why they own so many, and what rigid rules of etiquette apply to wearing them.

The women Cunningham photographed own an average of 54 hats; seven own at least 100. They come from various religious denominations, work in a variety of occupations, and span three generations. The youngest was a high-glamour 22, the oldest, a serene and stylish 78. What they had in common, Cunningham says “is a deep passion for hats ... working on the project took me back to when I was a child in Landover, Maryland, where my mother was an evangelist. We would visit churches and I would see all the pretty hats.”

For Marberry and Cunningham, who live in Greensboro, N.C. and Washington respectively, the women featured in the book and exhibition are considered “The Hat Queens;” their hats are considered “crowns.” Cunningham chose to photograph them in black-and-white to avoid producing images that would look like commercial fashion photos; he also did not want to call undue attention to the hats.

“I want people to look at each photograph and discover something special about the crown **and** the queen it adorns.”

Cunningham’s work has been featured in numerous publications including *The New York Times* and *Ebony*. His 2002 “Crowns” calendar won two Gold Awards from the Calendar Marketing Association including one for best black-and-white photography. His photos also were exhibited by the Anacostia Museum in 1999 as part of “Locating the Spirit: Religion and Spirituality in African American Art.”

Marberry, a graduate of Morehouse College and Columbia University, is a former television reporter and has written for *The Washington Post* and *Essence*. The result of another collaboration with Cunningham, “Spirit of Harlem,” was released in November of 2003. He is traveling the country researching a book on the rich cultural legacy of the black barbershop.

The “Crowns” exhibition was organized by a consortium of Atlanta-based institutions including Alliance Theater, the High Museum of Art and the Woodruff Arts Center with additional support from Morehouse College.

The Anacostia Museum offers the following exhibition-related events.

A Sunday Afternoon Hat Tea, Feb. 8, 2 p.m. Hat lovers of all sorts – designers, collectors and devout Sunday Hat Queens – will gather and parade their hats for each other at an old-fashioned tea party. Museum photographers and researchers will be on hand to capture images of the hats and collect stories about the headwear. The photographs and interviews will become part of the museum’s collection of contemporary African American fashion. The event is free. Reservations are encouraged; (202) 287-3382.

Book Talk by Michael Cunningham, Sunday, Feb. 29, 3 p.m. Cunningham will tell the story of a collection of photos that grew to become a book, an exhibition and a gospel-driven musical. The event is free. Reservations are encouraged; (202) 610-3292.

Created in 1967, the Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture works to explore and document the historical and cultural experiences of people of African descent. The museum, at 1901 Fort Place S.E., is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Admission is free. For more information, call (202) 287-3306 or visit the web at Anacostia.si.edu.

###

NOTE TO EDITORS: Digital images are available by calling (202) 610-3290.