



Smithsonian
***Anacostia Museum and Center for
African American History and Culture***

News

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Anacostia Museum Opens Three Exhibitions Celebrating the Work of Self-taught African-American Artists

The wit and daring of self-taught artists take center stage in a new exhibition showcasing the work of six artists with strong ties to the American south, the rural way of life and the African-American church.

“On Their Own: Selected Works by Self-Taught African American Artists” is at the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture and will be on view until June 12.

Concurrently, the museum is presenting “The Art of Charles Smith,” an exhibition that features 23 cast iron sculptures ranging from the whimsical to the politically charged. Totally self-taught, the New Orleans native attributes his work to divine inspiration and instinct. The exhibited works are part of a 50-piece collection acquired by the Anacostia Museum through a major gift from the Kohler Foundation.

A quilt called “In Celebration of Black Men” also is on view in the John R. Kinard Gallery, a space designated for the display of works by regional artists. Created in 1995 by 13 African-American men in the Washington area, this story quilt was designed to help prepare teenage boys for manhood. Each artist created a patch design addressing issues ranging from unity and knowledge to discipline and perseverance. Once the patches were completed, a team of fiber artists, headed by noted doll-maker Francine Haskins, assembled the quilt.

“On Their Own” showcases 54 items ranging from paintings, collages and bottle-cap sculptures to highly decorated home furnishings and miniature reproductions of decaying buildings in rural Tennessee. Subject matter ranges from a piano-playing cow and an out-sized, mountain-climbing mule to angels, church scenes and big city sophisticates.

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“This show allows visitors to see the diversity of creative expression and how self-taught artists are able to use what’s around them—doors, tool chests and discarded boards and metal—to create something bold and beautiful,” said Anacostia Museum curator Robert L. Hall. “Since 1990, the art world has seen a huge surge of interest in the work of self-taught artists in general and among African-American artists in particular.”

Historically black colleges and institutions such as the Studio Museum in Harlem and The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture have hosted scholarly symposia and published major books on the subject. The Anacostia Museum exhibition is designed to show what happens with self-taught artists who work in isolation and totally on their own.

“Mostly unaffected by the influences of peers, popular trends or creative movements, these self-taught artists have been free to develop their own truly personal ways of making visual statements about things going on in the world,” Hall explained. “They have something to say, and they say it in their own way.”

The featured artists are:

- Chris Clark, a fabric artist from Birmingham, Ala., whose boldly colored quilts carry stylized images of jazz and blues musicians, church scenes and memories of his first fancy dance in rural Alabama
- Simon Jackson, who makes intricately detailed, miniature reproductions of farmhouses, barns and country stores that once stood near his hometown of Eads, Tenn.
- Mary Proctor, of Tallahassee, Fla., whose soft-hued paintings and collages celebrate the nurturing power of African-American women and the central role of the church in her life
- Sam “The Dot Man” McMillan, of Winston-Salem, NC, who uses bold, multi-colored dots to paint town and country scenes on surfaces ranging from straight-backed chairs, table lamps and wooden tool chests to automobiles, overcoats and neckties
- Gregory “Mr. Imagination” Warmack, of Bethlehem, Pa., who uses discarded items—fallen trees, railroad ties and wire mesh, but primarily metal bottle caps—to create sculptures; the centerpiece of his exhibited collection is “Alferd, the Mountain Mule,” who stands more than six feet tall and celebrates the history of the barge mules that worked the Delaware and Lehigh Canal corridor

- Ruby Williams, of Plant City, Fla., who uses carnival-colored paint on recycled planks to create images of farm animals, field hands and juicy fruits and vegetables, items used to advertise her roadside vegetable stand

The Smithsonian's Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture opened in southeast Washington in 1967 as the nation's first federally funded neighborhood museum. Today, its collection is national in scope and features significant holdings in African-American art, religion and photography, with a focus on community and family history. In addition to creating original exhibitions and installing significant traveling exhibitions on a variety of African-American topics, the museum produces innovative educational programs and publications. Anacostia Museum is located at 1901 Fort Place S.E., Washington, D.C., and is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Information: (202) 287-3306. Tours: (202) 287-3369. Web site: www.anacostia.si.edu.

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