



TAVIS SMILEY PRESENTS



The African American Imprint

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EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Introduction

Scholar W.E.B. Du Bois once wrote, “Would America have been America without her Negro people?”

To examine the answer to that question, **AMERICA I AM: *The African American Imprint*** was mounted as the broadest museum exhibition of its kind. An assembly of poignant artifacts representing nearly 500 years of American history, the exhibition conveys and celebrates the undeniable imprint African Americans have had on the country and the world.

Core Themes

Covering history from the arrival of Africans to the present day, the exhibition presents a collection of pivotal moments of African American courage, conviction and creativity that have shaped the culture and society in which we live today.

The exhibition examines four themes in particular: economic, socio-political, cultural and spiritual. These themes serve as recurring touch points throughout the galleries, as visitors discover how these and other realms have been shaped by African Americans throughout history.

America I AM provides an opportunity for people from all walks of life to explore this uniquely American story. With the inauguration of the nation’s first African American president, **America I AM** endeavors to bring together Americans of all backgrounds to achieve a greater understanding of their shared culture and history.

Walking through the Exhibition

The exhibition is divided into twelve galleries, leading visitors through time on a journey from struggle to triumph:

Introductory Video

The purpose of this exhibition is to tell the unique story of the United States, a story that is in part unique because of the involvement of African people. Visitors are invited to experience their journey, share in their struggles and witness their triumphs.

W. E. B. Du Bois Vestibule

In the final chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, the Black intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois asks, “Would America have been America without her Negro people?” This exhibition is an attempt to answer this important question.

America I AM Our History

Visitors begin their journey in a passageway filled with depictions of African Americans leading them back in time, beginning with present-day icons and ending with Africans from generations ago.

America I AM Rooted in Africa

Artifacts and text depict African society and show how the slave trade began, as well as how it made its impact on the Atlantic world. Visitors pass through the “Doors of No Return” from Cape Coast Castle in Ghana where captive Africans were housed under lock and key, sometimes for months at a time, awaiting ships that would take them to the Americas.

America I AM Our Foundation

Enslavement was critical to this nation’s growth. During this time and despite the bleakness of slavery, African Americans engendered four kinds of major imprints on America: economic, socio-political, cultural, and spiritual. These are recurring themes throughout the rest of the exhibition.

America I AM the Measure of Justice

In this gallery, visitors see how free and enslaved Africans fought in wars dating all the way back to the Revolutionary War, before freedom for the colonies also meant freedom for them, and what their sacrifices ultimately meant for the nation.

America I AM the Soul of Freedom

Visitors will next enter a maze-like gallery that, through its physical design, reflects the ups and downs endured by African Americans after the Revolutionary War and through the Civil War. This gallery showcases objects from the Abolition Movement, the Underground Railroad and the Civil War. It provides an idea of what life was like for African Americans during the 19th century.

America I AM the Voice of Equality

At the close of the Civil War, amendments were made to the Constitution that granted citizenship to African Americans and guaranteed them the right to vote. This gallery highlights some of the positive changes made during this brief period known as Reconstruction.

America I AM Invincible

This emotionally powerful gallery relates some of the positive imprints made during the dark days of the Jim Crow era. The gallery details economic imprints like the increase of African American college graduates via the founding of historically black colleges and universities. It also conveys cultural imprints, such as artistic contributions, and the impact of black soldiers in both world wars. A video created by African American filmmaker Madison Davis Lacy showcases some of these contributions and what they meant in the social context of the era.

America I AM Spirit

This gallery explores the spiritual imprint of the African American community – from its impact on how other communities worship to nineteenth century churches that took a role in the fight against slavery to the direct role that many churches and church organizations played in the Modern Civil Rights Movement.

America I AM Patriotic

Visitors witness the enormous personal sacrifices made by many African Americans in defense of the United States. This gallery also offers insight into the discrimination African Americans endured as soldiers and how the black press’ Double V campaign during World War II helped to fundamentally change the military. A video by African American filmmaker Madison Davis Lacy summarizes the heroic military service of African Americans through the history of the country.

America I AM the Conscience of a Nation

This gallery offers a fresh look at the modern Civil Rights Movement in terms of how it became a model for other social movements in the United States and around the world. Visitors learn about peaceful protests and marches that defined the movement, and view a representation of the Birmingham jail cell that held Martin Luther King, Jr. after his arrest.

America I AM the World

Through an array of one-of-a-kind objects and photos, and an inspiring video presentation, this uplifting gallery celebrates the indelible imprint African Americans have had on the culture of the United States. African Americans are an integral part of American culture, a culture that is consumed all around the world.

What's Your Imprint?

At the end of the exhibition, visitors are invited to leave a video recording of what the African American imprint has meant to them. These video imprints will be added to a growing oral collection throughout the exhibition's four-year run.

America I AM: *The African American Imprint*

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www.americiam.org

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