

Exploring The 'Imprint' Of Black Americans

By FELICIA R. LEE

Imagine the boxing gloves Muhammad Ali wore when he knocked out Sonny Liston just steps away from a first edition of Phillis Wheatley's 1773 book of poetry, the first published by an African-American, around the corner from the cell door behind which the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

That is the dream of an elite group of scholars and artists, including the novelist Toni Morrison and the Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., who have been enlisted to help shape an ambitious traveling exhibition to showcase the black influence on life in this country.

The exhibition would travel to major museums in 10 cities for five years beginning in the summer of 2008, according to plans fleshed out over the weekend at the group's first planning meeting, held in New York. The 10,000- to 15,000-square-foot exhibition is tentatively titled "America at 400: The African-American Imprint on America," said Tavis Smiley, the broadcast personality and entrepreneur who hatched the idea.

"We want to wrestle with that question raised by W. E. B. Du Bois: Would America have been America without her Negro people?" said Mr. Smiley. The host of a TV talk show on PBS and a weekly radio program, he has also emerged as a major player in black politics and culture, especially after editing the best-selling books "The Covenant With Black America" and "The Covenant in Action," wide-ranging guidebooks on a

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Plan to Explore the 'Imprint' Made by Black Americans

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number of issues related to African-Americans. "We want people to understand, appreciate, embrace and see themselves situated in the experiences we have had," Mr. Smiley said. "You think about 400 years of Jamestown, Barack Obama running for president, even Don Imus making his crazy comments. It's a propitious moment for us to roll this thing out."

In two days of meetings at the Jumeirah Essex House Hotel, the panel pored over a historical timeline that noted events like the arrival of the first Africans in Jamestown in 1619 and the Sugar Hill Gang's recording of "Rapper's Delight" in 1979, thrusting rap music into the mainstream.

The project's scope is wide. The advisory panel hopes to gather and display documents and objects from many individuals and movements, as well as artifacts of African-American life: Dr. King's Nobel prize, a pressing comb used to straighten kinky hair, photographs of the Tuskegee Airmen and souvenirs from Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa campaign were mentioned as possibilities. The exhibition will examine the Civil War and black music, art, religion and scientific contributions. The material will come from private and

A dream of scholars and artists to create a traveling exhibition.

public collections. How it is all arranged is still being determined.

"I think we all know we're part of a historic project," said Cornel West, a professor of religion and African-American studies at Princeton and a member of the advisory panel. "This is an unprecedented moment. This is a moment in the struggle for freedom and democracy that we've been talking about in the last two days. That's why I'm so excited."

Besides Mr. West, Ms. Morrison (who did not attend the meeting) and Mr. Gates, the advisory panel includes Thelma Golden, director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem; Anna Deavere Smith, the writer and actor; Quintard Taylor Jr., a professor of history at Washington University in Seattle; Howard Dodson, chief of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, as well as the heads of a handful of other prominent black institutions. Lonnie Bunch, the founding director of the National Museum of African



Shiho Fukuda for The New York Times

Tavis Smiley, left, and Cornel West during a discussion on a proposed exhibition that would explore the black influence on American life.

American History and Culture, is listed as a member of the advisory board but did not attend the meeting.

Also in attendance were executives from Arts and Exhibitions International, a museum exhibitions producer that mounted the popular traveling King Tut show and is charged with pulling together and designing the displays for the project. Michael Sampliner, the company's chief operating officer, said planners have been in touch with major museums of natural history around the country that could mount the exhibition. None of those conversations have yet yielded a public commitment.

Mr. Sampliner said the show would include theatrical lighting and audiovisuals as well as artifacts.

For now, Mr. Smiley said, the interactive exhibition will be organized into seven galleries with a thematic focus, like as "Creative/Culture Expression" and "Fighting for America," which would focus on the role of black Americans in every American military conflict. Mr. Smiley said he expects admission to be free, and that he is still talking with corporate sponsors about financing the exhibition.

Some panelists said they saw the exhibition as a chance to attract African-Americans who do not regularly attend museums, to highlight unrecognized black accomplishments and to draw attention to the African-American art museums and cultural centers scattered around the country. "Over the past decade several cities have mounted impressive at-

tempts to create self-sustaining African-American museums," said Mr. Gates, the director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African-American Studies at Harvard. "But many of them are learning that having the dream is one thing but sustaining it is another," because of financial difficulties.

Mr. Smiley and some panel members consider the traveling exhibitions an interim measure until the establishment of a permanent black history museum at the Smithsonian Institution. In 2006 the Smithsonian selected a prominent space on the Mall near the Washington Monument as the site of its National Museum of African-American History and Culture. That museum is expected to open sometime in the next decade.

The exhibition project's size and scope create their own challenges, said one panelist, Fath Davis Ruffins, the curator of African-American history and culture at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. She wondered, for example, if museums and private collectors would be willing to relinquish objects for five years.

"The civil rights movement is well known," said Ms. Ruffins. "The challenge will be to communicate in a complex way and in an immersive way the contributions of an earlier period."

Mr. Dodson of the Schomburg Center said he hoped the show would reinvigorate the American discussion about race. "It is a perfect antidote," he said, "to the disparaging notions that people have."