

At a special time, the National Constitution Center is featuring a display of 200 artifacts detailing the "African American imprint" on the U.S.

By **Destinée-Charisse Royal**  
FOR THE INQUIRER

**O**n this weekend of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birth, the National Constitution Center, where President-elect Barack Obama urged the nation to confront "the complexities of race in this country," is offering a major exhibit of African American contributions to our country.

The stool where King sat in 1963 to write "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" and a copy of Obama's speech on race delivered last year are among the 200 artifacts displayed in "America I AM: The African American Imprint." The exhibit that opened Thursday, King's birthday, continues through May 3.

The exhibition is developed in partnership with commentator Tavis Smiley and The Smiley Group Inc., and organized by Arts and Exhibitions International (AEI) and the Cincinnati Museum Center. Philadelphia is the premiere city for this 12-gallery, 15,000-square-foot, touring multimedia showcase that exhibit presenter Smiley calls the "biggest, baddest, boldest exhibit ever to tell our story in the history of the country." And, Smiley says, having the show hosted by the Constitution Center in the nation's birthplace broadens its presentation.

To reach this moment, Smiley looked back to the words of Harvard-educated activist W.E.B. Du Bois: "Would America have been America without her Negro people?" "That is the quote that I wanted to create and design this exhibit around. I wanted all of America to wrestle with that question," Smiley said in an interview. "There is a back story to Barack Obama and this exhibit really is that back story."

Coordinating an exhibit of this magnitude required multiple contributors. Orchestrating matters as the

project's executive producer was John Fleming, president of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. He hired Fath Davis Ruffins of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History as curatorial consultant.

With Smiley, they assembled and met with an advisory board of scholars and historians that included Cornel West of Princeton University and Henry Louis Gates of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and American Research at Harvard University.

The board's discussions produced four exhibit themes: the economic, sociopolitical, cultural, and spiritual impact of African Americans on this nation. Smiley said the themes were critical to making the exhibit appeal to folks ranging from 8-year-olds to 80-year-olds.

"You have to break this thing down into pieces, where everybody gets it ... So whether you know some black history or whether you are completely ignorant of any black history, outside of Barack Obama ... I want to make sure you get it when you leave this exhibit," Smiley said.

If "America I AM" — with its mood lighting and photo montage murals — immerses you like a theme park showcase, it is because the exhibit's early concept was designed by folks with that background: Eric Parr and Phil Hettema of the California-based Hettema Group.

"It's kind of our specialty — taking culturally complex stories and making them interactive and hopefully, personally involving," Hettema said. "We know how to manipulate the senses."

The team illustrated eras for which there were few physical reminders, but ultimately, the design was meant to enhance galleries rich in artifacts, culled from more than 80 institutions and private collections from this area and across the nation.

"At the end of the day, the real





**Prince's guitar.** The pop star of the 1990s had several names, among them an unpronounceable symbol shaped like this guitar.

thing has a kind of power that nothing else has and it gets visitors to connect across time and across differences and across places, sometimes in a magical way," said Joseph Torsella, the Constitution Center's chief executive officer.

On loan from the African American Museum in Philadelphia are the Doors of No Return from the Ghanaian Cape Coast Castle, portals through which Africans passed to board slave ships. Other local institutions that contributed to the exhibit are Temple University, the Lest We Forget Black Holocaust Museum, and The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas.

Smiley expects that

"America I AM" will leave visitors enlightened, in-

## If You Go

**Phillis Wheatley's table.** Her book of poetry was the first by a black American. spired and entertained.

"There is no slow spot in this exhibit. It will grab you from the very beginning and hold you until the end. There is no letdown," he said.

"America I AM: The African American Imprint" runs through May 3 at the National Constitution Center, Independence Mall, 525 Arch St. Admission: \$17.50, \$15.50 for seniors and \$9 for children ages 4-12 includes the center's main exhibition. Free community days during Black History Month are on Feb. 2 and 23. Information and additional programming: 215-409-6600 or [www.constitutioncenter.org](http://www.constitutioncenter.org) or [www.AmericanAM.org](http://www.AmericanAM.org).

## Inaugural Day Events

*Below are some local events marking Tuesday's Inauguration of Barack Obama. For more information, go to <http://www.philly.com/philly/news/37145794.html>*

**From Abe to Obama: Having a Dream** Celebration of the historic inauguration. Storytelling & big-screen coverage of the event. Garden State Discovery Museum, 2040 Springdale Rd., Cherry Hill; 856-424-1233. [www.discoverymuseum.com](http://www.discoverymuseum.com). ♿ Included in admission. 1/19-1/20 9:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m.

**Live Simulcast of the Presidential Inauguration** Witness the live broadcast of this historic event,

215-409-6700. [www.constitutioncenter.org](http://www.constitutioncenter.org). Included in admission. 1/20 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

**Celebrate Inauguration Day** Enjoy \$1 off museum admission, free coffee, 10% discount on most items in the Mercer Shop & watch coverage of the inauguration. The Mercer Museum, 84 S. Pine St., Doylestown; 215-345-0210. [www.mercermuseum.org](http://www.mercermuseum.org). 1/20 10 a.m.

**FREE Presidential Inauguration Hawaiian Luau** Inauguration party w/Hawaiian food, drinks & inauguration viewing. McGillin's Olde Ale House, 1310 Drury St.; 215-735-5562. [www.mcgillins.com](http://www.mcgillins.com). 1/20 11 a.m.

including the grand parade down Pennsylvania Ave. Also features a community discussion afterward. Bryn Mawr Film Institute, 824 W. Lancaster Ave., Bryn Mawr; 610-527-4008. [www.brynmawrfilm.org](http://www.brynmawrfilm.org). \$6.75. 1/20 10 a.m.

**Inauguration Day Celebration**  
Take the Oath of Office, create your own presidential seals & watch the inauguration live. [National Constitution Center](http://www.nxnwphl.com), 525 Arch St.;

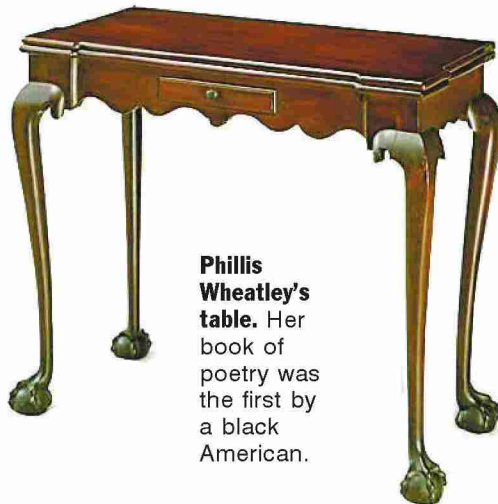
**Barack Obama Inauguration Celebration** Dancing, live music & light fare. The Philadelphia Clef Club of Jazz & Performing Arts, 736-38 S. Broad St.; 215-893-9912. [www.clefclub.org](http://www.clefclub.org). ♪ \$20. 1/20 7 p.m.-midnight.

**Obama Inaugural Party**  
Features live performance by Philly Gumbo. NXNW, 7165 Germantown Ave.; 215-248-1000. [www.nxnwphl.com](http://www.nxnwphl.com). \$10. 1/20 9 p.m.



MARK LYONS

**Captive Africans** were shackled until sold in the Americas.



**Phillis Wheatley's table.** Her book of poetry was the first by a black American.



**Muhammad Ali wore this robe** as he trained in Zaire for his 1974 "Rumble in the Jungle," when he beat champ George Foreman to reclaim his title.

 **A black impression**  
ON RED, WHITE & BLUE

Philadelphia, Pa. (AP) — The key belonged to the cell where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his famous 1963 "Letter From a Birmingham Jail."



At the Montgomery, Ala., police station, Rosa Parks is photographed after her 1955 arrest. She refused to give up her seat on a crowded bus to a white man.