

National Great Blacks In Wax Museum December 2005

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FIGURING OUT HISTORY

By Tony Ware



Baltimore's National Great Blacks In Wax Museum offers an unusual take on African-American movers, shakers and history makers.

There are many subjects over which people wax poetic, proclaiming their historical value. But there are few subjects so painstakingly captured in wax as African-American history has been at the National Great Blacks In Wax Museum.

A singular establishment located in East Baltimore, MD, The National Great Blacks In Wax Museum presents a breadth of great African-American leaders and role models in a manner that demands attention, stares visitors in the face. And though the wax figures may have glass eyes, they offer a piercing insight into the tensions and the tenacity that have shaped the African-American experience.

Baltimore has a deeply engrained African-American history. Long home to the headquarters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and now also the site of the recently opened Reginald F Lewis Museum of Maryland African-American History and Culture, Baltimore and its exhibits embody both inner-city struggle and inner strength, involuntary labors and labors of love. So it's appropriate that the first figure that greets visitors to The National Great Blacks In Wax Museum is WEB DuBois, pivotal civil rights advocate and NAACP founder.

Right across the small, movie-theater-like lobby of The National Great Blacks In Wax Museum is Hannibal rearing triumphantly on the back of an elephant. This magnificent spectacle reflects the scope of the museum's displays. They are on a scale so encompassing that the museum—founded in 1983 by Drs. Elmer and Joanne Martin—was forced to move from its original downtown location in 1988 to accommodate greater visitor numbers. The Museum's current facility spans the 1600 block of East North Avenue.

Now comprising 30,000 square feet of exhibits and offices within a renovated firehouse, Victorian mansion and adjoining apartment dwellings, The National Great Blacks In Wax Museum has progressed a long way from its humble beginnings.

In 1980 the Martins used the money they had saved for a house down payment to purchase four wax figures which they carried to schools, churches and shopping malls, and which they still exhibit in locations outside

the museum to celebrate historical occurrences. Now there are plans for more multimedia and special events facility expansions in the coming years.

Aiming to offer education and commemoration, The National Great Blacks In Wax Museum presents testaments to Black accomplishments chronologically from Africa to the antebellum period, reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance, and through the Civil Rights era to today. A guided tour brings to life African-American history, with museum narration as well as historical reenactments and readings. While the earliest figures in the museum are cast in beeswax with synthetic vinyl casing, and are therefore less lifelike, they illustrate such harrowing situations that they are no less effective than later models.

While there are cursory exhibits intended to debunk Hollywood's portrayal of ancient Africa as anything but humane and enlightened, a slave ship replica stands first and foremost in the Museum. You marvel at the gall of naming ships Liberty, Faith, Charity and Justice when they were used to transport human cargo. Figures are shown in the fetid hold of the ship, their bodies crushed but not their spirits. Dioramas of constrictive Underground Railroad safe houses, surreptitious "invisible churches" and the trial of Dred Scott reinforce the theme that the body will endure terrible hardship to preserve the spirit. No side, reprehensible or honorable, is without its extremes, however. The nigh-fanatical visage of John Brown, "God's angriest white man," illustrates the righteous anger of the most militant of abolitionists.

Also recorded in wax are all the noble ways African-Americans have participated in the building of the country—from soldiers in the Civil War to members of the Freemasons. Benjamin Banneker, handpicked and appointed by George Washington to survey what would become Washington, DC, is depicted. From the Western frontier to polar exploration to the space race, African-Americans are highlighted for their contributions.

Turn a corner and you'll find yourself turning a corner in history as well, to demonstrations of ingenuity and invention from Booker T Washington to Isaac Myers, among others, before the museum makes room for sports stars and authors. African freedom fighters and Islamic leaders share space with Marcus Garvey, Thurgood Marshall, Kweisi Mfume and other nonpartisan activists, candidates and preachers (stressing the Black church community backbone). Across the hall, Fannie Lou Hamer and Shirley Chisholm are displayed along with other female pioneers.

In the middle of the Museum—and history—two alternate paths are offered. The upstairs of the museum is dedicated entirely to Maryland's heritage, from contemporary neurosurgeons, politicians and radio personalities, back to Billie Holiday, Cab Calloway and Mary Carter Smith, Baltimore's official griot (the traditional West African storyteller). In the basement is a special exhibition area that has presented such thought-

provoking material as a survey on lynching that not only laments the sorrowful past but also warns the current generation against paving its own "boulevard of broken dreams."



So many figures have filled African-American history, and find their place in The

National Great Blacks In Wax Museum, that it is impossible to mention them all. Marking the final stretch of the museum, however, are the figures that most represent dignity and righteous indignation—Frederick Douglas, Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the late Rosa Parks, among others. While their faces are stern they also capture for posterity the emotion and impetus that inspired The National Great Blacks In Wax Museum: Hope, for a stronger community and for the future.

For more information on the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum visit www.greatblacksinwax.org

(This article can be found in the December 2005 edition of Air Trans Airlines' Go magazine.)

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