

VISITORS SHARE THEIR TAKE ON ARTWORKS IN DIALOGUE

SMITHSONIAN EXHIBIT CONNECTS AFRICAN AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE THROUGH ART

By Brianna Rhodes
WI Bridge Contributing Writer
@Bri_Rhodes24

For more than a year, visitors at the Smithsonian National Museum of Art have had the opportunity to talk about the connection between African and African American history.

They've done so through "Conversations: African and African American Artworks in Dialogue," an exhibit that highlights various interpretations of African and African-American culture. Spirituality counts among those topics that bridges the gap between the two groups.

"This section seems very important and meaningful," said Chase Nelson, a resident of Asheville, N.C. "I'm not super religious, but I am very spiritual and I feel the sense of spirituality here."

Nelson counted among the hundreds of people who have visited the exhibit since it opened nearly a year ago.

Conversations, on display until next January, honors the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art's 50th anniversary. It recognizes the history and contributions of the African diaspora. More than 160 of the works come from the National Museum of African Art and the Camille O. and William H. Cosby Jr. Collection.

Curators include David C. Driskell, Adrienne L. Childs, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Bryna Freyer.

"We didn't necessarily have a message [for the exhibit] in view," said Freyer, an employee of the Smithsonian Institution. "We wanted the idea of a conversation that people could have. [They] could look at an object and think 'this object is beautiful, this object is interesting, this object gets me thinking, and then I'm going to compare it, and how does it compare to the object that's next to it.'"

The pieces of art within the Spiritualities theme give an overview of how this concept is interpreted within African and African-American cultures. Often times, spirituality and religion are translated by word, but the artwork gives a visual outline with which visitors can identify.

Upon entering this section of the exhibit, visitors are able to view the artwork within a circle. In the middle of the space stands a circular structure named Nexus by Martin Puryear.

participate. Boy and the Candle shows a little boy lighting a single candle in the dark.

"To me, the piece [The Thankful Poor] means that you may not have everything

that this is a poignant moment," said Kanon.

The Last Bar-B-Que piece by African-American artist Margo Humphrey also piqued the interest of visitors who entered the Spiritualities section. The piece is an African-American rendition of The Last Supper, with black figures and cuisine.

"Its an artwork [The Last Bar-B-Que] that's similar to Jesus' Last Supper. It has African-American known food, some more kind of speculative like watermelon, it's not really proven that we like watermelon but it's more of a speculation that our culture loves watermelon," said Donyai Moffatt, who lives in Iowa City, Iowa.

Moffatt, a sales representative for Miller Coors Brewing Company, visited the District earlier this month to attend the Thurgood Marshall College Fund Annual Leadership Institute, where he could recruit potential employees.

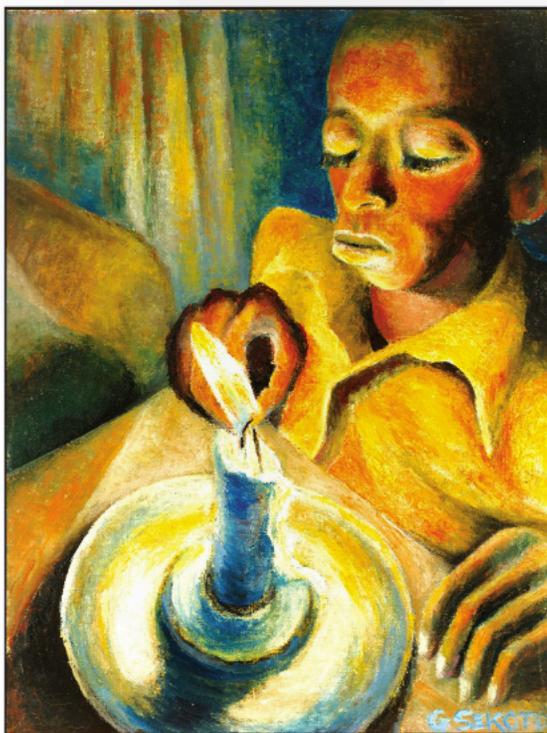
"This section makes me feel like in my church," said Moffatt "I came to the exhibit to kind of hone in on the African roots, of which I am an African-American male so I just wanted to look at it and get my feel in an atmosphere of African-American art."

The curators said they took the time to look at the objects first and see what themes struck them. There were a number of pieces that could have been placed in more than one theme.

"I wasn't expecting American pieces. The incorporation surprised me in a good way," said Aimee Hooper, who lives in Newport News, Virginia.

Hooper visited the museum with a family member. She said that she was interested in how the exhibit combined incorporated traditional Christian artwork. She also noted the cultural combinations included in the pieces.

"I think it's important to have it [the African and African-American pieces] together. It provides a cultural shift from Africa and America" said Hooper.



Gerard Sekoto, 1913-1993, South Africa, Boy and the Candle 1943, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution/ Photograph courtesy of Franko Khoury

Other popular portraits within the Spiritualities theme of the exhibit include South African artist Gerard Sekoto's piece Boy and the Candle and The Thankful Poor by Henry Owassa Tanner.

Both portraits visualize an intimate moment. The Thankful Poor shows a young boy and an older man praying at a table before eating a meal, an intimate custom in which black families

you want, but you have everything you need" said Lauren Nelson, a native South Carolinian who moved to D.C. in August. She brought some out-of-town family members to the Smithsonian for a weekly visit.

Rachel Kanon, Nelson's cousin, also said that The Thankful Poor was her favorite.

"I minored in African studies and I think