

The Smithsonian Looks at How the Slave Trade Shaped the World

“In Slavery’s Wake,” at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, looks beyond the United States to tell a global story.



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“In Slavery’s Wake,” a new exhibition at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, deals in huge themes and vast numbers. Over four centuries, an estimated 12 million Africans were transported across the ocean on more than 36,000 voyages, an epochal forced migration that reshaped societies on both sides of the Atlantic.

But of the artifacts on view in the show, it’s sometimes the smallest that speak most powerfully.



The exhibition, organized by an international group of curators, puts names and faces to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, telling stories that complicate the standard timelines and geographies of slavery and abolition. Maansi Srivastava for The New York Times

In a case in one corner, there's a scattering of cowrie shells excavated at Valongo Wharf in Rio de Janeiro, the point of entry for nearly 900,000 enslaved people, which was lost to history until a construction crew stumbled on the ruins a decade ago.

The shells, which may have been carried by people who endured the Middle Passage, are a rare and remarkable survival. But they are also a metaphor for the difficulties of truly grasping the subject of slavery, Johanna Obenda, one of the show's curators, explained recently during a tour of the exhibition.

"With this history, oftentimes we get lost in the enormity," she said. "It's challenging to even process. But when you see artifacts like this, you start to see faces, people."



Cowrie shells excavated at Valongo Wharf in Rio de Janeiro, the point of arrival for an estimated 900,000 enslaved Africans. They may have been carried by survivors of the Middle Passage. Maansi Srivastava for The New York Times

“In Slavery’s Wake: Making Black Freedom in the World,” which opens on Friday, is one of the most ambitious shows the museum has presented since it opened on the National Mall eight years ago. The product of a 10-year collaboration among nearly two dozen curators at 10 institutions on four continents, it goes beyond the Smithsonian’s traditional American focus to tell a global story of the ways that slavery shaped the modern world.

It’s a story of trade, capitalism, exploitation and violence, but also of the ways that the enslaved and their descendants constantly pushed back, creating their own freedom in ways big and small.

“If we’re talking about violence and attempted dehumanization, we’re also talking about the way people resisted and held on to their humanity,” Paul Gardullo, the museum’s assistant director of history and one of the exhibition’s directors, said.

After closing in Washington next June, the show will travel to partner museums in Brazil, South Africa, Senegal, Belgium and Britain, switching languages — and swapping out some objects — along the way.



A display including signs from Black Lives Matter protests around the world. The show connects the history of resistance to slavery to the unfinished work of Black “freedom-making” today. Maansi Srivastava for The New York Times

At the Smithsonian, it complements the story in the museum’s permanent history galleries, which chronicle how African Americans not only claimed their own freedom, but also shaped American ideas of liberty, justice and democracy.

“The African American experience is deeply, deeply important for world history,” Gardullo said “But it’s not all there is.”

Today, in the United States, slavery may be a more politically contentious subject than it was when the museum opened to broad acclaim in 2016. As Lonnie G. Bunch III, the Smithsonian’s secretary, puts it in an introduction to the show’s companion book, “A strong current of political leaders wants to prevent the public from engaging with Black history, which they deem ‘too divisive,’ and create a culture of silence.”



One case juxtaposes shackles used on enslaved people, produced by the British company Hiatt & Co, with modern handcuffs produced by Hiatt today. Maansi Srivastava for The New York Times

Anthony Bogues, a professor of Africana studies at Brown University and another project director, said in a telephone interview that the group had thought hard about how to draw connections between history and the present without sparking defensiveness.

“We are careful about making sure we are not banging people on the head, but telling stories in a certain kind of sophisticated but simple way so they say, ‘Oh, I see,’” Bogues said.

Wrestling unflinchingly with slavery and its legacy, Gardullo said, is the museum’s core mission. Done well, he said, “it’s about Black love and Black freedom, not about white guilt.”

The seeds of the exhibition were planted in 2014, when a group of international curators met at Brown’s Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Race and Justice, which Bogues leads. The center had done a study of about 90 exhibitions about slavery presented around the world over the previous decade. Most, it found, told a national or regional story, which neglected one of the central realities that scholars increasingly emphasize: its transnational nature.

Over the following years, the group brainstormed ways to create an exhibit that wouldn't just tell a global story, but do it through a genuine global partnership.

As the meetings moved to Amsterdam, Cape Town, Rio de Janeiro and other cities, the curators settled on several basic principles. The exhibition couldn't just tell a linear story that ended neatly with emancipation. African partners in particular (the show will also travel to the Iziko Museums of South Africa in Cape Town and the Museum of Black Civilizations in Dakar) emphasized the need to connect the slave trade with European colonial domination of Africa, which intensified after slavery was fully abolished in the Americas in the late 19th century.



The entry to “In Slavery’s Wake,” with a video by Tiffany McNeil. “Rather than starting from a historical launching point, we wanted to meet people where they are and create a mood,” Johanna Obenda, one of the curators, said. Maansi Srivastava for The New York Times

The exhibition also needed to foreground the voices of the enslaved and colonized and their descendants. To that end, the curators started an oral history project, Unfinished Conversations, which has so far gathered more than 150 interviews around the world, some of which are woven into the exhibit.

Still, when it came to creating an actual exhibition, the curators faced some basic questions: What to call it? And where to begin?

The title draws on the scholar Christina Sharpe’s metaphor of “the wake”: a reference to the wake behind a ship, the still-churning waters of history, the watching over of the dead, and the coming to consciousness. An opening video installation, by the filmmaker Tiffany McNeil, introduces the idea with a collage of contemporary scenes, archival footage and watery imagery.



A peek-through wall in the installation by Daniel Minter incorporates musical instruments and other artifacts enslaved people used as “tools of freedom.” Maansi Srivastava for The New York Times

“Rather than starting from a historical launching point, we wanted to meet people where they are and create a mood,” Obenda said.

A historical section presents plenty of cold, hard facts, starting with a wall map showing the flow of the roughly 12 million Africans carried away into chattel slavery (which was distinct from the forms of bondage that had long existed in many societies, including in Africa). Of those people, about 500,000 came to what is now the United States — a figure dwarfed by the estimated five million who landed in Brazil.

Another graphic illustrates the web of institutions — banks, insurance companies, universities — that benefited from slavery, and the ways that law, religion and science were used to create and enforce the idea of Black inferiority.

Nearby is a hulking 19th-century commodity scale from Bahia, Brazil, that was used to weigh crops grown by enslaved people (and possibly, a label suggests, the enslaved themselves).

It feels eerie, even threatening. But near the top, Obenda pointed out the elaborate decorative ironwork across the balance.

“There were so many skilled African artisans and ironworkers in Brazil,” she said. “It makes me wonder, ‘Who made this? Whose hands touched it?’”



A portrait of Marème Diarra, an enslaved woman who in the 1890s walked hundreds of miles from Mali to a “freedom village” in Senegal, where slavery had been abolished. At bottom, artifacts excavated near her home. Maansi Srivastava for The New York Times

The show puts names and faces to such questions, with installations dedicated to nine individuals from around the world. Together, they complicate traditional geographies and timelines of slavery and abolition.

Marème Diarra was a woman from Mali enslaved in Mauritania, who in the 1890s walked hundreds of miles with her children to the settlement of St. Louis, Senegal, one of many so-called freedom villages in that French colony, where slavery was abolished in 1848.

But those freedom villages effectively became work camps, with laborers trapped in a new kind of unfreedom. Through oral history interviews in Senegal, exhibition researchers learned that Diarra had left the town and settled in a smaller village nearby, where a team excavating her homesite found buttons and other objects.



A “face vessel” (upper left) possibly made by Tahro, a man from the Kongo kingdom who arrived in the United States in 1858 on an illegal slave ship, is displayed with traditional Kongo figures known as minkisi. Maansi Srivastava for The New York Times

Tahro was an enslaved man taken from the Kongo kingdom at 27, and brought to the U.S. in 1858 on an illegal slave ship, one of many that continued to arrive for decades after Congress banned the international slave trade in 1808. He settled in Edgefield, S.C., and worked in a commercial pottery, where enslaved artisans sometimes made “face vessels” that echo traditional Kongo figures.

“This was a lived history for millions of people, but with most of them, their names are lost to history,” Obenda said. “We were really deliberate in looking for people we could name, who could stand in for others.”

The exhibition includes virtually no names or images of enslavers, and only a handful of objects used to torture or subjugate. Instead, the emphasis is on survival and resistance.



A rare early flag from the Haitian Republic, the first free Black republic in the Western Hemisphere, which was established in 1804 after enslaved people overthrew French rule. Maansi Srivastava for The New York Times

There's a rare early flag for the Haitian Republic, founded in 1804 after enslaved people overthrew French rule. Alongside it are banners representing some of the hundreds of known slave rebellions across the Atlantic world, created by the artist Nuygen E. Smith.

The show's final section, dedicated to contemporary art, culture, music and protest, emphasizes that Black freedom-making is a continuing, unfinished process. After this section's explosion of color and sound, it might be easy to miss a piece of bent, rusted metal in a case near the exit.



Curators commissioned the artist Nuygen E. Smith to create flags for some of the hundreds of recorded slave rebellions. Here, a banner for Prosser's Rebellion, a planned rebellion in Virginia in 1800, which drew on the ideals of the American Revolution. Maansi Srivastava for The New York Times

It's a keel bolt from the São José, a slave ship that sank off the Cape of Good Hope in 1794, whose wreck was discovered in 2015. But it's also another metaphor — for the hard work of recovering the vast and still largely submerged global history of slavery.

"The exhibition is an opening, a catalyst," Gardullo said. "It's not the end of the story."

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