



Unpacking the 2015 Conference Theme: African American Museums and the Story of African American Progress

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Arguably, the most significant civil rights legislation in the history of our nation was passed 50 years ago. The 1965 Voting Rights Act extended legal protections and access to choice for millions of African Americans. The victory, after a century long struggle for freedom and citizenship rights also confirmed the ideals of establishing places to chronicle the African American experience. Milestones in History: African American Museums and the Story of African American Progress, the 2015 AAAM conference theme, is recognition of the inception and continued growth of African American focused museums, historical sites and cultural centers.

African American museums emerged as important institutions concerned not only with American ideals and values but also with the relationship of those ideals and values to African Americans' efforts to survive as a people. In spite of the "objective history" of the nineteenth and early twentieth century United States, which distorted and excluded black history, African American griots (family and community elders) collectors and interpreters preserved our historical traditions by passing on the community values that gave African Americans both their sense of identity and their sense of history.¹

African American repositories are a direct outgrowth of these preservers of culture. They grow out of a desire to represent the imprint of a black aesthetic in American life and culture and a necessity to connect the African American past with the present. Some of the earliest public



efforts include the Afro-American Cultural and Historical Society in Cleveland, OH (Icabod Flewellen), the DuSable Museum under the vision of Margaret Burrows, and the Charles W. Wright Museum in Detroit, formerly the International Afro-American Museum. These centers helped usher in establishment of the African American Museums Association (now the Association of African American Museums).

Their presence has spurred career pursuits in the field nearly unimaginable three decades ago. These museums have increased awareness and advanced educational use and research about African Americans, expanded the vitality of museums in community, preserved artifacts of intrinsic value, and been key to increased collecting efforts by Eurocentric museums and collectors throughout the world. Places and history once viewed as having little relevance outside the African American community are now major tourist destinations that help fuel the educational, social, and civic vitality where they reside. They serve audiences as community gathering centers, where difficult discussion can take place. They are evidence of all that has been accomplished. They reveal the myriad of ways in which our history and missions can and must lead, and support efforts to realize values aimed at creating a more open, informed and equitable society.

1. Fleming, John E., African-American Museums, History and the American Ideal, Journal of American History, 1994