



AT THE SMITHSONIAN | MARCH 14, 2022

How Black Men Changed the World

A Smithsonian traveling exhibition powerfully dismantles corrosive myths with triumphant portraits and the stories of African American men

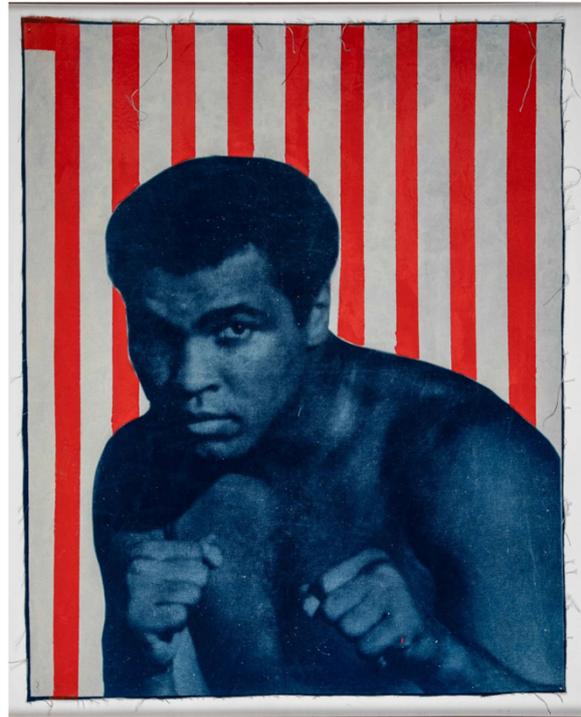
Too often Black men are seen as threatening. Over the generations, whether they are boys like Emmett Till, Tamir Rice or Trayvon Martin, or adults like Philando Castille, Eric Garner or George Floyd, or the thousands of victims of lynching in the 19th and 20th centuries, their deaths were made to seem justified by a fear based solely on their race. Only on rare occasions is someone held accountable. It's even evident with the recent murder of Ahmaud Arbery, killed by three men while he was out for a run, that the "lynching" of Black men is still happening today.

The Smithsonian traveling exhibition, "Men of Change: Power, Triumph, Truth," now on view at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture, delivers a world of ideas about who Black men actually are and works to dismantle myths. The show supports the diversity of Black male identities in their capacity as role models, and amplifies the many positive ways their work and endeavors impact the Black community and the world.

Unfortunate, as it is, that there is a need for such an exhibition, Marquette Folley, who is content director for the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, hopes the show is not only affirming for Black men, but that the messaging is potent enough to shift the cultural experience for all visitors. "Hard dialogues are occurring in the galleries," she says.



Figure in the Urban Landscape #25 (portrait of Kendrick Lamar) by Derrick Adams, 2018. Courtesy of the Artist



Know Your Right [Muhammad Ali] by David Alekhuogie, 2018. Courtesy of the Artist

Powerful personalities like Kendrick Lamar, Muhammad Ali and James Baldwin are featured because their work in music, sports and literature, appeals to a larger audience and is very much concerned with how their struggles and undertakings impact freedom and rights for all Americans, but especially African Americans.

“We’re reckoning, looking at a broad landscape of what is human, which humans are worth looking at, and noting excellence without stereotyping what that excellence looks like,” Folley says.

While there are countless Black men in our world impacting many sectors and industries, the men were especially chosen, not solely because of their achievements, but because they made conscious decisions to help the world and uplift us all, and there is no one right way to do that.

The larger society from diverse backgrounds can also witness the variety of Black male identities possible. As our country becomes more diverse every day, the stories that we tell ourselves about strangers we live with have an impact on the collective. An exhibition such as this one is a chance for people unfamiliar with the history of the United States to educate

themselves and their families about pivotal members of our society—Black men.

“It’s an affirmation of truth for African Americans. There is not one African American who doesn’t recognize a reality that was interesting and remains interesting within the exhibition, it is that those truths remain almost fairy tale to people who are not raised Black in America. And so there was the moment for culture’s storytellers to ask, can we effectively start changing the dialog,” Folley says.



Light Side Dark Side [Dick Gregory] by Shaunte Gates, 2018 Courtesy of the Artist

Though this exhibition features just a few of the countless people who have impacted the world, the lightbox displays interspersed throughout the galleries includes the names, images, quotes and writing of Black men and some women.

“It’s not a story necessarily for African Americans. It’s a story for Americans,” Folley says.

Sarah Nelson Jackson and Jonathan Jackson, the founders of [WeShouldDoItAll](#), a contemporary design studio in Brooklyn, New York, were enlisted to aid with the exhibition. In addition to the lightboxes that house photographic images and text, they suggested that the exhibition include artworks by Black visual artists in dialogue with the Black male personalities featured in the exhibition.

Each artist interpreted the assignment of creating an artwork about Black men differently. The artwork about the award-winning journalist and author, Ta-Nehesi Coates, was created by the New York-based artist Robert Pruitt, known for his figurative drawings. The image of a woman with a map depicting redlining on her head is based on the critically acclaimed article, "The Case for Reparations" that Coates wrote for *The Atlantic* in 2014.



Monumental [Ta-Nehesi Coates] by Robert Pruitt, 2018 Courtesy of the Artist and Koplin Del Rio, Seattle, Adam Reich Photography

These are not traditional portraits. An artwork about the Pulitzer-prize winning playwright August Wilson by Radcliffe Bailey is an assemblage of disparate items of locusts, dirt and a book.

Ryan Coogler is a global phenomenon. The writer and director of the film *Black Panther* created another world, one where for the first time, Black people were central to its narrative. His portrait created by the Atlanta-based artist Alfred Conteh is painted with the artist's signature style of distressed colorful figures against a patterned backdrop. In this instance, Conteh is not painting Black people he identified on Atlanta streets to represent economic disparity, he's painting one of the most influential filmmakers of today.

Kehinde Wiley, the artist who did Barack Obama's official presidential portrait, uses visual art to explode representation

of the Black image into largely white spaces. Wiley has been painting portraits of everyday Black men and women from cities around the world including, Harlem, South Central LA, Mumbai, Senegal, Dakar and Rio de Janeiro, and positions their bodies in a manner similar to that of the Old Masters. In this way, he makes the claim on the worth and importance of the Black body.

Now Wiley is himself the subject of a portrait painted by Devan Shimoyama whose signature style of bright colors, bejeweled with rhinestones and sequins and other mixed media, speaks to queerness in the Black community and challenges the myths surrounding Black masculinity.

Andrew Young, who worked alongside Martin Luther King, Jr., was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement, U.S. Congressman from Georgia, U.S. Ambassador at the United Nations, and 55th Mayor of Atlanta. His portrait, angular with a cartoonish feel, was created by Nina Chanel Abney as if in juxtaposition of the gravity and seriousness of Young's accomplishments. But she is employing symbols to represent the many aspects of Young's efforts.



Kehinde [Kehinde Wiley] by Devan Shimoyama, 2018 Courtesy of the Artist

When many people think of Black men of change, their minds instantly go to Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, and rightly so. But those are not the only Black men who have worked to change the world. This exhibition features men who are not always thought to be men of impact because they do not directly work to mobilize people or change legislation. And while there are athletes, artists, astronauts and authors among them in this exhibition, many of the men are not household names—Charles Bolden, an administrator of NASA, Marine Corps General, and astronaut who flew four space missions; Michael Seibel, who was the co-founder and CEO of Justin.tv, which was sold and became Twitch Interactive; and Shaka Senghor, a formerly incarcerated author who writes about transformation and redemption.

“Men of Change: Power, Triumph, Truth” marks a starting point, not an end. It allows for visitors to witness just a few of those who have made changes in history, art, politics, culture and activism. It challenges as much as it affirms the need to broaden the scope of our views.

“Men of Change” is on view at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum through August 14. The museum will have several virtual and in-person community programming opportunities to learn more about the impact of Black men and the change they create. View the Smithsonian Traveling Exhibition Service's online show here.



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