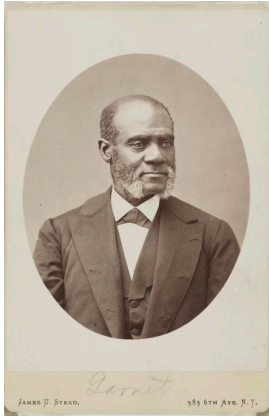




International Center of Photography

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media release



James U. Stead (active c. 1861)
Henry Highland Garnet, c. 1861
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution



Louise Dahl-Wolfe, William Edmondson, 1933. ©1989, Center for Creative Photography,
Arizona Board of Regents, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution



David Moses Attie, Lorraine Hansberry, c. 1960. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Let Your Motto Be Resistance: African American Portraits

On view from
May 11 through
September 9, 2007

Media Preview
May 10, 2007
9:30 - 11 am

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Teacher, preacher, editor, and abolitionist, Henry Highland Garnet was an unwavering advocate for racial equality and an electrifying speaker in support of that campaign before and after the Civil War. At the 1843 National Negro Convention in Albany, N.Y., Garnet unleashed a rallying cry, urging “the slaves of the United States of America” to rise up and emancipate themselves: “Let your Motto be resistance! Resistance! RESISTANCE! No oppressed people have ever secured Liberty without resistance.”

American history is retold through the photographic portraits of celebrated African Americans in *Let Your Motto Be Resistance: African American Portraits*, the inaugural exhibition of the new National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington D.C. The exhibition will be on view at the International Center of Photography (1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street), from May 11 through September 9, 2007. This collection of photographs traces 150 years of American history through the lives of well-known abolitionists, artists, scientists, writers, statesmen, entertainers, and sports figures. NMAAHC is the Smithsonian’s nineteenth and newest museum, with plans for building a major complex on Washington’s National Mall in under a decade.

Let Your Motto Be Resistance features 100 photographs from the National Portrait Gallery’s permanent collection, selected by guest curator Deborah Willis. Starting with portraits from the mid-19th century, the exhibition explores ways the sitters collaborated with photographers to create positive images and challenge demeaning stereotypes, and in the process shows how people demonstrated their “resistance” to the predominantly negative representations of African Americans circulating in American mainstream culture.

“As we examined the photographs that comprise this exhibition,” states NMAAHC Director Lonnie G. Bunch III, “it was clear that they revealed, reflected, and illuminated the variety of creative and courageous ways that African Americans resisted, accommodated, redefined, and struggled in an America that needed but rarely embraced and accepted its black citizens.”

Resistance, in this context, took many forms. Working with a growing circle of African American intellectuals and professionals, photographers often presented their sitters in idealized settings. Nineteenth-century images of African Americans in dignified dress, surrounded by symbols of culture—books, works of art, classical columns—challenged the prevailing view of blacks as intellectually and socially inferior. Later, dramatic images of activists Stokely Carmichael and Angela Davis put the spotlight on those who confronted racism and social injustice head-on. In addition, portraits of entertainers such as Billie Holiday, Nat “King” Cole, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, and Richard Pryor show how celebrating African American culture can be an equally effective way to call into question racist notions, and to empower a community to resist them.

Exhibition highlights include an 1856 ambrotype of Frederick Douglass; Berenice Abbott’s 1926 photograph of poet Claude McKay; P.H. Polk’s portrait of scientist George Washington Carver (c. 1930); Arnold Eagle’s image of Gordon Parks from 1945; Linda McCartney’s 1967 portrait of Jimi Hendrix; and Irving Penn’s 1983 image of opera singer Jessye Norman.

Photographers themselves often exerted a major influence in disseminating these messages and contributing to the fame of the subjects. In the mid-late 1800s, *cartes-de-visite* were made, purchased and traded in the millions. They often became treasured likenesses that inspired and invited emulation. Popular around the same time were the slightly larger cabinet cards, probably the best-known of which was the image of Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), a former slave turned abolitionist and orator. In the early twentieth century, African American studio photographers such as Addison N. Scurlock in Washington, D.C. [portrait of W.E.B. Du Bois] and James VanDerZee in Harlem [portrait of Reverend Adam Clayton Powell with his Sunday School class] had an impact on both their immediate communities and the broader African American population. The images created through the force of their talents (and others like them) gave rise to a fashionable new world of African Americans with social status, and reflected communities that had clearly come into their own both intellectually and artistically.

The life of Gordon Parks is emblematic of the societal changes and political climate in the United States during the middle of the twentieth century. He was the first black photographer hired by the Farm Security Administration and by *LIFE* magazine, and was the first black director to make a movie for a major Hollywood studio. As an African American who was often part of his subjects’ milieu, his access into worlds that other photographers could not enter enabled him to capture signature portraits, such as those of Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X.

“The partnership that brought *Let Your Motto Be Resistance* to ICP to start its national tour allows us to further a commitment we have to the diversity of the American experience as seen through the photographic medium,” said Willis E. Hartshorn, ICP’s Ehrenkranz Director. “Last winter we presented *African American Vernacular Photography: Selections from the Daniel Cowin Collection*, a major body of work from our archive. It is a fitting parallel to this important exhibition of noted pictures and notable individuals spanning the same two centuries.”

Let Your Motto Be Resistance has been organized by the National Museum of African American History and Culture, in collaboration with the International Center of Photography (ICP) and the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery (NPG), from whose collection the exhibition photographs are drawn. The guest curator is Deborah Willis, chair of the Department of Photography and Imaging at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, and author of numerous books including *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present*.

Following the ICP presentation, *Let Your Motto Be Resistance* will be on view at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. from October 9, 2007 through January 6, 2008. Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service will circulate a traveling version of seventy matted and framed modern prints. For a tour itinerary, visit www.sites.si.edu.

About the National Museum of African American History and Culture

The National Museum of African American History and Culture was created on December 19, 2003, when President George W. Bush signed legislation establishing it as a division of the Smithsonian Institution, the largest museum complex in the world. The only national museum devoted exclusively to documenting African American life, history, and culture, it is to be built on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. on a five-acre tract adjacent to the Washington Monument.

The museum's collections and educational programming will cover topics as varied as slavery, post-Civil War Reconstruction, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Civil Rights movement. In addition to staging a national tour of its inaugural exhibition, the museum is scheduling programs and activities in five target cities: Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C.

PUBLICATION

The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue. It features essays by historians and commentators including Elizabeth Alexander, a poet and a fellow at the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University; Marc Pachter, director of the National Portrait Gallery; Lonnie Bunch; and Deborah Willis.

SPONSORS

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Smithsonian
*National Museum of African American
History and Culture*