
Mining the Museum

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FRED WILSON

Mining the Museum

"Mining the Museum" is an exhibition selected and installed by Fred Wilson. Wilson was invited by The Contemporary, Baltimore, to create the exhibition using the archives and resources of the Maryland Historical Society. The exhibition, organized by The Contemporary's curator, Lisa Corrin, was installed in the Society's museum in October 1992.

Wilson was responsible for all aspects of the exhibition, including arrangement of works, labeling, wall colors, graphics, film projections, and audio recordings. He was assisted by other artists, community historians, volunteers, and the staffs of The Contemporary and the Maryland Historical Society. The artworks and artifacts were displayed in a succession of rooms thematically arranged and differentiated by their wall colors of gray, green, red, and blue.

**Benjamin Banneker,
Harriet Tubman,
and Frederick Douglass**

Empty pedestals with names on labels



“Truth Trophy”

Industry award given for
truth in advertising
c. 1913

**Henry Clay,
Napoleon Bonaparte,
and Andrew Jackson**

Pedestals with busts

**Portraits of Unknown Cigar-Store Owner, Elizabeth Buckler,
John Klein, and Bernard Faistenhamer**

Cigar-store Indians labeled with names of merchants who commissioned them



Portraits of Native Americans

Photographs displayed on walls



Jenny Proctor and Jimmy Linkens

Photograph of Native Americans, c. 1930

Portrait of Henry Darnell III

Painting by Justus Kuhn, c. 1710

Spotlight illuminates enslaved child in dog collar



On the museum's sound system a child's voice asks,
"Am I your brother? Am I your friend? Am I your pet?"

Metalwork 1793–1880



Silver Service

Pitchers, steins, and goblets
Baltimore repoussé style, c. 1830–80

Iron Slave Shackles

c. 1793–1872



Mount Vernon Place

Photograph, c. 1900

African-American domestics with charges

"One of the Rebels, Geo. Washington"

Envelope engraved,

"The Southern Gentleman, and Slaveholder.

C.S.A. [Confederate States of America],"

c. 1861



Modes of Transport 1770–1910



Model of Baltimore Clipper

Of type converted to slavers (rigged as brig)
after War of 1812

Maryland in 1750

Painting by Frank B. Mayer, c. 1856

Sedan Chair

Used by Governor Eden of Maryland, c. 1770

Baby Carriage

c. 1880, with Ku Klux Klan hood, c. 1900

Donated anonymously,

~~\$~~200 REWARD.

Ran away from the subscriber, living eight miles from the city of Baltimore, on the Falls Turnpike Road, on

**Friday, the 21st of May,
NEGROES
RICHARD & NED,**

Richard aged about twenty-six years, five feet six or seven inches high, yellowish complexion, small beard, has a scar on his forehead, stutters a little in conversation, but when he is alarmed it is increased considerably. He is straight and well proportioned, except one leg which is a little crooked from having been once broken. His clothing, not known, except a new wool hat, a dark grey broad-cloth surtout coat, and a blue uniform United States soldier's coat, both half worn, and two pair of new calf-skin shoes, one pair of which were right and left. Richard ran away from me in 1814; he was then taken up in Pennsylvania, at the house of a man named Gross, (near York Haven,) where he learned the distilling business---It is probable he will return to that state (and will call at Mr. Gross' house, as he left there a watch and some other articles) and engage with a distiller again.

NED, who was decoyed away by Richard, is about twenty years of age, quite black, five feet eight or nine inches high, stout and well formed, has a pleasant countenance, and generally smiles when spoken to, naturally slow in his motions and of an easy quiet disposition, he walks very erect and when in conversation has given himself the habit of spitting through his teeth. He has no particular marks recollected, except a scar on the back of his hand---His clothing like Richard's not particularly known, except a blue cloth coat with long skirts, a pair of greenish pantaloons, both half worn, and an old furred hat---Richard has provided himself with money by robbing Mr. Edmond T. Scarff of 75 dollars the night he ran away, and it is probable they will soon change their dress.

I will give FORTY dollars to any person that will give me information where they are so that I get them again, or ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS for each if brought home, and all reasonable charges paid.

Thomas Johnson.

N. B. They took with them two blankets, blue stripes, commonly called 'point blankets', 3 1-2 points.

MAY 25, 1819.



"Naughty Nellie" Bootjack

Cast iron, c. 1880

Zouave Soldier Doll

Dancing toy, c. 1882

Chesapeake Bay Decoys



Runaway Slaves Broadside

Printed in Baltimore, 1819

Cabinetmaking 1820–1960





Whipping Post
Baltimore City Jail, c. 1850

Side Chairs and Armchairs
Including one with logo
of Baltimore Equitable Society, c. 1820–96

African-Americans Who Resisted Slavery

Slide projections of names



The Gap at Harper's Ferry

Painting, artist unknown, c. 1880

Dollhouse *(above and right)*

Made by a child's father, c. 1904

Pikes from John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry

c. 1859



“The spirit of revolt spread throughout the Eastern Shore and in a County without police protection we were at the mercy of the slaves. The demon of massacre was at our door.”

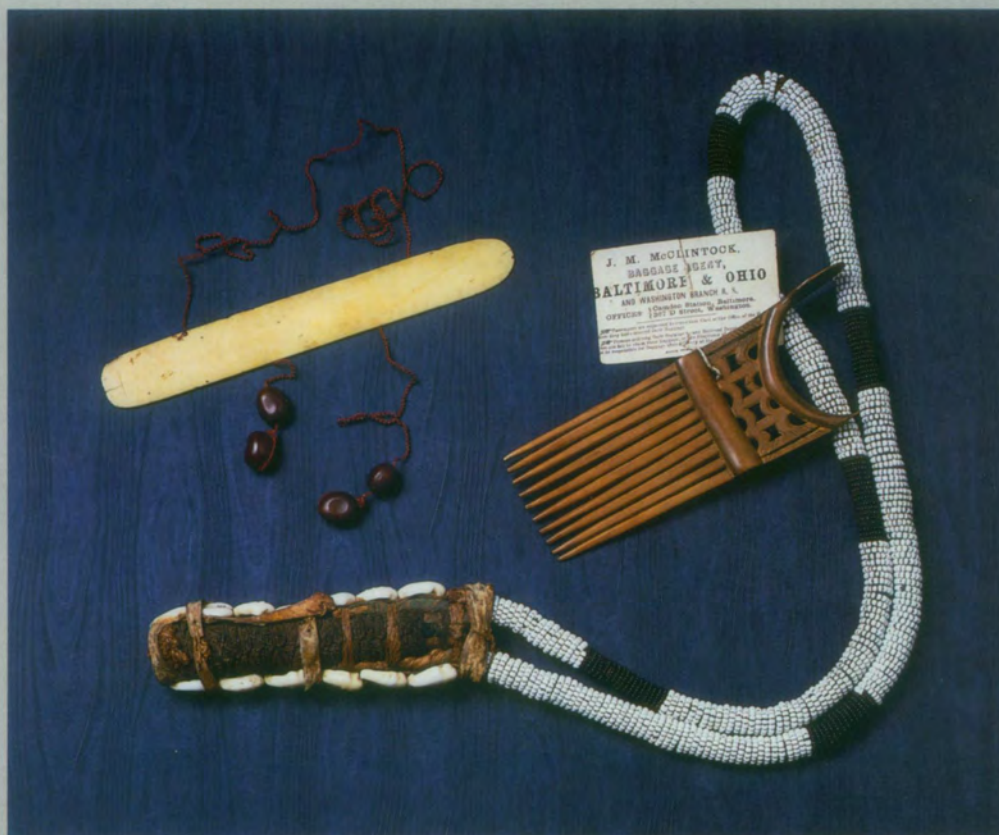
—from the autobiography of Mrs. Enoch Louis Lowe

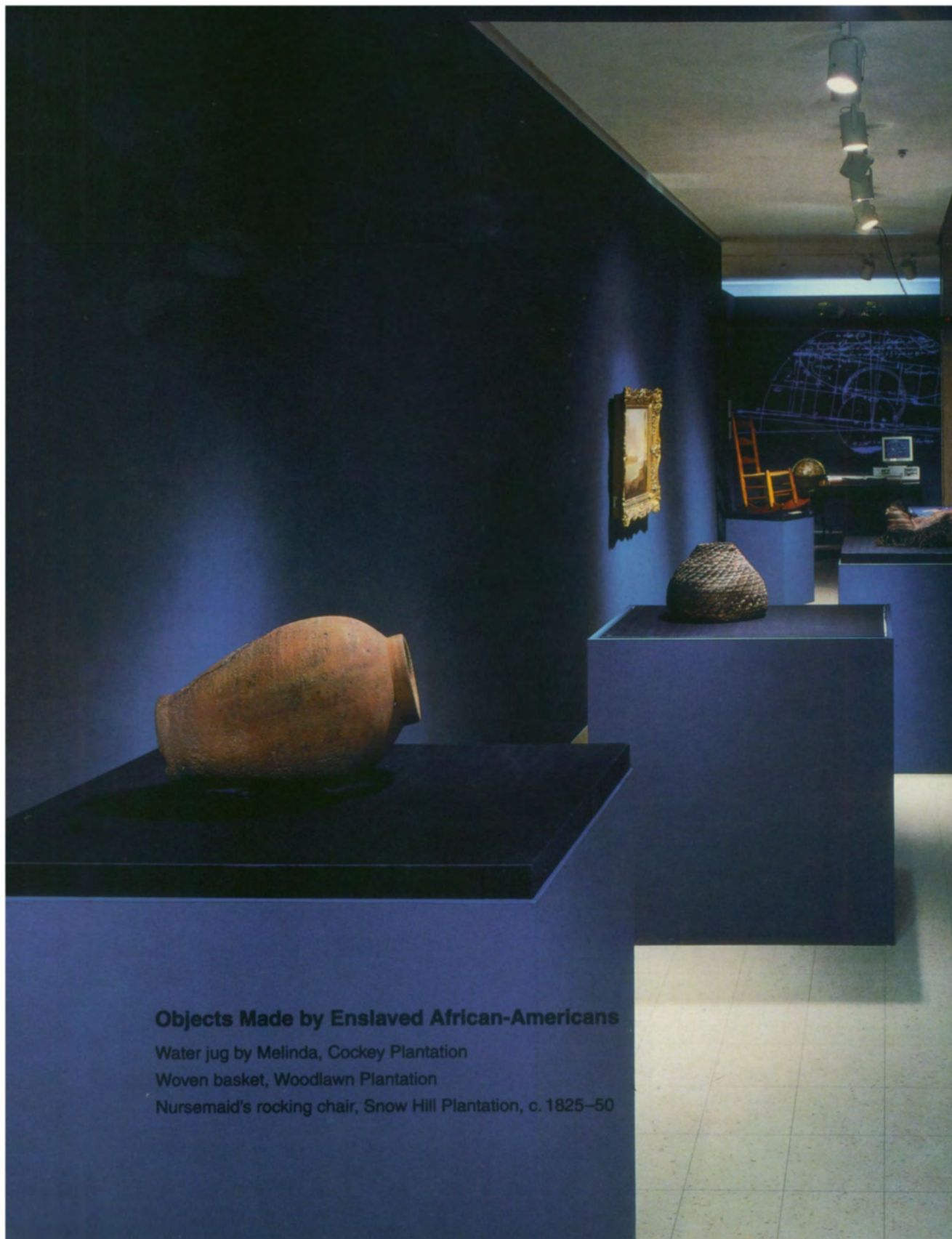


Souvenirs of the Colony "Maryland in Liberia"

Artifacts from the African colony of freed American slaves,
established by the American Colonization Society, c. 1870

Strip of ivory, beads, African comb, and beaded neck-rope with amulet





Objects Made by Enslaved African-Americans

Water jug by Melinda, Cockey Plantation

Woven basket, Woodlawn Plantation

Nursemaid's rocking chair, Snow Hill Plantation, c. 1825–50



Benjamin Banneker's Astronomical Journal
1790–1806; slide projection of his chart predicting eclipse of
October 18, 1800; computer showing night sky of same day

Chippendale Table and Celestial Globe
c. 1776

Mining the Museum

By excavating the site of institutional racism and retrieving forgotten African-American artifacts and heroes, Fred Wilson's "Mining the Museum" brings to light a history and a cultural presence that have been buried beneath layers of neglect and deliberate exclusion. Wilson has culled most of these objects from the permanent collection of the Maryland Historical Society and uses the museum itself as a locus for their presentation, which mimics the usual methods of curatorial selection and museum display: specially painted rooms, silkscreened wall texts, labels, audiovisual material, etc. The objects chosen, and the sly twists of Wilson's juxtapositions, call attention to the biases that normally underlie historical exhibitions, thus subverting and shattering them. In this way, "Mining the Museum" takes a place alongside other works that have focused on the meaning of the gallery or museum as both a formal space and an ideological construct. By adding the explosive element of racism, Wilson grafts a cold populist fury onto a now-familiar subgenre of conceptualism.

One antecedent of what has been referred to as "museumist art" and "institutional critique" is Yves Klein's 1958 Paris exhibition "Le Vide," in which he emptied the Galerie Iris Clert, transforming it into a "zone of immaterial pictorial sensibility." Whatever else Klein intended, the effect of this gesture was to call attention to the gallery space in and of itself. The idea was developed more explicitly in "Raid the Icebox 1 With Andy Warhol," a 1969 exhibition of objects from the art museum of the Rhode Island School of Design. Work in the 1970s by such artists as Marcel Broodthaers and Michael Asher continued to assail the perceived neutrality of institutions governing the cultural reception of art. Over time, the tenor of institutional critique has become increasingly radicalized, even as the practice itself has assumed a more entrenched—even conventional—position within contemporary art. Institutions, for example, have begun to invite artists to stage critiques within their own walls, as with Joseph Kosuth's "The Play of the Unmentionable" (1990) at the Brooklyn Museum. Yet in spite—or because—of this acceptance, "institutional critique" has assumed a preeminent role in redrawing the boundary between

art and life. It is no accident that many of its practitioners, such as Louise Lawler, Judith Barry, Silvia Kolbowski, and Andrea Fraser, are women; others, like Wilson, are artists of color. At the heart of their projects is a struggle to redefine art history, erasing the demarcations of gender, race, and class. As such, their effort reflects the larger struggle being played out in society as a whole.

Indeed, "Mining the Museum" opened against the backdrop of a presidential campaign in which the looming threat of a reactionary *kulturkampf* was one defining issue. Notwithstanding the charged atmosphere in which it was presented, "Mining the Museum" succeeds in circumventing its own polemical potential; although it is a devastating indictment of racism, it is also—and chiefly—an optimistic act of consciousness-raising, and this hopeful note sets it apart from other, similar, works.

The exhibit begins with a sort of prologue that immediately challenges the assumptions that surround the ordering and presentation of history. The viewer is confronted with a Plexiglas case containing a gold-and-silver globe bearing the single word *Truth*: an old industry award given among advertising "clubs" in the first half of the century. This "Truth Trophy" is flanked on the left by three empty pedestals, labeled "Frederick Douglass," "Harriet Tubman," and "Benjamin Banneker," and on the right by three pedestals supporting marble portrait busts of Henry Clay, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Andrew Jackson. The missing historical figures are all African-American, and all at one point lived in Maryland, yet they are not represented in this ostensibly "local" institution. Meanwhile, the other figures, all white, and none from Maryland, are prominently displayed in appropriately colored stone. Wilson makes clear that the link between historical veracity and the portrayal of history is as tenuous as the connection between truth and advertising.

"Mining the Museum" is filled with such ironies: carved cigar-store Indians—as conceived by the nineteenth-century merchants who commissioned them—turn their backs on the viewer to gaze at photographs of actual Native Americans. Slave shackles are insinuated among period silverware. A Klan hood is secreted in a baby carriage, not far from a turn-of-the-century photograph that shows black domestics pushing prams that hold their infant charges (and future employers). A whipping post is encircled by staid Victorian

furniture, pulled up as if for a performance. Wilson has also left “clues” alluding to the installation in other areas of the museum, such as a dog collar, similar to the collar worn by an enslaved child in a portrait of Henry Darnell III, placed where that painting normally hangs.

These objects are organized in a series of rooms, each painted a single color, signaling changes in thematic emphasis. The Green Room, for example, deals primarily with recovering the identity of African-Americans from examples of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century art and artifacts, while the Red Room deals with slave revolts and the battles for abolition. The last room of the exhibition is painted a deep and redemptive shade of blue. In one long, narrow space, Wilson juxtaposes artifacts made under slavery with others from Liberia. In a separate part of the room, he displays the astronomical journal of a free, self-taught African-American who was a prominent mathematician, surveyor, and astronomer, as well as a friend of Thomas Jefferson, to whom he once wrote, “Sir I freely and Chearfully acknowledge, that I am of the African race.” This man was Benjamin Banneker, one of the figures absent from the show’s initial tableau.

“Mining the Museum” thus ends by echoing its beginning, but adds a note of grace. After the relentless exposure of a complex, institutionally codified oppression, Wilson ends with the affirming portrayal of a courageous individual. In her upcoming book on “Mining the Museum,” the exhibition’s curator, Lisa Corrin, quotes James Baldwin: “The question of color takes up much space in these pages, but the question of color, especially in this country, operates to hide the graver question of self.” With Banneker as an example, Wilson suggests that this question can be triumphantly confronted.

—Howard Halle