

Evaluation of the Old Slave Mart Museum,  
Charleston, South Carolina

The Old Slave Mart Museum is a unique institution among museums devoted to the study of the Afro-American experience. It combines a significant historic site with a broad range of artifacts, documents, and photographs. Several institutions have one of these four components. The African Meeting House in Boston, for example, is a historic church built by blacks in the early nineteenth century, but has only a few archaeological remnants to display for artifacts. The Afro-American Museum in Philadelphia has a good collection of contemporary fine art, but little of the material substance of the plantation experience. The Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Boston will document a wide range of black creative competence, but will be housed in the manorial home of a former lead entrepreneur. The Slave Mart is thus important for its physical form as well as its content.

Moreover, its holdings, with respect to certain genres, are paralleled by very few institutions. Its collection of Sea Island and slave-made baskets, for example, is as large as that owned by the Smithsonian, and is much larger than that of the Charleston Museum. Its basketry specimens include, in addition to a range of contemporary examples, three very old rush baskets, which are extremely rare, plus a number of examples from Africa and the West Indies. In the area of textiles, the Museum again offers a good representative cross-section of forms and technologies employed during slavery: quilting, overshot weaving, embroidery and tatting.

Again, there are plenty of examples of African weaving to compare to these Afro-American textiles. The Museum is also strong in the metal crafts, having examples of both plantation and urban iron work -- both tools and decorative pieces -- which demonstrate the broad range of the Afro-American blacksmith. Techniques of handwork (i.e., forge process, anvil welding, etc.) are revealed in tools and scrollwork, while the more industrial processes of cast iron foundry work are indicated by a wide assortment of wooden cast iron patterns allegedly made by a black technician at the Riley Foundry in Charleston. A further inventory of materials and objects in the collection would only belabor an obvious point -- the Museum has a lot of valuable artifacts. But what may not be obvious is that as a total package the whole ensemble is even more valuable because the narrative which can be illustrated with these artifacts extends over the widest range of domestic and work contexts imaginable. The artifacts, as a collection, reflect not just isolated elements of the past, but an entire life style. One may give a price to single objects, but the value of the potential insights gained of the level of a whole culture are beyond price. The collection, when added to the documentary and graphic holdings, can tell the story of black people in Charleston and the surrounding area in a very personal and complete way. This is obviously a goal that should be achieved. It is indeed a responsibility that has for too long gone ignored.

The full potential of the Old Slave Mart Museum has never been fully realized. This is obvious to all concerned, and the reasons for that failure do not need to be detailed here. Let it suffice that we acknowledge that financial, personal and communal resources must be available in the proper proportions for the success of any ambitious program, and the right

mix has not always been available for the Slave Mart. Yet the potential remains. The collection has been held together for the last twenty years, and important work can still be done with it.

One of the main problems up to the present time has concerned the question of focus: "What should the Museum try to say?" Currently the narrative presented spreads the viewers' attention thinly and unevenly over the history of slavery, African art, the Civil War, plantation life, urban crafts, and aesthetic sensibilities. The objects in the collection are not in each case good enough or there are not enough of them to develop such an encompassing saga. The African objects are adequate for revealing some of the background of Afro-American decorative arts, but not for making a major statement about African art. Indeed, major art museums with masterpieces to put on display often fail in clearly explaining the significance of such art works. The African sections in the Slave Mart really need to be rethought, and in fact could be dropped altogether without harming the integrity of the collection which is most strong in the pre-industrial dimensions of Low Country life in South Carolina.

Another problem has concerned the nature of display strategies, labeling, traffic pattern and security. The museum building is very restricted with respect to floor and wall space. The present arrangement, which allows only one floor for exhibits, is frankly a terrible use of the building. Specimens are improperly lighted, badly displayed in rickety cases, and given labels that are painfully amateurish and sometimes out of step with current scholarship. One case in point might be used as an illustration. A framed "Ripley's Believe It or Not Column" is used to

explain a point about African body decoration. This would be a moot point for discussing Low Country life anyway, but to pass on information from such an unreliable popular source is totally unacceptable for a serious museum.

The Slave Mart has for most of its existence barely managed to remain financially solvent. The strategy used to keep above debt has been to use half of the building space, the entire first floor, as a gift shop. If the Museum had institutional support from the College of Charleston, this space could be given over to exhibits and educational programs. To be fully effective as a museum, the Slave Mart needs storage space, a workshop for curatorial, restoration and design activities, an administrative office, and perhaps a multi-purpose area for lectures, films, demonstrations, performances and changing displays. The first floor could be arranged with these functions in mind, but more space should be acquired, particularly if the documentary resources presently stored on Sullivan's Island are to be housed at the Museum. Plans to acquire the German fire house next door to the Slave Mart should be encouraged since space is always a valuable commodity. Moreover, since black church services were in the past held in the fire house, it too is a valuable site intimately associated with the black experience in Charleston. These two buildings could adequately house a first-rate small museum and research center.

To return for the moment to the potential future of the Slave Mart itself, I would suggest the following scenario as a possible strategy for putting the building and holdings to better use:

Upon entering the Museum there would be a brief display explaining the history of building, utilizing historic graphics, facsimile deeds, and maybe authentic handbills. A text would explain how and when the structure was built, who used it, and what subsequent changes occurred that brought the building to its present condition. There would also be a discussion of the neighborhood which places the Slave Mart in its historic context and explains its relationship to the Baracoon (a slave holding building now destroyed) and black focal points in the urban scene like "Mulatto Alley."

Once the viewer appreciates the significance of the site on which he stands, he is prepared to move into the materials of that experience. Continuing on the first floor, next would come a brief unit on Africa. Utilizing graphics and some of the decorative objects in the collection (masks, textiles, jewelry), a positive image of the origins of American blacks could be established. The major objective would be to explain that the ancestors of Charleston's black population came from distinct and interesting cultures, and had unique and valuable skills and abilities to contribute to the Low Country.

The next unit would then discuss slavery. Documents like day books, diaries, inventories, runaway announcements and slave tags could be used. The text might emphasize the points made by historian Peter Wood that Charleston was the "Ellis Island" for America's black populations, that most Africans came into the

U.S. via Charleston. Moreover, it is important to show that from 1670 to 1740 blacks out numbered whites five to one, and consequently were a major force in establishing the colony, eventually playing significant roles in the growth of plantations, towns and cities.

The remainder of the first floor could treat the technology of rice cultivation, the major activity of the Low Country, indeed the activity which gives the region its distinguishing character. The tools of rice growing could be displayed with graphic depiction of the process. Photo blow-ups of images such as those in Face of an Island would be very dramatic. The process of rice cleaning with such African-derived tools as the mortar and pestle and the coiled-grass fanner could be demonstrated here with examples from the collection. This unit on rice production establishes the context of the Low Country plantation and introduces the concept of black craft skills. A changing exhibit area on the first floor might have a fuller treatment of a particular craft such as basketry, blacksmithing, net sewing, quilting, etc. This area would utilize the holdings in the collection to their fullest potential, and would amplify the images developed in the plantation section. In this display area various audio-visual presentations could be made along with objects. Video resources are available on local basketmakers, blacksmiths, quilters and net sewers. In fact, some of the living practitioners of these venerable trades could be brought into the Museum to explain and/or demonstrate some aspect of their craft. This changing exhibit area might then double as a lecture, seminar, performance area.

At this point the viewer has worked his way to the back of the first floor. He would then ascend a stairs (which would have to be built) to the second floor where he would find more displays on plantation craft skills: textiles, furniture building, metal work, carpentry, cooking. Each unit could use materials from the collection plus textual materials excerpted from slave narratives and documentary sources. Bills of sale, for example, which name the skills of slaves could be used to verify the creative role played by blacks. If the craft skill shows elements of distinct cultural heritage, then comparative African materials might be included. For example, a strip quilt might be compared to a strip weaving from Africa. Such comparisons need not be made in each instance. A few strong examples are sufficient to make the point that blacks had prior skills that helped them endure the slave experience.

Next would follow a unit on Charleston and its relationship to the Low Country. A large map would be helpful to show how planters maintained residences in the city and moved back and forth between the urban and rural setting. The fact that they required the services of black labor in the city as well as on the plantation would then lead into a discussion of those services: masonry, plastering, carpentry, decorative ironwork. In addition, the role of blacks in transportation could be mentioned. The slave watermen who made and rowed the boats between the plantations and the city could be presented here with graphics and excerpts from documents. Texts of rowing songs might be presented.

The professions engaged in by blacks in Charleston could be presented by a combination of museum artifacts and textual reproductions of entries from city directories. Photographs of famous Charleston houses would show the final product of black craftsmen as well as a challenge to the prevalent mythology of white self-sufficiency in Charleston. These units could carry the narrative up to the Civil War and a conclusion about the overall contribution made to Charleston and the general region by black people. A combination of photographs and text could stress the point that the craft heritage lives on among men and women like Philip Simmons, Herbert De Costa, Mary Jane Bennet, Scrape Nelson, Irene Forman. This unit would remind the viewer that he has witnessed the record of an alternative culture, and that when he leaves the building he will actually be stepping into it. If he ventures into the Sea Islands, he may be told something of the distinct life style practiced there. If he goes through Charlestons' fabled lanes, he may be reminded of the black history that was played out there.

At this point the viewer would walk downstairs to the first floor and leave the museum.

To augment the museum narrative, trained and committed personnel would be needed. They would be stationed throughout the Museum to give short explanations, answer questions, or give more information than can be easily conveyed in texts and labels. They could give special presentations on the special display area. If the College of Charleston acquires the Museum, these "guides" could likely be student interns who are majoring in history,

sociology, museum studies, honors programs. Their work in the Museum could probably be worked into research assignments or serve as a means of gaining extra credit for coursework.

The changing display area is crucial to my proposed plan for the Museum. This area not only would maximize the use of the Museum holdings (which in general would be treated in static display units), but would allow the Museum to expand its viewpoint. It is probable that in staging a larger exhibit on a craft, say basketry, that new insights will be gained that can then be applied to the smaller permanent display. The changing display area is thus a research strategy. The changing display area could be remounted every two or three months so that in the course of two or three years the entire collection would receive a thorough evaluation. Decisions could be made then to change or modify units of the major narrative. New units could be added, others consolidated, others dropped. Such a system of rotating displays would give indications of where more artifacts and materials were needed. Thus the changing display area would also be a development strategy. This area could be scheduled to fit courses at the College and could provide the research theme for a seminar. Certain advanced classes could be given an organized project for field research which might culminate in a display design or discussions simply held in the display area. In such cases the insights provoked by being in the presence of historical materials might prove extremely valuable. The display area is then a vital element of linkage between the College and the Museum. It is also a link between the community and the Museum because it provides a motivation for periodic return visits. It would be a drawing card particularly if live demonstrations by local craftspeople were held.

In my experience, most of the visitors to the Old Slave Mart Museum tend to be tourists; visitors from out of town. Local citizens tend to stay away, and in particular, local black citizens pay almost no attention to the Museum. This is particularly unfortunate since the material in the collection relates so specifically to local black history. One of the reasons blacks have stayed away is that the Museum narrative has not been specifically addressed to their interests, but this could be corrected by a new design for the Museum exhibits and a publicity campaign explaining the redirection. The Museum has great potential for community outreach by putting people in touch with their own history. If the Museum staff were broad minded enough, they could even tap into the local black community as a source of information. Black visitors could become informants for a local oral history archive which, among other things, could provide material for museum exhibits. Local patrons might also be encouraged to donate or loan personal artifacts to the Museum for use as specimens, particularly in the areas of wood carving, musical instruments and costume. The changing display area could periodically be focused on issues related to a particular black neighborhood and its development, such as the "Upper East Side" or a noted black Charlestonian such as the artist Edwin A. Harleston. I think black participation would develop if it was known by local blacks that it was "their museum." The patronage from tourists would remain regardless of specific content. They come for reasons of curiosity, and in fact might be more intrigued with a specific narrative concerning the survival of a distinct culture in spite of overwhelming negative social conditions. The following gathered by "Roots" has shown that whites too are interested in black history.

There may be some concern on the part of the College of Charleston that the artifacts in the collection are not documented as well as the specimens in other museums, and hence may not actually be what they are represented as. This anxiety has some justification, but in fact should not deter their actions toward the acquisition of the Museum. What must be recognized is that the documentation for any black artifact from the nineteenth century and beyond is very sketchy. It is very rare that the documentation available will match up against the objects at hand. To cite one case: We know that Africans made banjo-like instruments in Africa as early as 1621 (and probably before that). We know that African slaves continued to make and play such instruments on plantations. From eyewitness descriptions and reasonable renderings we know how they were made, what materials were used, and how they were tuned. But at this time we have no examples of these gourd-bodied instruments. To my knowledge only one gourd-bodied fiddle from Southern Maryland still survives. How then does one explore the making of banjos by slaves in a museum? It would be possible to make a model and put it on display in conjunction with historic graphics. Such an object would not be authentic, but the narrative told would be. This is the challenge of the Old Slave Mart Museum -- to relate the narrative of local black history as accurately as possible.

The materials in the collection are, in my estimation, of the type, if not the actual objects, used by blacks on plantations and in the urban context. Absolute authenticity would seem to be more of an issue in the biography of a single individual, a so-called Great Man history. The historical narrative of the Museum is clearly a popular social saga and deals with justifiable reconstructions of typical situations. Absolute state-

ments, while not to be avoided, are not absolutely necessary. Historical reconstructions are always problematic, but can be done well if done with care and decisions reached in an objective manner. A technique used in writing the history of common folk in the eighteenth, nineteenth and even twentieth centuries is to construct a reasonable chain of inferences. One plays out his "hard" data as far as possible and then makes reasonable, defensible extensions from that data base. The problem of "authentic vs. historic" which may be raised with this collection would seem not to be of crucial importance. Even if objects cannot be historically validated, they may still be used to tell the truth. And in this case, the truth has been waiting so long to be told that to hold up a debatable academic standard as the only guideline would only further a long-lived social injustice. I might add here that in my research with Afro-American material culture I have used the resources of many museums and the available documentation on objects has been universally weak. The collections of the Old Slave Mart Museum are in this respect no better and no worse than those of the Smithsonian.

The scholarly community has already made use of the Old Slave Mart Museum collection, and may find the papers useful if made more accessible. If the Museum display strategy were revamped along the lines suggested, more would surely be attracted to the institution. In fact, visiting scholars might be drawn upon as a resource in improving display content, giving lectures on black history and culture, and enhancing the reputation of the Museum in the community. The current physical structure does not have sufficient space to allow for extended study visits by scholars. Again, if the adjacent building could be obtained, the possible development of a

research center could be entertained. Scholars would have access to rare books, documents, historic graphics, works of fine art by black artists and white interpreters of black life in the Low Country, artifacts from slavery, contemporary artifacts made in the traditional style, photographs, African craft items and living artisans. Such a mix of resources would certainly be attractive to scholars from many disciplines, and the sponsorship of such a center by the College of Charleston would surely boost its reputation.

A crucial element in the success of such a museum and research center would be its curator/director. With community politics in mind, the person should be a black scholar with museum expertise or a scholarly interest in the Low Country. The following people would probably be helpful in locating such a person:

- (1) Richard Dozier, Chairman, Department of Architecture, Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Ala.
- (2) David Driskell, Chairman, Department of Art, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland
- (3) Gladys-Marie Fry, Department of English, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland
- (4) Edmund Barry Gaither, Director, Museum of the National Center for Afro-American Artists, Roxbury, Mass.
- (5) John Kinnard, Director, Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, Washington, D.C.
- (6) E.J. Montgomery, Art Consultant, San Francisco, California.
- (7) Roslyn Walker Oni, Director, University Museums, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois.
- (8) Robert F. Thompson, History of Art, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.
- (9) Peter Wood, Department of History, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.