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Smithsonian Launches New Website for Teaching African American Civil Rights through American Art

Oh Freedom! Teaching African American Civil Rights through American Art at the Smithsonian is a new Web-based project developed jointly by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. It offers teachers an introduction to the civil rights movement through the unique lens of the Smithsonian's collections. Drawing connections between art and history, Oh Freedom! gives educators tools to help students interpret the long struggle for civil rights. Oh Freedom! broadens the definition of the civil rights movement beyond the 1950s and 1960s, presenting it as a longer and more complex quest for freedom, justice and equality throughout the course of the 20th century and into the present.

Oh Freedom! brings together more than three dozen featured artworks from the collections of the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, from early 20th-century photographs by James VanDerZee and Cornelius M. Battey to Shepard Fairey's iconic "HOPE" (from the series "Obama"). An interactive timeline, "Explore History in Art," frames these artworks with artist biographies and secondary sources from the wider collections of the Smithsonian, such as historical artifacts, additional artworks, musical and vocal recordings, photographs and more. The Archives of American Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the National Museum of American History and the National Portrait Gallery also contributed to the site. These sources, along with a glossary and other materials, help students and teachers contextualize the stories revealed by each artwork.

"The momentous events of the civil rights era were the culmination of a long struggle for justice that is still inspiring us today," said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. "We are proud to use our rich collections to present this essential history in a new way in classrooms nationwide."

The site offers lesson plans for teachers to download that were prepared by a national committee of teachers. Interactive features allow teachers to share new lesson plans using a prepared

template, provide activities and reactions to the site, and discuss how artworks suit their particular classroom needs. Additional resources, such as teacher and student bibliographies, also are available online. The site is designed primarily for teachers of middle and high school students, especially those who teach social studies.

“As a middle school social studies teacher, the Oh Freedom! website is easy to use with its lesson plans and abundant teacher resources about civil rights,” said Penny Prado, a seventh- and eighth-grade social studies teacher at Riverdale Middle School in Jefferson, La. “It is important for a teacher to spark student interest in a topic, and the Oh Freedom! website definitely sparked the interest of my students.”

Oh Freedom! is the first Smithsonian Institution-wide collaboration that focuses specifically on civil rights. It was created jointly by members of the education, curatorial and new media departments of both museums. A national Content Advisory Council helped guide the site’s framework, artwork selection and the interpretation of art and history. A national Teacher Advisory Council consulted about the site’s usability, provided feedback on activities and developed lesson plans.

To explore Oh Freedom!, visit <http://africanamericanart.si.edu>.

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