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## From Slavery to Liberty - Curated Exhibit

### Introduction

This curated exhibit is composed of four art pieces that represent four main stages in the **history of African American** in the United States. The first stage labeled *Building a Country in Slavery* is represented by the text “Metalwork” from the exhibit Mining the Museum created by Fred Wilson. The next stage is called *The Horrors of Lynching* is depicted through the sculpture made by Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, "In Memory of Mary Turner: As a Silent Protest Against Mob Violence". **The third phase** titled *Scaping toward freedom* is illustrated by the first panel of The Migration Series by Jacob Lawrence, “During World War I there was a great migration north by southern African Americans.” The last stage, *A New Identity*, is represented by the painting “Equestrian Portrait of the Count-Duke Olivares” by Kehinde Wiley. In the next pages, the TCI Method (Text + Context = Interpretation) for analyzing art pieces will be used to determine the **physical characteristics** of the texts, identify their historical context, and generate an interpretation that will explain how they relate to their corresponding stages in history.

## Building a Country in Slavery



Mining the Museum: *Metalwork, 1793-1880* by Fred Wilson.

### Formal Qualities

- **Date of creation:** 1992-1993
- **Dimensions:** Not found
- **Medium:** Curated Exhibit
- **Materials:** Silver
- **Location:** Maryland Center for History and Culture
- **Description:** Four ornate high-end-silver pitchers of different sizes and six high-end-silver goblets surround a pair of iron slave shackles that is situated in the center of the exposition.

## Historical Context

From the beginning of the history of the United States, thousands of Blacks were brought from Africa and other parts of the world to be sold as slaves to rich plantation owners.

According to the text titled *Selections of Nineteenth-Century Afro-American Art* by Regenia A. Perry, slave artisans played a significant role in the development of the country. In the seventeenth century African Americans became skilled carpenters, blacksmiths, shoemakers, cabinetmakers, coopers, seamsters, wavers, and stone masons. In the book *Along This Way*, James Weldon Johnson said “all of the most interesting things done that came under my observation were being done by colored men. They drove the horses and mule teams, they built the houses, they laid the bricks, they painted the buildings and fences, they loaded and unloaded the ships. When I was a child I did not know that there existed such a thing as a white carpenter or bricklayer or plasterer or tinner...” In addition to these activities, African Americans were the main workforce in large plantations of cotton and tobacco. These plantations produced millions of dollars to their white owners.

## Interpretation

The exhibition “Metal Work” symbolizes how under the condition of slavery, African Americans laid the infrastructure and wealth of the United States. Blacks were in charge of creating all the decorations of their white owners’ houses, decorations like the high-end-silver pitchers and goblets from the text. These silver repousse vessels represent the wealth of white slave owners. The author Fred Wilson put these silver pitchers and goblets with slave shackles together to convey the idea that all the wealth and luxury that whites possessed was acquired by the hard work of African Americans, and they in exchange got more slavery.

Furthermore, when looking at this exhibition, the first thing that stands up is the silver vessels. If the viewer does not look closely, the shackles at the bottom can be overlooked even though they are in the front. This represents the fact that the work of black slaves in laying the foundations of the United States is often omitted in history books and other forms of historical discourse. As personal experience, in high school I was never taught that African Americans were the ones who built everything whites people used in their daily lives. This is an essential part of the history of the United States and Fred Wilson is addressing it through this artwork.

## The Horrors of Lynching

*In Memory of Mary Turner: As a Silent Protest Against Mob Violence* by Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller.

### Formal Qualities:

- **Date of creation:** 1919
- **Dimensions:** 15 × 51/4 × 41/2 in.
- **Medium:** Sculpture
- **Materials:** Painted Plaster
- **Style:** Impressionism
- **Location:** Museum of African American History, Boston & Nantucket
- **Description:** A woman with her arms folded is looking down at a bunch of hands surrounded by fire that are trying to grab her. At the base there is a sign that reads “In Memory of Mary Turner: As a Silent Protest Against Mob Violence.”



## Historical Context

After the Civil War, thousands of African Americans died because of lynchings. The book *Lynching in America / Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror* defined lynchings as “violent and public acts of torture that traumatized Black people throughout the country and were largely tolerated by state and federal officials.” Lynchings prevented Blacks from exercising the rights granted by the Emancipation Proclamation, the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendment, and the Reconstructions Acts of 1867. Lynchings occurred mainly in Southern states. However, they also extended to non-Southern states like Oklahoma, Missouri, and Illinois. Lynchings were mostly carried out by white mobs who accused Black people of crimes such as murder and rape. These perpetrators were never held accountable.

Mary Turner, an African American woman who was pregnant of eight months, was a victim of one these lynchings. According to the official webpage of Equal Justice Initiative, she decided to speak out after his husband was lynched for being a suspected accomplice in the death of a white farmer. This enraged a white mob that “bound her feet, hanged her from a tree with her head facing down, threw gasoline on her, and burned the clothes off her body. Mrs. Turner was still alive when the mob took a large butcher’s knife to her abdomen, cutting the unborn baby from her body. When the baby fell from Mary Turner, a member of the mob crushed the crying baby’s head with his foot. The mob then riddled Mrs. Turner’s body with hundreds of bullets, killing her.”

## Interpretation

The sculpture *In Memory of Mary Turner: As a Silent Protest Against Mob Violence* was created with the purpose of immortalizing the horrors African Americans went through because of lynchings. The hands at the bottom of the woman’s dress represent the hatred white mobs had toward African Americans. These hands are desperately trying to bring the woman to the flames in the bottom that symbolize pain oblivion. Many of the victims of lynchings before being killed were tortured in public for many hours. Then, their bodies were either mutilated or burned, erasing their identity. The empty folded arms of the woman suggest the presence of the baby that was never born. This baby symbolizes the futures of young African Americans that were lost because of lynchings. Finally, the words “a silent protest” in the title represent the fact that most of the efforts made by black people to obtain justice were silenced by lynchings. This sculpture made by Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, shows the worst horrors caused by the hatred from white people towards African Americans. These horrors were not only physical, but also altered the history and identity of black people.

## Escaping Violence



The Migration Series, Panel No. 1: *During World War I there was a great migration north by southern African Americans* by Jacob Lawrence

### Formal Qualities:

- **Date of creation:** 1940-1941
- **Dimensions:** 12 x 18 in.; 30.48 x 45.72 cm
- **Medium:** Painting
- **Materials:** Casein tempera on hardboard
- **Location:** Goh Annex (1612) - Display, Gallery 200
- **Description:** A huge crowd of black people with coats and hats is going toward three doors. The first on the left is labeled Chicago, the second in the middle New York, and the last in the right St. Louis.

## **Historical Context**

According to the text *Lynching in America / Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, between 1910 and 1970 almost six million African Americans migrated from South to the Northeast, West, and Midwest regions. This was known as The Great Migration. Many Blacks “left their homes, families, and employment after a lynching or near-lynching rendered home too unsafe a place to remain.” Others migrated to seek opportunity and security in big cities where wartime industrial work increased.

## **Interpretation**

This image represents the Great Migration of African Americans to the North. The doors symbolize some of the most popular destinations black people chose for opportunities, security, and equality. The great mass of unified bodies that can hardly be distinguished from one another suggests the massiveness of the number of people who migrated at the same time. Most of them were escaping from the lynchings that threatened their lives in the South. Therefore, this massiveness shows the severity of these acts of violence in terms of the number of people they affected.

In the image there are some figures smaller than others, which means that people from all ages were coming into the cities. Also, everyone in the painting is looking in the same direction, which indicates their decisiveness in not coming back to the repressive conditions of the South. The text *Lynching in America / Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror* compares the Great Migration to “the vast movements of refugees from famine, war, and genocide in other parts of the world.” This idea can be seen in the painting in the lack of emotion or excitement in the faces of the African American who had to leave their family and homes because of the white violence.

## A New Identity



*Equestrian Portrait of the Count-Duke Olivares* by Kehinde Wiley

### Formal Qualities:

- **Date of creation:** 2005
- **Dimensions:** H: 108 in. (274 cm.), W: 108 in. (274 cm.)
- **Medium:** Painting
- **Materials:** Oil on canvas
- **Location:** Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL

- **Description:** An African American man holding a golden spear and a sword is riding a white horse with a golden mount. In the background there is a blue and golden pattern. The man is wearing a red hoodie and black sneakers.

## Historical Context

The decades of lynchings and racial segregation left many marks in today's society. The book *Lynching in America / Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror* said "institutional inequality, continued marginalization, and unaddressed histories of trauma have created a unique legacy of chronic generational poverty, persistent urban distress, debilitating violence, and limited educational opportunities." However, regardless of this marginalization, African Americans found through art new forms of expression and liberation. The most important period of Black art expansion was the Harlem Renaissance. It happened between 1920 and 1930 and set the basis for future artists like Kehinde Wiley to develop Afro-American Art.

Kehinde Wiley had a particular method to create his art works. He asked black people from the street if they wanted to pose for a painting. Then, Kehinde made them choose a painting from an art history book and recreated it using their image. At the time when Kehinde Wiley created the painting *Equestrian Portrait of the Count-Duke Olivares*, according to the webpage The Art Story, "young black men are constantly vilified in the press and mainstream media, and even murdered on the street by racist policemen."

## Interpretation

The artwork *Equestrian Portrait of the Count-Duke Olivares* by Kehinde Wiley was based on the painting with the same name by Diego Velázquez. He interchanged the image of Gaspar de Guzmán, a powerful Spanish duke from the Seventeenth Century, by that of an African American man, whose name is unknown, that is wearing street clothes. Kehinde also changed the color of the horse and the background. By replacing the image of the duke, Wiley transferred his power and status to the black man. This is significant because the historical vilification of the image of black men has made them feel ashamed of their identity and want to resemble the image of the good white men that has always been praised by the canons. Wiley through this painting is telling Blacks to be proud of their appearance, and that their identity deserves to be admired, respected and be portrayed and immortalized in museums. Kehinde Wiley through this artwork also gave young black men a new model to follow and admire and that encourages them to be proud of being black.