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Museums and the Representation of Slavery

John E. Fleming, Cincinnati Museum Center

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Any discussion of the interpretation of slavery in the 21st century ought to begin with an understanding of how museums and the academic community in the 19th century viewed, interpreted and collected African American culture. Museums influenced and were influenced by Social Darwinism that not only set the interpretative framework, but also dictated what museums would collect, or, rather would not collect regarding that history. The civil rights and nationalist movements during the mid-20th century gave rise to black museums that took ownership of their cultural heritage. These factors, coupled with changing urban demographics in the early 1980s created a renewed interest in attracting minority visitors to mainstream museums, interpreting their history and hiring of minorities on staff.

The interpretation of slavery in museums and other institutions varied overtime, but generally reflected the prevailing academic and public attitudes and perceptions toward African Americans. The most influential presentation of

slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction were the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* and the 1939 release of *Gone with the Wind*. Certainly, *Gone with the Wind* reflected the romanticized view of slavery interpreted in Southern museums, historic sites and plantations.

Dramatic change in how museums interpreted slavery and the black experienced occurred during the last two decades of the 20th century. I will highlight my findings from a tour of some 33 museums from Virginia to the southern coast of Georgia in the early 1980s. While few of these institutions had large African American collections, they were aware of the need not only to collect, but also to incorporate black history into their exhibitions.

Finally, I will explore how museums and related institutions are interpreting the subject of slavery in the 21st century. I will examine the Museum of the Confederacy and the National Civil War Center in Richmond; Colonial Williamsburg; the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore; the National Afro-American Museum in Wilberforce; the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati; the North Carolina State Museum in Raleigh; Old Salem and the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston Salem; the South Carolina State Museum in Columbia; the Charleston Museum, and the Drayton Hall Historic Site outside of Charleston. These museums are interpreting a controversial period in our history. While some have been more successful than others, we can learn from all of their experiences.