



HIGHLIGHTS

from the

NATIONAL
COLLECTIONS

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***Freedom Just Around the Corner: Black America from Civil War to Civil Rights*/National Postal Museum**

On February 12, 2015 the National Postal Museum (NPM) opened *Freedom Just Around the Corner: Black America from Civil War to Civil Rights*. The exhibit is the National Postal Museum's first exhibition devoted entirely to African American History. The exhibit was occasioned by the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery as well as the 50th anniversary of the march from Selma to Montgomery and the Voting Rights Act. *Freedom Just Around the Corner* highlights letters carried by enslaved Americans, mail sent to and from leaders of the civil rights movement, and original artwork for numerous stamps issued by the United States Postal Service. Roughly 50 items from the NPM's collection are on display along with an equal number of pieces on loan from other institutions and private collections. *Freedom Just Around the Corner* will close on February 15, 2016.

Before the introduction of home mail delivery, slaves often carried letters to and from the post office. Slave-carried mail is usually identified by a notation, called an endorsement, which also served as a travel pass. The "Sent girl Susan" stampless folded letter and endorsement are dated April 17, 1850. Susan was probably unaware that the letter she carried to the Eastville, Virginia post office contained arrangements for her to be sold to a slave dealer in Richmond.

On the eve of the Civil War, four million slaves produced cash crops—cotton, tobacco, and rice—that were exported at high prices. In addition to the crops they raised, slaves themselves were commodities to be bought, sold, bred, and borrowed against. Richmond, Virginia was the center of the domestic slave trade on the eve of the Civil War. Despite the large volume of mail that must have been sent by slave dealers, just a few examples like the one from Davis, Deupree and Company survive today.

***Ananda's Perfect Memory*/Freer Gallery of Art**

This scroll is part of a large-character copy of the Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish, attributed to Emperor Shōmu, a devout Buddhist who unified Japan in the eighth century. Each column in this scripture has 12 or 13 characters rather than the 17 found in most sutras. The paper, called dabishi, was made of hemp mixed with white clay and aromatic wood particles and may be of Chinese origin.

Known as the Ōjōmu (Great Shōmu), the sutra was originally dedicated to Tōdaiji, a temple in the ancient capital of Nara that the emperor commissioned in 743. Tōdaiji, with its colossal bronze image of the Vairochana Buddha, served as the national temple, and Shōmu also decreed that branch monasteries and convents be erected in each province. Although this ambitious scheme was not fully realized, a large number of new temples were established, leading to an increased demand for sutra copies and the scriptoria to produce them. The scriptoria, including the government establishment at Tōdaiji, employed skilled copyists, many of whom were recent immigrants from Korea or descendants of earlier immigrants.

Tea Bowl/Freer Gallery of Art

This tea bowl was made at the Motoyashiki kiln, in the former Mino province, in the beginning of the seventeenth century. It was shaped, glazed, and decorated in the format now classified as Black Oribe, one of numerous varieties of dramatically sculpted and decorated ceramics invented by the potters working at Motoyashiki. The Black Oribe style, at its most elaborate, as on this bowl, combines lustrous black glaze, graphic motifs incised into the black glaze, and unrelated patterns loosely brushed over the velvety white Mino clay and coated locally with translucent Shino glaze; where they overlap irregularly, the two glazes create modalities of gray. All this, cradled in the hands, would serve to frame a freshly-prepared drink of chartreuse-green powdered tea, in an experience that engaged, sight, touch, and taste.

A watershed moment in the development of Japanese ceramics occurred with the opening of the Motoyashiki kiln in 1607. According to archaeologist Inoue Kikuo, the kiln would operate until 1615. Until then, Mino wares had been fired in small, single-chamber kilns representing the continuation of medieval ceramic technology. The Motoyashiki kiln was built as a chain of fourteen chambers ascending the hillside, linked by vents to allow heat to rise but capable of being fired sequentially and independently to the desired atmosphere and temperature. The tea bowl, which demonstrates innovation in both design and creation, is currently on display at the Freer Gallery of Art.

Contact/National Museum of African Art

Contact, by contemporary artist Nandipha Mntambo (born 1982, Swaziland), was purchased in 2010 by the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. Inspired by a ship's figurehead that comes toward us but is always just beyond reach, *Contact* is simultaneously an invitation and a warning, a play on the contradictory notions of isolation and exchange. *Contact* explores the tensions between presence and absence, and attraction and repulsion, while also probing how ideas of identity, femininity, and contemporaneity can be shaped – or emptied of value.

In the artist's own words, *Contact* has: "Extended arms in a welcome – the invitation for an embrace, which is disrupted by the shield/crust formed by the rigid material. The height at which the work is displayed makes it next to impossible to position one's body at the same height. This work suggests one being allowed a certain degree of contact while also being made aware of the ever-present boundaries." It is currently on display in the National Museum of African Art's permanent collection gallery, African Mosaic.