

# The Glittering A-List of Black History

By HOLLAND COTTER

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“Let Your Motto Be Resistance: African American Portraits” at the [International Center of Photography](#) is a praise song in pictures, a shoutout to history. It’s also a fancy-dress inaugural party for the yet-to-be-built National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington. As such, it is a little too fancy, too heavy on glitz, too short on grit. Still, what a party it is.

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Benedict J. Fernandez/National Portrait Gallery

The coffin of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. surrounded by mourners, including his children, in the show “Let Your Motto Be Resistance.”

The guest list includes an abbreviated Who’s Who of charismatic black statesmen, from Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X. In terms of entertainment, the event is beyond compare. [Josephine Baker](#) and Bill (Bojangles) Robinson dance. Sarah Vaughan, Leontyne Price and Odetta share a stage, with Sidney Bechet on sax, and Hazel Scott, looking divine, at the keyboard.

You’d look divine too if you had James VanDerZee behind the camera, or Berenice Abbott or Edward Weston or Addison N. Scurlock or any of the other great photographers responsible for the 100 vintage-print portraits here, all from the archives of the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery.

There are more artists and writers than usual at such an affair. You’ll recognize Horace Pippin, Edmonia Lewis and a beaming Lorraine Hansberry, by name if not by face.



Estate of Linda McCartney/National Portrait Gallery

Jimi Hendrix in 1967, one of the glamorous shots in the exhibition.

And a few people you may be meeting for the first time. Ernest Everett Just (1883-1941), a pioneering biologist who spent much of his career in Europe after he was stonewalled by the American scientific establishment. And Henry Highland Garnet (1815-1882), a Maryland slave who escaped north, became an abolitionist firebrand and delivered the phrase that gives the show its title: “Strike for your lives and liberties. Rather die freemen than live to be slaves. Let your motto be resistance! Resistance! Resistance!”

As you look around the gallery, you can imagine some of the portraits reacting to his call. Elizabeth Catlett (in a wonderful likeness by Mariana Yampolsky), A. Philip Randolph, [Paul Robeson](#), [Amiri Baraka](#), Sojourner Truth and a young, blanket-swaddled James Baldwin seem to hear it and they’re on the alert. Mr. Garnet’s words aren’t party words. They are stark, preaching, move-now words.

Which brings us back to the kind of party this is. It is, as I said, a housewarming in advance, and a buzz-builder, for a national African-American museum. When that museum goes up on the National Mall — 2015 is the target date — an essential aspect of American history will have its official monument. America and African America are one and the same. They’re inseparable.

If this show can be taken as a preview of exhibitions to come, what will that history look like? Obviously, it will have glamour to burn, to judge by the lush, burnished portraits chosen by the guest curator, Deborah Willis, a professor of photography at [New York University](#).

Roland Hayes, who sang like an angel, looks like an angel in a 1934 light-and-shadow likeness attributed to Johan Hagemeyer. [Lena Horne](#) floats like a butterfly for Philippe Halsman’s Vogue-savvy eye. One after another, people glow or glower. Everyone is a star, an inspiration, a certified member of W. E. B. DuBois’s Talented Tenth.



This Hall of Fame approach to cultural history delivers thrills, no question. But it also has a too easy, been-there air. The show feels like a throwback to another era, to a kind of exhibition that might have been mounted 20 years ago at the [Studio Museum in Harlem](#), an institution that was until recently deeply invested in black pride, devoted to ethnic uplift.

That devotion was effective in its time. Among many other things, it encouraged the upward mobility of what has since become an economically and politically powerful black middle class. But is uplift on the same terms, for the same ends, the right framework for viewing African-American, or any other American, history in 2007? Is *Bright and Beautiful* the model to follow?

The show doesn't entirely adhere to the model. Wall texts make clear that almost every person portrayed had to fight bitter odds for a seat in front of the camera. Each likeness was, consciously or by default, an effort to cast the African-American image, distorted by racism, in acceptably positive, mainstream terms. Three images, set by side by side at the start of the show, make life-and-death stakes clear.

In a 1956 picture the Rev. Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) — just a year after he had successfully used passive resistance as a tactical tool in Montgomery, Ala. — stands in the sunshine beside his smiling wife, Coretta, holding their infant daughter, Yolanda Denise, in his arms.

In 1968 the same daughter, now in her teens, looks down at her murdered father in his coffin as her 5-year-old sister, Bernice, reacts with open-mouthed shock to the sight. A year later Stephen Shames catches the 25-year-old Angela Davis standing at a microphone, her mouth open to deliver a speech. Passive resistance is over; active resistance has begun.

Significantly, some of the best things in the show are action shots: the Supremes — Diana, Mary and Flo — in a recording session; Stokely Carmichael and a white-suited Adam Clayton Powell Jr. cracking up at a joke; [Malcolm X](#) impassively hawking broadsides on the street; Marian Anderson singing as a skinny young [Leonard Bernstein](#) looks on.

These portraits are close to snapshots; their subjects look like regular people, Americans who happen to be black, in the middle of their accomplished lives. African America has, of course, a distinctive history, of profound pain and amazing grace. But the figures in these on-the-fly images are also part of a larger fabric: We the People. They are us; we are them. And with all our shared flaws and heroisms, we make up one mercurial, complicated, crazy quilt of a crew.

Many of the young artists seen at the Studio Museum these days are intensely interested in complications, in giving “black” and “white” hard critical scrutiny, in consigning racial pride, along with all other essentialisms, to the shelf. Such artists resist the old, easy-chair version of history that this crowd-pleaser of a show comes too close to emulating. I hope the National Museum of African American History and Culture will resist it too, when it finally gets the home it should have had years ago at the heart of the nation.

*“Let Your Motto Be Resistance: African American Portraits” continues through Sept. 9 at the International Center of Photography, 1133 Avenue of the Americas, at 43rd Street; (212) 857-0000, icp.org. It opens at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington on Oct. 9.*