



Hampton University Museum

A Tradition of Diversity

The Hampton University Museum is the oldest African American museum in the country and one of the oldest museums in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Established the same year as the school in 1868, its founder, General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, believed the museum would strengthen the school's academic program by connecting the student population to its cultural heritage. The Museum collections are recognized internationally for their quality and diversity. With unique collections in African American art, African art, American Indian art, Asian art and the art of the Pacific Islands, this cultural inclusiveness of over 10,000 objects reflects the school's diverse student population. Armstrong believed strongly that in order to know ourselves we had to look at the art objects from our history. The Hampton University mission became "educating the head, the hand, and heart."

The Founder

Armstrong, the school's founder, was born in Hawaii. It was logical; therefore, that he turned to the Pacific when soliciting the first collection of objects for the Museum. Natural history specimens and cultural materials were assembled to broaden the educational experience for the students, most of whom would never have the opportunity to travel. Used primarily as a resource for the school and community, the Museum had a special role to play in the 1920s as it was the only museum in the south open to African Americans.

The African Collection

The Hampton University Museum houses one of the oldest African art collections in the world. The collection was amassed at the turn of the 20th century by an African American missionary, William Henry Shepherd, a native of Waynesboro, Virginia. Shepherd was the first westerner to penetrate the Kuba kingdom, a renowned Central African empire in the heart of the Congo. Through donations from African students studying at the college, other fine pieces of African art have been added to the Museum's internationally known collections. The Hampton African art collection is considered as significant as the Kuba collection at the British Museum in London and The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium. Through the years other important African art collections have come to the Museum from Kenya and South Africa.

Native American Roots

In 1878, Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, now Hampton University, began a pioneering program in American Indian education. Between 1878 and 1923 over 1300 native students from 65 different tribal groups from around the nation attended Hampton. The American Indian collection at the Museum developed out of this association much the same as the development of the African art collection. The goal was to preserve culture and to maintain respect for traditional ways by assembling a group of art objects that expanded awareness and understanding of American Indian culture.

The Museum

In 1997, the Museum moved from the original Academy building on campus to the University's former library, the Huntington Building. Located in the heart of the historic university campus, the expanded facility provided enough space for the creation of permanent exhibitions worthy of the Museum's fine collections. The Museum's permanent exhibition *Soul and Spirit: Two Hundred Years of African American Art* is the only permanent exhibition in the country which chronicles the history of African American art. This ground-breaking collection of African American art is the oldest in the country and was begun in 1894 when the school acquired an icon of American painting Henry Ossawa Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson* (1893). Through the years, the Museum acquired a magnificent collection of art related to the Harlem Renaissance. The African American Fine Arts Collection, one of the largest in the country, also features major holdings of work by such noted artists as Jacob Lawrence, John Biggers, and Elizabeth Catlett.

Training “The Head, The Hand and The Heart”

Hampton University Museum's treasured collections are a critical link between the art and culture of diverse populations, populations no longer afar but populations which are changing our communities. The Museum serves a beacon to the entire educational community, creating a place where students, teachers can learn about artists who helped to define a people through the work they produced. Continuing a tradition of teaching through “the head, the hand, and the heart,” the Museum remains a vital part of the University's original mission.



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