

# The Presentation of Artisans: The Community as Museum Space

## Video Transcript

Hello, my name is Dr. Diana Baird N'Diaye, and I'm a senior curator and cultural heritage specialist at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. I am also a textile artist inspired by the needlework traditions of my family and community.

This presentation will discuss how museums can forge relationships and collaboratively developed projects with people outside of the museum in local neighborhood settings to create programs of outreach and mutual engagement.

I'm going to talk about three things, therefore: bringing community into the museum space before museum presentations in new ways as partners, planners, experts, and participants.

Secondly, I want to talk about taking the museum out to the community. And that's planning programs of community engagement through projects and events that may bring some of the things presented at the museum that revolve around issues of heritage and in folklife outside the museum.

Finally, I'm going to talk about the dynamic forging and maintaining museum and community relationships. I am going to speak about this based on some of the programs that I have curated or led in about three decades of being at the Smithsonian Folklife program and Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Community engagement is one of the pillars of the Folklife Festival. And there are three aspects to the way that these programs are developed. Before the Festival, in the *Will to Adorn* program for example, we worked with a variety of researchers. Some of them were folklorists and had degrees or museum staff. Others were students. Others were people within the community: educators, as well as cultural practitioners themselves who wanted to learn how to document their own communities. Others were just interested in making sure that if we were presenting their community at the Festival, we were able to present it in a way that reflected what they see as the important aspects.

So, we formed study groups in various cities, and we went into art studios, we went to barber shops, we went to beauty parlors. We went to the places where people had fashion shows to show off the work of designers or people who made and designed their clothing. We looked at the venues where clothing was worn and performed. So, we looked at a range of culture that related to dressing. We did this with an eye towards thinking about what we would present at the Festival. Our philosophy was that there's no folklore without the folk, or nothing about the community without the community's involvement.

So, we even started with writing our own autobiographies of dress. We started thinking about what messages we received when we were young, and what messages we received from our parents, from the people in our community, and what were the values that they were passing on. What were the criteria for beauty? What were the events that we went to that highlighted dress and adornment?

So coming back to the table with the stories and narratives from all over the communities, all over the cities, as well as our own stories, that was the first step in engaging community, and really thinking about the role of the dress within in African American community.

These stories, reflections, and images and videos were recorded. They were brought together in an archive, and we discussed them. We discussed the values that these icons of dress represented. Who were the best dressers in the community and why? And all of these, the answers to these questions, helped to shape the Festival.

Another way that this could have happened might have been to send out only seasoned researchers or only museum staff members. But if we did, we would have created a much less vibrant Festival and experience. So, the first pillar of community engagement is what takes place before the exhibition and when people go into the community and come back.

The second pillar of community engagement takes place at the Festival. In the case of *The Will to Adorn*, we had members of the various communities that were represented present their communities both on the narrative stages and on the stage as performances, and also in discussion. Our discussions might have ranged from the way that religion, or faith, has a role to play in how people dress, to the ways that people who were artisans of style sustain themselves as makers within the community. Who are the customers? How did they make a living while preserving and carrying on the culture of, let's say, hair braiding or hairstyling, or creating specialized clothing?

Another topic that came up at the Festival had to do with how artisans of style have people who had knowledge about dress and hairstyling and leather working. Some pass that knowledge onto others, whether they be people of a new generation, younger generation, or to people who were new to a tradition.

As part of the Crafts of African Fashion project, which looks at the ways that artisans are involved with creating the things that people wear on the African continent and in the African diaspora. One of our programs that I guess links *Will to Adorn* and the *Crafts of African Fashion* was with a metalsmith, a woman metalsmith, who was African American but who studied metalsmithing in West Africa, in Senegal. Some of the questions we asked about were, what she talked about was how learning metalsmithing in Senegal as a woman was quite a challenge, because traditionally only men learn metalsmithing.

But we also learned from her how she was taking the knowledge that she had acquired to expand the tradition to teaching women the art of metalsmithing. Women are often the recipients, the wearers of jewelry or gold, especially gold and silver jewelry, but this was an innovation on the tradition. So the ways in which community agency came into play there was not only in the interest in sharing this knowledge, which has to do with something that might take place during a Festival, but also in the ways that people would connect with others, who had similar concerns, or were learning about similar conditions, during the Festival. So, this is a really important aspect of community engagement, how the Festival connects people who have one cultural experience to people who may have a different cultural experience but that may be parallel.

At the *Will to Adorn* program, we were paired with people who were participating in a language program but also included artisans of style, people who made either clothing or are interested in the culture of dress. So, the opportunities to bring people together and to convene in a museum setting is another aspect of community engagement which takes place during a Folklife Festival.

The third context for community engagement that translates to the museum experience takes place after the Folklife Festival, when participants who are the cultural practitioners, the cultural experts who have been involved in sharing what they do, with others in a public setting. At that time, people may choose to create their own experiences right there in their own studios, or in their own places of gathering within the community, and they may do so with the assistance of museum staff or with the encouragement of Festival staff.

Some of the things that come out of the Festival with *The Will to Adorn*: we were able to work with museums that had their own youth programs and replicated their whole research process, where they had students go out and follow the same set of inquiries that we made to create the Festival. But they did it at home, in their own communities, and they used that as a learning experience and then created mini festivals or, in some cases, exhibitions.

At the Institute of Texan Cultures, for example, the museum staff worked with young people in internships in their community to interview someone who was a “sneakerhead,” someone who collected sneakers and who knew everything there was to know about the culture of wearing sneakers. Who are the people nationwide who are the inspiration for sneakers? Who helped to develop sneakers? What were the sneakers that were popular at different stages? After sneakers which were tennis shoes came into use, and had a collection, which he then presented back at the museum.

There was another gentleman in San Antonio, Texas, who collected shirts made of different African textiles and made in different places. Wherever he traveled on the African continent, he would bring back a shirt that would become part of his curated wardrobe. And so at the museum and at community get-togethers, the young people who were trained through the *Will to Adorn* program were able to introduce him, share their experience, and have him share his experience with the community members. So that is only one place.

In other programs, people went to each other's fashion shows, went to each other's presentations of dress. Fashion shows are like visual concerts in many African American communities. So there are all sorts of fashion shows that they placed, and each community may have its own style of dress. We saw at the Festival, there were fashion shows that were presented by church communities, showing off the beautiful hats that are part of the culture of wearing hats in church as to show respect for religion, to present oneself in a way that is, as they would say, pleasing to the Lord.

There are fashion shows that are created to raise funds for community. With the *Will to Adorn* program, we had fashion shows of church hats, hats that people wore to churches, but we also invited the milliners. And the church fashion shows that always have the people who create the hats to come to the shows. But there is opportunity to sit down and discuss the meaning of these church fashion shows. After the Festival, some of these presentations were created in community libraries, other venues that allowed more people to engage in the conversation about the role of the hats in African American heritage.

The Festival and also museum programs are the spaces for community engagement, both before, during, and after community events. There are things that we can learn about the importance of creating a venue where people feel comfortable as part of the museum, feel welcomed by the museum, but also are able to learn about techniques and practices of presenting, of looking at traditions in new ways, and in presenting back to their own community.

Like the *Will to Adorn* project, the *Crafts of African Fashion* project, the *African Immigrant* project, the museum project can also facilitate community and individual agency about the content of what is presented at the museum, but also the way that they are presenting the material and presenting their own perspectives.

Significantly, we took advantage of technologies that are now readily available. Some of the research by communities was done on iPhones and iPads and included social media. Some of the ways that people presented back were through things like through social media, through virtual conferencing, and through the growing recording quality and capacity of mobile tools, which we used to link together several community-centered research communities.

Some suggested strategies for community engagement: first of all, at the beginning of projects, get to know your constituents. Get to know who is interested in documenting community life. Who are the cultural practitioners that are respected within the community? Invite the communities' representatives into the research and planning process. Provide training, cultural documentation, and orientation for community students and cultural groups, co-create museum programs and neighborhood spaces, as well as at the museum.

And finally, evaluate, revise, and build on programs that you've created, because it's a matter of a learning curve, that navigating through collaborative community documentation project is

always fraught with negotiation for space with difficulties. Sometimes it's very important for people to know who the museum is and to trust the museum, that the materials are being honored and respected and the people are being honored and respected. The people who are involved are being honored and respected.

Many times, community scholars or community researchers find the research process very challenging. Mastering the cameras and other recording equipment prove frustrating for many people. Frustrating for me as well, even as someone who's done this quite a bit.

Furthermore, community researchers often didn't expect, and neither did we, that even if you are a practitioner who's respected in the community, sometimes you'd have to establish a real rapport with members of your own community. Even though they were well respected for a while, it was difficult to convince members of the community that researchers were not just trying to get information to use commercially. So the level of trust that is part of engaging in community work is very, very important.

So the decision to meet outside the museum can be a very important one, symbolic of determination to maintain the community center core. Other things are, obviously, there are always political challenges. There are bureaucratic challenges. It's important for museum staff to go into this with a little knowledge.

This work is very intensive, in terms of dealing with the day-to-day basis. Staff burnout is one of the factors that museum staff need to consider. You are interacting not only with objects in the collection, but you're having constant conversations with people about things that are very meaningful and need to be presented in a way that those cultural practitioners know, respect what they do, and how they do it, and the cultural aspects of this are quite important.

Finally, maintaining relationships with the community is a very important aspect of these projects within a particular place, especially if you're going outside of the museum.

When we closed the *African Immigrant Folklife* program, as well as when we closed the *Will to Adorn* program, it was clear that the program had made a significant impact, that people wanted to continue the relationship, that people wanted to do new things, both the cultural practitioners and people who had attended the Festival programs. Many people continued to be involved and to meet, for several years, to discuss new collaborative programs of their own.

When we did the *African Immigrant* program in 1997, an oud musician from Somalia, living in the United States, Hassan Gure, and Ghanaian drummers Kofi Dennis and Kwame Ansah-Brew performed together on several occasions, at cultural and social events of the D.C. area.

At the fiftieth commemoration of the March on Washington, commemorating the march led by Martin Luther King for justice and civil rights, one of the community scholars and community organizers wore the T shirt from the *Will to Adorn* project, because she said that being involved in the project, working with young people, and talking about and organizing the fashion shows

which were celebrating and learning about African American heritage is one of the ways that she saw herself as an activist.

So, there are ways that we can encourage, perhaps through bringing people back to the museum periodically, by sharing what we learned from working with the communities within our particular neighborhoods, within our particular museum constituencies, that help to carry on the work.

Finally, it's my conviction that, notwithstanding the cultural and the social complexities, contradictions, sometimes the missteps that are part of real-life practice, that the Folklife Festival and the extensions into the community can be a means to facilitate shared ownership of the curatorial role, the research role, to really create the programs that are of the people, by the people, for the people, and that are continued to help to sustain the important heritage of a group, of a community, of a neighborhood, of a nation, and of humanity. Thank you.