


Detroit Art Institutions Resist Political Challenges to Diversity

Leaders at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History and others say their core mission of elevating Black voices will not change.

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This article is part of our Museums special section about how artists and institutions are adapting to changing times.

Back in the 1960s, a prominent Detroit obstetrician had two passions — delivering babies and collecting artifacts that told the African American story.

And just as those babies grew up, so did his collection.

Today, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, named after that doctor, is one of the nation's pre-eminent and largest museums of its type, second only in size and scope to the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.

Yet, as the Wright prepares to celebrate its 60th anniversary, the diversity it represents is coming under attack by the Trump administration, which has moved to eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion programs wherever it can. Rather than retreat, the museum's leaders say, these attacks make its mission ever more urgent.

Located in downtown Detroit, a city that is more than 70 percent Black, the museum traces the African American experience from slavery to the

presidency of Barack Obama and beyond. The museum, started by Wright, contains works by Black artists, historical documents and letters, and offers an array of programs including a speaker series and an annual festival. To commemorate its 60 years, the museum is presenting a number of activities along with a special multimedia exhibit, “Luminosity: A Detroit Arts Gathering,” which features Black artists who have worked, lived or studied in Detroit. (It opened April 4 and runs through March 31, 2026.)

To commemorate its 60 years, the museum is presenting “Luminosity: A Detroit Arts Gathering.” Valaurian Waller for The New York Times

However unsettling the political winds from Washington may be, Neil Barclay, president and chief executive of the museum, said its core mission of elevating African American voices, as well as the upcoming celebration, will not change.

“We have to resist and persevere,” Barclay said in a video interview. “Attempts to undermine the significance of our culture are nothing new to us. We will continue to tell our stories.”

He added: “We see African American history as part of American history and not separate from it. Inclusion is part of our mission. We want to use the resilience and courage of African Americans as a source of unity and not divisiveness.”

The Wright museum is one of around 300 museums and institutions in the United States that are focused on African American culture and history. And there are no signs so far that anyone is in retreat. Vedet Coleman-Robinson, the president and chief executive of the Association of African American Museums, said that the Trump administration’s attacks on diversity “feel like the rug was pulled out from under us.” Even so, she said: “I have not seen any indication we will slow down.”

“D.E.I. is part of our DNA,” Coleman-Robinson said by video. “It’s nothing we can just stop. We have a duty to tell the truth and make sure people coming to our spaces walk away with something they didn’t know before.

“There was a time when we were not allowed to tell our stories and we did,” she added. “As a community we pulled together and that’s what’s going to have to happen. We’re going to have to depend on each other a little more.”

The exhibition features works by artists who have worked, lived or studied in Detroit. Valaurian Waller for The New York Times

Another leading Detroit institution, the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, known as MOCAD and located blocks from the Wright, is also standing firm with two shows opening on May 2 that feature Black artists and themes of interest to Detroit's large Black population. One show focuses on gun violence and the other on African American artists in the internet age.

"D.E.I. is part of our core values," said Marie Madison-Patton, MOCAD's co-director and chief financial officer, in a video interview. "There is no change in how we do this work. We have a diverse perspective and our programs are a reflection of that."

The Wright museum traces its origins to Dr. Charles Wright's efforts to commemorate African American history by setting up a museum in 1965 for his collection, first in his medical office and then in a trailer parked outside his downtown Detroit practice.

To describe Wright as a passionate collector is an understatement. He amassed rare documents, photographs, African masks, fine art, personal items from key historical figures and all sorts of memorabilia. Over time, the collection grew to include material from the civil rights era and oral histories of Black leaders. Wright also became one of the founders of the Association of African American Museums. He died in 2002.

The Wright's permanent exhibition "And Still We Rise" features life-size replicas of Detroit neighborhoods and streets. Valaurian Waller for The New York Times

In 1997, with money from the city of Detroit, the 125,000-square-foot Wright museum was built, just a stone's throw from the Detroit Institute of Arts and in

the heart of the city's cultural center. Designed by the city's oldest Black-owned architectural firm, Sims-Varner Associates (now SDG Associates), the building is based on an African village, with a central gathering spot as its core and galleries extending from it. The museum's most striking feature is the 140-foot domed Ford Freedom Rotunda and its "Ring of Genealogy," a floor installation encircled by bronze nameplates of hundreds of prominent African Americans.

Heading the permanent collection is "And Still We Rise," a 22,000-square-foot exhibition spanning 20 galleries that looks at the African American experience from the Middle Passage when slave ships crossed the Atlantic Ocean, to the civil rights era, to today. This exhibition includes a life-size slave ship and accounts of those who survived the journey. The museum has hosted memorial services for Rosa Parks and Aretha Franklin, and sponsors the annual African World Festival, a three-day celebration of art, music and food. There have even been — and more are planned — events for residents who were delivered as babies by Wright.

It also features a life-size slave ship and accounts of those who survived the journey. Valaurian Waller for The New York Times

“Our work is about telling the African American story from the point of view of African Americans,” Barclay said. Yet while the story may be of the Black experience, visitors come from a wide range of backgrounds and locations, Barclay said, including Detroit’s largely white suburbs, and represent the kind of diversity and inclusion that the museum aims to achieve.

Last year, around 53,000 visitors came to the Wright museum. It is considered one of Detroit’s top tourist sites.

The highlight of the 60th celebration “Luminosity” is an exhibition of film, sculpture, installation art, collages, sketches and other artistic expressions. Some 97 works will be shown, featuring 69 artists with a link to Detroit.

“There has to be a strong connection,” Vera Ingrid Grant, the show’s guest curator, said in a video interview, adding that the show’s inspiration came from Marvin Gaye’s protest song “What’s Going On.” “We are focusing on the production of a glorious canopy of art and putting it all together,”

The show is in two parts — “Daylight” and “Nightlight.” “Daylight” features works of brightness and joy, exploring such themes as self-examination, motherhood and family. “Nightlight” will be darker — and quite literally in a more darkened gallery — and deal with themes of grief, protest and violence.

While most of the art selected is contemporary, “Luminosity” will also display

work by Robert S. Duncanson, a 19th-century landscape painter who is considered to be the first African American artist to be internationally known, and who settled in the Detroit area.

“The show will be encyclopedic and show the range of what is out there,” Grant said. “We want to recognize the significance of the museum and to celebrate the artists of Detroit.”

“The Westside Johnsons” by the Detroit artist Sydney Johnson, on display in
“Luminosity.” Valaurian Waller for The New York Times

Detroit has long been a city of creativity. For years, designers and engineers working for auto and auto-adjacent companies made the city a leader in industrial design and the arts in general. The Detroit Institute of Arts is considered one of the premier museums in the country. More recently, the city’s low cost of living, raw urban space and gritty history have attracted a new wave of young artists from elsewhere.

The Wright can stand firm against attacks on D.E.I. in large part because it gets very little federal money. Its biggest support comes from the city of Detroit, which gave the museum \$2.6 million in fiscal year 2024, and the state of Michigan, which provided \$3.2 million. Other big donors include the Ford Motor Company Fund, the Mellon Foundation and a number of local foundations. The Wright has an operating budget of around \$12 million. It recently spent \$15 million to upgrade infrastructure and is about two-thirds through a multiyear program for mechanical improvements.

The Wright would like to get more of its funding from local homeowners. In 2020, voters in Detroit and nearby suburbs approved a 10-year property tax hike to support the Detroit Institute of Arts. The Wright, along with the Detroit Historical Museum, plans to put a similar property tax proposal on the ballot in 2026 for voters in Wayne and Oakland Counties.

MOCAD is the only contemporary museum in Detroit. Housed in a former car dealership, which provides it with 22,000 square feet of raw industrial space, it is not a collecting museum. Rather, it is a space for a rotating group of art exhibitions and events. Next year, it will celebrate its 20th anniversary.

The two exhibitions opening on May 2 have been shown at other locations and are now traveling to MOCAD. One is the “Gun Violence Memorial Project,” a collection of 700 glass bricks arranged into four houses, with each house representing one week of lives lost to gun violence. As part of the exhibit, friends and family members are invited to place remembrance objects from someone lost to gun violence in the glass bricks. Each brick will then have the

name and birth and death dates of the person being remembered.

The “Gun Violence Memorial Project,” a collection of 700 glass bricks arranged into four houses, with each house representing one week of lives lost to gun violence, is coming to the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. via Elman Studio LLC/MOCAD

During the exhibit, community groups will have tables at MOCAD to provide information on antidrug and anti-violence projects, as well as information on overdose prevention and grief support.

“Gun violence is no stranger to Detroit,” said Jova Lynne, MOCAD’s co-director and artistic director, in a video interview. “This will be presenting a monument to the community.”

The other exhibition opening May 2 is “Code Switch: Distributing Blackness, Reprogramming Internet Art,” presented in partnership with The Kitchen, a New York artists collective, and The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York’s Harlem.

“Code Switch” features Black artists — from Detroit and elsewhere — dealing with issues of the internet age, including technology, automation and disruption. Works include paintings, sculpture, video, photographs and other installations. Lynne said one reason the exhibit is in Detroit is because of the city’s legacy of creative technologies and industrial innovation.

Like the Wright, MOCAD receives little financial support from the federal government. It has an annual operating budget of around \$2 million and recently received a \$1.6 million grant from the Ford Foundation. Other major donors include the Mellon, Kresge and Hudson-Webber Foundations.

“We are as committed to showing diverse artists as we have ever been,” Lynne said. “This season it is mostly Black. Other seasons it has been white artists. Diversity to us is celebrating everyone. Our mission is to reflect the world.”

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