“Let Your Motto Be Resistance” Opens Oct. 19
at the National Portrait Gallery

“Let your Motto be resistance! Resistance! RESISTANCE! No opposed people have ever secured Liberty without resistance”—abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet, 1843

Garnet’s words have found their way into the title—and the essence—of the inaugural exhibition of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture. “Let Your Motto Be Resistance: African American Portraits” opens at the Portrait Gallery Oct. 19. The exhibition consists of 100 photographs selected from the National Portrait Gallery’s collections that highlight African American resistance spanning more than 150 years of U.S. history. This is the second venue for the exhibition.

“It is a great honor for the National Portrait Gallery to have its collection of photographs of African Americans featured in the first exhibition presented by the National Museum of African American History and Culture,” said Marc Pachter, Portrait Gallery director. “These images and this exhibition examine how photographers and their subjects worked together to challenge demeaning stereotypes and shape new attitudes about race and the testing of the possibilities of American life.”

“Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, almost all of black America embraced Garnet’s plea to ‘let your motto be resistance,’ based on ‘the circumstances that surround you,’” said Lonnie G. Bunch III, founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. “As we examined the photographs that comprise this exhibition, it was clear that they revealed, reflected and illuminated the variety of creative and courageous ways that African Americans resisted, accommodated, redefined and struggled in an America that needed but rarely embraced and accepted its black citizens.”

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In the context of the photographs, resistance took many forms. Working with a growing circle of African American intellectuals and professionals, photographers often challenged the prevailing view of blacks as intellectually and socially inferior. Dramatic images of labor leader A. Philip Randolph (1948) and activist Malcolm X (1963) spotlight those who confronted racism and social injustice head-on.

Exhibition highlights include an ambrotype of Frederick Douglass (1856); James U. Stead’s photograph of abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet (c. 1881); Addison N. Scurlock’s portrait of author and activist W.E.B. Du Bois (c. 1911); Underwood and Underwood’s photograph of boxing legend Joe Louis (c. 1935); Josef Breitenbach’s image of singer Sarah Vaughan (1950); Dan Weiner’s photograph of Martin Luther King Jr. (1956); Irving Penn’s image of opera icon Jessye Norman; and Linda McCartney’s portrait of rock star Jimi Hendrix (1967).

“Let Your Motto Be Resistance” was organized by the National Museum of African American History and Culture in collaboration with the National Portrait Gallery and the International Center of Photography. The guest curator is Deborah Willis, chair of the department of photography and imaging at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts. Ann M. Shumard, curator of photographs at the Portrait Gallery, assisted Willis in selecting the exhibition’s photographs. The exhibition, national tour and catalog were made possible by a generous grant from lead sponsor MetLife Foundation. Additional support was provided by the Council of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

The Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) will circulate a traveling version of the exhibition. For the tour itinerary, visit www.sites.si.edu.

Publication

The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalog, which features contributions by historians and commentators, including Cheryl Finley, assistant professor in the department of history of art and visual studies at Cornell University; Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, curatorial assistant in the department of photography at the Museum of Modern Art; Elizabeth Alexander, a poet and fellow at the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University; William C. Rhoden, author and sports columnist with The New York Times; as well as Bunch and Pachter. Biographies of the portrait subjects were written by Ann M. Shumard, Frank H. Goodyear III and Frederick S. Voss. The editor of the catalog is Jacquelyn D. Serwer, chief curator for the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

National Portrait Gallery

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery tells the stories of America through the individuals who have shaped its culture. Through the visual arts, performing arts and new media, the Portrait...
Gallery portrays poets and presidents, visionaries and villains, actors and activists who speak American history.

The National Portrait Gallery was established by an act of Congress in 1962 and opened to the public in 1968. The museum’s collection of nearly 20,000 works ranges from paintings and sculpture to photographs and drawings. It is housed in the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture at Eighth and F streets N.W., Washington, D.C. Smithsonian information: (202) 633-1000; TTY (202) 633-5285. Web sites: www.npg.si.edu and reynoldscenter.org.

**National Museum of African American History and Culture**

The National Museum of African American History and Culture was established by an act of Congress in 2003. The museum will be erected on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., at Constitution Avenue and 14th Street N.W. Currently, during the pre-building phase, the museum is presenting exhibitions, producing publications, hosting public events and offering an array of interactive programs and educational resources at the museum on the Web at http://www.nmaahc.si.edu.

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