

PAST IS PRESENT: BLACK ARTISTS RESPOND TO THE COMPLICATED HISTORIES OF SLAVERY

# VISITOR'S GUIDE

## INTRODUCTION

***Past Is Present: Black Artists Respond to the Complicated Histories of Slavery*** explores African American responses to the enduring legacy of slavery. The exhibition includes contributions from nationally renowned and Indiana-based artists.

Indiana is an important nexus of African American history and struggles surrounding slavery, and freedom are foundational to its statehood. Indiana's agricultural landscape is not dotted with plantations. Corn is not a crop that is associated with slavery. However, Indiana and Indianapolis hold an important place in understanding slavery and African American history, bearing in mind that a long-standing African American community was razed for the construction of IUPUI.

Learn more about local history and its relationship with larger histories of enslavement through suggested readings highlighted in this guide. The artists in this exhibition raise important questions about slavery's past and present, reflecting on how this problematic history is not repeated in the future.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Visitors who want to go beyond the artwork and wall text to understand the themes in *Past is Present* are encouraged to use this guide. We also hope classroom instructors can incorporate ideas from it into their lesson plans.

The exhibition experience of *Past is Present* provides Herron Galleries visitors with opportunities to:

1. Deepen your understanding of foundational theories and systemic race, power, and inequality issues.
2. Place structural racism in Indianapolis in a larger national and global context.
3. Understand African American artists' creative responses to slavery and its legacy.
4. Learn that the continued struggle for freedom not only plays in policy and economic realms but also relies on creativity and storytelling.

If you have any comments or feedback about the exhibition or your visit, please get in touch with the Herron Galleries at [hgallery@iupui.edu](mailto:hgallery@iupui.edu). We'd be delighted to hear from you.



EXPLORE THE  
EXHIBITION ONLINE

## KEY VOCABULARY

Power is embedded in language. It is important to reflect on how nomenclature may or may not reify existing power structures. Below, key vocabulary is clarified to enable a deeper understanding of these commonly used terms in *Past is Present*.

**Black:** The prevailing preference among many is to capitalize Black, though there is certainly not a consensus among scholars. Capitalizing Black highlights blackness as a cultural and political identity and not simply a descriptor of the color of skin.

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**Race:** Race is a social construct and not a scientific reality. That said, our entire world is structured around racial hierarchies, bringing light to a tension between phenotype and heredity.

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**African American:** Not all people of African descent in the U.S. identify as African American. It is typically used to describe people of African descent with long-standing roots in the United States who are often descendants of formerly enslaved people.

**Slavery/enslavement:** There is a growing preference for use of "enslavement" to emphasize that it was a historically specific predicament to which people of African descent (and others) were subjected.

## KEY THEMES

In addition to clarifying vocabulary utilized in the exhibition, it is essential to note how certain themes emerge and intersect throughout this exhibition. The following themes are intentionally juxtaposed.

**Liberation and Oppression:** Art and creative expression have the power to liberate and oppress. The artists in *Past Is Present* are deeply engaged in using their creative practices as tools of liberation.

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**Indianapolis and the World:** The exhibition's curator used Indianapolis as a point of departure for exploring local and national histories of enslavement, and trans-Diasporic stories of Black people globally.

**Past and Present:** The artists in *Past Is Present* draw creatively from histories of enslavement and its legacy to build a better future.

## GET INVOLVED

After experiencing *Past Is Present*, you may be wondering how to thoughtfully respond to the exhibition. We invite you to join the Herron Community for one or more of the upcoming events related to the exhibition, which can be found at [go.iu.edu/4Aag](https://go.iu.edu/4Aag). We guarantee that you will find lively and thought-provoking discussions with the curator, exhibiting artists, and special guests.

Consider assigning the reflection activity (see below) or incorporating ideas from the educational resources in this guide into your lesson plans if you are an educator. The resources provided in this guide cover a wide range of possibilities for teaching at various educational levels through this exhibition.

Whatever you choose to do next, we hope you will act thoughtfully and consider how art, creativity, and storytelling can contribute to a better future, despite the reality that the past is present.

## REFLECTION ACTIVITY

TIME NEEDED: 40 MINS. | MATERIALS NEEDED: WRITING UTENSIL AND PAPER

Below is an activity to guide your reflections on the exhibition experience, including your emotions and real-world implications.

### Directions

Each student will be given a piece of paper and a writing utensil. Provide students with a specified amount of time (suggested 15-20 minutes) to write down or draw their response to the *Past Is Present* exhibition. They can address specific artwork, an experience that resonated with their own, an issue they had with something, or a feeling that *Past Is Present* raised in their mind. Students are encouraged to jot down every thought, emotion, etc. that comes to mind when they think about the experience of *Past Is Present*.

### Discussion

After students have had time to write or draw their experiences, the instructor can go through each of the following questions:

1. In one word, everyone describes how they are feeling after exploring the exhibition.
2. What is something you wrote down or drew?
3. Was the experience what you expected? Why/ why not?
4. Did any elements of the artwork stick out to you?
5. Did you learn something new from exploring this exhibition? If so, what?
6. If you could tell one person in your class anything after exploring *Past Is Present*, what would it be?
7. Do you feel like you understand race, power, and/or inequality better?
8. How might you carry these learning experiences into your profession?

## EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

- Allen, James. *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000.
- Bongiovanni, Domenica. "This famous Hoosier painted a mural for Crispus Attucks in the '30s. Why did it disappear?," [bit.ly/3S8fii4](https://bit.ly/3S8fii4).
- Bundles, A'Lelia. *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker*. New York: Scribner, 2001.
- Coffin, Levi. *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin: The Reputed President of the Underground Railroad; Being a Brief History of the Labors of a Lifetime in Behalf of the Slave, with the Stories of Numerous Fugitives, Who Gained Their Freedom Through His Instrumentality, and Many Other Incidents*. Cincinnati: Western Tract and Book Society, 1876.
- Cox, Anna-Lisa. *The Bone and Sinew of the Land: America's Forgotten Black Pioneers and the Struggle for Equality*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2018.
- Painter, Nell Irvin. *Old in Art School: A Memoir of Starting Over*. Counterpoint, 2018.
- Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. New York: Boni & Liveright, 1923.
- Pierce, Richard. *Polite Protest: The Political Economy of Race in Indianapolis, 1920-1970*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005
- Still, William. *The Underground Rail Road*. Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872.

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