

Untold Stories Voiced: The Kinsey Collection

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Bernard Kinsey discusses the power and magnitude of The Kinsey Collection

The Kinsey Collection: Shared Treasures of Bernard and Shirley Kinsey –Where Art and History Intersect.

June 29 - Oct. 12

**The Harvey B. Gantt Center for African American Arts + Culture
Presented by the Gantt Center and Wells Fargo**

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[Image to left: Bernard & Shirley Kinsey – Lane oil on canvas]

Bernard Kinsey is an impatient man. By his own admission, he does not like to rely on others to ensure the things he wants to happen are realized. "Each of us leads many lives," Kinsey said in a recent phone conversation.

"I have many things left that I want to accomplish in the journey that I have been on with my wife Shirley with this collection," he says. "And even though we have been in 10 cities across the country and have a dedicated exhibition at Epcot Center at Walt Disney World in Florida where we are reaching millions of viewers, I'm still not satisfied that enough people in this country have experienced this exhibition. I want help in making sure our visit to Charlotte is met with capacity crowds."

Kinsey, a former Xerox executive, longstanding entrepreneur and philanthropist, need not worry. The collection he, his wife Shirley, and their son Khalil bring to Charlotte is perhaps the most significant grouping of African American art, photographs, historical documents, and ephemera ever assembled by a private collector. The collection, more than 28 years in the making, spans more than 400 years and offers rarer-than-rare look at art and artifacts that detail the African American experience stretching back to the 1600s and continuing through present day.

As impressive as individual pieces are, it is the way in which they are assembled and the voice given to the untold stories that make this exhibition so powerful and a must see. The collection features Mathew Brady photographs of the first-ever African American Congressmen and Senator who were members of the 41st and 42nd congress, direct orders from Abraham Lincoln to his Civil War troops announcing the Emancipation Proclamation, letters by Zora Neale Hurston and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., correspondence between Malcolm X and Alex Haley, slave shackles, a first-edition copy of poems by Phillis Wheatley, a 1795 Bannaker's Almanac, and 17th century slave documents. The overlying narrative, brought to life through individual stories and underscored by historical (factual) documentation, unleashes a powerful and emotional testament to an all but lost arc in American history.

Nothing short of an all-consuming passion has driven the Kinseys to answer the questions that at some point burn in each of our souls: "Who are we?" and "Where do we come from?" Those of us with European heritage often can answer these questions more easily than African Americans, whose stories were stymied by the slave trade that effectively erased generations of background and lineage that all but disappeared along with the African Diaspora.

Kinsey indicated he has pulled out some special stops for the exhibit's Charlotte run, noting that 40 selected items that typically "don't leave the house" will be part of this tour due to the significance he places on the gravitas of the Gantt Center, and the desire to pull in as great an audience possible.

I spoke with Bernard Kinsey by phone earlier this month about his inspiration, motivation, goals, and expectations surrounding the collection.

How long have you been in conversation with Gantt about bringing your collection here and why is it important for you to be in Charlotte?

We have been to 10 cities around the country already. We've been to the Smithsonian; we have an exhibition at Epcot in Orlando (20 million people will see this). We felt we have not done as good a job as we would have liked in coming to the premier African American museums across the country. The Gantt always comes up in the conversation when talking about these museums in the same conversation as the Reginald Lewis Museum in Baltimore. I knew this was the place we wanted to do this and engaged in conversation with David Taylor. When Wells Fargo initiated sponsorship, it just made perfect sense.



Mathew Brady photo of First colored Senator and Congressmen

How many pieces will be on display in Charlotte? Will this include the copy of the Emancipation Proclamation?

About 120 pieces will be on display. Actually, the document represents the history from September 24, 1862. Over the period of two days, President Lincoln issued two proclamations, one to the public on the 23rd and one to the Union Troops on the 24th. We own the document from the 24th. These are typed orders sent from Lincoln to the troops indicating the Emancipation Proclamation would take place in January. What he was doing was signaling to his commanders his intention to do this.

How did collecting start for you and what was your intent initially?



We have been to 94 countries and six continents. We loved making the connection that the more people look dissimilar, the more they are similar. We have seen this all over the world. When our son Khalil was in the third grade, we simply couldn't answer some of these very basic questions for his book report about who we were and where we came from. We decided to start learning more about the African American story, and that is exactly what we have done for the past 25 years. I had a business colleague who had found a long ago stored away document in an aunt's

attic and he forwarded this document to me. As I opened the package and pulled out the paper, here was [a bill of sale for] William Johnson in my hands. Sold for \$550 in Alabama. My entire life changed at that moment and I wanted to learn everything I could about the Black experience.

What can people expect from the collection?

We take you from 1600 all the way to present. We have done this in a fun and interesting way and by bringing voice to many whose stories haven't been told and also by teasing out the many, many positive accomplishments made by black Americans over time. We put in an entire vocabulary surrounding slavery, without recrimination or making anyone feel ashamed, that call things the way they were. For African Americans, plantations weren't the idyllic homes of Clark Gable, but in fact were prisons.

What type of response are you getting, particularly from young people?

People leave with a different feeling and understanding about the African American story. For young people in particular, there are very powerful messages of worth, value, and contribution. When people see themselves differently, they behave differently. When their friends see them differently, they treat them differently. We believe our young people are killing themselves for tennis shoes because they don't value themselves.

What myths have become dispelled for you as a result of undertaking the collection?

The myth of absence is one that we speak to often and is important to understand. The myth of absence says "We are invisibly present." Now that simply doesn't make sense. Black folks have been a part of the American story from the beginning, but were never included in the [retelling of the] story. In other words, Black folks are found in every instance of American history, yet we are invisible. When George Washington crossed the Delaware, there were blacks present. There was a black person on the Lewis and Clark expedition. Three hundred years before Lewis and Clark, a black man by the name of Esteban Dorantes discovered the southwest United States and the deep South as we know it today. What we do with our exhibition is we take you from the Egyptians all the way through and we do it with F-A-C-T-S.

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There will be an exclusive Wine and Champagne Reception of the Kinsey Collection where Bernard, Shirley, and Khalil Kinsey will give private guided tour at the Gantt Center June 27 following the Gantt Symposium with Dr. Henry Louis Gates at the Knight Theatre. Guests can preview the collection before it opens to the public. Tickets for the Symposium and the Exclusive reception can be purchased on the Gantt Center website at www.ganttcenter.org.

At the June 29 opening, the Kinseys will conduct their lecture "An Afternoon of Art and Legacy" at the Wells Fargo Auditorium at 2 pm and after give a tour of the Kinsey Collection.



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