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Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art to Debut Exhibition Co-curated by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Sarah Elizabeth Lewis; I Am Seen…Therefore, I Am: Isaac Julien and Frederick Douglass to Open this Spring

Hartford, Conn. (March 9, 2023)—A new exhibition exploring the reflections of Frederick Douglass on image-making, race, and citizenship opens this spring at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art and The Amistad Center for Art & Culture. Co-curated by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, the exhibition brings together rare nineteenth century daguerreotypes—on public view for the first time—with an immersive film work by contemporary artist Sir Isaac Julien that meditates on Douglass' life and times. I Am Seen…Therefore, I Am: Isaac Julien and Frederick Douglass is on view May 18 through September 24, 2023.

The exhibition was conceived to mark the 180th anniversary of Douglass’ first visit to Hartford in May 1843. When Douglass stood outdoors on Hartford’s Main Street on the grounds of Center Church to speak out for the end of slavery, he would have seen the Wadsworth Atheneum, founded in 1842, under construction directly across the road. Douglass in 1861 would call his era an “Age of Pictures” and considered the capacity to make and enjoy pictures one of the distinguishing characteristics of human beings.
When the Wadsworth Atheneum opened its doors in 1844 it contained the very first public gallery for the enjoyment of pictures in the United States. This collaborative exhibition, between the Wadsworth Atheneum and The Amistad Center for Art & Culture, reflects on the profound impact of Douglass to the cause of freedom and the importance of pictures and picture-making to our nation.

“Douglass understood the importance of who is represented in society, and how they are represented, to a functioning democracy. This issue of representation has never been more urgent for museums in this country. I am delighted that 180 years after the greatest American visited the City of Hartford, we can honor his legacy and pay heed to the lessons he can teach us today,” said Matthew Hargraves, Director of the Wadsworth Atheneum.

Throughout his impressively productive and extraordinarily successful career, Douglass—who was born enslaved and died a statesman—anticipated the inevitably fraught relations among race, representation, and justice with which we, his heirs, still grapple today. Marking Professor Gates’ first curatorial endeavor, the exhibition is a dialogue between the local and the international, between Douglass’ encounters with Hartford, Connecticut, and the continuing national and international reach of his unfinished movement for social justice for African Americans. The exhibition centers upon Douglass’ first anti-slavery speech in Hartford in 1843, and his subsequent speeches in the city: during the Civil War in 1864, in Allyn Hall, on the rights of Black soldiers; and in 1883, during the rollback to Reconstruction, on the life of John Brown.

Sir Isaac Julien’s immersive five-screen film installation Lessons of the Hour anchors the exploration of the visionary abolitionist whose work amplifies his own. An acclaimed London-based Black filmmaker and installation artist, Julien’s works break down the barriers between artistic disciplines to construct powerful visual narratives through multi-screen film installations. Seen in the Northeast for the first time and in its five-screen version, the 25-minute video installation weaves Douglass’ writings with filmed reenactments of his travels and contemporary protest footage, underscoring Douglass’ relevance and resonance today.

Julien’s work is presented alongside the work of pioneering African American photographers of the period, bringing the enduring legacy of Frederick Douglass into clear focus. Among these is prodigious photographer Augustus Washington, one of the few known African American daguerreotypists, who based his practice in Hartford before emigrating to Liberia in 1853. On public view for the first time and drawn from the singular collection of Greg French, a selection of rare daguerreotypes also pays tribute to the many individuals who patiently sat before the photographic lens, inviting further research into these subjects’ anonymous identities and their still largely unheralded lives.

The enthralling images offer transfixing, thought-provoking reminders that rights in the United States have been secured and retained not only by laws and social customs and norms, but also by how we see and refuse to see “the other.” The exhibition raises important questions that continue to resonate: What is the relationship between visual representation and being seen both in culture and society—the right of citizens to be accorded recognition justly, and their “self-evident” right to representation in a democracy?

“Frederick Douglass is central to American history and his life, times, contributions, and image are well-represented in The Amistad Center’s collection. We are thrilled to have this opportunity to continue to share Douglass’ story with museum visitors and celebrate him in this extraordinarily multi-faceted and collaborative exhibition,” said Olivia White, Interim Executive Director of The Amistad Center for Art & Culture.
“These extraordinarily arresting images, frozen both in and beyond time, bespeak a history of American slavery and race relations that begs to be written,” said Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the Alfonse Fletcher University Professor and Director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University, and an Emmy Award-winning filmmaker. Gates is perhaps most widely known for serving as host of the popular PBS series *Finding Your Roots*, now in its ninth season.

“Isaac Julien’s masterwork of a film and the stunning daguerreotypes in the exhibition are not only a meditation on Frederick Douglass’ signal importance for our age, and but also tribute the unfinished movement Douglass began to consider the critical role of cultural representation for American democracy anew,” said Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, associate professor of history of art and architecture and African and African American studies at Harvard University and the founder of *Vision & Justice*.

Lewis was at the Wadsworth last April to deliver the inaugural Pennington Lecture, *Vision & Justice*, named for the Rev. Dr. James W.C. Pennington, a notable leader, educator, and leading abolitionist, who pastored Talcott Street Church during the same era as Douglass’ speech in Hartford. The lecture was presented in conjunction with The Amistad Center for Art & Culture and Capital Community College.

**Opening Artist Conversation**
**Friday, May 19**
5pm gallery viewing and reception, 6pm conversation
Exhibition curators Profs. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Sarah Elizabeth Lewis talk with artist Sir Isaac Julian about the ways image and history weave throughout his work, *Lessons of the Hour*. Tickets will be available via thewadsworth.org.

**Exhibition Support**
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**About the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art**
Founded in 1842 with a vision for infusing art into the American experience, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is home to a collection of nearly 50,000 works of art spanning 5,000 years and encompassing European art from antiquity through contemporary as well as American art from the 1600s to today. The Wadsworth’s five connected buildings—representing architectural styles including Gothic Revival, modern International Style, and 1960s Brutalism—are located at 600 Main Street in Hartford, Conn.

Current hours are noon–5pm Thursday–Sunday. Admission: $5–15; discounts for members, students, and seniors. Free admission for Hartford residents with Wadsworth Welcome registration. Free “happy hour” admission 4–5pm. Advance ticket registration via thewadsworth.org is encouraged, not required. Phone: (860) 278-2670; website: thewadsworth.org.
About The Amistad Center for Art & Culture
In 1987, a handful of visionaries that included Trustees and staff of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, joined forces with independent foundations, corporations and the State of Connecticut and formed The Amistad Foundation in order to purchase, protect and provide public access to the Randolph Linsly Simpson Collection then housed in the collector’s farmhouse in Northford, CT.

This extraordinary collection, which now consists of 7,000 works of art, artifacts and archives, documents more than 300 years of the artistic, literary, military, enslaved and free life of Black Americans—truly a treasure and a rich resource of immense educational value and testimony to America’s diverse and dynamic culture. In addition to collection care and development, The Amistad Foundation was intended to take on the broader tasks of preserving and interpreting African American culture and history and correcting the misrepresentation and under-representation of this important aspect of our country’s evolution.


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