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National Nordic Museum Organizes Unprecedented Traveling Exhibition
Nordic Utopia? African Americans in the 20th Century

The exhibition reveals the untold stories of African American visual and performing artists who sought new possibilities and inspiration in the Nordic countries.

SEATTLE, WA (February 27, 2024) The National Nordic Museum announces the premiere of *Nordic Utopia? African Americans in the Twentieth Century* (March 23 – July 21, 2024). The groundbreaking exhibition offers a new lens through which to view African American art and history in the context of Nordic culture.

Nordic Utopia? explores the significance of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden as destinations for black cultural figures in the 20th century. Seeking to escape racial segregation and discrimination while pursuing professional opportunities and creative freedom, visual and performing artists, scholars and writers, diplomats and political activists visited, worked, and relocated to the Nordic countries.

This exhibition contributes new scholarship to trace the journeys of singers Josephine Baker and Anne Wiggins Brown, jazz tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon, dancer and choreographer Doug Crutchfield, painters Herb Gentry, William Henry Johnson, and Walter Williams, and multimedia artist and designer Howard Smith, among others.

In search of inspiration, these individuals found an environment conducive to creative expression in the Nordic countries, as well as an alternative to Paris' cultural scene. While the Nordic countries may have held the promise of a beacon of progressive politics and racial equality, the exhibition will show that the reality was more complex.

Nordic Utopia? assembles a range of artifacts, artworks (music, paintings, drawings, sculpture, ceramics, textiles), and documentary evidence (photography, film, and journalistic writing) from private and public holdings throughout the Nordic countries and the United States, including the National Gallery of Art and Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC, the David C. Driskell Center at the University of Maryland, College Park, Moderna Museet in Stockholm, and the National Gallery of Denmark in Copenhagen.

The exhibition is the first comprehensive, pan-Scandinavian examination of this subject and presents years of research conducted by Dr. Ethelene Whitmire, Professor of African American Studies at the University of Wisconsin – Madison.

National Nordic Museum Chief Curator Leslie Anne Anderson has collaborated with Whitmire to transform that research into a large-scale touring exhibition with significant loans.

“Dr. Whitmire’s important research on African American visual and performing artists in the Nordic countries presents an alternative and complementary narrative to the allure of Paris in the

20th century. This story will be brought to life through iconic and rarely-seen examples of the artists' works," said Anderson.

The exhibition also draws from the National Nordic Museum's permanent collection, which has made strategic acquisitions in recent years. *Nordic Utopia?* will open at the National Nordic Museum in Seattle on March 23rd and close on July 21st. It will then travel to the Chazen Museum of Art in Madison, Wisconsin, and Scandinavia House in New York City.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated exhibition catalogue, co-edited by Whitmire and Anderson and featuring essays by Dr. Temi Odumosu (University of Washington) and Dr. Ryan Thomas Skinner (Ohio State University). It will be published by the National Nordic Museum and distributed by University of Washington Press.

The National Nordic Museum has organized a rich calendar of programming that will provide more insight into the key individuals and themes of the exhibition.

A screening of Bruce Baker's 1971 documentary *Dancing Prophet* about Doug Crutchfield will be shown with a selection of short films directed by Amir George about the legendary performance artist. The screening will be followed by a conversation with George and Dr. Davia Crutchfield, the dancer's great niece.

In collaboration with Spectrum Dance Theater, the Museum will present an original performance choreographed by Spectrum's Artistic Director Donald Byrd that responds to the posthumously-released album *HOME.S.* by Swedish jazz pianist Esbjörn Svensson and is inspired by the exhibition.

Additional programs include lectures, panels, and youth and family programming.

Museum membership and general admission tickets include access to *Nordic Utopia?*, with special exhibition tickets available for \$5 on Free First Thursdays. For tickets and information, visit nordicmuseum.org.

Support and Sponsorship:

Generous support for *Nordic Utopia?* comes from The Terra Foundation for American Art, Laurie Black, Nordisk Kulturfond, Microsoft, Seattle Office of Arts & Culture, The Hugh and Jane Ferguson Foundation, ArtsFund's Guendolen Carkeek Plestcheeff Fund for Decorative and Design Arts, with additional support from ArtsFund, Arts WA, Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation, Scan Design Foundation, and 4Culture.

About the Curators

Nordic Utopia? is the culmination of extensive collaborative efforts by the curators spanning years.

Dr. Ethelene Whitmire is the Chair and a professor in the Department of African American Studies at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Whitmire was a Fulbright Scholar and a

Visiting Professor at the University of Copenhagen's Center for Transnational American Studies in 2016-2017. She has received additional fellowships from the American-Scandinavian Foundation and the Lois Roth Endowment.

Leslie Anne Anderson is Chief Curator of the National Nordic Museum and a Seattle Arts Commissioner. She has been an American-Scandinavian Foundation Fellow and a Fulbright scholar at the University of Copenhagen. Anderson has organized over twenty exhibitions, including the celebrated collection reinstallation *American and Regional Art: Mythmaking and Truth-Telling* at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, and she was the commissioning curator of *Jónsi: FLÓÐ* for the National Nordic Museum. She has received the international Association of Art Museum Curators Award for Excellence in Exhibition and the Utah Museums Association Award for Excellence.

About the National Nordic Museum

The National Nordic Museum is the only museum in the United States that showcases the impact and influence of Nordic values and innovation in contemporary society and tells the story of 12,000 years of Nordic history and culture, across all five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) as well as three autonomous regions (Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Åland) and the cultural region of Sápmi.

Awarded a national designation by an Act of Congress in 2019, the Museum shares Nordic culture with people of all ages and backgrounds through exhibitions, a collection of 80,000 objects, unique educational and cultural experiences, and by serving as a community gathering place.

The National Nordic Museum collaborates with institutions in the Nordic countries to present world-class exhibitions. Recent and current exhibition partners include: Ateneum Art Museum, Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki; Nationalmuseum, Stockholm; Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo; Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

For more information, visit: www.nordicmuseum.org.

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