

Celebrating a Decade as a Cultural Powerhouse

THE HOUSTON MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE

By Morgan E. Thomas



John Guess, Jr. cuts the ribbon at the opening of the Houston Museum of African American Culture (HMAAC) in 2012. Photo courtesy of HMAAC.



A newspaper box located at the museum entrance hints at HMAAC's contemporary edge, illustrating a Black superwoman in the style of a comic book.

Photo courtesy of Morgan Thomas.

On the corner of Caroline and Wentworth Streets, a newspaper box stands near the doorway of a white building. Upon closer inspection, the box features an article entitled “REPARATIONS: Where Are Our 40 Acres and a Mule?” while its exterior, which adopts the style of a comic book, illustrates the story of a Black superwoman bearing the letters “BW” on her chest. Inside the building, a panel of glass surrounding the front desk attests to the impact of the coronavirus on local businesses.

The Houston Museum of African American Culture (HMAAC) has become a nationally recognized institution since it opened in 2012. It boasts two floors for exhibits, one gallery dedicated to the native Houston artist Bert Long, Jr., a separate alcove for films, and a large room on the second floor with the words “BIG Thoughts Transform People” printed on the wall. Self-proclaimed to be the “most visited African American” establishment in the city with 50,000 annual visitors, HMAAC’s success lies in its multicultural mission, emphasis on contemporary art, and community-oriented perspective. “We’re helping to define an incredibly diverse and multifaceted community of people of color in Houston,” HMAAC’s chief executive officer, John Guess, Jr., told the *Houston Chronicle* in 2012. “The African-American artists we bring in transcend race, as it should be.” By exploring the historical and the contemporary, HMAAC highlights the “African American experience while informing the wider community of how much that experience is shared” by people of all backgrounds.²

Towards the end of the twentieth century, advocates for an African American museum often pointed to the rich history of Houston’s Black community. When African

American freedmen migrated to the city in 1865, they developed enclaves for Black “families, businesses, and institutions” in the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards. Settlements such as Freedmen’s Town and establishments like Antioch Baptist Church provided more than services for self-sustainability following emancipation, they represented what historian Tyina L. Steptoe calls the Black community’s “collective sense of shared history” rooted in enslavement and relocation.³

The expansion of manufacturing facilities during the two world wars drew many Black Americans to cities looking for work. Houston’s Black population swelled to 124,760 residents by 1950. However, despite African Americans’ large numerical and cultural presence in the city, segregation prohibited them from accessing Houston’s fine arts scene in the early 1900s. On one occasion in 1950, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) denied admission to John T. Biggers, founder of the art department at Texas Southern University (TSU). Although his conte crayon submission, *The Cradle*, won the MFAH’s 25th *Annual Exhibition of Houston Artists*, the museum barred him from attending his own award

ceremony, as it restricted admission of Black people to Thursdays. Furthermore, Black Houstonians typically avoided the MFAH “except for those who worked as maids tending to the children of museum patrons.”⁵

It was not until 1995 that the MFAH raised \$500,000 to exhibit Biggers’s work, *Art of John Biggers: View from the Upper Room*. Remembering how Biggers and his staff once struggled to train aspiring artists at TSU with limited resources, *Houston Chronicle* writer Bob Lee argued that surely \$500,000 could instead be invested in constructing a museum that would contribute financially and culturally to the Black community. Lee pointed to books, letters, memorabilia, and art African Americans preserved from their ancestors: items he argued that “would be welcomed in the collection of Houston’s African American Museum.” Lee asserted, the time had come for Houston to match cities that already established “museums dedicated to ethnic history.”⁶

Although Houston hosted a handful of Black art galleries in the 1970s, such as The Adept on Binz Street and the Black Art Gallery on Dowling Street, its first attempt to establish a museum came in 1988 under Robert Galloway, M.D. Joined by “art curator Alvia Wardlaw, City Councilman Judson Robinson and art dealer Eugene Foney,” Galloway provided space for spotlighting artwork by TSU teachers and students in St. Joseph’s Medical Plaza Building on Crawford Street. However, within two years, the African American Heritage Museum closed after failing to pay its \$800 rent; Galloway cited a lack of visibility and inadequate space as contributing factors.⁷

Efforts reignited in 1995 when middle school teacher Rhonda Burnett founded the African American Heritage Museum (which had no relation to the one established by Galloway). This nonprofit aimed to turn a former church on Almeda Road into a history museum. Having amassed artifacts from antique shops and garage sales, Burnett envisioned interactive exhibits where visitors could follow African Americans’ struggle “through slavery, through



John T. Biggers (1924-2001) rose to prominence as an artist, muralist, and professor to aspiring artists at Texas Southern University.

Photo courtesy of Ben DeSoto, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Reconstruction and civil rights.” In 1998, her dream nearly came to life when her fellow board members opened a NationsBank account for public donations. However, the \$100,000 raised by the board as of January 14, 1998, fell short of the \$700,000 needed to purchase the site.⁸

Finally, with a vision to make Houston a “destination” while preserving African American contributions to the city, Mayor Lee Brown appointed a committee to head the development of an African American art museum in 1999. Chaired by banker Gerald Smith, project developer Irene Johnson, Reverend Bill Lawson, and other prominent African American figures, the board aimed to create a museum with a contemporary edge that charted the development of African American culture in Houston.⁹

With a genealogy center, a performing arts theater, and ample gallery space in their plans, the members began fundraising for the \$30 million project. In 2001, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that the board raised \$400,000 from corporations such as “Enron, Compaq Computer Corp. and Chase Bank.” With Mayor Bill White’s support, the city also contributed \$2 million as a part of his \$4.04 billion capital improvement plan in 2004. As the decade slipped away, the project struggled to get off the ground until 2009, when John Guess, Jr., was recruited as CEO and purchased a



Never one to shy away from candid conversations, HMAAC houses a room with seats seemingly poised for conversation that declares “BIG Thoughts Transform People.”

Photo courtesy of Morgan Thomas.



HMAAC's building has retained its original appearance since Guess purchased it in 2009, rather than the color scheme shown in the artist's rendering. Nevertheless, it has fulfilled its vision to serve visitors of all ages in educating them and inspiring their interest.

Photo from the Bert L. Long, Jr. Papers Collection, courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

building on Caroline Street in the Museum District.¹⁰

As a native Houstonian, John Guess, Jr. made forays in the arts and international business before becoming HMAAC's chief executive officer in 2009. As the manager of a mayoral campaign, the first Black representative for Chase Bank in Brazil, a stockbroker at Merrill Lynch, and a filmmaker, Guess fit the description of a man who "didn't elect to do one simple thing," but "many things." True to his involvement in the arts, Guess also sat on the boards of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, the Houston Arts Alliance, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.¹¹

Ironically, Guess entered the museum scene as a developer involved with repurposing the Gregory School, one of the first schools established for freedmen in Houston. In 2000, Mayor Brown planned to use the 1926 school building for an archival center and affordable housing, recognizing how rising housing prices in nearby areas forced out longtime residents of Freedmen's Town. Although City Council and community activists initially expressed support as the federal government granted Houston \$1 million for the project, the Texas Historical Commission blocked Brown's proposal to construct apartments on top of the school in 2002. While Brown faced criticism and backtracked his intent to develop an archival museum, Guess, who submitted the housing proposal as a consultant for a real estate company, did not. "My dream was to make it a museum that told the African-American

story in the Houston area, and I could think of no better place than where these folks originated their culture in Houston," he told the *Houston Chronicle*.¹²

Although Guess later mused that "creating a museum wasn't [initially] on his bucket list," he emerged at HMAAC's helm seven years later with the same vision he expressed in 2002. The building he selected needed work, including a paved parking lot, a security system, and new flooring. Nevertheless, Guess focused his efforts on recruiting multimedial and state-of-the-art exhibitions, asserting, "We are not American history through an African American lens... We [are] a multicultural conversation on race geared towards a common future."¹³

Before the museum officially opened, Danielle Burns, a curator at HMAAC and the Gregory School, organized *ROUX* in 2011 – a printmaking exhibit by African American women artists focused on the relationship between "traditional storytelling and hand-made objects." Apart from the visual arts, HMAAC also drew a diverse crowd by hosting turntablist DJ Spooky, who meshed "old school and new school sounds" to create "a sonic fiction landscape." Achieving the same inclusive outreach by presenting *The Vagina Monologues* and electronic vocalist Pamela Z, HMAAC solidified its appeal to a multicultural audience while exploring different avenues of artistic expression.¹⁵

As HMAAC developed its galleries on site, Guess also hoped to distinguish the museum from others through its community activity. By presenting programs at the Menil Collection, SHAPE Community Center, the Gregory School, and the MFAH, Guess told the *Chronicle* that HMAAC influenced "the culture of our city' outside of the simple confines of [the] building." The museum's community involvement extended into Black neighborhoods and Texas Art for Justice in 2018, hinting at HMAAC's advocacy for intergenerational opportunity and social justice beyond its walls.¹⁶

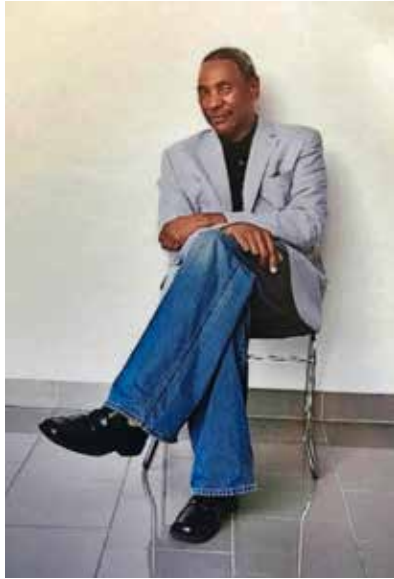
When HMAAC officially opened in 2012, its diverse exhibitions continued to explore the intersection between race, gender, sexual orientation, and other demographics. Activities such as a "Contemporary Texas Latino Artists" exhibit curated by Benito Huerta in 2013 and QFest, an LGBT



An exhibit organized by curator Emily Bibb housed a multimedial private collection in 2020. The most visible piece, which reads "contemporary" above the painting of a boxer and two women, appears to echo HMAAC's preference for that style of art.

Photo courtesy of Morgan Thomas.

film festival, in 2014 reflected HMAAC's role as a member of a multicultural city. Diverse crowds also attended the museum in 2017 to engage in public forums about Barack Obama's presidency and the voting patterns of white women behind Donald Trump's election.¹⁷ In its pursuit of candid conversations, HMAAC's wide-ranging audiences exemplified the success of its inclusive mission.



John Guess, Jr., the driving force behind the museum. Photo courtesy of HMAAC.

At the same time, HMAAC spotlighted challenges unique to the African American experience. In 2012, HMAAC hosted *The Ballad of Emmett Till*, directed by Ifa Bayeza. The show used theatrical shadow play and drama to narrate Till's life before his murder in 1955 for allegedly whistling at a white woman while visiting Mississippi. In 2014, HMAAC invited two philanthropists to showcase artifacts that documented African Americans' "struggle for freedom and equality." The exhibited items from the Kinsey Collection, which ranged from shackles sized for a child to a letter detailing the trade between a slave and a horse stable, illuminated the history of slavery locally and nationally.¹⁸

Likewise, *Fort HMAAC* by Otabenga Jones and Associates in 2012 communicated one of HMAAC's financial challenges as an African American institution. *Fort HMAAC* consisted of sandbags that flanked the museum entrance, causing *Houston Chronicle* writer Molly Glentzer to think HMAAC was anticipating one of Houston's infamous floods. On the contrary, "Guess wanted the installation to express his sense that HMAAC [was] under siege and [needed] protection." Recognizing HMAAC's status as a fledgling African American institution, Guess was referring to its insufficient support from public donors and the need to protect HMAAC "against the exclusion of Black history." Guess wrote in 2016, "While the Houston region benefits from an exceptionally generous body of philanthropists, less than 2% of Houston's philanthropic dollars go to cultural institutions of color." With \$4-5 million needed for renovations, the lack of support forced Guess and his board to organize exhibits on a "shoestring budget."¹⁹

Funding and advocacy for disadvantaged communities and the museum went, and still go, hand in hand. HMAAC does not charge admission, a luxury that extends beyond cultivating a positive visitor experience. To quote HMAAC's addendum, "We have never forgotten that our audience must always include those Houstonians most in need of access to authentic cultural experiences – the young, those with

little disposable income and those yearning for identity." By dismantling one financial barrier, the museum hopes to give low-income citizens the same opportunities to be culturally empowered as wealthy people.²⁰

In 2016, Guess began writing on this topic in a series of White Papers, published on HMAAC's website. Conceptualizing HMAAC as a cultural asset – characterized as any entity that enhances the "culture, meaning, and vitality" of a community – Guess highlighted how being disproportionately underfunded hindered the museum from serving predominately Black neighborhoods. Citing a study by New York University professor Patrick Starkey, Guess wrote that "70 percent of African American children raised in the poorest and most segregated neighborhoods a generation ago now [raise] their children in similar circumstances ... Consider Houston's Sunnyside neighborhood, historically segregated with little political clout and neglected public services, as a contemporary example of a 'stuck in place or decline' neighborhood." Further, he argued that the closure of schools, post offices, and smaller African American art galleries – the cultural and educational backbones of Black communities – meant that cultural assets necessitated funding throughout their lifespan, not just their advocates' outrage when they cease to exist.²¹

Recognizing how "high opportunity" neighborhoods were often replete with cultural assets, HMAAC began to assert its role as an active contributor to disadvantaged communities. In 2016, HMAAC commissioned a mural by Reginald Adams on the back of Johnson Funeral Home in the Third Ward. The wall, depicting two African



HMAAC placed its first message mural empowering youth in Houston's Third Ward.

Photo courtesy of HMAAC.

American girls against a blue sky with the words "These Lives Matter" between them, aims to empower "youth in a bold and positive way." By accomplishing the same feat at Wheatly High School and seeking to do so for the Acres Homes and Sunnyside neighborhoods, this program reinforced HMAAC's role as a promoter of intergenerational opportunity in Houston's underserved communities. "We're a museum in a building, and in the community," Guess declared. "We don't inspire. We actually *do*."²²



Willow Curry, poet and HMAAC artist in residence, performs her message to Spirit, “This is What Hatred Looks Like.”

Photo courtesy of HMAAC.

Today, HMAAC continues to provide youth outreach while advocating for social justice and equal support for minority-led institutions. In recent years, exhibits have focused on police brutality as the Black Lives Matter movement emerged under the national spotlight. In an “exercise of empathy,” a 2018 exhibition dedicated to Sandra Bland, an African American woman who was found dead in her jail cell in 2015 after being arrested in a minor traffic stop that escalated, prompted visitors to sit in a four-seated car while playing footage of the state trooper that arrested her. Guess curated the exhibit to “allow visitors to experience the many emotions Bland felt on the day of her arrest.”²³

In 2020, HMAAC accepted a Confederate monument as protests wracked the nation in response to George Floyd’s murder by a Minneapolis police officer who knelt on his neck for nine minutes. *Spirit of the Confederacy*, erected by the Robert E. Lee Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1908, had stood in Sam Houston Park until a task force under Mayor Sylvester Turner began searching for a place to relocate it. After Floyd’s death, sending it to Houston’s African American museum proved to be a sensitive event for the Black community. In a press release, Guess acknowledged that “we receive this monument at a time when our community is hurting, as America comes face to face with the racism and police brutality we have endured since our ‘freedom’ after the Civil War.”²⁴

Never one to shy away from forthright conversations about race, HMAAC responded by using *Spirit* to confront the past and promote healing and education. Placed in the museum’s private courtyard for security reasons and watched by sculptures of eyes in Bert Long, Jr.’s *Field of Vision*, *Spirit* reminds visitors about America’s white supremacist past and warns against its resurgence. In her performance entitled “This Is What Hatred Looks Like,” artist in residence Willow Curry offered her thoughts:

“Generations of people have taken up your sword, and your flag, and your gun ... And yet, despite your continued dominion, the foot that remains on our necks, times change. I see you’re looking at Bert Long, Jr.’s field of eyes. Aren’t they a marvel? All looking at you. No matter how infuriated it makes you ... You’re on our turf now.”²⁵

The museum plans to expand its programming around *Spirit* once it secures adequate funding. For instance, HMAAC has discussed developing curricula alongside Prairie View A&M and Johns Hopkins Universities. Guess also hopes to launch an interactive online portal for visitors to engage safely with the monument.²⁶ But for now, *Spirit* serves as a touchstone for HMAAC’s racial justice and community empowerment initiatives.

The Houston Museum of African American Culture resulted from a challenging journey that began long before Dr. Galloway first attempted to establish an African American museum in 1988. Through its exhibitions and activism, HMAAC encapsulates the historic fight for artistic representation, justice, and equality as an African American establishment striving for public support. The discourse surrounding it has not always been positive; in 2004, Councilman Mark Goldberg denounced the proposed museum, writing that “it will, by its very name and purpose, serve to exclude all races and cultures except one.” However, speaking for a historically underrepresented community and shedding light on its diversity today, HMAAC explores topics relevant to *all* Houstonians while peering through the lenses of race, social justice, education, and empowerment. Concrete steps towards healing from injustice have yet to be taken, but HMAAC, through acquiring *Spirit* and its related efforts, has led Houston by taking a major step forward to open the conversation. □

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