

Reviews (Exhibitions)

Double Victory: The African American Military Experience [online exhibition].

Curated/ designed by Krewasky A. Salter. Online exhibition/National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C. November 2016-present.

When the history of African Americans is addressed, their tragic past of enslavement and being abused, and their continuing fight for freedom often take center stage. However, one thing that seems to be excluded or at least neglected is their involvement in the military. Pre-collegiate education forgoes the topic for a more general take on African American history (or merely brushes the surface of the subject, if at all), and it is not until higher education that students receive better opportunities to learn about this specific history. While it appears that there are few opportunities for those outside of the education system to obtain knowledge on the matter, the online exhibition *Double Victory: The African American Military Experience* at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) tries to change that. This exhibition takes place virtually and dives deeply into the military history of people of color in America. Ranging from the War of 1812 all the way to the current War on Terror, the presentation tries to educate viewers about specific historical battles and prominent Black American figures who have served the country. Although the information that is offered may prove to be beneficial to uneducated individuals, the virtual exhibition format is somewhat detrimental and hinders the presentation.

Given the current events in this country and around the globe (especially the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic), technology is one convenient way to keep everyone together. With institutions integrating themselves into the virtual world, it is no surprise that public venues such as museums are also making the switch. However, as these exhibitions move online, they generate new problems that a normal public presentation would avoid. One of these issues is the fact that viewers miss the freedom to examine the historical artifacts and objects up close. It is hard to replicate the experience of seeing a piece of history face to face. Unfortunately, a virtual replication of the materials cannot compare to seeing the real-life pieces in front of you. It diminishes the potential emotional value and, depending on the artifact, the awe an in-person visit would produce. Some things cannot be fully appreciated through mere photography and must be viewed in person to convey their brilliance. Another potential shortcoming of online exhibitions is the order in which presentations are laid out. Given a website, viewers are encouraged to inspect the virtual display in a linear manner. This muddies parts of the presentation that would shine if they were toured in person. Both these complications affect the *Double Victory* exhibition.

The virtual tour includes twenty objects, ranging from clothes to coins. The last part of the showcase displays the historical pieces in a slideshow with only one single photo to view for each item. While it is possible to examine more photos of certain artifacts, some only offer one or two photos, and others give an in-depth

look (for example for clothing and literature pieces), but those without magnifying features are hard to appreciate and limited in view. This is not an issue during an in-person visit when one is able to see objects from unlimited angles and can thereby obtain a more realistic impression of the artifact. Additionally, the exhibition struggles to offer a virtual layout that is interesting to the viewer. The linear style fails at giving an engaging experience and loses the personal feeling that a physical visit would offer. Although the organization is fine, it limits the freedom of the viewer to follow a singular path. The restricted journey feels robotic and monotonous. Compared to other exhibitions, such as the *African American History in Colorado online exhibition* (at the History of Colorado Center), the *Double Victory* exhibition falls short. The *African American History in Colorado* online exhibition offers a far more engaging interface, allowing it to accomplish what the *Double Victory* presentation does not. It offers more freedom to users by giving viewers a chance to look at the different sections on their own accord. Visitors can choose to look at the early history of African Americans in Colorado, explore the 1920s, dive into the history of Lincoln Hills, or view Civil Rights movements in the state. Unlike *Double Victory*, the tour does not feel restricted. This particular exhibition feels more realistic in its set-up, provides users with an experience that differs from visitor to visitor, and contains more concise information no matter where one starts. While the *African American History in Colorado* exhibition does fall victim to the same fates as the *Double Victory* exhibition (such as not being able to fully replicate what a physical visit would accomplish), its organization and interface provide a more interesting experience. It simply feels more like an in-person visit, and its character is more appealing when viewed next to its linear counterpart. However, despite being overshadowed by other shows, the *Double Victory* exhibition still carries out its main goal of educating visitors on African Americans and their military service. The museum's mission statement is upheld in this presentation, and the information provided is valuable.

The NMAAHC was set up in 2003 by an act of the 108th Congress, which created the museum as part of the Smithsonian Institution to ensure the preservation of African American history and culture. The museum's founding director, Lonnie G. Bunch III, oversaw the production of the project and brought it to the public. Bunch is a successful author and had achieved success in museum work before. Collaborating with the Smithsonian in the past, Bunch has considerable experience in preparing historical exhibitions for tourists. When it came to implementing this museum's original vision, Bunch had literally nothing when he started: no archival materials or collections. Through determination and effort, he built the museum into what it is today, with over 40,000 historical objects (and counting). Bunch's goals are outlined on the museum's website. The museum aims to give opportunities for those interested in African American history a chance to learn, show visitors what it means to be an American, supply an outlet to educate museum-goers on how their cultures are influenced on a global scale, and serve as a place to preserve history. Looking at the *Double Victory* exhibition,

it is clear that the curator, Krewasky Salter, and his presentation uphold these goals. *Double Victory* not only supplies a chance for those interested in Black American history to learn more about subjects that are less familiar (such as African American military service), it also stands as a place to keep the story alive. Salter's background as a United States Army Colonel ensures an interpretation of events and objects that is grounded in reality. He knows the ins and outs of war and the topic of race in the military, and his experience is evident throughout the exhibition. Regardless of the online limitations, the exhibition successfully meets the NMAAHC's expectations and tenets.

As viewers journey on their virtual tour, they are greeted with an opening statement which outlines the purpose of the exhibition, namely to detail the history of African American service men and women and how their service "benefitted both their personal lives and their community." This is followed by a propaganda poster featuring an army of Black Americans who are standing symbolically behind their country ("Negroes and the War," 1942). While the poster is included to visualize the patriotism of African Americans, it also has a deeper history that is not revealed right away. Viewers can choose to explore the poster's true motives on the website's commentary. There, viewers learn that the United States Office of War Information (OWI) created this poster and many other sources of propaganda to persuade African Americans to join the fight during World War II. Chandler Owen, a prominent author and Civil Rights activist, was commissioned by the OWI to oversee the efforts to convince members of the African American community to enlist.

Further down the page, visitors are greeted by a section that is titled *Journey Through the Exhibition*. Here, viewers are presented with a map that they can click to read about different events, significant military service members, and battles. Arrows to the right and (after the first click) to the left serve as navigational tools. Each click moves the map to a different area and details the significance of the respective place and the impact of the African American soldiers who fought there. The first event celebrates the Haitian Patriots who "fought with the French and Americans during the Siege of Savannah in 1779," and the last event refers to 9/11 and what the future may hold for the United States military. The timeline includes familiar events and battles such as the War of 1812 and World War II, but there is also history that is not as well known, such as the Brownsville Affair of 1906, when U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt discharged 167 African American soldiers "without honor" because a White resident of Brownsville, Texas, had been killed, and the town's inhabitants had blamed Black soldiers for the death. This section is the most captivating. It is the only piece that provides animation, and the layout used for the map is the most developed out of the entire virtual exhibition. The information supplied for each segment (there are nineteen segments total) adds to the quality as well.

Continuing on through the exhibition, visitors encounter the *Double Victory Storylines*. This section is divided into three points, namely the "Struggle for

Freedom,” “A Segregated Military,” and “Stirrings of Change to a Colorblind Military.” Each gives a brief summary of what it entails but nothing more. Although these topics could have been expanded, the basic information is useful. As viewers go past this, they approach two short videos (featuring historical footage), one about African American Medal of Honor recipients buried at Arlington National Cemetery (duration 01:30), and the other on African American Women’s Auxiliary Corps Volunteers in 1944 (duration 00:41). Similar to the *Storylines* section, this part does not give much additional information on the topics. The videos are remarkably short, and the summaries provided do not add much to the overall product. These two parts are perhaps the weakest part of the exhibition. Other parts are more visually interesting and include more in-depth information on their given subjects.

The last two sections are titled *Exhibition Luminaries* and *Exhibition Objects*. The former, *Exhibition Luminaries*, deals with prominent African American military figures, showing a single photo for each and offering a terse summary of their background and significance. Similarly, *Exhibition Objects* offers single pictures with short captions, or so it seems. However, once viewers click on the “view more” button under each “luminary,” they are taken to a page that has a more in-depth view of purportedly related objects and detailed descriptions of said objects. However, while the “luminaries” and “objects” sections are interesting by themselves, the connections between the two sections (for example when one clicks the “view more” button underneath each “luminary”) is not always apparent. The luminaries include the second African American West Point graduate, Black chaplains, decorated African American members of the Armed Forces, and prominent individuals who served in the U.S. military (such as Alex Haley and Colin Powell). The objects include uniforms, medals, historical photographs, and the like.

Overall, the *Double Victory* exhibition achieves its goal of educating visitors on African American military service. It offers solid information on military history, and it can prove to be beneficial for anyone willing to learn. The “virtual” setbacks are outweighed by the positives. Keeping historical memories alive is more meaningful than the visual quality of a presentation. If it “does the job” of preserving history, it is successful, and this is exactly what this exhibition achieves. With a resurgence in racial tensions in the United States, African American history is more important than ever. Given the lack of education on Black history in our schools, we need more opportunities for all to learn about the subject outside of traditional educational settings. The *Double Victory* exhibition is recommended to all, no matter their background or interests. Its material is valuable, and visitors will obtain a better understanding of Black culture and history.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Trenton Buzzone of Yorba Linda, California, is currently pursuing a B.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF).

The Mausoleum Museum of the First Emperor of Qin [online exhibition].

Established by the Shaanxi Provincial Cultural Bureau. Online exhibition/Lintong County, Shaanxi Province, China. 2013-present.

Touting itself as housing the eighth wonder of the world, the Emperor Qin Shi Huang's Mausoleum Museum talks a big game. Within its walls it holds the over 8,000-strong terracotta army which protects the mausoleum of Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of a unified China (r. 221 BC-210 BC) and founder of the short-lived Qin Dynasty. Established by the Shaanxi Provincial Cultural Bureau, the museum stands as a state-priority protected site and is recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a world heritage site. The online exhibition equivalent reviewed here was created in 2013 to preserve the mausoleum digitally and allow those unable to travel to China to see the terracotta warriors up close. This digital exhibition has recently taken on a whole new level of relevance as the COVID pandemic has made it nearly impossible to travel outside one's own country and visit exhibitions in general.

The discovery of the Qin Shi Huang's statue army was purely accidental. On March 29, 1974, farmers digging a well found pieces of terracotta figures and thus sparked the curiosity of Chinese archaeologists. Then began the discovery of the vast necropolis surrounding Emperor Qin Shi Huang's tomb which itself has not been excavated. This tomb and its necropolis make up the mausoleum which is supposed to be modeled after the ancient Qin capital of Xianyang. The first excavations in May 1974 led to the discovery of what is known as Pit 1 which contains the bulk of the terracotta army. Pit 2 houses statues of cavalry, infantry units, and war chariots, and seems to represent a military guard. Pit 3 appears to be the command post as it houses statues of high-ranking officers and a war chariot. Other pits contain figures of entertainers, such as acrobats and strongmen, rare animals and laborers, as well as bronze cranes and ducks set in an underground park. Ancient Chinese records indicate that work on the mausoleum began in 246 BC when Emperor Qin was thirteen, and it was regarded as an artistic funerary monument to serve and protect the emperor during the afterlife.

When you access the online site, your first impression may be slightly intimidating as you are bombarded with Chinese characters. Thankfully, due to advanced technology, you may be able to translate the webpage, and I was able to do so, using a Google Chrome web browser, and read the introduction to the digital exhibition on the left sidebar of the website, which also includes links to the main entry page (since the left sidebar stays in place while you explore) and a link to the museum's official website. The museum claims to have five pavilions and a total of forty-four pieces in its online collection, which can be seen on a horizontal scroll bar at the bottom of the page, although the main exhibition should be started by clicking the round "Start" button on the first page. As you enter the exhibition, you are presented with a dialog box that, although in Chinese, indicates with a picture that the mouse may be used to look around; the bottom toolbar of blue buttons with arrows and plus/minus symbols can also be used for navigation. The

initial view is stunning: it provides you almost with a bird's eye view of the pit with the terracotta warrior statues. This digital rendition is in high quality, and you can use the plus button to zoom in on the statues and lose almost no quality – even when zooming in on the ones furthest in the back.

The default opening view features three blue hexagons with plus signs that are clickable. This is where you may encounter one of the biggest issues. While my Chrome web browser was able to translate the introductory sidebar and the sidebars of any of the pieces that can be selected from the bottom of the screen, it did not translate any of the text of the application that is used to explore the exhibition itself. Clicking on any of the blue hexagons brings up a dialog box with a picture or pictures that you can scroll through, along with a Chinese caption at the bottom. Sadly, I was not able to translate the captions and could only admire and guess what the exhibition was trying to convey in the captions. Despite this inconvenience, the pictures included in these blue hexagon dialog boxes appear to illustrate the process of excavation.

You may take a 360-degree look around while exploring. In the initial view, looking behind you provides you with a picture of some onlookers, which highlights just how much closer you are to viewing these statues compared to if you were on location to see them in person. From the initial position, if you look to the ground to your right or left, you detect blue circles with arrows. Clicking on either of these arrows takes you face to face with the statues. Clicking left provides you with two more arrows, one pointing forward and the other pointing left, so you may explore further. If you continue using the left arrows, you encounter another arrow to continue your journey to the left, or an arrow going further inside the pit toward the statues. If you continue left you eventually get to a site on the left-hand side with two blue hexagons with plus signs that indicate informative dialog boxes—or at least informative if you know Chinese. Thankfully, the physical sign at the actual site on the left hexagon reads in English “site of the well,” which seems to indicate that this is where the farmers in 1974 had dug their well which had led to the discovery of the terracotta pieces. The right hexagon dialog box (as its pictures suggest) seems to concern itself with the brickwork. If you continue on further to the left of this site, you end up with a face-to-face view of the statues.

If you decide to go forward, after clicking the initial left arrow, it takes you to a space in between the statues and furnishes you with an even more immersive view of the figures. On the bottom right corner of the stone block in this area, there is another blue hexagon, again in Chinese, which (as its pictures suggest) seems to indicate something about the footwear of the figures. From the initial first position of the left arrow, if you go left once more and then forward, you find yourself in a corridor-like section of the pit with a horse statue right next to you. The arrow taking you further down this corridor provides you with two additional blue hexagons, one apparently concerning some sort of chariot, the other dealing with the real bronze weapons that were discovered in these pits. If you choose to go

right from the initial position of entering the exhibition, you find yourself face to face with the statues, along with an informative blue hexagon and a blue arrow button to continue to the right. Continuing right brings you once more to the end of this side, with another face-to-face view of even more statues. Seeing these statues so close (compared to the visitors on the upper level) is a reminder of how special this virtual visit really is.

You might think that this is the end of the interactive portion of the exhibition, but by now you may have noticed a blue square to the right and slightly above the center. Clicking this blue square provides you with two maps with blue circles that contain eye symbols. The map on the left displays the pit we have just been viewing, and each eye represents one of the various positions you can assume in the interactive map. This offers you the opportunity to travel quickly between the different sections, and an animated, moving blue circle indicates the position in which you find yourself. That said, in my opinion you get a better feeling of moving around this place if you use the arrows: it is certainly more interactive than simply jumping around. The other feature of the blue square on which you have clicked is that it reveals a second pit which is indicated on the right-side map. Clicking on any of the blue circles that contain eye symbols transports you to this other pit, and you can either click on the other blue circles on the map to explore or elect to move around by using the arrows on the ground. This section is not too big, and it features more terracotta soldiers as well as some more horse figures.

Once done exploring, I decided to take a look at the items that are featured on the horizontal scroll bar at the bottom of the page. Clicking on any of these images brings up the image on the main screen with a description on the left sidebar. If you have already translated the page, the sidebar, too, should be translated into English. The only problem is that, when it is translated, some of the descriptions end up being longer than the length of the sidebar and there appears to be no way to scroll through the entire description. Fortunately, there are two square buttons on this side bar, one that reads "the explanation" and another that reads "see entry." If you click "the explanation" button, it provides you with what seems to be an audio recording of the description (although, unless you know Chinese, it is rather useless). Clicking on the "see entry" button leads you to a new webpage that has all the details of the respective object in Chinese, and this page can be translated by the browser. Returning to the museum webpage allows you to use your mouse as a magnifying glass to inspect the various objects more closely.

This signals the end of the exhibition. However, if you want to view more pictures or more details of the museum, you may click the link to the official website that is on the left-hand sidebar on the main page. Overall, this is an online exhibition well worth visiting. The interactive map that facilitates face-to-face views of the statues is exquisite, as one would not be able to view the figures this close in person. The detailed photographs of the collection on the lower horizontal scroll bar, along with the ability to use a digital magnifying glass, are powerful and allow you to view these fascinating pieces in detail. There are some drawbacks

though, the greatest one being the inability to translate the interactive program, which excludes those who do not know the language from reading the informative captions. In addition, as far as I can tell, the online exhibition itself does not provide the historical background information that I have included at the beginning of this review. Nonetheless, this exhibition is worth a visit, especially since it is simply a click away and houses such a grand collection. I would recommend this online museum to anyone interested in history in general, as the discovery of this site is significant enough to warrant everyone to know about it. If you like this exhibition, you should also consider virtual tours of other historic locations such Petra, Jordan, which even includes audio footage relaying facts of the site. Other historic locations worthy of a virtual tour are the Palace of Versailles (near Paris, France) or the Colosseum in Rome, Italy.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Erika Victoria of Santa Fe Springs, California, earned her B.A. in History at California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA). She is currently pursuing an M.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), where she is a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). She also served as an editor for volume 47 of "The Welebaethan: A Journal of History" (2020).