



Figure 1. A mural in the galleries uses the IAAM's initials to say "I am still here." Photograph by Akeia de Barros Gomes

GULLAH GEECHEE, AT THE INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM, CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

Reviewed by Akeia de Barros Gomes, Vice President, Maritime Studies, Mystic Seaport Museum

"Maybe, ultimately, the most surprising and profound thing about the IAAM is that by standing at the edge of this historic wharf, it helps bring African Americans back to the ocean, back to the turbulent Atlantic, back to a place of origin, death, sustenance—and now, self-healing."¹

When I reached out to visit the newly opened International African American History Museum in Charleston, South Carolina, I was cautioned by Chief Curator Martina Morale, "We do not offer much in the way of maritime history within the exhibitions." As a visitor with a mind toward maritime history, maritime culture, and maritime narratives, I saw maritime history threaded throughout the museum and within almost every story told.

The International African American Museum (IAAM) was first conceived in the year 2000 by then-mayor Joseph P. Riley, Jr. Twenty-three years later, on June 27, 2023, the museum opened with nine galleries that tell the histories of how enslaved Africans and their descendants—both enslaved and free—shaped the economic, political, and cultural development of the South Carolina Low Country, the nation as a whole, and the larger diaspora. It is quite fitting that a museum that works to reclaim Black histories and creativity is located on the Cooper River and occupies Gadsden's Wharf—the only wharf in Charleston that was permitted to engage in the transatlantic slave trade. Gadsden's Wharf is a location where approximately 30,000 Africans disembarked and where, between



Figure 2. Exterior view of the museum. Photo courtesy of the International African American Museum

1807 and 1808, 700 Africans perished from poor nutrition and exposure. For the community, it is hallowed ground.

After *Transatlantic Experience*, a fully immersive and diasporic media experience at the entry of the museum, the maritime story begins in the theater with a narrative of the Gullah Geechee community. Visitors are introduced to *Seeking: Mapping Our Gullah Geechee Story* (Julie Dash, 2023). This short film grounds the visitor in Indigenous perspectives on African and European arrival by sea; we learn about African belief systems and practice, and how

Gullah Geechee, at the International African American Museum, Charleston, South Carolina © 2023 by Akeia de Barros Gomes is licensed under CC BY 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Figure 3. *Vodunaut (Hyperwizer)*, 2021, by Emo de Medeiros, Benin. Cowrie shell helmet with HD video smartphone. Photo courtesy of the International African American Museum

belief and practice were incorporated into survivance. I left the theater space grounded in the perspective of the museum, knowing that *everything* I was going to see and every story in the museum would be rooted in Black voices, the power of community, creative adaptation to enslavement and Christianity, survival and resistance, and joy. The museum and its galleries take the visitor on a journey to “explore the history, culture and impact of the African American journey on Charleston, on the nation, and on the world, shining light and sharing stories of the diverse journeys, origin, and achievements of descendants of the African Diaspora.”²

Maritime narratives are woven throughout the museum, from an early twentieth-century statue depicting a dugout canoe with six rowers at the entrance of the *Atlantic Worlds* gallery to the exhibition’s telling of the Middle Passage. A highlight in this gallery space is an Afro-futurist cowrie shell helmet with a captivating video of the cosmos within it (Figure 3). The *Atlantic Worlds* gallery also has an entire wall facing the Cooper River and the Atlantic Ocean. It is a maritime space. One wall in the gallery is reserved for a large 7-by-32-foot video screen which currently provides an immer-



Figure 4. A bateau traditionally used by the Gullah Geechee. Photo courtesy of the International African American Museum



Figure 5. Recreation of a praise house. Photo by Akeia de Barros Gomes

sive audiovisual experience capturing a contemporary artist's interpretation of an Atlantic journey.

There are maritime narratives to be seen throughout the exhibitions, including *African Roots*, *Carolina Gold*, *South Carolina Connections*, *American Journeys*, and other special exhibitions. However, nowhere is the story of maritime life and a maritime community clearer than in the *Gullah Geechee* exhibition. While there is still debate over the origins of the name Gullah Geechee, it is a term that encapsulates African-descended cultural and language (African and Caribbean influenced) groups that live in southeastern coastal areas and island groups of the United States from North Carolina to Florida.

The centerpiece of the gallery is a bateau (Figure 4). These flat-bottomed canoes were used for navigation around the South Carolina sea islands inhabited by the Gullah Geechee. Because of their relative isolation and maintenance of African language, foodways, and cultural practices, the Gullah Geechee have been the subject of numerous studies, films, and television programs.

The exhibit challenges the notion that the Gullah Geechee are a "backwards" people by highlighting and demystifying their history of "activism, organization, and cultural practices and preservation." From a recreated praise house with audiovisual elements (Figure 5), to a cookbook opened to a page featuring salmon cakes, shrimp and fried okra, and one-dish seafood casserole, to a handcrafted fishing net made by community member Joseph Legree of the St. Helena Islands, the *Gullah Geechee* exhibition is the story of a people who are rooted in and sustained by the sea and their African roots. It is also a maritime story that neither begins nor ends with slave ships, but originates in millennia-old African maritime traditions that continue on. For example, there is a collection of oyster shells in the exhibit:

...symbols of immortality...often used during the burials of enslaved people to help guide the deceased into the afterlife. Many saw seashells as symbols of the ocean that brought them or their ancestors from Africa, and they hoped the ocean would return them when they died.

The Gullah Geechee are a people who see the land and water not as binaries, but as complementary entities that enable survival and maintenance of culture. For the Gullah Geechee, "marshes, woodlands, fields, creeks, and rivers supported farming, fishing, and hunting and offered medicinal plants and craft materials."



Figure 6. Visitors in the galleries. Photo courtesy of the International African American Museum

Bringing the story into the present, the visitor is also confronted with the threats to Gullah Geechee coastal and island communities, including racism, displacement, pollution, and sea-level rise. But because the exhibit roots the Gullah Geechee story in resistance, creativity, and survival, one leaves with a feeling of hope (Figure 1). The exhibition is a powerful example of reframing narratives. While the Gullah Geechee have been studied extensively by outside scholars, often either romanticized or portrayed as backward or “primitive,” it is now Gullah Geechee scholars, historians, artists, and educators who are telling their ancestral stories from their own perspectives and reframing the narrative of their history and community.

This exhibition—indeed, the entire museum—is well worth the visit. Visitors were enthralled by the panels, objects, and histories. Many, like me, spent five or more hours visiting the exhibits and then going back to revisit...to see it again (Figure 6). For some, they were learning new histories—empowering histories. For others, it wasn’t so much new information, but information presented in new, enlightening ways and through new perspectives. Two hundred fifteen years after Africans disembarked from Gadsden’s Wharf, robbed of their identities and their voice and sometimes their lives, the International African American Museum is allowing them to speak. And they are being heard.

Endnotes

1 Tara Roberts, “Charleston’s Newest Museum Reckons with the City’s Role in the Slave Trade,” *National Geographic* (November 2023), <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/charleston-black-history-international-african-american-museum>.

2 Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are taken from the IAAM website or from within the exhibition.



International African American Museum, Charleston, SC