



For Immediate Release  
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## THE HETTEMA GROUP COUNTS DOWN TO CHANGE

### **America I AM: *The African American Imprint* Opens in Philadelphia**

February 10, 2009

This groundbreaking exhibit—based on original concept design by The Hettema Group—opened January 15, 2009, leading into the Obama Inaugural Festivities. Philadelphia’s National Constitution Center is the first stop of 10 planned for the 4-year tour of this timely social and cultural exhibit that explores the impact of African Americans on America itself.

Kicking off a momentous week in American political life, the world premiere opening of the “America I AM” exhibit presented by Tavis Smiley at Philadelphia’s National Constitution Center caps a multi-month effort by organizers Arts and Exhibitions International and Cincinnati Museum Center, with design team **The Hettema Group**, and exhibit producer Nancy Seruto of **Seruto & Company**--all working with one goal in mind.

WEB Du Bois posed the question in 1903: “Would America be America without her Negro people?” This provocative query greets visitors at the entrance of the 15,000 square foot space. And, by the time visitors get to the final galleries-- that include both Barak Obama’s speech on “A More Perfect Union” and footage from the inaugural— both exhibit design and artifacts have made the answer is more than clear. Talking to the **Philadelphia Inquirer** Tavis Smiley explains, “That is the quote that I wanted to create and design this exhibit around. I wanted all of America to wrestle with that question. There is a back story to Barack Obama and this exhibit really is that back story.”

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“When we began the design process on this project none of us knew who would win the Democratic party nomination, let alone the final election,” says Phil Hetteema, Creative Executive, of The Hetteema Group. “This has been an amazing ride. I cannot think of any other exhibition that is both as prescient and current as America I AM. “

The flexibility in terms of artifacts and what exactly would be included at opening presented certain challenges for the design process. When the Seruto & Company and The Hetteema Group first brainstormed with Arts and Exhibitions International, The Smiley Group and a team of expert consultants, there was a list of knows and unknowns. The approximate square footage of 15,000 was a given. But the configuration of the spaces would change for the different tour destinations. More challenging still was that the artifacts on display were not committed. The mission for The Hetteema Group’s lead designer, Eric Parr, was to create a flexible space that would tell the story and provide a compelling frame for artifacts.

The result was twelve galleries, each with its own music thematic and theater experiences, that convey a journey from struggle to triumph to celebration. Featuring more than 200 artifacts culled from every period of U.S. history, the exhibit includes objects, texts, religion, music, narration and media. An interactive component of the exhibition allows visitors to leave their own video “imprints,” and this collection has the potential throughout the life of the exhibit to become the largest recorded oral history project in U.S. history.

Among the poignant pieces in the exhibition are:

- "The Doors of No Return" from the Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, which enslaved Africans passed through to board ships to the "New World"
- The typewriter Alex Haley used to write the groundbreaking book, Roots
- Objects representing the African American troops that fought and impacted the outcome of major U.S. wars
- Malcolm X’s journal and personal Koran
- The door key and stool from the Birmingham jail cell that held Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he authored his infamous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"
- Frederick Douglass’ clothing and letter from President Lincoln that was designed to protect him from harassment as he moved about the nation’s capital campaigning for African American rights
- The robe that Muhammad Ali wore during training for the "Rumble in the Jungle," where he defeated world heavyweight champion George Foreman
- The original, signed copy of Barack Obama’ s speech on race “A More Perfect Union” given at the National Constitution Center, March 18, 2008.

Exhibition organizers worked with some of the most notable scholars in the field. Advisory panel members include Howard Dodson, director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library; Lawrence J. Pijaux Jr., president and CEO of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and immediate past president of the Association of African American Museums; and Cornel West, professor of religion and African American studies at

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Princeton University. John Fleming, president of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History and director emeritus of museums at the Cincinnati Museum Center, serves as the executive producer for the exhibition.

The **Associated Press** sums up: "'America I Am: The African-American Imprint,' didn't begin with any expectation of such a powerful ending. Two years ago, when the television personality Tavis Smiley conceived the idea for a museum show about black contributions to this nation, a black president was all but inconceivable. Yet the impossible arrives Tuesday. How did this, how could this happen? Walking through, you realize America I Am can help explain."

### **About [The Hetteema Group](#)**

The Hetteema Group specializes in uniquely creative design in the world of experiential entertainment for museums, visitor centers, theme parks, and resort developments. THG specializes in strong conceptual thinking –breakthrough, out-of-the box solutions –combined with top quality design for

- Destination Resorts & Parks
- Retail, Dining & Entertainment Lifestyle Destinations
- Museum and Exhibit Design
- Shows, Entertainment, & Attractions.

Highly experienced in world-class experiential projects (from concept through production), THG provides innovative and original solutions that bring a fresh approach to all of its design work. Under the guidance of Phil Hetteema, who has been a leader in this industry for over 30 years, THG's team consists of experienced designers, illustrators, master planners, architects, engineers, project managers, and producers. The Hetteema Group provides full design services including program development, project analysis and feasibility, concept development, detailed design, and on-site design supervision.

Current and recent THG clients include the Royal Hashemite Court of Jordan, Harrah's Casinos, the National World War II Museum ( New Orleans, Louisiana), Universal Studios (Hollywood and Orlando), Paramount Pictures, the Russian Jewish Museum (Moscow, Russia), Gallagher and Associates, (Bethesda, Maryland), the Museum of Science and Industry (Chicago, Illinois), ResortsWorld (Sentosa, Singapore), Samsung Corporation (Korea) MGM Location Based Entertainment, Busch Entertainment Corporation, and Dreamworks Animation SKG.

### **About [Arts and Exhibitions International \(AEI\)](#)**

Founded in 2003 by president John Norman and international vice president Andres Numhauser, AEI produces the award-winning exhibition "Diana: A Celebration" in association with the Althorp Estate in the United Kingdom, two touring exhibitions dedicated to the treasures of King Tutankhamun and "Real Pirates: The Untold Story of the Whydah from Slave Ship to Pirate Ship." Norman and Numhauser have nearly 40 years combined experience in the entertainment and exhibition business, working over the years on such projects as "Titanic: The Artifact Exhibit" and "Saint Peter and the Vatican: The Legacy of the Popes." The company has relationships with the most important museums in the world and has presented traveling exhibitions on four continents.

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AEI is part of AEG Exhibitions, an affiliate division of AEG LIVE. AEG LIVE is a collection of companies dedicated to all aspects of live contemporary music performance and the live-entertainment division of Los Angeles-based AEG, one of the leading sports and entertainment presenters in the world.

### **About The Smiley Group, Inc.**

Founded in 1998 and based in Los Angeles, The Smiley Group, Inc., (TSG) is a communications corporation dedicated to supporting human rights and related empowerment issues. The mission of TSG is to achieve positive results through advocacy and education on issues of concern to African Americans and other people without substantial economic or social standing. TSG is the holding company for Tavis Smiley Presents, Smiley Radio Properties, High Quality Speakers Bureau, TS Media, and SmileyBooks. The Tavis Smiley Foundation is a nonprofit organization that provides leadership development training for youth. Tavis Smiley is the host of *Tavis Smiley* on PBS and *The Tavis Smiley Show from PRI* and the author/editor of 11 books including the *New York Times* best sellers *Covenant with Black America*, *What I Know for Sure: My Story of Growing up in America*, and *THE COVENANT In Action*.

### **Read more about America I AM: The African American Imprint on the Web**

[www.americaniam.org](http://www.americaniam.org)

<http://www.constitutioncenter.org/AmericalAM/>

<http://cbs3.com/local/tavis.smiley.ncc.2.908306.html>

<http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2009/01/18/america/NA-FEA-US-Inauguration-Black-History.php>

<http://www.philly.com/inquirer/weekend/37653489.html>

<http://www.delcotimes.com/articles/2009/01/23/entertainment/doc497892b6d2ea6639084838.txt>

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