Expressions of Culture

Exhibit examines heritage of African Americans

A culture can be defined by many things—its language, history or even its food. But when trying to impart the essence of a particular culture to others, art often can be the most effective tool.

With this in mind, the Lafayette Natural History Museum is aiding in the celebration of Black History Month by presenting one of the largest collections of art and artifacts by local and regional African American artists. The show, which was put together by Statewide Enterprises, has "a little bit of everything in it," according to Heidi Parker, marketing coordinator for the museum.

The exhibit, which opens Saturday and runs until Feb. 28, will use several formats to express aspects of the African American heritage.

One of the many Clementine Hunter paintings

Thelma Fleming, right, a Lafayette Mardi Gras Association member with maid at '50s ball.

Information will be offered through a panel exhibit; history will be shown by way of old, black-and-white photographs; and, of course, art will be offered in forms such as paintings and sculpture.

"This exhibit will allow us (the museum) to fulfill our goal in terms of educating visitors about the rich and diverse African American culture," said Parker.

The struggle by African Americans to gain voting rights in the United States is traced through a variety of artifacts donated by the Amistad Research Center.

And, in keeping with the Carnival season, the center also contributed an eight-panel exhibit which explores the background and traditions of Mardi Gras.

The meat of the exhibit, however, will be the art. Regional pieces include paintings and black-and-white portraits by Dennis Williams; the sculpture of Clifton Webb; and the vivid colors uniquely indicative of Van Chambers' paintings.

A high-point of the art portion of the exhibit will certainly be the 40 works by renowned Southern artist and former slave Clementine Hunter. Hunter, known for her primitive style, often depicted the more rural aspects of life. However, behind the art's overt simplicity lurks a deeper meaning, which can be translated as the role her work serves to record a way of life which is fast disappearing.

The original style of Randell Henry can be witnessed in the artist's vivid portrayals of people in very ordinary situations. Henry's use of fabrics and cutouts further enhance his distinct expressions.

The black-and-white portraits of an accordion player and a solitary-looking young boy are among the works of W.J. Louis Jr. and artist Randy Comeaux contributed such pieces as a graphic print titled, "Two Face" and a painting of Martin Luther King Jr.

One wall of the exhibit is filled with a portion of Lafayette Parish Clerk of Court O.C. "Dan" Guillot's collection of old photographs from Acadiana. The photographs provide an extensive look at the history of the region's African American population.

Subjects included in the photo exhibit are entertainers such as Clifton Chenier and Rockin' Dopsie, local notables like Loomis St. Julien ("The Ice Man"), civic leaders Doremas Dorsey and Carlton James and members of the 1950s Heymann Porters baseball team.

Archive materials from several state universities—including Southern, Grambling, Xavier, Dillard and UNO—help to round out the exhibit.

In addition to the art contributed by local artists, Barrister's Gallery in New Orleans and private collectors Warren Lowe and Laura Foote also loaned pieces to the show.

The exhibit, free to the public, will be open Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday from 9 a.m.-5 p.m.; Tuesday from 9 a.m.-9 p.m.; and Saturday and Sunday from 1-5 p.m.