

African Burial Ground

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

African Burial Ground
National Monument
New York, NY 10007



African Burial Ground National Monument Self-Guided Art Tour

Art in Federal buildings has been a tradition since the year 1855. Today, the United States' General Service Administration (GSA) continues this tradition with their program called the "Art in Architecture Program," established in 1963. This program commissions the nation's leading artists to create large-scale works of art for new federal buildings. All of the works in this building have been made possible through the GSA. A panel comprised of art professionals, civic and community representatives, and the project's lead design architects all met to discuss and select artists to participate in the art displayed in this building. The works selected for installment in the Ted Weiss Federal Building at 290 Broadway were specifically chosen to pay tribute to the African Burial Ground.

THE NEW RING SHOUT



Commissioned: 1993

Installed: 1994

Made of: Terrazzo and Polished Brass, 40' diameter

Artists: Joseph Depace (Architect), Estella Conwill (Poet), Houston Conwill (sculptor)

The art is site specific, recognizing the history and spirituality of the location. The multi-layered works are both political and spiritual, synchronizing traditional African, Judeo-Christian and Eastern religions, mythologies, and cosmologies, forming a synthesis of multicultural references. The design of the work is in the tradition of world ceremonial ground markings and the name is after the

historical ring shout dance of celebration performed throughout North America and the Caribbean. The work contains a multi-layering of patterns, symbols, texts, and languages. The contents of this piece is to address issues of world peace, social injustice, human rights, and freedom, as well as the universal enemies of racism, oppression, violence, and poverty. The message of this piece is to break down the barriers between people of diverse backgrounds in order to build bridges of compassion and to find a common meeting ground for all of humanity.

Its outer blue ring, signifying water, is marked with fourteen quotations by heroic men and women in both English and fourteen international languages. The inner white ring holds the names of twenty-four African nations victimized by the enslavement trade. The central earth-colored ring is marked with a collage of symbols and a multilingual spiral song line composed of edited lyrics from twelve songs. This line directs a transformative journey along twelve global water sites and marks the migration of the diverse cultures and peoples to New York City. It continues through fourteen significant signposts in the city's geography to the African Burial Ground. Two major intersecting arrows are drawn in homage to Harlem Renaissance luminaries Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes.

RENEWAL



Commissioned: 1993

Installed: 1995

Made of: Silkscreen, Mural is 38 ft w x 7.5 ft h

Artist: Tomie Arai

Through a series of overlapping silkscreen images, Arai draws the viewer's attention to relevant activities, events, and symbols pertinent to the 18th and early 19th century. There are images from the 1600s-1827; however, these images are not in chronological order.

The main image in the mural is of a mountain, flanked by two pillars. The mountain, as a symbol of land, appears as a sacred site and a place of spiritual truth. The image of the mountain rising from the water can also refer to the history of New York as a thriving harbor, as well as one of the major centers of the British slave trade in America. The pillars, through which the mountain is viewed, represent the past and present. The Middle Passage and the watery holocaust of the Atlantic Ocean are represented in the pillar on the mural's right. The pillar on the left contains a sky line of New York. Below the skyline is a foundation of bricks which contain the names of the first eleven Africans brought to America through the Dutch slave trade. These pillars can be seen as the foundation for the city of New York's success. Also seen in the mural are: figures representing the different types of labor Africans endured, the African Free School, Freedom's Journal, Mother A.M.E. Zion church, and Frances Tavern. At the center of the mural is a reproduction of an 18th century map of the Burial Ground. Above the map, artifacts unearthed at the burial site—buttons, coins, shroud pins, and beads—become a tangible connection to the past; and the talismans for a renewed vision of the future.

UNEARTHED



Commissioned: 2002

Installed: 2003

Made of: Finished Bronze with Patina

Artist: Frank Bender

About the piece: The three faces seen on this sculpture were created using computer imagery and the forensic skills of Bender who depicted what these people would've looked like today. They are actual referenced burial sites described from left to right.

Burial #25 was a woman in her early 20s. She suffered multiple injuries to the face; a fractured arm (wrist), and had been shot with a musket—a lead musket ball was found lodged in her rib cage.

Burial #101 was a young man ranging in age from 26-35 years old. On the coffin lid with brass tacks was a symbol adorned in the shape of Sankofa shown just above the three joined hands. That symbol on his coffin proved to be one of the front running images to represent the African Burial Ground National Monument. One interpretation of Sankofa is to learn from the past to prepare for the future. He stands taller than the other two, rising for the hope filled future.

Burial #89 was a woman between 50-60 years of age and was considered an elder. That age was not reached by many so those who did were treasured by the rest of the community. The average life span during the 1700s was the early 40s.

The three hands joined together protruding out of the earth conveyed Bender's idea that we are all one in death.

AFRICA RISING



Commissioned: 1995

Installed: 1998

Made of: Bronze with dimensions of 15'5" x 8'6" x 4'4"

Artist: Barbara Chase-Riboud

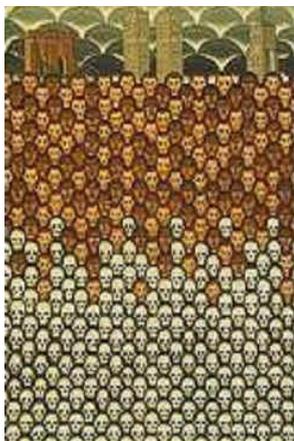
In the form of a new classical representation, the sculpture pays homage to the African Burial site, the transport of Africans to this land, and also their bondage and struggle for freedom.

The front of the piece may resemble that of a boat. The journey called the Middle Passage lasted anywhere from 4 ½ weeks to 2 months or longer. The period of greatest importation of enslaved laborers was between 1715 and 1774 when upwards of 6,000 arrived. The ropes throughout the piece can represent the bondage and struggle Africans faced daily.

This work of art has two faces. One face points towards the West. She is traveling to the New World to be sold. Her wings are clipped and her legs are bound by ropes or straps. Her face may look more European. The face on the opposite side points to the East, back towards Africa. Africa is where this woman is free; her freedom is represented by the wings where she can fly free like a bird. The wings are stretched back in the direction of Africa yearning to be home, to be free. Her face may look more like an African woman.

Coins or medallions represent the descendants of the enslaved. Although their ancestors were brought here in bondage, they continued to struggle for freedom and equality. The faces on these coins or medallions are of successful African Americans that rose from the depressed site of being bound.

UNTITLED



Commissioned: 1993

Installed: 1994

Made of: Brown initially painted his image on canvas and then had the composition transformed by skilled artisans in Italy of special glass mosaics.

The dimensions of the mosaic are 14' h x 10' w

Artist: Roger Brown

Although this piece pays homage to the African Burial Ground, the core theme is the tragic toll the AIDS epidemic has had on the African community, especially during the 1990's when the burial ground was re-discovered.

Brown said, "On this ancient cemetery site below the modern skyline of New York City, a contemporary tapestry of human faces, each made thin and hollow by the ravages of AIDS, descends like some medieval nightmare into a mosaic of death heads in memory of those of all races who have suffered and died too soon."

The skulls become a sea of gaunt (extremely thin and bony in appearance) faces from dark to very light complexion, rising to a New York cityscape where stylized depictions of the Brooklyn Bridge (top-left), World Trade Centers (top-center), and Empire State building (top-right) appear among dark, wedge-shaped clouds. This piece can also commemorate the 9/11 attacks which occurred after the creation of the piece.

This piece displays a cross-section of an urban gravesite; creating the sense of a city built on top of many dead people (different skin tones representing all cultures including the burial ground). As Brown states, "The city rises in the background as if growing out of the heap of human misery left behind."

AMERICA SONG



Commissioned: 1993

Installed: 1995

Made of: Concrete, Granite, Stainless Steel, Fiber Optics, and Electronics

Dimensions are 32'6"h, 16'w, and 30"d

Artist: Clyde Lynds

About the piece: This sculpture is Lynd's tribute to the history of the site and to all people who strive for freedom. It is an embodiment of American independence; by night, the sculpture is transformed by lighting effects that add visual radiance to the idea of freedom.

The piece is a relief sculpture located at the building's main entrance. The cast concrete is embedded with fiber optics, which in the evening emit moving light across the surface of the image. Sandblasted on stone below the sculpture is the poem from an unknown African poet:

*"I want to be free
Want to be free
Rainbow round my shoulder
Wings on my feet"*

The sculpted wings can represent freedom. It is meant to convey an uplifting and hopeful feeling on this public building. The artwork takes on a more dramatic effect at sundown when the fiber optic lights illuminate the piece.