



Princeton home's history of slavery explored in new contemporary art exhibition
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(author: Peter Crimmins)
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 Cast iron skillets hanging in the kitchen at Bainbridge House are from Hugh Hayden's series, 'American Food.' They are modeled from African Masks and historical artifacts in the Princeton University Art Museum collections. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

The art museum at Princeton University recently acquired the oldest building on the town's main avenue: an 18th-century mansion known as Bainbridge House.

In its 254 years, Bainbridge House has been a home, a doctor's office, a student dormitory, a library, the home of a historical society and for a very brief and hectic moment in national history, it was the seat of Congress.

Last fall, it opened as a contemporary art gallery, Art@Bainbridge.

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The gallery's second exhibition, "Creation Myths," opened Saturday. New York-based artist Hugh Hayden used the house's four ground-floor rooms to install pieces that respond to the Black experience in America over the last 300 years — including Bainbridge House's own history with slavery.

"The art museum has gone to great lengths to restore and keep as many of the original elements of the architecture as possible," said curator Mitra Abbaspour. "And to resuscitate that history of the many different lives this house had had over the centuries."

Hayden's exhibition starts with the kitchen, featuring a hearth and fireplace.

"I like the idea of entering someone's home through the kitchen," said Hayden, who is Black, and grew up in Dallas, Texas. "In the house I grew up in, that was the door for friends and family to come through."



 Hugh Hayden puts the finishing touches on a claw machine that occupies one room of his exhibit "Creation Myths." Rather than grabbing a toy, the machine picks up balls of raw cotton. A sense of an infinite field of cotton is created by opposing mirrors. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

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A metal hanging rack for pans dangles from the ceiling, hung with cast iron skillets.

Each skillet in Hayden's reimagined kitchen was cast by hand into shapes of African masks and figures by Western artists who used African and other indigenous imagery, including Amedeo Modigliani and Paul Gauguin.

Some of the skillets are double-sided, with African art on one side and on the other, European art inspired by tribal work.

"I think of southern food as the only real American food," said Hayden. "In colonial America, who was in the kitchen? Who was nourishing America? That was enslaved Africans in the kitchen, mostly with cast iron."

One of the house's 18th-century inhabitants was Absalom Bainbridge, a loyalist to the British crown who left to serve with the redcoats as a surgeon during the Revolutionary War. In his absence, American soldiers seized his property, including an enslaved man named Prime.

Prime would later join the Revolutionary Army and fight for independence.

After the war, Prime engaged in a long legal effort to gain freedom based on his military service. He was one of only three Black Revolutionary soldiers in New Jersey to be freed through legislative action.

Hayden said he was not thinking specifically about Prime when he conceived the pieces in "Creation Myths." Rather, he mused more generally and abstractly about race in America.

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“Being conscious of the history of this house was enough,” said Hayden, who was trained as an architect. “The Bainbridge House is not a white cube. It has moldings, windows, historic wooden floorboards, hearths, and fireplaces. The fact that this is a house is an asset.”



📷 Art@Bainbridge occupies a 300-year-old home in downtown Princeton. Hugh Hayden's installation uses that domestic space to create scenarios that are both alluring and inaccessible. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

The next room is set up as a dining space, with a small round table surrounded by four matching chairs — the kind of furniture Hayden grew up with.

All the pieces are hand-carved from mesquite, a tree native to Texas. Hayden made the table and chairs with large, sharp thorns pointing out from all the surfaces, making it impossible to sit comfortably — a piece called “America.”

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"It's a materialization of the American dream," he said, "this thing that is sort of desirable and something you want to inhabit, but at the same time it's threatening and dangerous."



 The thorny dining table and chairs from Hugh Hayden's "America" are fashioned from mesquite trees. The thorns are fashioned from the trees' branches. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

Hayden often works in wood, considering the species of wood for both its material and social qualities. Mesquite is a hardwood that can grow in harsh environments, often unwanted by landowners because it robs precious water resources.

The next room features a mahogany cabinet. Certain types of mahogany, particularly from Peru, are illegal to import because of the environmental damage caused by harvesting. Hayden used Honduran mahogany.

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The cabinet is also an arcade game — the kind where users manipulate a suspended claw to grab prizes. In this case, the prizes are piles of raw cotton, inviting users to literally pick cotton, albeit from a distance, through the hermetically sealed cabinet carved in a Chippendale style.

“Chippendale was for the very wealthy, people who could afford those objects because of slave labor picking cotton,” said Hayden.

The fourth room is set up with four, old-fashioned schoolroom chairs and desks, each hand-carved from fir trees and sprouting tangles of branches. The wood was sourced from Christmas trees set up along the median on Park Avenue in Manhattan from Thanksgiving through Martin Luther King Jr. Day.



 Hugh Hayden's "Briar Patch" simulates a classroom. the pieces are constructed from discarded Christmas trees from Park Avenue in New York City. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

Hayden meticulously carved the furniture without removing the tree branches with the chairs' brambles sprouting from their organic position in the wood.

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He calls the installation “Brier Patch,” from the Br’er Rabbit folktale about a trickster who uses brambles as a hiding place. The classroom of brambles is either a place of safety or repulsion, depending on your interpretation.

“A lot of my work has this play of ‘look, but don’t touch,’” Hayden said. “There’s something seductive that you want to touch, but there’s also something undesirable about it.”

Hayden has shown in his work in galleries before, but “Creation Myths” is his first institutional show.

The Princeton University Art Museum is using the inaugural season of Art@Bainbridge to showcase emerging artists whose work is able to echo the history of the house.

“Hugh Hayden’s art is about those complications,” said Abbaspour, “asking us to consider what they are made of, what form they take, the way they draw us in, and the way they hold us at a distance.”

“Creation Myths” runs through June 7.