

## Andrew Jackson's Hermitage: Critical Museum Review

Jennifer Eichstedt's *Museums and (In)Justice* outlines styles of racialized interpretation in plantation museums and has inspired me to explore how Andrew Jackson's Hermitage site and museum could be categorized based on this rubric. In my observations, I'll be applying Eichstedt's rubric as a tool to critically analyze how this institution frames its history of enslavement, and who this framework may benefit. Though The Hermitage avoids commercially labeling itself a plantation, I will refer to it as such to reflect its history. Finally, my critique suggests evidence that The Hermitage covertly minimizes Andrew Jackson's history of enslavement via exhibition design to benefit his and the estate's character. These elements of deflection materialize as coercive language, misrepresentations of African American people, and institutional dishonesty.

First, I visited the museum's website. I noticed the tours offered are split according to their content, or rather, by which history a visitor may be interested in learning. The visitor's choice of perspective is by the museum's design, as it informs them here:

“While we do recommend two-and-a-half to three hours for a typical visit, you can choose to focus on different highlights to meet your needs.”

I began to wonder if the museum perpetuates a dissonance that encourages visitors to avoid subjects on enslavement as if an inclusive history is too discomfoting to display. One tour option is titled the ‘Commander in Chief Tour’ in which visitors will “have the opportunity to take in the view from the beautiful Hermitage balcony!”. The same blurb emphasizes that ‘Hermitage Enslaved: A Wagon Tour’ may be purchased separately. The walking tour offered for visitors to explore the lives of enslaved African Americans is titled ‘In Their Footsteps: Lives of the Hermitage Enslaved’. In both titles, ‘Hermitage’ denotes ‘enslaved’, indicating a possessed state of being. To be optimistic, I could regard this language choice as one that communicates specificity toward the site's history of enslavement. However, the historical exhibit for the enslaved titled ‘First Hermitage: Worlds Apart, Side by Side’, affirms how the site's name acts as a brand identity—visitors may be comforted to know that the exhibit will remain white-centered despite its location in a slave quarter. The title is also ironically self-aware—‘side by side’ insinuates objectively parallel histories while the institution itself is responsible for crafting a divided narrative. This style of representation is what Eichstedt's system refers to as “segregated knowledge”, in which a museum's education components on enslavement are separated from their white-centered content (Eichstedt 2006, 128-129).

The Hermitage's physical presence is introduced by at least three blocks of well-maintained landscaping and bookended by middle-class suburbia. Healthy groupings of trees that

resemble small orchards, soft green rolling hills, and a picket fence communicate to travelers on the busy road that they are passing an estate of great importance. From the aesthetic representation of nobility, I anticipated the site to purport a monumental characterization of Andrew Jackson. Further, if Jackson and The Hermitage are as centralized as I expect, I doubt that African and Native American histories will be represented with coherent interpretation. The first media I encounter at the museum is a short film that provides a historical overview of Jackson. This screening will be my first on-site indication that the museum uses ‘relative incorporation’ to represent enslaved African Americans, which is to marginally include their histories within a white-centered narrative (Eichstedt 2006, 129). The small theater looks like a briefing room in which a political figure would answer journalists’ questions, complete with a podium, American flag, Tennessee state flag, and orderly rows of classroom-style chairs. The pre-screening slides feature quotes from various US presidents sharing their grand opinions of Andrew Jackson. These elements prelude the documentary-style film, which utilizes short quips from various historical professors and authors, as well as reenactments of important moments in Jackson’s political career, and brief descriptions of enslavement at The Hermitage and his Native American policies. Through this display of academia, I began to collect that the unspoken rule for the exhibit’s intellectual basis should be beyond reproach. The film goes so far as to assert the educational importance of not being dismissive toward President Jackson, despite our knowledge of his atrocities. This ideal sets the framework for how interpretive language will coercively deflect his role as an oppressor throughout the museum.

The ‘Andrew Jackson: Born For A Storm’ exhibit begins on one side of a hallway and features an aesthetically inundated mural comprised of reproduced elements such as Jackson’s portraits and political cartoons which fall along a timeline depicting his life. The red, white, and blue colors intermingle with sepia which suggests an age-old patriotism. A display podium showcasing a farm journal and artifacts of enslaved people sits at the head of the long hall. The text label lists each object but only provides context regarding the farm journal, which displays a page listing the names of enslaved African Americans and livestock. Here, the visitor learns that this entry was cataloged when Andrew Jackson was preparing his move to Washington, D.C., and uses terms such as ‘traditional farming’ and ‘responsibilities’ to frame the forced labor on the plantation. The museum will repeatedly frame the forced labor as benevolent and in a way that emphasizes its importance in the life of Jackson, not to explicitly acknowledge his brutality, but to suggest how forced labor was a necessary evil to his success. I realize how pervasive the notion is at the museum later in Jackson’s exhibit, in which themes are crudely joined together with topics such as his affair with Rachel Donelson leading into an interactive display detailing Jackson’s Indian Removal Act. While exploring the touch screen’s timeline of disparaging events in the lives of various Native American tribes, I overhear a clip of audio from a film looping further in the exhibit that effectively deterred me from internalizing information:

“He [Andrew Jackson] could have been a better man but perhaps not a better president (chuckles) if Jackson had been more prone to self-reflection.”

On the wall opposite Jackson's timeline is a sequence of large, white, biographical banners showcasing individual enslaved people at The Hermitage. The bios are headed by their photos, and read like a page from the farm journal; Who they married, how many children they had, who they were sold to, and if they stayed or left after emancipation. Some accounts include racialized stories such as how Betty, the enslaved cook, once stole laundry 'presumably to earn some money', and that the enslaved wagoner, Alfred, was so cherished by Andrew Jackson Jr. that he and his family were deeded to Jr.'s wife after his death. These portrayals indicate only a basic understanding of who they were as people and, at worst, profile them in a critically harmful manner. These tropes such as the 'criminal slave', 'faithful slave', and 'benevolent master' are referred to as a 'trivialization' in Eichstedt's rubric, and it stands to perpetuate and even comfort the inherent biases that exist in the museum's audience (Eichstedt 2006, 130).

Later while viewing the 'First Hermitage' exhibit, I realized that perhaps the museum has utilized these tropes as a quasi-creative solution for the museum's apparent lack of interpretive data. However, I remember how the website detailed a 1970s archaeological project that produced over 600k+ artifacts related to African Americans at The Hermitage. This claim was astonishing, as my recent understanding is that interpreting enslaved people's history is normally limited. To my confusion, the enslaved peoples' artifacts and interpretive data were unfounded in the exhibit. Since the 'First Hermitage' originated as Jackson's first home and was then converted into labor quarters, the museum communicates that its goal is to present parallel histories that converged under one roof. The same text label goes on to suggest that the viewer should "look carefully" within First Hermitage to "find the interwoven story of two American experiences" (The Hermitage, n.d.). But the inside of the log house structure is completely bare, except for large text labels detailing the Jackson family's early life and 'entrepreneurship'. As a visitor, I felt as if I had been tricked. Even when I navigated next door to another cabin, I was met with more field journal-styled text labels with descriptions of enslavement that devolved into redundancy. It's here that I understand the museum ultimately positions itself with covert academic integrity that comforts visitor biases while misguiding those with curiosity like mine.

One critical detail in understanding Jackson's monumental characterization is that he is a historical figure who represents several, often politically nationalistic, American ideals: the self-made man, entrepreneurship, and necessitating evils above ethics. This pervasive historical plantation model is a tool that can, as Jennifer Eichstedt describes it, ". . .articulate and reaffirm the racialized mythic life of the dominant white public in the United States and resonate with national and regional, collective white memories and senses of identity," (Eichstedt 2006, 128). Revealing Jackson's success as rooted in forced labor and violence would undermine his image as a self-made man and assert his disregard for human life. Consequently, this necessitates the audience's self-reflection as well. To abandon soothsaying and orient itself with historical authenticity would require The Hermitage to rectify the coercion, misrepresentation, and dishonesty within its exhibitions. I conclude with an acknowledgment of The Hermitage's true

goal as an institution, which is to serve visitors a narrative that maintains the integrity of Andrew Jackson, ‘the people’s president’.

#### References

Eichstedt, Jennifer. “Museums and (In)Justice.” In *Museum Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Hugh H. Genoways, 127-130. Blue Ridge Summit: AltaMira Press, 2006.

The First Hermitage, World’s Apart, Side-by-Side. (Hermitage, Tennessee: Andrew Jackson’s Hermitage, n.d.) Museum exhibit label.