

OUT THERE

Between the lines

Searching the "America's Smithsonian" exhibit for signs of gay life

by Will O'Bryan

When I was a child, growing up outside of Washington, D.C., it seemed my classmates and I couldn't turn around without being shuffled onto school buses and driven to one of several Smithsonian museums for a field trip.

At the National Museum of Natural History we learned about the Japanese tea ceremony. Archie Bunker's chair at the National Museum of American History frightened me: It came too close to home and my own overbearing father. As with most visitors, the National Air and Space Museum was my favorite. If I ever got separated from the rest of my class, I could always be found gazing at the case that held various stewardess uniforms.

I don't know how the Smithsonian influenced me as a queer child, but it certainly molded me. All grown up, a proud, gay, "tax-paying American," I wondered if there would be anything queer in the Smithsonian version of the U.S.A. that's landed in Portland.

In the first of three official halls, dubbed "Remembering," I looked around and saw George Washington's battle sword and scabbard, two first ladies' gowns and

There were some items that hinted at homo, but not directly. Indiana Jones' jacket and hat were there, but no whip. A pair of Amelia Earhart's coveralls stood proudly, as did a portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe—taken by her husband. A taste, but nothing definitive. Andy Warhol's *Flowers* held a prominent spot, but his role in gay culture did not. Of course, Dorothy's famous ruby slippers occupied a case all their own.

Something unique to this traveling exhibit is the displays created by the tour's corporate sponsors: Intel, Discover Card and TWA. (MCI is also a sponsor, but had no display.) As a jaded socialist, my first reaction was that these corporate pavilions would cheapen the whole experience. After the huge crowds in the Smithsonian halls, though, these little islands and their small crowds were very inviting. Maybe they'd have something gay?

The Discover Card display was a tribute to music. The queerest offering there was a still from *A Chorus Line*. I thought I saw a photo of The Village People, but it turned out to be group of Native American musicians wearing full head-dresses.

Intel offered live terminals to link visitors to the Internet. I knew I could find something gay on-line, but that would've been cheating.

For me, TWA turned out to be the diamond in the rough. They created an entire wall of celebrity photos with a TWA bent. Here again was Amelia Earhart, but this time her memory was placed next to a photo of Eleanor Roosevelt. That did my queer heart good. Another photo cap-

tured Marlene Dietrich sitting on the steps leading up to a jet. That may have been the most directly queer artifact at the whole exhibit.

Indirectly, I had a sort of queer homecoming in the TWA exhibit. While the Smithsonian left the stewardess uniforms back in D.C., TWA filled the void. The uniform they brought was called the "Français." It was made of gold lamé, incorporated Velcro fasteners and looked like it was designed by NASA. By any definition, it looked pretty gay to me.

If you visit America's Smithsonian looking for a hint of gay U.S. history, you'll be disappointed. As large as the Smithsonian's collection is, and as hostile as much of Congress may be, I'm sure there are pressures to keep the exhibit as mainstream as possible. And while it's not controversial, it's still fascinating. Perhaps by the Smithsonian's bicentennial in 2046, that Stone-wall brick will be along for the ride.

The exhibit is open from 9 am to 8 pm daily at the Portland Expo Center through May 6. Same-day tickets available at the Expo Center are free; tickets reserved by phone at 1-800-913-TOUR carry a \$3.50-per-ticket service fee and must be charged to a credit card.



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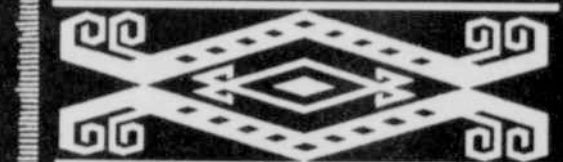


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Mary Todd Lincoln's tea set. Nothing seemed remarkable till I heard a woman near the tea service explaining its role to a young boy, presumably her son.

"And the molding begins," I thought.

If this boy grows up to be awfully dandy, he may have his mother and the Smithsonian to thank for it.

Nevertheless, having finished the molding process myself, I wanted something more obvious. With "nearly 300 major artifacts and national icons" in tow, there had to be something gay.

I passed sections chronicling the civil rights movement, the struggle of the United Farm Workers (featuring César Chávez' jacket) and Native American art, but nothing particularly gay. There was no brick from the Stonewall Inn, no photos of J. Edgar Hoover in drag. I did get my hopes up as I neared a sports display: From about 15 feet away I could see tennis rackets behind glass. Tennis practically being a synonym for "lesbian," I thought the Smithsonian was about to redeem itself.

Was it Martina's? Billie's? How about Renee Richards'? No, it was Chris Evert's racket. It was paired with Arthur Ashe's. While Ashe was heterosexual, his battle with AIDS was linked to our own battles, but I couldn't find mention of that.

I'll give the curators the benefit of the doubt and assume I missed the placard. It was awfully crowded—according to a Smithsonian spokeswoman, the exhibit is averaging 10,600 visitors daily—and I couldn't see everything.

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