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Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History Presents "Discovering Rastafari!"

"Discovering Rastafari!" charts the origins of the Rastafari culture in colonial Jamaica and its subsequent development into a multilingual movement throughout the African Diaspora and the world. The exhibition uses artifacts, rare photographs and ephemera to explore the emergence and development of the movement in Jamaica, taking viewers beyond the popular Jamaican music known as reggae to the deeper roots of the Rastafari culture. Using the museum's unique Rastafari archives and an extensive collection of Rastafari ritual objects, art, clothing, drums, recorded sound and video, banners and material culture, the exhibition will present Rastafari's origins and significance.

"Discovering Rastafari!" is the first exhibition on Rastafari culture ever presented by a major museum. The exhibition opens at the National Museum of Natural History Nov. 2 and will remain on view for one year through Nov. 7, 2008.

"We are excited to bring aspects of this fascinating yet often misunderstood cultural movement to the public," said Paul Risser, acting director of the National Museum of Natural History. "With the benefit of rare artifacts from Smithsonian collections and the expertise of our own curators, 'Discovering Rastafari!' shows the breadth of Rastafarian culture, and emphasizes the museum's eminent role in cultural anthropology."

The Rastafari movement is cultural and religious and traces its origins to Jamaica in the 1930s. *Rastafari* also refers to members of the movement who are dedicated to the development of African consciousness, heritage, identity and repatriation to Africa. Resistance to colonialism and racism became the cornerstone of Rastafari culture, inspired originally by Ras Tafari Makonnen who was later crowned His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia.

The exhibition uses video footage featuring first-person testimony from male and female Rastafari of different ages, nationalities and ethnicities, and socioeconomic classes to emphasize the unity and the spread of the movement. A presentation on the three major “mansions” (organizations) within Rastafari provides visitors with a sense of the movement’s complex diversity, as well an understanding of the core of sacred practices that inform their daily lives. The exhibition focuses on the origins, practices and beliefs of the 77-year-old Rastafari movement in Jamaica and introduces His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, explaining his influence on the movement.

Exhibition curator Jake Homiak of the Department of Anthropology has been working with Rastafari for 30 years and has created forums for Rastafari elders and culture at the Smithsonian on previous occasions in order to enable the movement’s strong ambassadorial tradition of traveling elders. Along with the influence of reggae music, this practice has been central to forging and strengthening bonds between far-flung communities and reaffirming their commitment to orthodox practices. This project began with a convening of an advisory team of leaders in the Rastafari community from around the world that has consulted on all details of the exhibition to ensure that it communicates the most important aspects of Rastafari to the public.

To celebrate the opening of “Discovering Rastafari!,” the National Museum of Natural History has partnered with The Smithsonian Associates to present roots reggae legend Ras Michael and the Sons of Negus Nov. 2 at 7 p.m. in Baird Auditorium. See smithsonianassociates.org for ticket information.

The National Museum of Natural History is located at 10th Street and Constitution Avenue N.W. in Washington, D.C. Opened in 1910, the museum is dedicated to maintaining and preserving the world’s most extensive collection of natural history specimens and human artifacts. It also fosters critical scientific research as well as educational programs and exhibitions that present the work of its scientists and curators to the public. It is the most visited natural history museum in the world. The museum’s Web site is www.mnh.si.edu.

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