

New Orleans Is Proud to Put Its Long, Complex Past on D...

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NEW ORLEANS ¶ Now that many museums are no longer imagined as repositories for cherished objects, they are becoming repositories of cherished identities, chronicling the ways we like to imagine ourselves or portray ourselves to others. They have always been declarations of pride: look what we have made! Look what we have collected! Now they are declarations of our self-images: look at what we have been! Look at what we seek to be!

And the pride is not always pure; sometimes it incorporates accounts of suffering or confessions of sins.

Perhaps because New Orleans has had more than its share of near-death experiences ¶ one is still being felt ¶ or because decadence, disease and racial strife have long accompanied its ecstatic festivities and intermingling cultures, many of its museums seem to touch slightly raw nerves. In some cases unsteadiness almost seems to be sought. This can be felt in the imaginative exploration of arthropods in the new Audubon Insectarium, whose creatures inspire a strange mixture of fascination and repulsion.

But you can feel that tipsiness as well in the epic telling of Louisiana history in the permanent exhibition at the Louisiana State Museum at the Cabildo, in tours of nearby plantations, in the very subject of a new museum devoted to the history of the American cocktail, even in the extraordinary ambitions of the National World War II Museum as it plans a major expansion.

First, the Cabildo. Its multistory exhibition recounts Louisiana history in an almost leisurely fashion, its panels of text revealing latent contradictions and tensions.

New Orleans, we learn, was once a cultural backwater that in the decades before the Civil War could boast the highest death rate of any American city. But it was also the largest metropolis in the antebellum South. Its slaveholding society mixed the ugliest brutality with tolerance for a considerable population of free blacks. It also established quadroon balls in which light-skinned black women were courted by white Louisiana men prepared for what were essentially common-law marriages under a system known as *plaçage*. And New Orleans's polyglot culture evolved under the oversight of the French, then the Spanish, then again the French, and finally the Americans.

As for the region's long-celebrated carnivalesque atmosphere, the show suggests that colonial Louisianans "most likely made such an effort at having fun because, for many, life was short and filled with suffering."

"True to its complex past," the exhibition also notes, "Louisiana had ties to both the Confederacy and the Union during the Civil War." But those ties, the show outlines, were also contortions. New Orleans was the first Confederate city to fall. By May 1862, "occupied New Orleans," as the exhibition puts it, was under martial law, controlled by Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler from Massachusetts, a man Lincoln asked to be his running mate in 1864.

Here, though, Butler was known as "the Beast." He ordered New Orleans citizens to respect the American flag, and imprisoned those who did not. When there were complaints that women were taunting Union soldiers, he posted an ordinance almost wickedly sly in its attack on Southern gentility:

"As the officers and soldiers of the United States have been subject to repeated insult from the women (calling themselves ladies) of New Orleans," the law read, any woman who shows such disrespect "shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation."

The show has stretches of the mundane, but it fascinates: you can sense the tension between its enthusiasms and its dissents. It is wrestling with the past and so unsettles the present.

No such struggle takes place at a plantation museum I visited about 50 miles away, in Vacherie, La. The Oak Alley Plantation is renowned not only for its elegant 1839 mansion, but also for a stately lane of 300-year-old oaks. Hoop-skirted guides tell how the house was built by a loving husband for his wife, who after his death turned out to be so profligate that the plantation had to be sold. No slave quarters or work areas survive. So all that is left is elegance without context, nestled in a haze of fantasy.

There is less glamour but more substance in the nearby Laura Plantation in Vacherie. Its 1805 house, built on pillars to avoid flood damage, had also fallen on hard times, but its current owners, Norman and Sand Marmillion, engaged in extensive detective work. They discovered a cache of photographs, documents and a bound manuscript, "Memories of the Old Plantation Home," completed by Laura Locoul Gore in 1936. Gore was born in the house in 1861; her father named the plantation after her, and she ran it for a time in the matriarchal tradition established by her grandmother. More than 5,000 related documents were discovered in France, where members of her extended family had lived.

As it turns out, Gore herself is thoroughly likable. She anticipates the spirit of American modernity: she shunned the harsh, slave-driving temperament of her grandmother; defied Creole tradition by marrying a Protestant; and left the plantation at 29, eventually settling in St. Louis. Her home also fascinates because in the 1870s her friend Alcée Fortier visited the plantation's slave quarters (some are still standing) and transcribed residents' French Creole folk tales. Fortier published them as "Louisiana Folktales"; they are variations of what became known as the Br'er Rabbit stories.

All of this detail, some touched on in tours, means that the plantation has more resonance than its rooms provide on their own, revealing the density of the region's history, fraught with complexities, conflicts and cultural interactions.

It's enough to turn a visitor to drink, which is, apparently, what happens. That is one reason the Museum of the American Cocktail opened here last month inside the rather cursory Southern Food & Beverage Museum. There have been claims that the cocktail was invented in New Orleans, though the small museum informs us that the word was first used in an 1806 Hudson, N.Y., newspaper.

But since drinking is a strong New Orleans tradition, sugar cane a local product and French culture a strong influence, the city can make a plausible claim for cocktail primacy. Cocktails, after all, seem intended to surprise with their ingredients and ritualistic preparation; they are cultivated creations, hybrids, cleverly disguised concoctions: an alcoholic masque.

As for the museum itself, it is too compressed and omits much European influence. But its collections of tankards and bottles, its recipes and photos of barmen, its Prohibition memorabilia and its relics of '50s bachelor-pad paraphernalia do evoke a pleasant tipsiness. The museum would benefit from offering tastings, particularly since the now dominant New Orleans nighttime drink seems to be an alcoholic ice slush, slurped in the streets out of enormous plastic goblets.

In contrast, the National World War II Museum might seem almost sedate. Its account of D-Day is supple, smart and detailed, inspiring amazement at the event's scope and planning. The museum, which opened as the National D-Day Museum in 2000, was conceived by the historian Stephen E. Ambrose. It is here not just because Ambrose taught at the University of New Orleans, but because D-Day was made possible by boats designed and manufactured here by Andrew Higgins; President Dwight D. Eisenhower told Ambrose that Higgins "won the war for us." The pride is shared by the city.

But the 2006 name change embracing the entire war seems premature. Proportions are a bit off: the museum skimps on context and then devotes extensive attention to minute battles in the Pacific apparently because, as with Normandy, they involved amphibious landings. The institution's ambitions promise a fuller narrative. Indeed, plans are daring: \$300 million is being raised to quadruple the museum's space on a nearby lot by 2015. A theater is scheduled to open next year.

Designs for other buildings almost suggest a World War II World's Fair, including a United States pavilion, a Great Campaigns pavilion, a Victory pavilion. Will that give us more spectacle than history? Will pavilions break up the past rather than reconstruct it? Time will tell, but right now, the dizzying dreams seem right at home in New Orleans.

Information on the National World War II Museum in New Orleans: ddaymuseum.org; the Louisiana State Museum at the Cabildo in New Orleans: lsm.crt.state.la.us/cabildo/cabildo; the Museum of the American Cocktail in New Orleans: museumoftheamericancocktail.org/NewOrleans; Oak Alley Plantation in Vacherie, La.: oakalleyplantation.com; Laura Plantation in Vacherie: lauraplantation.com.

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