Acknowledging the Role of Slavery
Some museums are revamping shows and permanent collections.

Wall labels are being changed to reflect historical truths.

By ALINA TUGEND

One of the plainest, yet also most poignant items at the Chrysler Museum of Art’s exhibition highlighting Thomas Jefferson as an architect is a worn, reddish-brown brick with a handprint.

The handprint very likely belonged to one of the many enslaved craftsmen who helped bring to life so many of Jefferson’s designs, said Erik H. Neil, director of the museum. While it might not have been included in such a show in the past, now items that prominently display, rather than hide, the reality of slave labor play an important role.

The exhibition at the Chrysler Museum, in Norfolk, Va., is one example of how some museums are working to incorporate the impact of slavery in exhibitions and permanent collections in a way not commonly done even a decade ago.

The Chrysler Museum exhibition “Thomas Jefferson, Architect: Palladian Models, Democratic Principles and the Conflict of Ideals” — which runs through Jan. 19 — follows Jefferson’s evolution as an architect through 120 objects, including models, paintings, drawings, photographs and architectural elements — as well as bricks, nails and other items linked to enslaved laborers and craftsmen.

The exhibition was organized in collaboration with the Palladio Museum in Vicenza, Italy, which put on a show in 2015 about Jefferson and his relationship with the Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio.

While the Chrysler Museum is using a number of models from the Italian exhibit, “I knew for our audiences, we would have to tell a fuller story,” Dr. Neil said. “From the start, we knew there would be a component that would focus on enslaved craftsmen,” who built Jefferson’s home, Monticello, the Capitol Building in Richmond, the University of Virginia and other endeavors that Jefferson either designed or influenced.

But it wasn’t always easy to find information on those largely anonymous enslaved workers.

“With Jefferson, we have thousands of letters, and reams of paper have been spilled about him as a person; in many cases, we barely know the names of the people who were building and designing or interpreting his designs,” Dr. Neil said.

But the identity of some were discovered. One of the objects in the show is a paneled door from Poplar Forest, in Bedford County, Va., a plantation that was Jefferson’s second retreat.

Microscopic examination by architectural historians at Poplar Forest found that tools used to help shape the door belonged to John Hemmings, an enslaved craftsman who also worked at Monticello.

He was part of the large Hemmings family connected to Jefferson; Sally Hemmings fathered at least six of his children.

The show also includes a photograph of Isaac Granger, also known as Isaac Jefferson, who was an enslaved metalsmith, later freed. He is wearing a blacksmith’s apron over an open-neck collared shirt, leaning on a table and staring straight at the camera.

“It’s a fascinating object because in so many photographs of enslaved people, they have no choice over how they’re portrayed — they’re part of the landscape,” Dr. Neil said. “It’s much more rare that this man — he was free at the time — could go into a studio and represent himself as a skilled craftsman.”

Other museums are also grappling with how they can rework or revise their collections, even in small ways, to acknowledge the role of slavery in the art itself or people represented by the art.

“People have been doing research about these issues of slavery for a long time, in deep, critical ways in art and art history,” said La Tanya S. Autry, a Ph.D. candidate in art history at the University of Delaware and a fellow at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland.

“The knowledge has been out there, but there’s been more resistance to incorporating it into the museum field,” she added.

“It’s interesting to see in the last several years, there’s been more effort or more openness to actually start questioning things, such as wall labels and thinking about how we show objects.” Ms. Autry is known for her work on how museums approach race.
At the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts, Elizabeth Athens, a former assistant curator for the museum, had long noted that the portraits in the museum’s American Paintings Galleries showed only white faces.

After the 2016 presidential election, she felt compelled to act. “The charged rhetoric — it was so violent,” she said of the presidential campaign. “This idea, of making America great seemed to be about erasing people of color from American history. And with the way we have galleries installed, we were unintentionally reinforcing this idea — and it’s false. We need to address this.”

But, she said, “everything we came up with seemed too difficult to implement and wouldn’t come across clearly.” Then a relatively simple, but powerful idea was suggested — change or add to existing wall labels to identify people who were slave traders or owners.

And it turned out there was already a fair amount of information in the museum’s files.

The museum hung additional labels on top of the traditional ones for 10 out of 29 portraits; for example, one for a portrait of a Captain-Lieutenant James Larrabee notes that the compensation for his military duties included “his living expenses and a slave named York, who was freed upon Larrabee’s death in 1762.” Another, of an Ann Gibbes, states that her father owned a plantation along with 68 slaves.

In addition, a larger sign in the gallery says in part: “Many of the people represented here derived their wealth and social status from the system of violence and oppression. This tragic history has been overlooked in our galleries.”

At the Harvard Art Museums, a similar effort has taken place this year for a handful of paintings, including 18th-century portraits of the Boylston family, who were Boston aristocrats. One painting of Nicholas Boylston shows a ship in the background; his arm rests on a ledger “signifying wealth that came from trans-Atlantic trade,” said Soyoung Lee, the museums’ chief curator.

“Part of that wealth and social status came from trading in luxury goods, but also enslaved people from Africa,” Dr. Lee said. “This indisputable fact was not really incorporated into the story about the Boylston family, but because the painting itself has these visual clues that tell about the family business, we thought it was important to include that story.” The wall label was rewritten, “adding a more complex layer,” she said.

For Ms. Autry, the fact that museum administrators outside of African-American museums are talking about this, she said, is a sign of change.

And, she added, so are programs that teach and train future museum curators. “A lot of institutions are incorporating this other approach to history and trying to focus on things that have been obscured and excluded in the past — and ways that people have challenged that.”
Clockwise from above left, portrait of Isaac Granger, 1847, photographer unknown; nail-making materials excavated on Mulberry Row, Monticello, in Charlottesville, Va.; and “Brick with Handprint,” at the Chrysler Museum of Art.