

Robeson's timeless song of freedom

For most of his life, Dr. Charles Wright has been a healer. As an obstetrician, he's comforted the sick. As an historian, he's kept alive the stories of the African-American odyssey. A cool compass in one hand, notes from a compelling anecdote in the other.

And for Wright, founder of the Museum of African American History, one story has stood above all the others. A tale that stands out like an heroic Greek myth.

It's the story of Paul Robeson, whose character, physical presence and sonorous voice inspired Wright to also carry a medical bag of remedies for social injustices. To a large extent, it's been the story of Robeson and others who followed in his footsteps that inspired Wright to establish the largest African American History Museum in the United States.

This Tuesday, the Southfield Library will celebrate the centennial of Robeson's birth. It's a sign to Wright that the word is spreading.

Incomparable star

Popular culture has a singular image of Robeson. He's probably most remembered as the bellowing singer of "Ol' Man River" in the 1936 film, "Show Boat."

But celluloid can't capture the dimension of the life behind Robeson's stage and screen performances. Even four books and hundreds of lectures still haven't been enough for Wright to present the full measure of the man.

"I knew Martin Luther King Jr. and many of his contemporaries, but when it comes to Robeson, he's incomparable. The closest is probably Nelson Mandela."

In American history, there is no one who combined such great athletic and artistic ability with a passionate search for peace and justice. How great was his talent?

Robeson is in the College Football Hall of Fame. He holds the record for most performances of "Othello" and was a founding member of Eugene O'Neill's Provincetown Players.

While many black American performers were relegated to second-class venues, Robeson sang to sold-out audiences at Carnegie Hall.

Accomplishments that would have made him a legendary American performer, if only, of course, his skin color was a shade of pale.

Artist's responsibility

Unlike many of today's headline-grabbing stars, Robeson believed that an artist's responsibility didn't end when the spotlight went out.

As graceful as he was as a performer, Robeson was a powerful figure standing up to Sen. McCarthy's Committee on Un-American Activities, the exploitation of workers and racial discrimination.

And for simply chronicling Robeson's life, Wright became a subject of furtive FBI investigations.

In the mid 1970s, shortly before Robeson's death, an FBI informant infiltrated the museum staff.

Please see FREEDOM, C2



Freedom fighter: The achievements of artist/activist Paul Robeson are gaining recognition.



Sunny skies: Bob Fisher, juror, and Janet Torno, executive director of the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, sit in Birmingham's Shain Park. In a few days, the park will be transformed into festival venue.

From fair to festive

NEW NAME AND IMAGE FOR BIRMINGHAM'S ANNUAL ART FAIR

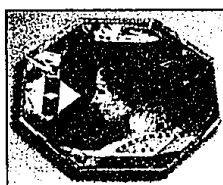
There's little doubt that in art, much like in politics - and the stock market, for that matter - perception is everything.

That seemed to be especially true when it came to renaming the annual spring art fair, held for the last 17 years in downtown Birmingham's Shain Park.

The revamped arts event now entitled, "Birmingham Fine Arts Festival," premieres, appropriately, on Mother's Day weekend, a time to honor maternal instincts and the proverbial warm touch.

In the age of advertising sloganeering and pulse-taking opinion polls, perception may rule, but the restyled fine arts festival proves there's still something to be said about substance. (Isn't there?)

"People want more of a cultural experience," said Janet Torno, executive director of the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center (BBAC), which



Ornate plate: The mixed-media artistry of David Tuwillan of Troy is featured in the Birmingham Fine Arts Festival.

cosponsors the event with the Birmingham Bloomfield Chamber of Commerce.

"Many other art fairs (around the country) have expanded into festivals to attract new audiences," she said. "We're definitely trying to reach a new audience."

Clearly, there's more at stake than a name change. The former "art fair" is attempting to elevate its image into an annual multidisciplinary celebration of spring.

This year's inaugural festival features an expanded entertainment schedule of local performers, an increased number of fine artists covering 17 categories, additional food vendors and a first-ever list of corporate sponsors.

Significant changes have come about since the BBAC and the Chamber began their partnership two years ago, an alliance marked by a decidedly entrepreneurial approach.

Despite an impressive ranking of 147 of 600 best art fairs by the Art Fair Source Book, there was a general consensus that the fair could be improved.

There was a "logical connection" in combining the Chamber's marketing savvy with the BBAC's experience in organizing an arts event, said Tom Markus, city manager of Birmingham.

"What's more, this (expanded program) gives arts groups more opportunities."

A cultural experience

In many ways, the Birmingham Fine Arts Festival is an example of an emerging trend. The festival builds on a formula of a high-profile art center partnering with local businesses while drawing on collaborations among arts groups.

As art fairs continue to proliferate, it's not enough to simply offer artists enough space to sell their wares, said BBAC's executive director Torno.

The more successful festivals - such as the Cherry Creek Festival in Denver - combine venues for music, food and dance, she said.

"Everyone's taste is different when it comes to the arts," said Torno. "A festival has to have a little of every-

Please see FAIR, C2



Glass art: Claudia Zeber-Martell and Michael Martell will show their ceramics at the Birmingham Festival.

DSO diary: Weary travelers arrive in Europe

(This is the first in a series of reports from Ervin Monroe, principal flutist of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, on their European tour.)

BY ERVIN MONROE
PRINCIPAL FLUTIST, DSO

Day One, April 27 Departure to England. This is the day we've all been waiting for. The excitement and the anticipation of the tour has been building for the past month. Following our Saturday night concert at Orchestra Hall, we had Sunday to pack and make our final arrangements for the trip. Counting the orchestral personnel, stage crew and staff members, our travel group numbers well over 100, so the orchestra will be traveling in two units. The first group had a check-in time of 5:30 p.m. and flew directly to London with a connecting flight to the final destination of Manchester.

My wife, Susan, a school psychologist with the West Bloomfield district, will be flying with that group, and I am scheduled to leave with Group Two, which has a check-in time of 9 p.m.

My group is flying to Amsterdam and then back-tracking from there to Manchester. By the time our flight departed, it was already early Tuesday morning in our destination city. I was sitting next to Haden McKay, a cellist from Birmingham, and he had invested in an inflatable travel pillow such as the one I brought along. When we hooked these gadgets around our necks, the two of us looked like a pair of oxen ready to haul a heavy load across the Atlantic.

I could hear Bob Murphy, violinist from Bloomfield Hills, directly behind me talking about returning to the "old country" to play a round of golf. He leaned forward and asked, "Scotland's not too far from Manchester, is it?" (It's about 200 miles).

Day Two, April 28 When we changed planes in Amsterdam, we were quite a sight to behold. Detroit's Ambassadors for the Arts resembled a Scout troop returning from a bad camping trip.

Genevieve Code, symphony operations manager from Grosse Pointe, was our fearless pack leader. Only after arriving at our new departure gate did Yours Truly realize that he no longer had a ticket! A most embarrassing moment. Just the previous evening, I had been chiding some of the new members of the orchestra about their inexperience in traveling with the Big Time ensemble.

I quietly sneaked over to the airline desk and explained that I had left my ticket on the other flight. The Dutch speak excellent English and humored me considerably, but explained that there was nothing they could do. I even offered to buy a ticket on the flight, if necessary, but they told me that the entire flight was booked. I guaranteed them there would be one no-show by the name of Monroe, but this was to no avail.

Finally, in desperation, I went over and confessed my predicament to Genevieve. She took over at the desk and moments later I had a new boarding pass. I returned to my spot in the waiting area, where Vicki King, bas-

Please see TRAVELERS, C3



Ervin Monroe

EXHIBIT

Pop artist provokes thought about everyday objects

The 1935 Chrysler Airflow fascinated Claes Oldenburg since childhood when he played with a wind-up model of the first aerodynamic car. After visiting Airflow's designer Carl Breer in Grosse Pointe in the 1960s, Oldenburg headed back to New York with a batch of sketches under his arm with the intent of creating a black vinyl soft sculpture but never did. In 1969, he created "Profile Airflow," a cast polyurethane relief over a lithograph in two colors. The work is one of more than 130 on exhibition in "Claes Oldenburg: Printed Stuff" at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

"I wanted to make an L.A. Airflow," said Oldenburg during an interview before an opening reception on Saturday, April 18, at the museum. Oldenburg intended for the see-through green vinyl to give the appear-

Claes Oldenburg: Printed Stuff

What: An exhibition of more than 130 works, including prints, posters, drawings, and sculpture, from 1956 to 1996.

When: Through Sunday, June 14. Exhibit hours are 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday-Friday, and until 5 p.m. Saturday-Sunday.

Where: Detroit Institute of Arts, 5200 Woodward Avenue. For more information, call (313) 833-7000.

Cost: Exhibition free with recommended museum admission \$4 adults, \$1 children. Founders Society members free.

Related activities: Gallery tours with Dennis Newbeck, Center for Creative Studies art history professor, 2 p.m. Sunday, May 10 and Sunday, May 30.

Animation class for ages 11-14, 10 a.m. to noon Saturdays, May 9, 16, 23. Fee \$30. \$24 Founders Society members. Call (313) 833-4240.

Video: Claes Oldenburg Anthology runs continuously during museum hours in Prentiss Court Screening Room.

ance of peering into a swimming pool. At the time, Oldenburg was in Los Angeles, noted for its proliferation of swimming pools.

As a Pop artist, objects such as cars, hamburgers, baseball bats, and even toilets were subjects for Oldenburg who frequently began works as sketches in a small notebook he carries with him everywhere. Thumbing the black spiral binder, custom-made with archival paper, the 69-year-old artist talked about his early years and the influences of those times.

Born in Stockholm, Sweden, Oldenburg moved to Chicago in 1956. After graduating with a bachelor's of art and English degree from Yale University in 1950, he studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and worked as a reporter before moving to New York in 1956. His



DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

Streamlined art: Claes Oldenburg created "Profile Airflow," a cast polyurethane relief over a lithograph in two colors.

first solo exhibit was in 1959 at Judson Gallery in New York.

"By the end of the fifties, art was changing rapidly," said Oldenburg. "Abstract Expressionism was played out. In the early '60s style changed, and I became more interested in

Please see ARTIST, C2