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THE SMITHSONIAN'S 'WATCHING OPRAH' EXHIBITION: A FASCINATING EMBLEM OF WINFREY'S SHAPING OF AMERICAN CULTURE

WRITTEN BY: LACEY JOHNSON

IT WAS EARLY 1984, in the era of after-school specials and the Reagan administration. An ambitious, ripe and relatively unknown television correspondent by the name of Oprah Winfrey was hired to host *A.M. Chicago*, a dwindling half-hour local morning talk show. Within a week, there was a shocking upsurge in its ratings.

No one could identify exactly what made the 30-year-old fledgling journalist so endearing, but there was something about her that intrigued viewers—grabbing them by their collars, pulling them to the edge of their recliners, and demanding that they put down their coffee and watch. In one month's time, the show was pronounced the highest-rated of its kind. Prior to Winfrey's arrival, it was practically begging to depart from the bottom spot.

The following year, the segment was extended to an hour time slot, and renamed *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Then, on September 8, 1986, it stretched out its arms to reach a national audience, syndicating in diners and living rooms all across America. *How would she fair in the big leagues*, her colleagues speculated. *Would a black woman be able to hold America's attention and favor in a field dominated by white males?* In an interview with journalist Mike Wallace for *60 Minutes*, filmed in December 1986, shortly after the show's airing, his skepticism

was apparent, but so was Winfrey's confidence. "It'll do well," she said, coolly. "And if it doesn't?" he asked. "And if it doesn't? I will still do well," said Winfrey, emphatically. "I will do well because I am not defined by a show... I think we are defined by the way we treat ourselves and the way we treat other people."

Six months later, Winfrey proved to viewers that she was not only endearing and intriguing, but also brave—venturing to Forsyth County, Georgia, a hotbed of racism at the time, and confronting even its most brazen of white supremacist citizens. As the show evolved, she began to daringly address a myriad of compelling topics—from drug abuse, to incest, to religious occultism.

The show's popularity exploded. Teenagers began venturing home after school, curling up with a snack to watch her. Stay-at-home mothers fell in love with her, stealing moments with the show to laugh and weep as their babies napped. Everyone from factory workers to executives set their VCRs, making sure to never miss an episode. What was it—her endless curiosity, her fun-loving sense of humor, her attentive and penetrating gaze, her transparency, her infinite supply of both discernment and empathy?

Regardless, whether revealing her own 67-pound weight loss by wheeling a wagon of animal fat across the stage in representation



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of it, or cozying with actors and pop stars in promotion of their movies and album releases, or consoling guests as they unraveled painful narratives of having survived various modes of abuse, betrayal or tragedy, Winfrey pioneered the intimate, confessional style of talk show that has since become commonplace. But, most significantly, she spun a web of connectedness throughout America—transcending age, race, economic status and creed, all the while sparking revolutionary conversations and destigmatizing even the most controversial of topics. She did this for 25 years, across 4,561 episodes, until the finale aired in 2011. To this day, it is still the highest-rated talk show of all time.

At the Smithsonian National Museum of African-American History & Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, D.C., there is poignant evidence of why we could never turn away from her, and why we miss her presence in our living spaces year after year, five days a week. In its “Watching Oprah” exhibition—a fascinating time warp—there exists an encapsulation of not only her thumbprint on American culture, but also highlights of the odds she defied in order to leave it there.

In a review by the *Washington Post*, the writer calls the exhibition “a testament to our culture’s transformation, to who we have

become,” and declaring the icon to be, “American’s confidante.” Winfrey’s closest friend, Gayle King, reported from the exhibition on *CBS This Morning* in June, just days before the exhibition was unveiled to the public. She said, “It’s humbling, it’s overwhelming, and in Oprah’s words, it’s surreal.” Unable to contain her emotion, her voice shook as she continued, saying, “It’s beyond amazing what has happened in this room.”

Lonnie Bunch, Director of NMAAHC, introduced King and Winfrey to the exhibition for the *CBS This Morning* segment. As they navigated its parts, Bunch, King and Winfrey paused to gaze in awe at the display of Winfrey’s private journal entry from the night before the show’s first national airing. Eerily, she had written, “I keep wondering how my life will change... if it will change... what all of this means—why have I been so blessed... I just know that I must be pressed to the mark of a high calling.” Winfrey recalled having been overtaken with nerves on that first day, confessing, “I had hives underneath my armpits.” In true Winfrey fashion, as she moved through the exhibition, she was provoked to tears upon reading words from other black journalists who credited her for their belief in and love for themselves, then embracing Bunch, saying, repeatedly, “Thank you.”



Photo by Lindsey Koren



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Long revered for her refreshing candor, undeniable compassion, rare combination of confidence and humility, and entertaining personality, the 4300-square-foot space in honor of Winfrey offers evidence of why she was a reliable infusion of hope, inclusion, laughter and the possibility of change for Americans for more than two decades—from the tossing of her head back and shouting into the air when excited, announcing when she had goosebumps, walking through the aisles and embracing her guests for a hug, stretching out her arms and communicating freely with her body language. There is testimony, too, of her willingness to share the spotlight—not only creating a variety of other television careers, but launching her celebrated book club, where she often chose obscure and unconventional books, turning lesser-known hopefuls into *New York Times* bestselling authors.

Through the exhibition's progression, a trail of the era's most precious fragments can be found. There are backstage and on-set artifacts—from the original chairs used by audience members to Winfrey's personal work space and most memorable wardrobe ensembles. There is an interesting collection of gifts from some of her most famous guests—a flamboyant purple hairpiece from pop star Lady Gaga; a Rubik's Cube solved by actor Will Smith; a journal with her dear friend and mentor Maya Angelou's handwritten words—just to name a few.

Screens throughout the space loop clips from obscure footage of Winfrey's early career on local news stations—"That's when I was doing my own hair," she joked on *CBS This Morning*—to the most memorable episodes from *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, including the massive, audience-shrieking "You get a car! You get a car!" giveaway moment in 2004. There are stills of her interviews with Patti LaBelle, Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama, as well as glittering footage from the popular annual segment that was Oprah's Ultimate Favorite Things.



Photo Courtesy of Harpo Studios

But, most compelling, the exhibition houses moving imagery and precious artifacts from the generations that came before her, starting with the Civil Rights era, and showcasing evidence of the African-American actors and television personalities that fought to break through oppression and stubborn stereotypes, thereby inspiring and shaping Winfrey's willingness to trailblaze her way toward not only equal presence in the media, but on to becoming perhaps the most influential public figure of our modern day. Because America still can't get enough of watching Oprah.