



Request for Proposal

Submission Deadline: June 30, 2022

I. OVERVIEW

A. Services Requested and the Submission Process

The American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) is requesting proposals from experienced exhibition design firms to design and produce the exhibition, *Unnamed Figures: Black Presence & Absence in Early American Vernacular Art* at the Museum (2 Lincoln Square, NYC). The exhibition designer(s) will: incorporate ideas for the layout of the exhibition in our galleries which will include the design and visual concept of the exhibition including: density studies; to scale architectural drawings (plans and elevations); display furniture; adapting existing exhibition furniture into the design, if possible; wall colors; and lighting concepts, as well as align with the Museum's mission, design standards, and branding. The planning process will involve Museum staff and leadership.

Scope of Work:

- Design an exhibition of approximately 65 objects of art which include: paintings on canvas and panel, 3-dimensional objects, sculptures, needlework, works on paper, and photographs, ranging in time period from the 17th-century to the 21st. The exhibition designer will oversee the design and production of plans and elevations and the production of exhibition display furniture and work with the lighting designers on a lighting concept. Exhibition designer will provide construction drawings for fabrication of display furniture.

Other tasks:

- Provide 1-2 design concepts.
- Complete a density study.
- Meet onsite and over Zoom multiple times during the design phase starting in January 2023 until August 2023, with a preliminary design meeting in summer or early fall of 2022.
- Oversee exhibition installation in November 2023. Final production schedule will be shared with chosen designer/design firm.
- Coordinate with AFAM's Director of Design who will be responsible for the graphic design of the exhibition.

Submission:

AFAM would like a written description of exhibition design concepts for the exhibition *Unnamed Figures* along with an estimate. The proposal can include concept sketches but these are not required for consideration. Please see section V. for more information.

Submissions are welcome via email to Eve Erickson, Administrative Manager, (eerickson@folkartmuseum.org) by 6 PM EST on June 30, 2022.

Please inform us if you have questions prior to formally submitting your proposal.

This RFP and its contents are considered confidential.

The American Folk Art Museum is an equal-opportunity employer.



B. About the Museum and Exhibition

Mission Statement

The American Folk Art Museum engages people of all backgrounds through its collections, exhibitions, publications, and programs as the leading forum shaping the understanding and appreciation of folk and self-taught art across time and place.

About the Museum

Since 1961, the Museum has been the leading institution shaping the understanding of folk art through its exhibitions, publications, and programs. Moving across four centuries, AFAM's collection brings together a rich array of voices, experiences, and mindsets, yielding a correspondingly diverse set of objects: community-based creations rooted in long-standing traditions; functional but highly aesthetic objects reflecting widespread popular practices; distinctive works by neurodivergent individuals made outside the purview of artistic peers; works as fragments entangled in lifelong private mythologies.

Rejecting artificial and discriminatory boundaries prevalent in dominant art historical narratives, the identity of the Museum's collection has been formed and reformed over the years by newly-added makers and fresh ideas. AFAM lives in two locations in New York City. The Museum's galleries and shop are on Manhattan's Upper West Side amongst cultural institutions such as Lincoln Center, Julliard, and the American Museum of Natural History. The Museum's Administrative Offices, Archives, and Collection Center are in Long Island City, Queens.

Exhibition Description

Unnamed Figures: Black Presence & Absence in Early American Vernacular Art

Black figures and faces seldom appear in American art of the 18th and early 19th centuries. When African Americans are represented, they are typically placed in secondary positions, subjected by both artist and patron to marginalization, and portrayed as lacking in individuality and interiority.

Although initiated by the works' makers and original consumers, this compositional sidelining has also been reinforced by histories of interpretation, with museums and art historians re-inscribing, through narrative repetition, white representations as the dominant point of interest. In landscapes, small Black staffage figures are glossed as incidental, their presence left without further exploration or interpretation. Incorporated into portraits of elite white sitters, enslaved Black servants are continually described only as accessories to power, symbols that elevate the status of the primary, white subject of a picture.

What if we actively choose to refocus our attention, to center interpretation on questions about Black subjects, even though the answers may well elude us? Taking these questions as a prompt, *Unnamed Figures: Black Presence and Absence in Early American Vernacular Art* shifts the traditional narrative by inviting the viewer to consider early American images from an alternative perspective, positioning the Black figure as the principal subject of inquiry.

An innovative and thoughtful exhibition design will be essential to exploring these questions and actively forefronting the experience of historically marginalized figures. The project poses key design challenges: namely, how do we make absence visible? We seek a highly collaborative and sensitive designer to partner with our curatorial team in envisioning this exciting project.



II. PROJECT GOALS

- Create an exhibition design plan for *Unnamed Figures: Black Presence & Absence in Early American Vernacular Art*.
- Align the design with the Museum's brand, design standards, and mission.

III. PROJECT SCHEDULE

The Museum intends to complete the design phase of this project in July 2023 (final design drawings will be due August 2023). The exhibition opens on November 13, 2023.

IV. DESIGN FEE

Commensurate with experience, 20-23K

V. SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS

1. Experience, Structure, and Personnel

- Cover letter that explains the firm's strengths, qualifications, experience, and competencies that are especially relevant to AFAM and this particular project.
- Organizational structure of the firm, indicating team members who would work with AFAM.

2. Methodological Approach

- Description of firm's philosophy, approach, and methodology in exhibition design.
- Description of proposed design concepts for *Unnamed Figures*.

3. Conflicts of Interest

- Notify AFAM of any potential conflicts of interests that may arise in acting as the Museum's consulting firm.

4. Contact information

- Lead individual's name and contact information (phone number, email, and legal mailing address)

VI. PROPOSAL EVALUATION

A. Criteria for Selection

1. Demonstrated understanding of the project scope and goals in submission materials.
2. Successful experience in facilitating effective exhibition designs for cultural organizations.
3. Demonstrated capacity to meet deadlines and operate within budgets.
4. Ability to show empathy and discretion through all facets of a design process.

Candidates with a demonstrated interest in and knowledge of DEAI, the telling of underrepresented stories, and grappling with challenging histories, are actively encouraged to apply.