

REWRITING

FROM LEFT:
Roberto Lugo,
Fabiola Jean-Louis,
Ini Archibong,
Tourmaline, and
Jomo Tariku inside
the Metropolitan
Museum of Art in
New York City.



HISTORY

A new period room at the
Metropolitan Museum of Art
presents an imagined Black
home in New York City.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELLIOTT JEROME BROWN JR.

In November, the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened “Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room.” The exhibition, on view for two years, draws inspiration from the Black literary and cultural tradition that became known as Afrofuturism, which used science fiction and fantasy to imagine bold futures free of the legacy of racism. The room is the first of its kind for the museum, whose period rooms include grand European interiors and reconstructions of early American life, but very few things, until now, that nod to African or African American interior design and domestic culture. A project like this is inherently complex, in both its goals and its execution; it includes the work of about a dozen Black and Latino artists and designers (turn the page to see some of their contributions). The Met also enlisted the collaboration of several external players, including *Black Panther* production designer Hannah Beachler and scholar Michelle D. Commander, Ph.D., whose work centers on slavery and memory. The show references the very real histories of gentrification and erasure in Black communities across New York City, but is it possible to do that in an institution inextricably linked to that past? We asked art critic, writer, and former Met staffer **Kimberly Drew** to take a stroll through this period room of the future—and to parse its meaning in the present. >

IN 1857, A PREDOMINANTLY AFRICAN AMERICAN community in New York City called Seneca Village was razed to the ground to create Central Park. Built three decades earlier on a stretch of land between West 82nd and 89th Streets, on which churches, houses, schools, and cemeteries sat, it was seized by the city through eminent domain. Now, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, due east of the site, a period room called “Before Yesterday We Could Fly” has been unveiled—one which sets out to ask: What if this community had had the opportunity to grow and thrive?

For those who have never wandered past the Egyptian Temple of Dendur or the seemingly endless maze of European painting and sculpture galleries, the Met is also known for its early-American period rooms. According to the museum’s website, “period rooms capture how people lived in the past, revealing the historical fashions and values of different eras.” They have the power to illustrate narratives informed by the past, but what happens when a period room is inspired by a speculative future?

“Before Yesterday” is constructed with what the literary scholar and cultural historian Saidiya Hartman, Ph.D., has defined as “critical fabulation,” or the practice of telling an “impossible story while also amplifying the impossibility of its telling.” The exercise coined by Hartman is the work of overlaying historical gaps with imaginative narrative building. This practice stems from the reality that the everyday lives of Black people have often been underdocumented or plainly ignored. The oldest existing photographs of New York City, for example, date to 1853—

four years before the destruction of Seneca Village—and yet there are no known images of the community or the various buildings therein. This means that until relics like bone toothbrushes, Chinese porcelain, and iron tea kettles were exhumed by archaeologists in 2011, it had been almost completely forgotten by the public.

When entering the space, your journey begins in a fictional living room. Adorned with a stunning chandelier by industrial designer Ini Archibong and furniture pieces by a host of Black designers, including Jomo Tariku and Yinka Ilori, the room ties together objects that might have made up the decor of a descendant of the original Seneca community, had it survived to this day. As you explore, it’s hard to suspend reality because in the real and present day, there is a well-documented

decline in Black homeownership across New York City. Yes, this fictional resident may have inherited their home, but who is to say that they would have been able to weather decades of racist machinations since? On one hand, I want to be optimistic and revel in the beauty of what’s being presented, but it’s hard not to be cynical, especially when there are no other period rooms in the museum that show real homes or rooms inhabited by Black people. Why not reconstruct Harlem Renaissance painter Augusta Savage’s atelier or partner with the estate of America’s first female self-made millionaire, Madame C.J. Walker? What does it mean to apply speculative fiction in lieu of creating a room based in the reality of Black life in New York?

The allure of the room is clear. At a time when there is a hyper-focus on Black life and “getting it right” institutionally, it is no mystery that a museum like the Met would find something meaty in this query. In the global consciousness that arose in the aftermath of the brutal police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and far too many others, we have seen an acknowledgment of holidays like Juneteenth and an explosion of interest in the art market for works by Black artists. And yet it can be hard to hold on to the warm fuzzy feeling that comes from increased awareness and conversations about inclusion when projects like this feel far more whimsical than the subject matter might call for.

There will undoubtedly be many people who will visit this period room and revel in the possibilities it explores. The period room as curatorial exercise is always one where reality meets speculative fiction, but as with any other museum display, context is everything. ■



Inside the “Before Yesterday We Could Fly” period room, which includes works by Yinka Ilori, Fabiola Jean-Louis, Chuma Maweni, Atang Tshikare, and Tourmaline. metmuseum.org

WHAT'S ON VIEW

A survey of some of the original pieces in the Met Museum's new Afrofuturist Period Room.

BY CAMILLE OKHIO



^ ATANG TSHIKARE

Tswana artist Atang Tshikare created the delicate Mollo oa Leifo-Mme chairs in collaboration with furniture manufacturer Casamento. The pieces evoke nights spent by a hearth, recounting the folklore of Tshikare's Bantu compatriots. The delicate grass back was woven by Butha-Buthe weavers from Lesotho and is encircled by singed beech and rubber wood. The ends of the weaving are left loose, quivering from the back of the chair—a rustle recalling the ghosts and mythological creatures that inspire much of Tshikare's work.



^ NJIDEKA AKUNYILI CROSBY

The artist and 2017 MacArthur fellow used collage and photo transfer to create *Thriving and Potential, Displaced (Again and Again and...)*, a wall-covering that envelops the period room. Crosby is no stranger to interiors; the Nigerian-American's recent work includes a mural for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in 2018, depicting a colorful living room with wallpaper of its own. At the Met, her design provides a cohesive background to the variegated works on display.

> ROBERTO LUGO

Originally a graffiti artist, Puerto Rican-American Roberto Lugo now translates his tags, along with the faces of celebrities, living and dead, onto hand-thrown ceramics. Colonial and diasporic traditions meet in bright forms, with Lugo's subjects framed by squiggles, swirls, and stripes in bold glazes.



LUGO: JULIA LEHMAN, COURTESY OF WEXLER GALLERY; TARIKU, TSHIKARE: COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

^ INI ARCHIBONG

The Nigerian-American artist has dissected space through design for more than a decade. One of his pieces at the Met, *Vernus Chandelier 3*, follows in this tradition, using handblown glass in bold tones and galvanized steel. The Orion Table (above) incorporates similar materials and construction. The pieces in the period room marry

Archibong's optimistic view of the future and the domestic necessities of lived space.

^ YINKA ILORI

Design's king of cheer, Ilori has made a name for himself creating everything from basketball courts to flamingo-shaped playground rockers. In the period room is a piece by the Nigerian-British artist entitled *Iya Ati Omo*, which means "mother and child" in Yoruba. The piece is from a series of found works to which he gave new life with vivid colors and wax-print upholstery. The chair's inclusion in the period room brings Ilori's public space-minded work into a domestic context, circling seamlessly back to the childhood memories that still inspire his practice today.



^ ZIZIPHO POSWA

The South African potter calls on her Xhosa heritage in colorful, hand-built ceramics, distinguished by heavily textured surfaces. The several pieces on display are early works from Poswa's studio, *Imiso*, meaning "tomorrow" in Xhosa. The name is fitting, as the period room's aim is to envision a bright new future where equity abounds.

> JOMO TARIKU

For his Mido chair, the designer used modern bentwood techniques in a larger-than-life Afro pick that serves a different function. The Kenyan-born, Ethiopian-American artist pulls on his rich cultural background, combining an African American visual vernacular with the precision of ancient Ethiopian architecture. With its directness and ease, Tariku's work contributes greatly to the African contemporary design lexicon.

