

Spencer Museum to host teachers' workshops exploring race in American education



New landscaping and entrance displays greet visitors to the new renovated spaces and reinstalled galleries at Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas.

The Spencer Museum of Art is hosting a series of workshops this summer intended to explore the history of racial disparity and discrimination in the U.S.

educational system. Kansas, and our state's cultural landmarks, play a role in that narrative, museum leaders say — and they're hoping local educators will sign up for the program meant to ruminate on “how” and “why.”

Funded by a \$159,049 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities' “Landmarks of American History and Culture” program, the weeklong workshops are tailored specifically for K-12 teachers, says Cassandra Mesick Braun, curator of global indigenous art at the museum.

“The premise of it was really interesting and important and would represent a way for us to connect with K-12 teachers in a very different way,” she says of the program, which is being offered to educators — both from Lawrence and outside its school district boundaries — free of charge.

It was her idea, initially, to focus on the experiences of Native-American and African-American students for the Spencer's project, which spans from 1830 to 1960. Normally, Mesick Braun says, the museum's interaction with local teachers is limited to field trips or similar programming. In the “Landmark” workshops, educators will join Spencer staff in exploring local landmarks such as the Shawnee Indian Mission State Historic Site, Haskell Indian Nations University, the predominantly black settlement of Nicodemus, and Topeka's Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, among others.

“From the very beginning of when we started to develop the program, we really wanted to take a two-pronged approach. One would be educating teachers on aspects of U.S. history that maybe aren't part of the standard curriculum,” says Mesick Braun, who is co-directing the project with Celka Straughn, the museum's Andrew W. Mellon Director of Academic Programs.

“The second prong of that was to go at it from more of a practical skills and pedagogical approach,” she says, as in, “What are some things that we might be able to teach teachers that could then apply to all these different subject matters?”

In that vein, participants will engage with primary source material from KU’s Spencer Research Library, the Black Archives of Mid-America Kansas City and the Haskell Cultural Center and Museum. The Spencer will also host an exhibition in conjunction with the “Landmarks” project drawing from its collection of art related to the cultures and histories of indigenous and black Americans.

Mesick Braun and her colleagues worked with a master teacher and the Kansas State Department of Education to develop the programming, which will also involve 10 “experts” in providing keynote lectures and tours, hosting interactive seminars and facilitating conversations and panel discussions with community activists. Kim Warren, an associate professor of history at KU, will serve as keynote lecturer and faculty member for the project.

“Landmarks” meets state educational standards, Mesick Braun says, but also “enhances” teachers’ understanding of historical events that still resonate in contemporary times. “Regardless of political position, I think it’s undeniable that conversations about race have sort of been renewed in the U.S. consciousness over the last several years,” Mesick Braun says.

“Some of the difficult conversations and topics are being raised and being felt even in our local Lawrence community in ways that are pretty profound,” she says. “I think the workshop, in dealing with history that isn’t always talked about, will hopefully give teachers some ways to bring up some difficult conversations and topics and impart that to students.”

The first “Landmark” session, for commuting teachers, will be held June 18-24. A second session for teachers in need of housing accommodations will be held July 9-15.

The deadline to apply for the workshops is March 1. For more information, including a link to the application, visit www.sma-neh-landmark.ku.edu.

