

Spencer Museum of Art to host traveling exhibition on Emmett Till, civil rights movement

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photo by: File courtesy of AP

An undated portrait shows Emmett Till, a Black 14-year-old Chicago boy who was brutally murdered near Money, Mississippi, Aug. 31, 1955.

An exhibit on the impact of the 1955 murder of Emmett Till — a 14-year old Black boy who was killed in Mississippi and whose murderers escaped conviction — opens Friday at a KU museum.

The exhibit “Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley: Let the World See” opens Feb. 9 at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas. The exhibit focuses not only on Till, but also on his mother, who used her son’s death and funeral to spark activities within the civil rights movement.

The exhibit includes photographs, first-person accounts and other historical materials, including some from a KU professor who has become a national leader in the effort to properly memorialize Till’s death.

The exhibit includes a bullet-ridden sign that once marked the spot where Till's body was removed from the Tallahatchie River. Dave Tell, KU professor of communication studies, helped secure the sign for the exhibit. Tell helped launch the Emmett Till Memory Project, an app that highlights important locations related to Till's murder.

"The sign at the center exhibit was the third sign to mark the spot where Till's body was pulled from the river. The first sign was stolen, thrown in the river and never recovered. The second was filled with 317 bullet holes and eventually went to the Smithsonian. The third is here. The fourth — still standing — is bulletproof," Tell said in a release announcing the exhibit.



photo by: Pablo Correa

A bullet-riddled Emmett Till memorial sign in 2015 at the Tallahatchie River in Mississippi.

Till was murdered in August of 1955 after being accused of offending a white woman while visiting Mississippi from his Chicago home. Upon his death and the recovery of his bullet-ridden and bloated body from the river, Till's mother insisted upon a public funeral with an open casket. The heavily attended funeral drew national media attention and sparked new conversations about the lack of civil rights protections in parts of the South.

The exhibit comes to Spencer after having previously been on display at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library and the National Civil Rights Museum, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, and The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, which hosted its premier in 2022.

In addition to the Till exhibit, Spencer is hosting a companion show titled "One History, Two Versions" that features multiple pieces of art from both the Spencer's collection and collections from across the country.

“The artwork is big, bold, colorful and expands on themes of Emmett and Mamie’s story, like the love between a mother and her children, or how media representation and activism have evolved over time, while also recognizing that more work is needed in the fight for racial justice,” Sydney Pursel, Spencer Museum curator for public practice, said in a release.

“Let the World See” will remain on view at the Spencer Museum through May 19. “One History, Two Versions” will remain on view through June 16. Admission to the Spencer Museum is free.

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