

artnet news

‘Hip-Hop Is a Canon’: How the Baltimore Museum of Art’s Major Hip-Hop Show Is Bridging the Divide Between Rap and Art

"The Culture," the museum's first hip-hop exhibition, is on view through July 16.

Miki Hellerbach, April 5, 2023



Installation view of "The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century" at the Baltimore Museum of Art.
Photo: Mitro Hood/BMA.

“Hip-hop is a canon. It’s only 50 years old and it belongs in museums,” Asma Naeem, director at the Baltimore Museum of Art told Artnet News. “It doesn’t just belong in temporary exhibitions; it belongs in the permanent collections of museums.” To coincide with the 50th anniversary of a genre born in the Bronx at a birthday party hosted by DJ Kool Herc, the institution is presenting its first hip-hop-themed exhibition, titled “The Culture: Hip-Hop & Contemporary Art in the 21st Century,” to consider how the form has shaped all manner of cultural production. The show, which opens today, is not alone in commemorating the movement’s 50th year—Fotografiska and the Museum at FIT are also doing so—but it’s one that’s weaving the overarching culture with works of art in a collage of consequential objects and imagery.



Installation view of “The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century” at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Photo: Mitro Hood/BMA.

One of the exhibition’s goals, set by Naeem and her team of curators including Gamynne Guillotte, is to dismantle the divide between hip-hop and high art. As Guillotte said in her opening statement before a preview tour of the gallery: “The separation between street and gallery is a fallacy,” with perhaps an unintentional rhyme recalling the wordplay of Biggie Smalls, the rapper who inspired a piece by Mark Bradford draped behind her.

Titled *Biggie Biggie Biggie* (2002), Bradford’s piece, which is made of gauze “endpapers” used to curl hair, form an abstract rendering of the Brooklyn M.C. in the first section of the exhibition. Within this same room, described by Guillotte as a “tasting menu” of the sections to come, there is also Baltimore transplant Zéh Palito’s hot pink double portrait, *It was all a dream* (2022), a 1983 Basquiat canvas dedicated to jazz musician Charlie Parker, and a Dapper Dan down jacket from 2018.



Zéh Palito, *It was all a dream* (2022). Photo courtesy of the artist, Simoes de Assis, and Luce Gallery.

This collage of styles offers a positive response to a text-based work by New York artist Shirt, installed in the following section of the exhibition centered on Language, which reads in bold black letters, “CAN A RAP SONG HAVE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ART.” It’s a statement, less a question, that bears out the exhibition’s thesis, but also emphasizes the timeless messaging that runs throughout hip-hop.

Across its elements, hip-hop has always been a way for Black artists in particular to express the grind of systemic oppression, with rap and fashion offering aspirational counterpoints to reclaim painful narratives and history. The Adornment section of the exhibition offers such a juxtaposition of trauma and beauty.



Hank Willis Thomas, *Black Power* (2006). Photo courtesy of Barrett Barrera Projects.

We see Robert Pruitt’s arrangement of gold chains mirroring the passageways of the transatlantic slave trade, Hank Willis Thomas’s *Black Power* (2006) gold grills, and Deanna Lawson’s portrait of two men with bold African facial jewelry next to a snapshot of George Washington’s rotting dentures. Naeem described such fashions as a “graspable language” to translate hip-hop’s cultural messaging to a far-reaching audience.

Baltimore sculptor Murjoni Merriweather and her hair braid-crafted sculpture *Z E L L A* (2022) are also included to center a more personal perspective. “The section is a lot about adornment and I feel like it caters to the purposes of my piece, but also to myself, as a person,” the artist explained. “With hair, we use it in a way to adorn ourselves, to make ourselves feel proud.”



Murjoni Merriweather, *Z E L L A* (2022). Photo courtesy of the artist, © Murjoni Merriweather.

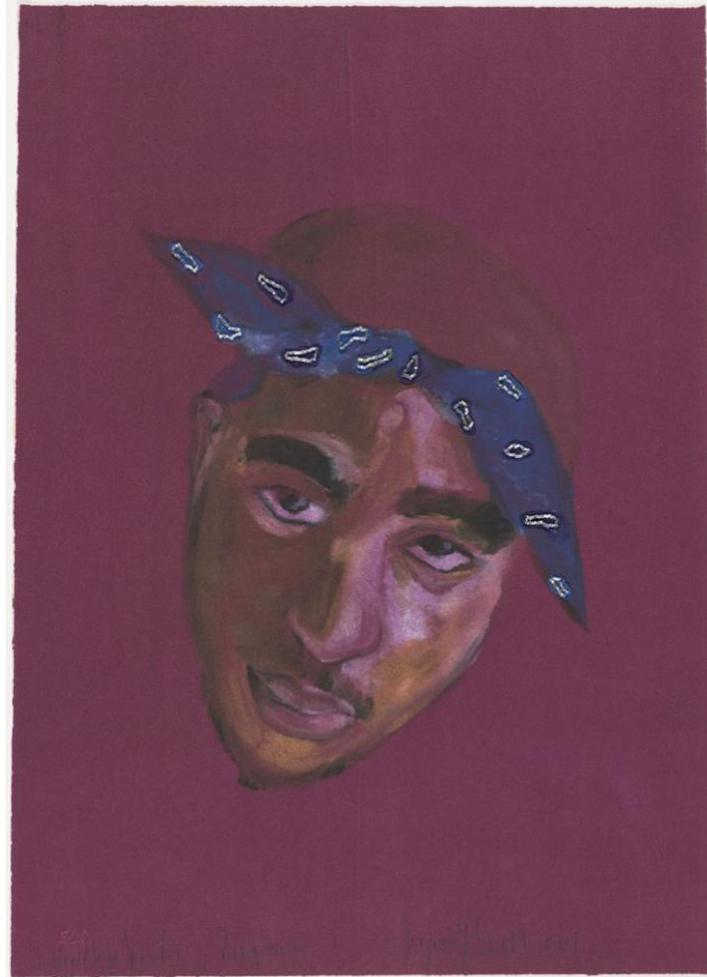
Hip-hop fashion has also had a terrific commercial appeal, as explored in the Brand section of the exhibition. The gallery opens on a graffiti panel, directly contrasting it with an encased Travis Scott Air Jordan 1 and a Cross Colours denim bucket hat—spotlighting how a criminal act of vandalism has, over the decades, helped birth a commodified culture.

There is even a display of Pharrell Williams's now-legendary Buffalo Hat (debuted at the Grammys in 2014), which was originally designed by Vivienne Westwood and inspired by Malcolm McLaren's 1983 *Duck Rock* album. The curators had to borrow the hat from the fast food brand Arby's, which recently purchased the hat at auction.



Installation view of "The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century" at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Photo: Mitro Hood/BMA.

“It’s always been multidisciplinary and it’s always been about the hustle,” said Guillotte about hip-hop. “So it finds a very natural allegiance with the idea of commerce.” Naeem’s favorite section, Tribute, adds to this conversation between generations with an homage to Tupac Shakur, who elevated gangsta rap into a veritable art form. The most stirring of three pieces dedicated to the late rapper here is Alvaro Barrington’s aluminum and cardboard hessian spelling Shakur’s potent lyric, “They got money for war but can’t feed the poor,” in yarn.



Joyce J. Scott, *Hip Hop Saint, Tupac* (2014). Photo: © Joyce J. Scott and Goya Contemporary Gallery.

“Hip-hop is about youth. But how that gap between youth and respect for the previous generations constantly jumps and collides all happens in this section,” said Naeem, who added that Tribute remains her favorite gallery of the exhibition. “I just love Tupac.”

“The Culture” wraps with two rooms, themed Ascension and Pose, that each hold pieces exploring hip hop’s complex relationship with grief and the afterlife (the genre, unfortunately, continues to see many early deaths). Here, John Edmonds’s white-on-white silk print and Baltimore’s own Ernest Shaw Jr.’s dazzling portrait, *I Had A Dream I Could Buy My Way To Heaven* (2022), encapsulate both the gains and the losses across hip-hop culture.



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The exhibit itself extends, intentionally, into the BMA’s contemporary art wing. In the midst of this crossover hangs Devan Shimoyama’s sculpture, made of Timberland boots, rhinestones, silk flowers, epoxy resin, and coated wire. A showstopper. This blend of street accoutrements and gallery-tier fabrics evokes a beauty that encompasses the street. “Hip-hop conveys different kinds of beauty—other forms of beauty that belong side by side with the Western canon,” said Naeem. “These worlds have always been in dialogue,” Guillotte added about the coexistence of hip-hop, fashion, and art. “That’s enormously important because there’s power in that. It serves somebody to assume that there is this thing that we call ‘the street’ and there is this thing that we call ‘the gallery.’ How scary would it be if there wasn’t?”

“The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century” is on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art, 10 Art Museum Drive, Baltimore, through July 16.