

A Reflection Piece from The Executive Director of the Black Inventors Hall of Fame Museum

I recently visited the Henry Ford Museum, considered to be one of the *coolest museums in America* according to its promotional pamphlet and regarded as one of the best museums in the country by Conde Nast Traveler. The museum showcases the story of innovation success in America, from the industrial revolution to modern times. However, during my 5-hour self-guided tour, I couldn't help but notice a few missed opportunities. The museum seemed to have lost significant details about the contribution of key African American figures to the rich history of innovation in America. For instance, at the entrance, visitors are greeted with a **Philip Downing** inspired mailbox, patented in 1891, but there was no mention of his name.

Similarly, the fully fabricated cobbler shed tells the story of mechanized shoe making, but there is no mention of **Jan Matzeliger**, who revolutionized the shoe industry and increased production from fifty shoes a day to more than five hundred shoes a day. Quite frankly, Matzeliger's invention did for the shoe industry worldwide what Ford and the assembly line did for the auto industry.

The display of **Elijah J. McCoy's** inventions was also downplayed, and the key role his self-lubricating cup played in revolutionizing the railroad industry was dismissed. Even **Andrew Beard**, whose patented coupler immensely improved the Janny coupler and transformed train connections worldwide, was not mentioned in the immense display of trains that covered nearly an entire football field. To add insult to injury, McCoy's display was far displaced from the train display.

Although Ford pays homage to the history of automobile making, with hundreds of cars and mentions of most significant car tycoons, the short-lived contribution of the only African American car manufacturer in the country, **CR Patterson and Sons**, was surprisingly missing from the storyline. Patterson, born in 1843, began to manufacture automobiles, producing nearly 200 cars from 1910 to 1915. However, they struggled to fulfill an order of 200 cars a year and were unable to compete with Ford's assembly line production of hundreds of cars a day.

Lastly, and on a more personal note, I would like to have seen fellow industrial designer **McKinley Thompson** recognized as one of the key contributors to the design of the 1966 Ford Bronco, hailed as the country's first commercially successful recreational vehicle. Kudos, however, to Ford for highlighting Thompson's Warrior car.

It is understandable that the museum cannot recognize every possible contributor to history, but it's important to present a complete and accurate narrative, especially one that includes the significant contributions of diverse communities. The missed opportunities I noticed highlight the need for the museum to improve its inclusivity and accuracy in its presentations of history. I urge the museum to take steps to recognize the contributions of key African American figures as well as other underrepresented communities. By doing so, the museum will not only enhance its reputation as one of the *coolest and best museums* in America but also fulfill its responsibility to present an honest and complete history of innovation in this country.