

Sidedoor S6 Ep. 18 Bonus Happy Birthday to Us Final Transcription

Lizzie Peabody: Hey Sidedoor listeners, we're working on some exciting new episodes for season seven, which is coming out this fall. But in the meantime, we wanted to share a birthday surprise, whose birthday you ask? Our birthday. On August 10th, 2021, the Smithsonian institution turned 175 years old, which puts us in the elite category of things that live for 175 years. Along with bowhead whales, giant tortoises, and deep-sea tube worms. Well, a lot can happen in the lifespan of a tube worm and to get a sense of what has changed, since the Smithsonian's founding in 1846, we're turning the mic over to, Kim Sajet, Director of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, to take us back in time through a single portrait that reveals a lot about who we were and who we are becoming. We have that episode coming up for you, right after a quick break.

[MUSIC]

Speaker 2: This is Washington DC. Washington is one of the most beautiful cities in the world. It is named after a man who never told a lie. Now, it's filled with men who seldom tell the truth.

Kim Sajet: Welcome to, "Portraits." I'm Kim Sajet, Director of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: So, imagine for a moment that you're here in Washington, DC, standing on the national mall, but it's 1862. The Capitol building is at one end, only its dome isn't finished. And the Washington monument is at the other end, but it's a stub. Construction has been halted because after all, we're in the middle of a civil war and between these two landmarks, there's this really odd building with Gothic motifs it's made from red sand stone, that was quarried by enslaved people. And it looks kind of like a cross between a castle and a church. Inside however, there's not a priest and not a king, but a scientist.

Richard Kurin: And so, the whole idea was that science was a new religion. That knowledge pursuit was our kind of secular form of religion in American life.

Kim Sajet: That was cultural anthropologists, Richard Kurin, and the scientists living inside the castle. That was Joseph Henry, the first ever secretary of this new project known as the Smithsonian institution.

Richard Kurin: And he did have his laboratory in the castle and people would complain about it. The grounds were called the, "Smithsonian Pleasure Gardens."

Kim Sajet: Richard is going to take us back to the Smithsonian's founding 175 years ago before it had become the largest museum and research complex in the world. At the time, the castle was a lonely building that stood for progress American style. And we'll also talk to the current

Secretary Lonnie Bunch about what counts as progress for him today. But as you know, we're all about the portraits. So, we're going to start with a portrait from the same year in 1862 with Joseph Henry, right in the middle. I asked Richard to describe it. And Richard, by the way, was speaking to us from inside the castle because his office used to be Joseph Henry's sitting room. Richard, welcome. In a way you have become the Smithsonian institution's historian. You've written a book, 101 objects about the history of the Smithsonian is told by the things that we look after. I'd like to start by asking you to describe this major painting that we're basing this episode around called, "The Men of Progress" by Christian Schussele. What do you see when you're seeing all of these guys around this table?

Richard Kurin: You know, this was in the middle of the 19th century, and this is a depiction of what many people at the time thought motivated society. These were some of the greatest inventors. They would never together in this portrait, this was a construed portrait. And it was kind of the idea of the promise of America. Really the idea that somehow knowledge and invention and progress would really color our country. And these are people that brought us everything from the telegraph to ways of making iron and improving railways and other things. So, they really were taken as characterizing the progress in American life in American society.

Kim Sajet: So, Richard as you know, I'm actually Dutch and as a good little Dutch girl, I completely identify with the composition of this because it's very 17th century dutch. It's all of these men, they're all white men arranged that everybody kind of gets equal billing. And to your point, they're all inventors, they're scientists. So, you have people like Samuel Colt, and he's got actually a revolver, the revolving pistol right next to him. And there's Charles Goodyear who came up with vulcanized rubber. So, Goodyear tires, it was actually commissioned by the guy who invented the coal burning stove, Jordan Mot. So, what is interesting is there's this idea that progress was about science. Can you see who the patron Saint of science is in this picture on the back wall?

Richard Kurin: You see Benjamin Franklin looking over the assembly.

Kim Sajet: It's Ben Franklin. Of course, everything leads to Ben in the end, the men in this painting accredited with finding better ways to harvest crops, produce newspapers and sew clothing. And thanks to the industrial spirit on display here. Our young scrappy country would eventually overtake Europe, economically. All the men in the painting are wearing dark suits with elegant long overcoats. And there are miniature patent models at their feet. In fact, these men are supposedly gathered in the old patent office, which today houses us the National Portrait Gallery.

Richard Kurin: Patents, copyrights are enshrined in the U.S. constitution. It's not the things belong to the king or the rulers of the state. Individuals can benefit from their inventions. And that helps incentivize them. There's all sorts of theories about what that did in America, but it really incentivized invention. So, rather very many people from very modest backgrounds could benefit if they invented something and many people aspire to it. And so, the idea is patent invention knowledge was our national religion.

Kim Sajat: Yeah. The old patent office was located between the capital one side and the white house on the other, but it was also based on a church. So, the architecture as neoclassical was based on the Parthenon in Greece, when Pierre L'Enfant came to lay out the plans for Washington, he said the old patent office, or of course, then the new patent office was going to be the temple of invention. So, Richard, tell us more about the man in the middle, this painting, Joseph Henry, the first secretary of the Smithsonian.

Richard Kurin: You know, Henry was upstate New York, not, not a wealthy family or anything. He's what I guess we would call. It was natural science. Then maybe a physicist is probably the best kind of description. And he was interested in a whole variety of scientific endeavors from understanding issues with the sun and power to understanding energy. The term Henry is actually a measure of energy.

Kim Sajat: Is it really? There's the Henry.

Richard Kurin: Yeah. And he invented what was called the electronic relay. That was so key in the development of the Telegraph because the Telegraph you're stringing long lines of electricity. And if like a wave, it peters out as it goes on, then it's not going to be effective.

Kim Sajat: Interesting. And in fact, Joseph Henry was having a massive fight with Samuel Morse, who was the other central figure sitting at the table. And as we know, Samuel Morse, well, whether we did, or he did not, this is the big thing they were fighting about was invented the Telegraph in the 1840s. So, before we move on from patents and inventions, I've just put up a picture and it's a drawing taken from a patent. Can you describe it? Can you tell everyone at home what I've just shown you?

Richard Kurin: Yeah. So, this is an interesting one, because this is a guy that went on to be president that actually put in a patent. And this was a system for boats in terms of rising and lowering water. And this was invented by a guy named Abraham Lincoln.

Kim Sajat: It wasn't very successful though, right? I mean, did they ever build, I don't think the idea was that these boats these shallow bottom boats would regularly get stuck on the side of rivers. So, these giant kind of balloons is flotation devices would come out of the side of the boats and presumably push the boat back into the middle of the river, but it didn't work
Richard Kurin: Well, we could have used it recently in the Suez Canal. Exactly. Well, just to say off that Joseph Henry was Lincoln science advisor.

Kim Sajat: Was he really? In fact, when Lincoln's wife, Mary Todd Lincoln began holding seances in the white house, it was Joseph Henry that the president turned to with some of his concerns about her activities. He asked Henry to look into a medium that she was employing to make sure that he was on the up and up, but this portrait of the man of progress, it's just as interesting for the people who are not in it apart from the fact that there are no women, there are no African-American men of progress. For example, people like Solomon Brown.

Richard Kurin: So, a Solomon Brown was really a polymath in his own, right? He was a, he was a naturalist. He still to this day may be the longest working Smithsonian employee worked for the Smithsonian for 54 years.

Kim Sajat: Wow.

Richard Kurin: So, he worked for Morris and Henry, and he was key in laying the first Telegraph line from Washington to Baltimore to test out the Telegraph.

Kim Sajat: What hath God wrote. Right.

Richard Kurin: Which we have, we have that first Telegraph message. So, Solomon Brown work closely with Morris were closely with Henry. Henry was as others in the portrait. What you'd call scientific racists of the time. And again, look at the picture. You know, everybody in it is white. There were certainly black inventors at the time, but they were left out and left out of the picture.

Kim Sajat: Yeah. I'm embarrassed to say that the national portrait gallery does not have a portrait of Solomon Brown, even though he was so impactful, both to the Smithsonian and the nation. We do have this photograph. It's a black and white picture taken by an unknown artist, dated to 1891 he is sitting on the steps of one of the side entrances of the castle wearing a bowler hat. He's looking directly at you, but he's kind of a lonely figure is not with the others. This is the same time 1862, when the painting has done was when Joseph Henry actually did not allow Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist, to speak in a series of lectures that was being held. There were a lot of sort of thought leaders giving talks at the Smithsonian around the time of the Civil War. And, and he said, you know, it was a step too far to actually ask a black man to talk in the castle. He felt that politics had now crossed into the sort of the sacred space I guess, of knowledge.

Richard Kurin: You are too polite to Henry. He basically wrote to one of the regents, basically, "I will not allow a colored man to speak in the rooms of the Smithsonian." Well, the Smithsonian's endowment was invested largely in Southern states.

Kim Sajat: Oh, that's interesting.

Richard Kurin: So, he was worried about that. So, Henry did not fly an American flag over the Smithsonian castle during the Civil War. He said, we're an international organization.

Kim Sajat: The men of progress, might've been inventing all sorts of things that benefited lots of people. But at the end of the day, their club was a really exclusive one.

Richard Kurin: I think Henry's notion was pretty narrow. The ideas that certain people would produce knowledge, and then it would be distributed to the masses, you know, democratically.

Well, I think that has evolved to a broader view that hey, knowledge is going to come from all sorts of quarters, not just those guys in the portrait, wearing suits and bow ties.

Kim Sajet: On the other side of the break, we're going to hear from the man sitting in Joseph Henry seat today, Secretary Lonnie Bunch, and we'll do a little "Man of Progress" photoshop, stay with us.

[MUSIC]

Speaker 6: If I could airbrush someone into the "Men of Progress" painting, I would choose Thurgood Marshall. His dedication to racial equality led to the ruling and the brown vs board of education, Supreme court case. Without this ruling, I may not have had the educational opportunities that have defined my life.

Speaker 7: I would add two men of progress. Two women, Admiral Grace Murray Hopper. Amazing Grace was a mathematician and a pioneer of computer science developing the first programming languages.

Speaker 8: Maybe Rachel Carson, and for her bringing environmental issues to popular attention through her writing.

Speaker 9: If I could add someone to the "Men of Progress" portrait, I would add Sacagawea. She brings a diverse perspective to the expedition that is led by Lewis and Clark navigating the land. She even uses her knowledge to help them find edible flowers and supplement rations. This core discovery expedition really sets off the progress of westward expansion and changes the United States as we know it.

Speaker 7: Jane Adams pioneered the field of social work, her work demonstrated that true progress involves not just an invention, but a benefit for society.

Kim Sajet: The Smithsonian Institution's origin story actually begins a little before the men of progress painting that we've been talking about. It starts off in England with another gentleman, scientist named James Smithson. He was a chemist and a geologist. He was also the illegitimate son of a duke. So even though he became wealthy and he moved in elite circles, he was kind of marginalized and well that might've put a chip on his shoulder. When he died in 1829, he left an unusual will. He gifted his entire fortune to the United States, a place that he hadn't even visited. There was one condition though. It had to found an institution in Washington, DC for quote, the increase and diffusion of knowledge.

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: It's also about how do you extend the progress of America to everyone?

Kim Sajet: That is Secretary Lonnie Bunch. I showed him the same painting of the men of progress from the Civil War era. And I asked him, what did he see?

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: As a historian? It's a fascinating portrait, right? Because in some ways, this is really the engine of 19th century America, right? The economic engine. And this is also the sort of rationale, if you've noticed that there aren't Southern planters, I mean, this is really about scientists. So, it really is saying, you know, the economic and industrial might of the union is really what has kept the country together. So, I understand all of that, but I think it really raises the fundamental question of this is a vision. These are the people that will lead America to the promised land of greatness. And what we're arguing is they lead America to the promised land of economic possibility, of elitism, but they don't lead us to the promised land of a fair America living up to its stated ideals. That's what's missing.

Kim Sajet: Right? At this point, native Americans, African Americans, we've still got slavery happening, women. All of those people don't even have a vote. But what I think is fascinating about this is if we were to paint this today, Lonnie, you would be right at the center. So amazing. So, if we got forward, you know, let's say that you are now presiding. Who would you want to include in your people of progress Lonnie?

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: There are three people that I think are really interesting that really shaped the course of a nation in a way that's equal in some ways, even greater than these folks, whether it's Frederick Douglas, who I think the world of here is somebody who began his life enslaved, who gained his freedom by running away who was educated while he was enslaved. But he then built on that education and became probably the most prominent abolitionist. He was also in favor of women's suffrage. And he also recognized that his job was to challenge America, to be fair. He became the conscience of a nation.

Kim Sajet: We have this portrait of him, a painting. It's the only one in existence that was done somewhere about 1845. We actually don't really know who the artist is. Can you describe that portrait? When you look at Frederick Douglas here, what do you see?

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: When you look at the portrait, Frederick Douglas, you see that he's mixed race, right? So therefore, he is really a product of that system of slavery. You also see, however that it's important for him in this painting to be not what people think of a runaway slave. He really is the epitome of sort of almost a young dandy, the way his hair is parted, the tie he's wearing. And it was also crucially important for Douglas through this portrait to let people know that he aspired to middle-class respectability. I mean, as you know, Frederick Douglas is the most photographed man in 19th century America, and it was intentional.

Kim Sajet: Well, who else would you have at the table with you? If you could, it's a little bit like that story. Who would you want to have for dinner? Who else would you invite at your table?

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: You know, for me, I am a big lover of Eleanor Roosevelt. I just think this is one of the most amazing people that ever existed. I mean, first of all, here is somebody that grows up in an elite family. She's cousins of Teddy Roosevelt and Mary's another cousin Franklin Roosevelt, and she was raised to sort of be on someone's arm. And yet here is a woman who said, it's not enough for me to be a wife or be the traditional first lady.

Kim Sajet: What's kind of interesting is that she was quite shy. She had to really train herself to be able to speak in public and have that sort of self-confidence to be in front of people. Similarly, to that, she did not like having her portrait taken. We have a photograph of Eleanor Roosevelt done by use of cash, but he's definitely glamorized her. She's got the pearls on and she's holding a pencil and she's got sort of a glittery top.

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: I think that the photograph really does suggest there are certain strictures that I even have to deal with, you know, the way you just said the pearls, the glamor. But what I love is somehow the notion of the pencil in the hand and the way her hands are placed suggest activity, right? So, you can put me in the kind of pose that you think many women should be in, but I'm going to also remind you that for me, it is less about my look and more about my hands. I love the fact that Eleanor Roosevelt was really one of the first, first ladies to really dip her hands into the challenge of race. Whether it is after world war two, when her husband was agreed to in terror, many Japanese Americans, because of the kind of racist fears of the war, she spoke out against that or whether it was the fact that she was close to African-Americans or like Mary Cloud Methuen and Ralph Bunche and others.

Kim Sajet: Yeah.

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: I mean, so basically what she did explode, what a woman was supposed to care about. One of the things that was so moving to me is watching her, getting involved and helping to create the United nations.

Speaker 11: I'm going to read you the universal declaration of human rights. Now therefor...

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: She kicked down so many doors to go to, then being one of the leaders in the U.S. delegation.

Speaker 11: ...will promote respect for these rights...

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: To then go on to being a woman that has a sort of amazing newspaper column. She was looking to an era where women had something to say, but more importantly, women had power.

Speaker 12: That's your most severe critic, Westbrook Pegler. He said, this woman is a political force of enormous ambitions. I believe she has a menace unscrupulous as to truth, vein and cynical.

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: She was called socialist. She was called an amalgamator. She was called to pro Negro.

Speaker 12: It seems to me exaggerated that has safe. No one could be quite as bad as all that.

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: For many of the people in the men have of progress. It's about science. And for her, it was about fairness.

Kim Sajet: Lonnie's third-person progress has been called the godmother of civil rights.

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: A woman who was also shy, a woman who was also told that, well, you know, thank you, make the coffee, but don't make history. And that would be Dorothy Height.

Kim Sajet: Dorothy Height presided over the National Council of Negro Women for four decades. And you might've seen her photograph without even knowing it. She was at arm's length from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he spoke at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, did you meet her? Did you know?

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: Oh yes. Oh, my goodness. Oh, Dorothy Height. You know, you, you felt like you better have a tie on and your shoes better be shine because, you know, you sort of felt like you were going to the epitome of respectability and especially African-American respectability this notion of making sure she had more hats to wear to church and the right gloves. This was a woman that carried respect.

Kim Sajet: Yeah. She died at the age of 98, remarkably long life in 2010 and president Barack Obama eulogized her at the funeral. He said, quote, that the hat she wore were like a crown.

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: She was a quintessential black church woman. And the hats tend to be flamboyant. There's nothing worse than being behind somebody with a big hat when you're trying to see at the wedding or something, right. I've done that many a time. You basically see hats that really reflect beauty, color, but really reflect substance and heft.

Kim Sajet: It's that whole thing about the armor or the strategy of dress. Right? And actually, goes all the way back to Frederick Douglas, who, who understood that.

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: You put your fingers on it. It's really important. You know, when we did a show with the portrait gallery collections years ago at the museum, let your model will be resistance. We recognize that the way you presented yourself was a symbol of resistance looking at Dorothy, it also tells us about sexism within the civil rights movement. Here, you have the March on Washington in 1963 with Martin Luther King. And initially no women were asked to speak and Dorothy height made sure the Daisy Bates and Josephine Baker would have a chance to speak. What was interesting is they didn't get a chance to speak as part of the main program. It was the kind of answering program, but be that as it may, it was Dorothy Height who demanded that women's roles be recognized.

Kim Sajet: Those are just three change-makers that Lonnie would include as people of progress. And there is so many more that we could talk about. But at the end of the day, when I look at the original men of progress painting, I can't help but think that they'd have to be pretty impressed by what we've become. We have 19 museums, 21 libraries, nine research centers

and a zoo. In fact, we're the largest research complex in the world with two more museums on the way I asked Lonnie, what he thought about in terms of the legacy left to us by James Smithson and Joseph Henry and Solomon Brown.

Sec. Lonnie Bunch: The Smithsonian is always going to be that place of wonder of science of history and art. But it also has to be the place that I know Frederick Douglas would have wanted us to be, which is a beacon that helps hold the country together by giving clear truth. I think that what we're trying to suggest is that first of all, we want to democratize knowledge. You can tell a lot about a nation by how democratic it is and it's knowledge sharing. So, I think that looking at a 19th century image like that, these were the elite. We're now arguing that the great strength of America is that that picture will be populated by a lot of different people who have access to knowledge. And even more importantly, their access to knowledge broadens our understanding of that knowledge. So, it's not just a one-way street.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to an episode of, "Portraits" from the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you liked this episode, you can hear more by subscribing to portraits, wherever you get your podcasts. The "Portraits" podcast team is Ruth Morris, Justin O'Neill, Deborah Sisum, Rebecca Kasemeyer and Rebecca Ortiz Hernandez. Their theme music is by Joe Kye. The show is hosted by Kim Sajet. You can see the portraits Kim talked about on the "Portraits" podcast website, which we'll link to in our newsletter, subscribe at SI.edu/sidedoor, or you can go see them in person. The National Portrait Gallery doors are open again after pandemic closures.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This show was mixed by Tarek Fouda. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Sidedoor theme music is by Breakmaster Cylinder.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: All right, back to producing new shows. And Hey, if you have an idea, you'd love to hear us explore next season, drop us a line at sidedoor@si.edu, or find us on social media at [@sidedoorpod](https://www.instagram.com/sidedoorpod).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.