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Missing piece from Harriet Tubman statue returned to Banneker-Douglass Museum in Annapolis

By Luke Parker

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"Araminta with Rifle and Vevé" by Joyce J. Scott at Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, N.J. ___ CREDIT: Tim Smith (Tim Smith/ Baltimore Sun)

The Annapolis Police Department has returned the beaded staff stolen from a Harriet Tubman statue in December to the Banneker-Douglass Museum, museum officials announced Wednesday.

“Words cannot describe how relieved we are to get back this precious artwork by Dr. Joyce J. Scott,” Chanel Johnson, the museum’s executive director, said in a news release. “I want to thank the Annapolis Police Department, Del. Shaneka Henson, Dr. Scott, Goya Contemporary Gallery, museum staff, and the community at large for working together to get the missing work back to the museum.”

The staff, or vevé, is part of Scott’s “Araminta with Rifle and Vevé,” a 10-foot statue honoring the Maryland native and hero of the Underground Railroad. Tubman, who was born Araminta Ross into slavery in Dorchester County on the Eastern Shore, is depicted holding the staff in one hand and a beaded rifle in the other.

The rifle is adorned with flowers, and the vevé, a religious symbol used throughout African diaspora in different branches of Vodun, holds two birds.



Banneker-Douglass Museum Executive Director Chanel Johnson and curator of collections Schillica Howard stand with Annapolis Police Detective Lawrence DeLeonibus. - Original Credit: Banneker-Douglass Museum (HANDOUT)

In December, toward the end of what then-Gov. Larry Hogan anointed the “Year of Harriet Tubman,” the *vévé* was stolen from in front of the Banneker-Douglass Museum. It had received the statue on loan from the Goya Contemporary Gallery in September. Scott’s statue was brought to Annapolis from Baltimore as part of the museum’s latest exhibit, a collection of works from Maryland-based Black artists called “The Radical Voice of Blackness Speaks of Resistance and Joy.”

Scott, a Baltimore native and MacArthur fellow, offered to re-createthe stolen staff if it was not found.

Capt. Amy Miguez, a police spokesperson, said the department received several tips after hosting a Facebook community update with Johnson and Henson. In it, police showed security footage of two suspects, a man and a woman, they believed were responsible for the theft, saying, “It is possible the individuals who stole the staff were not aware of its significance and may now want to do the right thing and return it.”

The update took place on a Friday in January. Soon after, a man called police and said he had one part of the staff and knew who had the other. The *vévé* was returned in its entirety that weekend, Miguez said.

“The collective resolve to restore the dignity of this monumental figure — which exemplifies the resilience of the real-life person renowned for fighting against injustice — offers symbolism that cannot go unnoticed,” Amy Raehse, Goya Contemporary Gallery executive director, told The Capital.

“May we all continue to work together toward more enlightened times,” she continued, “and use this moment to shine light on the power of Harriet Tubman and her insistence on a more just future.”

Damage to the *vévé* is still being assessed, Banneker-Douglass officials said Wednesday, and staff members are working with Scott, the Goya Contemporary Gallery and an insurance company “on a path forward.”

It is “undetermined” whether the *vévé* will be reinstalled to the statue, according to a news release, and museum officials said Wednesday they had yet to decide whether they would file charges for the theft.