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Exhibition Review

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“John F. Kennedy: The Exhibition.” Florida International Museum, 100 Second St. N., St. Petersburg, Fla. 33701. Temporary exhibition, November 12, 1999-March 29, 2000; daily 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Adults \$13.95; senior citizens \$12.95; military (active and retired) \$12.95; college students \$7.95; 6-17 year olds \$5.95; children under 6 free. Sheila Mutchler, director of exhibitions; Wayne Atherholt, director of marketing; Joseph F. Cronin, president and CEO of museum; Criswell, Blizzard, and Blouin, architects; Creative Arts, theatrical consultants.

Confronted by the announcement of “JFK: The Exhibition” my first thought was how could there be a major traveling museum exhibit on this President and his brief administration? How could such an exhibit possibly satisfy any critic or any student of history? If, however, we accept the premise that such an exhibit is possible, then what would, should, or could it include? What might be its themes, its areas of focus?

No doubt these questions confronted those who put the exhibit together, and, given the limitations of this life and presidency, those who put “JFK: The Exhibition” together did a creditable job. They could simply have thrown out all pretense to factual historical truth, accepting the mythic boundaries of Camelot and putting on a slam-bang tribute to this glamorous mid-century martyr. Luckily, the exhibition only rarely falls victim to Camelot-vision.

Over the years the Florida International Museum has shown a marked ability to layout a user-friendly and aesthetically pleasing exhibition. They have seemingly developed a formulaic approach to exhibits that has been quite effective and which they use again in this presentation. This time, however, the materials (which seem to come mostly from the collections of Kennedy’s personal secretary, Evelyn Lincoln) are too insubstantial to sustain the venue or the formula.

The exhibit begins with a room of family memorabilia dating back to the early part of the century. These include baby, childhood, and young adult photos of the future president. The centerpiece of this room seems to be the death of Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. in August of 1944 which may be appropriate given the shadow Joe Jr. cast over his younger brothers. From here viewers are led to a viewing room for a short film sketching highlights of Jack Kennedy's childhood, the road to the White House, and the achievements of the presidency. The film is a foreshadowing of what is to come.

From the film, which is over before you settle in, it is on to the PT109 Room which is an unsuccessful attempt to simulate a PT Boat at sea. Perhaps it is the excessive use of navy gray paint in the room that finally overwhelms all but the most seaworthy, or maybe it is the particularly lifeless waves on the artificial ocean. Still, there are two interesting items here. One from Kennedy to a female journalist "friend" expresses misgivings and anxieties as he resumes duty after the PT109 affair. The other, a letter from the journalist affectionately known as Hinga Binga, is a rather touching attempt to offer reassurance and a declaration that her love for the brave sailor involves more than just the sex.

The next room examines the political life of the young Congressman and later Senator from Massachusetts. Photos and paraphernalia from the campaigns of 1946, 1948, 1950, and 1952 cover the walls. The only non-political events noted here are his courting of and wedding to Jacqueline Lee Bouvier, a photojournalist. A *Life* magazine cover, several lovely pictures, wedding invitations and guest list, and other memorabilia are on display. For those who prefer the gossipy showbiz side of life, a picture of the Rat Pack and JFK's Desert Inn Country Club Card are in a small case along the wedding wall.

Next we enter a large hall labeled "The Road to the White House" where we get our first look at a rocking chair; the focus is on the 1956 run for the Democratic nomination for vice-president, and the 1960 presidential campaign up to and including the inaugural. The long back wall of this room has a timeline and large blowups of photos from 1956 to 1961 which are nicely done. The room is loaded with campaign materials including recordings of the official campaign song "Kennedy, Kennedy, Kennedy, Kennedy" and Sinatra's "High Hopes"—the unofficial theme of the campaign. There are audio snippets of the debates with Nixon as well as photos showing a smiling JFK looking across the TV studio-set at a sweating RMN.

The highlight of this room, and perhaps the entire exhibit, is a large collection of campaign kitsch: Jack and Jackie masks, Jack and Jackie salt and pepper shakers, a JFK pipe, a Jack and Jackie plate, Jack and Jackie plaster heads, a JFK joke book, a JFK bottle stopper, a number of Jack and Jackie books, and oh so many more pieces of Americana. The *pièce de résistance* may be the Jackie and Caroline magic wand paper dolls—"Just Touch With the Wand and the Clothes Stay On."

Moving out of this room (and I finally pulled myself away after it became apparent that nothing associated with Judith Exner and Marilyn Monroe was here), I found myself in a hallway that moved around a mock-up of the Rose Garden. It was now apparent to me that at least this part of the exhibit was set up to approximate the layout of the White House; in fact, I may have just left the East Room. The Rose Garden rivaled the PT109 room as the low point of the exhibit. Artificial turf surrounded by plastic roses glistening in the lights somehow do not do justice to this wonderful Kennedy contribution to the aesthetics of the White House grounds. In the hallway there were some interesting photos of the Kennedy Brain Trust and the Cabinet, along with a Rose Garden photo of the first Peace Corps contingent to go overseas.

Approaching the Oval Office you pass through the Evelyn Lincoln office area with a few interesting photos on the wall, including one in which the President is wearing a Knox Hat—ironic given that Kennedy had been accused by the men's hat industry of killing their business as he never wore a hat in public. Be sure not to miss the numerous Pet Photos and Caroline's crayon artwork on display here. In the Oval Office is the President's desk along with a photo of John Jr. peeking out from under it. Photos of his birthday celebration in 1963 are on display along with JFK's wallet and its contents consisting of a small number of membership and credit cards.

Next is the First Lady's Gallery emphasizing the heavy impact Jackie had on the image of this administration. Featured are photos from the television tour of the White House hosted by the First Lady, a number of presidential Christmas cards, a presentation on arts and culture in the White House, and several place-settings of White House china.

Moving to the next large room the focus is on foreign policy, civil rights, and the space race. Here we are reminded of the now quaint phrase "Leader of the Free World." Kennedy visits to France, Berlin, and Vienna are featured along with a model of the

first Air Force One and Jack's and Jackie's passports. The key role played by Jackie on the trip to France and the electric effect of the Berlin Wall speech is noted, but not enough attention is given to the significance of the Vienna meeting with Khrushchev. On Cuba we see uncritical accounts of the Bay of Pigs, which will not please Florida's Cuban population. The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty are also highlighted here. Hidden off in a corner is a very small reference to Vietnam, and perhaps that is symbolic.

On civil rights there is a tendency to give Kennedy too much credit for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, too much credit as a leader in this area, and probably not enough credit for connecting at an emotional level with a large portion of the African American population. On the space program, the glamour factor is overdone, but then that may be understandable as glamour was central to the space race.

It is now apparent that Dallas and the assassination are just ahead. A brush with death is recorded in a small case dealing with the August 8, 1963 death of Patrick Bouvier Kennedy, the son who survived just thirty-nine hours after his birth. It provides a sense of foreboding.

The assassination, as would be expected, is fully recorded with one of the more stunning exhibits being a large wall covered with newspapers displaying the headlines of the assassination as it was reported across the nation and around the globe. A piece of the Zapruder film and a video of Jack Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald are also featured, along with other video and audio clips from Dallas.

The last stop is a deeply moving seven-minute film of the funeral procession with its military pomp underlining the magnitude of the tragedy for the family and the nation. This excellent piece of footage was made by the Secret Service and given to Jackie Kennedy who chose not to view it and instead passed it on to Evelyn Lincoln.

The Kennedy legacy is proclaimed as the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Peace Corps, and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. The latter was probably the only one of the three that is clearly a part of Kennedy's legacy, and that of course was largely the result of going to the nuclear brink over Cuba. The legacy of Vietnam, which surely must be part of the record, is not mentioned. The strengthening of the office of the presidency, or at least the raising of the

profile of that office, could also be seen as part of the JFK legacy. Kennedy clearly reinvigorated the concept of the President as active leader, something that had been absent in the Eisenhower years.

The last stop in the exhibit is a bronze bust of JFK above which is a framed blowup of a note from Jackie to Evelyn Lincoln written on White House Stationery. It reads simply, "Dear Evelyn, There will never be Camelot again," and it is signed "Jackie." One wonders if Jackie Kennedy realized how prophetic that note was.

Overall, I found "JFK: The Exhibition" somewhat disappointing. It is burdened with too much insignificant ephemera and lacks sufficient focus on the political and personal legacy. There was no mention of how Kennedy used television to his advantage, especially the televised press conference in which he displayed his wit and charm to tremendous effect. Some might also have expected more on the politics of the period such as his struggle with powerful southerners who controlled congressional committees, his confrontation with U.S. Steel, and the constant hammering from the extreme right wing despite his Cold Warrior stance.

A smaller exhibit with a tighter focus may have improved the overall impact; there seemed to be too great a desire to use all the space available for the displays. Errors in spelling and grammar are inexcusable and may be a sign of an exhibition that did not give enough attention to detail while losing itself in a morass of trivia. Still and all, it was worth the trip.

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