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Richard Cohen

Columnist



Martha Stewart in the Museum

By *Richard Cohen*

Tuesday, June 5, 2001; Page A21

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It just so happens I know Martha Stewart. And it just so happens that I like Martha Stewart and am awed by her accomplishments. It is also the case that I am totally perplexed as to how someone who looks like a human being and talks like a human being can get by on only eight hours or so of sleep -- a month. In that sense, she belongs in a museum.

But that is not what the Smithsonian Institution has in mind for her. Instead, its National Museum of American History is prepared to establish a 10,000-square-foot exhibition called "The Spirit of America," which will focus on the lives of American "achievers." One of them is the delightful Ms. Stewart.

Others include the ubiquitous Martin Luther King Jr., who, I can say as an admirer, has been honored quite enough (a national holiday, countless roads, schools and now tasteless television commercials). Also being considered are such celebrities as Oprah Winfrey and Dorothy Hamill. You cannot say of Hamill that she has been honored enough. You can merely ask why she should be honored at all.

The answer is that it is the whim or, if you believe Smithsonian blather, the impeccable choice of Catherine B. Reynolds, whose eponymous foundation has given the museum \$38 million to establish what henceforth shall be known here as The Great Hall of Kitsch. The Smithsonian insists it will retain "ultimate control" over the selection process. But the fact remains that Reynolds has not only packed the nominating committee (10 of 15 members) but that the head of the Smithsonian, Lawrence M. Small, has already shown that he is worthy of an exhibition himself: a standing man who lacks a backbone.

In the interest of fairness, I shall let Small speak for himself. The Reynolds exhibition, he said, will "send a clear message that with determination and hard work you can achieve your goals, no matter what the odds." This is either museum-quality banality or a sly attempt at humor. I recommend that Small himself recite it to the museum's custodial staff or, say, the guy who picks up his trash at home. The poor can always use a good laugh.

But Small's is not an original observation. Horatio Alger beat him to the punch more than 100 years ago and, in a more scholarly mode, so did the historian Daniel Boorstin, in his thoroughly enjoyable trilogy, "The Americans." Here you will find such "achievers" as Clarence Birdseye, the Brooklyn-born naturalist who noticed while in the Arctic that fish caught and instantly frozen tasted just yummy when later thawed

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and cooked. No offense to Ms. Hamill, but frozen food plays a bigger role in my life than, say, even a well-executed triple lutz. I give Birdseye a 9.6.

It's clear that Small can best serve the Smithsonian by leaving it. He has neither the confidence of much of the professional staff -- he tried to close the Smithsonian's animal research facility to save money -- nor the judgment to run one of the nation's great scholarly institutions.

But it is also clear that if the government -- which is to say the people -- is going to support institutions such as the Smithsonian, it ought to do so in a way that makes some sense. Whatever might be said of Small -- and I have said quite enough -- he ought not be a beggar, running around Washington with a tin cup because Uncle Sam is so tight with a buck. The government puts up 70 percent of the Smithsonian's budget. It ought to go the other 30 and make an honest man of Small.

Don't get me wrong. I have no problem with private money, and I applaud Catherine Reynolds's impulse, if not her taste. But scholars and experts ought to decide what goes into a museum -- into *our* museum. They should make an educated guess -- for that's all it can be -- as to what will have lasting value. Often, rich individuals do a good job. The Frick Collection in New York is testament to the discerning eye of a robber baron. Steve Martin's exhibition of his paintings at Las Vegas's Bellagio Hotel is yet more proof that you don't have to have advanced degrees to appreciate beauty.

So if Reynolds wants to create her own museum, fine. Frick did so and I wouldn't be surprised if someday Bill Gates (another discerning collector) does the same. But the Smithsonian's my place, our place. It should be glad to take Reynolds's money, but not her conditions. To do otherwise would not, as Martha Stewart herself might say, be "a good thing."

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