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The New Black View

Jackie Robinson Museum honors MLB's first Black player—and Black progress

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Credit: Karen Juanita Carrillo photo

New York City's [Jackie Robinson Museum \(JRM\)](#), which opened in its 20,000 square-foot 75 Varick St. location in Lower Manhattan this past July 26, is an interesting mix of U.S. history, a story of Major League Baseball (MLB), and a tale of Black life in 20th century America.

With archival documents, short films and images, it tells a story about the personal and professional life of Jackie Robinson. JRM visitors learn about why Robinson was chosen to break MLB's all-white color line—and get to learn why there was a color line in the first place.

Robinson was a respected athlete at the college level: he lettered in baseball, football, basketball and track at California's Pasadena City College and later UCLA. He left college before graduating to take care of his family and spent some time in the military before beginning his iconic baseball career playing shortstop with the [Negro Leagues' Kansas City Monarchs](#).

The Brooklyn Dodgers executive Branch Rickey signed Robinson to their minor league team, the Montreal Royals, in 1946 and Robinson famously broke the baseball color line when he started at first base for the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 15, 1947. JRM has several photos and depictions of people's reactions to Robinson's first year with the Dodgers. In one part of the exhibit, the short film "Us Against the World" by Victorious Decosta (a recently *AmNews* profiled "Black New Yorker") shows what Jackie and his wife, Rachel, had to go through as they traveled from the West Coast to the East when Jackie first started his baseball career. But the enthusiasm Black baseball fans had when coming to see

Jackie Robinson play helped each of them deal with the challenges they faced along the way.

When Robinson donned the uniform of the Brooklyn Dodgers, he became a symbol of the Black community's nascent steps toward the Civil Rights Movement. "Black journalists like Sam Lacy of the *Baltimore Afro American* and Joe Bostic of the *New York Amsterdam News* were advocating for baseball to integrate," a placard at the museum notes. "While other baseball officials resisted the call to integrate the game, Rickey acted. Rickey's choice of Robinson, influenced by *Pittsburgh Courier* writer Wendell Smith, was a bold one. Robinson was better known for his talent in basketball and football than in baseball, and he had a reputation for speaking out. But Rickey believed in Robinson. The men bonded over both being men of faith and having experienced the trials of integration within sports in college."

Jackie Robinson's physical attributes led to his later entrée into the world of politics, just as the Civil Rights Movement was gathering steam. And JRM features important images and references to Robinson's appearances at famous locations where Civil Rights Movement history took place. It's interesting to note that the Civil Rights Movement was mostly left-leaning and progressive and JRM does not provide as thorough of an examination of Robinson's conservative leanings or his membership in the Republican Party as one would expect (Robinson was part of a large percentage of African Americans who had been loyal to the party of Abraham Lincoln, prior to influential Democratic Party presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt). It's only casually pointed out that Robinson worked with New York's Republican Gov. Nelson Rockefeller and had even endorsed Richard Nixon's presidential candidacy in 1960.

There is an extensive and interactive timeline positioned on one part of the JRM wall detailing moments in history as they intersect with various times in Jackie Robinson's life. Many of his uniforms and baseball cards are displayed throughout the main hall and there is a small replica of the famed Ebbets Field, the stadium in Brooklyn where Robinson used to play, with several videos projected on the wall as well as within the stadium replica itself.

One section of the museum includes pop culture-related items that Jackie was showcased in. And, back in another section, more than 30 screens are mounted with videos of people giving their accounts of how the symbol of Jackie impacted their lives. On top of showcasing Jackie Robinson and his career, JRM also urges its visitors to follow in Robinson's footsteps and make activist work a part of their lives. It asks visitors to make a pledge to take a stand on fighting for the rights of marginalized people.

The various interactive archives, films and documents help the flow of the Jackie Robinson Museum—you could easily find yourself learning and being entertained in the building for an hour or two. It makes the Jackie Robinson Museum a fun place to learn history, see art, and reflect on how activism can change the world. *The Jackie Robinson Museum is open Thursdays through Sundays from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Pre-registration is required for entry at www.jackierobinsonmuseum.org.*