

THE MUSEUM OF THE NATIONAL CENTER OF AFRO-AMERICAN ARTISTS
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A Violence Transformed Exhibition

INMATE INGENUITY: THE CELL SOLACE COLLECTION
Containers made in U.S. Prisons

The Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists (NCAAA) is pleased to present *Inmate Ingenuity: The Cell Solace Collection* featuring more than twenty exquisitely crafted containers made by inmates in American prisons and jails over the second of the twentieth century. *Inmate Ingenuity* is a *Violence Transformed* exhibition continuing the decade long collaborative between the NCAAA and the Violence Transformed project. The exhibition opens Sunday, July 22 and continues through October 21, 2018. Hours are Tuesday through Sunday, 1-5pm.

The exhibition is partially supported by the *Mayor's Office for Arts and Culture*, *Josephine and Louise Crane Family Foundation*, and *Violence Transformed*.

Inmate Ingenuity presents a jewelry box, and many purses, hand and shoulder bags all completely made of folded woven cigarette cartons and paper. Surprising design sensitivities and remarkable artisan skills are evident in the sophisticated and well-crafted containers many of which eventually found their way to specialized markets. Others were gifted by the inmates to sweethearts, wives, family and friends on the outside. Many viewers, in addition to being awed by the beauty of the bags and boxes, will also recall the once universally familiar motifs on the cigarette packaging, such as the familiar camel associated with that brand name, or the prancing lion and crown on *Pall Mall* boxes. Works on display evoke an era when smoking was widely accepted as a social norm, and before smoking was banned in US prisons. At that time, cigarettes were prized commodities behind bars. The availability of cigarette containers and endless time, combined with the introduction of purse weaving as a craft into the prisons allowed inmates a new arena of creativity and a humanizing opportunity to connect to the world beyond the incarceration.

The *Cell Solace Collection* was assembled by Antonio N. Inniss who grew up in Roxbury and spent his formative years in Boston and Los Angeles pursuing an interest in music. His

father, whose friend Terrence was incarcerated at New York’s Rikers Island, unintentionally planted the seed for the collection when he received two of Terrence’s purses: One for Inniss’ mother and the other for Terrence’s girlfriend. They fascinated young Inniss who shared his enthusiasm for them, and eventually found his family and friends giving him new bags that they encountered. He thus became a collector and the bags and purses became his passion. He increased his collecting activity during a period when he worked for Amtrak and travelled widely. Inniss appreciated the discipline, hard work, creativity and inventiveness invested by inmates in producing the bags. He said that “. . . sometimes beautiful things come out of the worst conditions.” In the end, the bags and purses are evidence of the prisoner’s humanity and desire to retain relationships in the outside world. The bags and boxes constitute a specialized form of communication—of expression—that could quiet and calm the soul, thus the title “Cell Solace”.

Incarceration remains a major issue for black and brown communities all across America. It disrupts families and feeds social collapse, poverty and fragmented social relationships. Increasingly, it targets woman and girls as it always has men and boys. Since the Civil War and Reconstruction eras, public policy has victimized and dehumanized black communities. A prime expression of the abusive and unjust legal system has been the oppressive operation of prisons and jails. The *Cell Solace Collection* evinces that the flicker of love, family and hope was not extinguished.



Anon.
Purse of Peace, 1960s, Woven cigarette packaging
Nevada State Prison, Carson City, Nevada