

# Stolen staff reinstalled on statue of Harriet Tubman in Annapolis

By Luke Parker

When Harriet Tubman was born into slavery on Maryland's Eastern Shore, the name given to her was Araminta Ross. Affectionately, she was called "Minty."

Before escaping north at the age of 27, afraid the financial pressures of her enslaver would soon separate her from her family, Ross worked the timber fields of Dorchester County alongside her father. There, she met her husband and, assuming his surname and her mother's first, adopted the moniker spread nationwide as one of the leading conductors of the Underground Railroad.

However, in her 2017 interpretation of the abolitionist, Baltimore native and MacArthur Fellow Joyce Scott returned Tubman to her roots, while also arming her with two accessories: a rifle with spiritual significance and strength.

"Araminta with Rifle and Vévé" was lent to Annapolis' then Banneker-Douglass Museum in 2022, serving as a joint celebration of radical Black voices of resistance and Tubman's 200th birthday. Sitting outside the museum's front entrance, near Church Circle, the sculpture became the museum's first large-scale, exterior display, according to Executive Director Chanel Johnson.

Not long after, the 10-foot sculpture was defaced when two young people dislodged the vévé, which took the form of a staff, from Tubman's hand in what Annapolis Police Chief Ed Jackson called "a college prank."

The return, restoration and reinstallation process took nearly two years to complete. But in late October, one week before the museum was renamed to include Tubman, Scott went to the state capital with a lengthened version of the staff and anchored it back into her subject's hand.

Johnson said "Araminta" is part of "a new chapter" for the museum, one focused on sharing the legacy and contributions of Black women across the state and over time.

"We're excited of the future," she said, "and having Tubman [as] the symbol of where we're going is really incredible."

Johnson said Friday she was first drawn to the matchlessness of Scott's sculpture. Unlike many representations of histor-



In Dec. 2022, the Harriet Tubman statue outside the Banneker Douglass Tubman museum was vandalized. The vévé, a beaded staff, was taken by a man and a woman who eventually returned it after its cultural significance was described in a Facebook post by Annapolis Police. It has since been reinstalled on the statue. PAUL W. GILLESPIE/STAFF

ical figures, this Tubman was not crafted of iron, but rather a mixed-media piece combining milled foam with found objects, blown glass and appliques. The rifle and staff are beaded, the rifle adorned with writings and Maryland flowers, and the staff with two birds.

The vévé's theft in December 2022 was quickly publicized online, as cultural and law enforcement leaders conveyed its importance.

A religious symbol common in Haitian Vodou but seen throughout the African diaspora, vévés are icons usually drawn on the ground to invoke and transfer the energy of a particular spirit into the body of a devotee, according to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

The "spirit stick," as Scott described it, can be an "antenna to hear from God," said Martina Dodd, the museum's curator of collections.

"General Tubman was herself a straitback courier of freedom's metaphysicality," Scott said in a statement. "The Vévé extends her Alchemy, reveals safe passage, obscures those hiding and unveils the keys to Liberty" [sic].

Jackson said the staff, which was installed using two pieces, was returned in two packages from out of state. They arrived shortly after the department hosted a community update online with Johnson and Maryland Del. Shaneka Henson explaining the piece.

"Kids do silly things sometimes and they don't

realize the impact of what they do," the police chief said, adding the situation could have "easily" led to theft and destruction of property charges.

Johnson said the museum decided not to press any charges. Instead, the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture, which operates the museum, held a "healing circle" with the two people identified by police.

"It was definitely a day where lessons were learned, you know, a difficult conversation," Johnson said, "but it definitely closed with healing and renewal."

Scott participated as well, the director said, and the discussion was facilitated by activist Cheryl McLeod.

"Charging someone with a crime is not always the best course of action," Jackson said. "Sometimes people can appreciate what they've done wrong by sitting down and talking to them."

The reinstallation took place a week before the Annapolis museum was renamed in honor of Tubman.

Dodd said as Scott worked outside to piece her sculpture back together, reinforcing the longer staff with additional beads around Tubman's hand, the artist had the opportunity to interact with several passersby "standing in awe" of her work and happy it was being restored.

For many, including a college group on a Tubman-themed tour around the state, the artist explained

her connection to the abolitionist and her motivations for the sculpture, Dodd said.

"It was awesome to see community members being activated by seeing it be reattached," she said.

Amy Eva Raehse, executive director and partner at the Goya Contemporary Gallery in Baltimore, said the restoration of Scott's sculpture affirms the Annapolis museum's commitment to preserving the artwork and the "deep significance it represents."

The Goya Gallery first lent the sculpture to the Banneker-Douglass-Tubman Museum and has since matched a grant from the Arts Council of Anne Arundel County for the museum to purchase it, Johnson said.

In conjunction with the museum's renaming, Raehse said the repaired sculpture enhances Tubman's legacy "in a meaningful way for future generations, while strongly opposing the global resistance and attacks on an accurate and just representation of history."

To donate to the Banneker-Douglass-Tubman Museum's efforts to purchase "Araminta with Rifle and Vévé," go to the donation page on the museum's website and add a note to your contribution, visit the museum at 84 Franklin Street or contact Chanel Johnson at [chanel.compston@maryland.gov](mailto:chanel.compston@maryland.gov).

Have a news tip? Contact Luke Parker at [lparker@baltisun.com](mailto:lparker@baltisun.com), 410-725-6214 and [x.com/lparkernews](https://x.com/lparkernews)