

## Artist Robert Lugo Discusses Walters Museum Collection, History

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Roberto Lugo isn't your ordinary artist.

He's a young professor of Puerto Rican descent who proudly wears a baseball cap — frontward, backward and to the side — while donning a slick dress jacket and a pair of baggy jeans.

The Philadelphia-based ceramicist who the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore commissioned to create works of art and participate in programming for the reopening of the historic Mount Vernon building, waxed poetic in his artist statement about his attire.

"I got my hat turned backwards because the sun don't shine here, loose jeans to fit all this baggage that I carry ... I am a potter, activist, culture-maker, rapper, poet, and educator," he said.

His works are eye-catching, and when the museum opens on Saturday, June 16, the pieces are certain to draw a lot of conversation.

Lugo's works combine the forms and traditions he previously observed in the Walters' collection with contemporary color and imagery.

The elegant shapes of Sèvres porcelain are echoed in vases that also feature the "Fred Collection," with figures like Frederick Douglass and Freddie Gray, the Baltimore man who died in police custody in 2015.

"I think like most artists, you kind of have a fear of being exploited or someone offering you an opportunity just because you're a person of color," Lugo said.

"I wanted to be myself and say what was on my mind in an unfiltered way. What was great is that the Walters Museum had a scholar that worked with 19th century decorative art and we were sitting there one night looking at porcelain and it was like an underground hip-hop battle," he said.

Among the end results were the "Fred Collection," and the "Seat at the Table," to honor Sybby Grant, the enslaved but proud cook who served at the very building, 1 West, during the 19th century.

The "Fred" includes Frederick Douglas, Freddie Gray, Fred Sanford and others.

"Fred Sanford of course being Red Foxx because that's how I knew Foxx, as Fred Sanford all of my life. I was trying to connect where we are today and when this house was built," Lugo said.

"I didn't want to participate if I couldn't talk about Freddie Gray and the part of Baltimore that wouldn't normally be included. I started to think about people named Fred and the folks that made a significant impact in our culture and those who carry one name and the amount of people who went through slavery and those who never had a chance to make an impact."

In his homage to Sybby Grant, Lugo created a set of plates with a monogram of her initials and visual references to the dishes in which she took pride.

At one time, porcelain was considered more expensive than gold and only the wealthy and those with prestige could own such items, Lugo said.

"But, people like Sybby Grant and the way she existed with grace, allowed me to go to college and to be able to make this work," he said.

"We are owners of this museum. This is our museum and not just the folks who literally do own it. Because of the work of Sybby Grant and Frederick Douglass and others, I'm now able to make a set of china with the little that I know about Sybby Grant who was proud of her craft in terms of her cooking and I was careful not to contrive anything or to speak on her behalf.

"The china represents her seat at the table and when I say her seat, I mean all of ours because this is a museum for all of us," Lugo said.