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Photo by ERIK S. LESSER

'I AM AMERICA' — Patrons move through Tavis Smiley's "America I Am" exhibit. The 300-piece exhibit, which spans more than 400 years of African American life in the United States, will open in Los Angeles on Oct. 30.

'America I Am' Set to Open in Los Angeles

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A traveling exhibition celebrating nearly 500 years of the contributions, history and cultural influences of African Americans in the United States and around the world will open in Los Angeles Oct. 30.

"America I Am: The African American Imprint" will have nearly 300 artifacts and memorabilia on display at the California Science Center until April 2010.

The exhibit has items that convey the collective experience and saga of blacks in America, from the first steps of enslaved Africans on the nation's soil to the present.

The idea for the traveling exhibit, which will make the third stop of its 10-city tour in L.A., was

sparked two years ago by talk show and radio host Tavis Smiley, who in 2007 attended the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Jamestown colony, an entrance station for African slaves.

"I started wrestling with the idea of how the story of the contributions we have made to this country over a 400-year period and all the things we've done could be told," said Smiley, who is presenting the exhibit.

Smiley said he first thought about doing a permanent museum exhibition, but realized it would be too limiting. He wanted something

the entire country could enjoy.

"I wanted to tell the story beyond that (400th anniversary) weekend," Smiley said. "Everybody knows the story of the immigrants coming through Ellis Island. That's one story about the founding of America. But, the other story about the founding of this country is the story of Jamestown and the slaves on whose backs this country was built.

"It's been 400 years since those slaves first arrived, and so much of America, 400 years later, knows nothing about our story, about our

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