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BACKGROUNDER

The 1968 Exhibit: Historical Background

At the start of the 1960s, the United States was a superpower with military strength and great economic prosperity. President John F. Kennedy opened the decade by saying “It is a time for a new generation of leadership to cope with new problems and new opportunities, for there is a new world to be won.”

Indeed, during the 1960s students on campuses across the country took up the cause of creating a “new” and more just society. Highly idealistic, they demanded racial desegregation, championed free speech and protested the U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam. They challenged views of mainstream culture, supported new roles for women and explored alternative views of sex and marriage. Searching for a new identity, many dabbled in illicit drugs, created new styles of dress and listened to new forms of music.

After a landslide win in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson took up the call for social and economic justice, pushing through domestic programs including the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start and the Office of Economic Opportunity. General prosperity meant the money was there to support these programs. Unemployment was low and salaries were rising. Idealism was not just for students or counterculture groups, it was embraced by people of all ages in public and private life.

But not every American took up the call for change. Many defended the traditions of segregation and pushed for a limited role of government. A generation gap developed between parents who came of age in the 1940s and '50s and the more experimental views of 1960s youth. Some saw long hair and bell bottoms as signs of anarchy while others saw explorations with drugs and sex as immoral. Critics often labeled student protesters as self-indulgent and inexperienced. Student revolutionaries did not bring an end to capitalism, nor did they lead the masses to abandon material goods. But they did successfully call for the withdrawal of U.S. troops in Vietnam, gains were made in the civil rights movement and women across the nation took control of their social and economic futures, increasing their presence in the workforce by 50 percent during the 1960s. Fewer Americans lived in poverty, the elderly got better healthcare and America's

workplace was more diverse and flexible. And towards the end of the decade the United States became the first nation to land a man on the moon.

Still, optimism was fading and in its place was a growing sense of doubt, anger and fear. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated; American military power was challenged at home and in the field; a growing tax burden created by expanding government programs and a mounting war debt pushed the economy to the brink, while peaceful protests turned into violent displays of public disorder and rioting. The new youth slogan became “turn on, tune in, and drop out.” Drug use was blamed for the deaths of Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix. By the end of the 1960s women may have held nearly half the jobs in the United States, but they earned 60 percent as much as their male counterparts. And the manned space program began to be scaled back in favor of cheaper and more effective unmanned flights.

Some argue the events of the 1960s fostered a culture of immorality while creating a welfare state at the expense of an immense tax burden. Others say civil and political rights improved, social inequities were leveled and a renewed sense of American idealism was fostered. The debate is never more important than it is today. Those who lived through the 1960s are now in positions of leadership in American government and society, and they are raising families and passing on their beliefs to a new generation.

ABOUT THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA

The Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) brings together collections of art, history and natural science under one roof to tell the extraordinary stories of California and its people. OMCA's groundbreaking exhibits tell the many stories that comprise California with many voices, often drawing on first-person accounts by people who have shaped California's cultural heritage. Visitors are invited to actively participate in the Museum as they learn about the natural, artistic and social forces that affect the state and investigate their own role in both its history and its future. With more than 1.8 million objects, OMCA is a leading cultural institution of the Bay Area and a resource for the research and understanding of California's dynamic cultural and environmental heritage.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) is at 1000 Oak Street, at 10th Street, in Oakland. OMCA is situated between downtown Oakland and Lake Merritt. Museum admission is \$12 general; \$9 seniors and students with valid ID, \$6 youth ages 9 to 17, and free for Members and children 8 and under. OMCA offers onsite underground parking and is conveniently located one block from the Lake Merritt BART station, on the corner of 10th Street and Oak Street. The accessibility ramp is located at the new 1000 Oak Street main entrance. For more information, visit museumca.org.

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