FAU exhibit honors black inventors

BY IVETTE M. YEE  
STAFF WRITER

BOCA RATON • Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell are well-known inventors who found their place in history books, but there are countless others who never received acclaim—and many were black.

Florida Atlantic University Libraries' Arthur and Mata Jaffe Collection is presenting a traveling exhibit of handmade books titled "Books in Black: A New Page!" The exhibit highlights little-known black inventors and achievers throughout history and runs through April 15.

With 38 handcrafied books and objects spread throughout the library, including some with 3-D elements, fabric, heading and illustrations, "Books in Black" pays tribute to these black pioneers. They include Dr. George Franklin Grant, who patented the first golf tee in 1899; Janet Collins, the first black prima ballerina at the New York Metropolitan Opera in 1934; and Lewis Howard Latimer, the man who in 1881 invented the carbon filament inside the light bulb that made it functional.

"Thomas Edison gets all the credit for the light bulb, but it was Latimer who created the inside that we still use today," said John Cutrone, FAU's book arts coordinator. "He was part of Edison's staff, but you don't hear much about him, like most of these inventors."

Artists, dollmakers and quilters made the objects showcased in "Books in Black."

Ruth E. Edwards, the exhibit's curator from New York City, visited FAU and led a bookmaking workshop last month. Her work, "What's in the Fridge?" tells the story of John Standard, who patented an improved refrigerator design in 1891. It resembles a refrigerator and has multicolored magnets on the cover and an electric plug running from the back. The pages contain illustrated poetry about what's in the refrigerator.

Another object features a large pencil and text pages crushed look like pencil shavings, a nod to J.L. Love, who invented the pencil sharpener in 1897.

"I didn't know that," said student Roxy Sena, 19, as she browsed it.

Other works in the exhibit aren't books, but objects with text. Artist Gail Beckford's "Elijah 'The Real' McCoy," consists of a smudged oil rag and lubricator cup, an invention by McCoy that changed the way large machines are maintained.

"We are not trying to write an encyclopedia. We write a few sentences to steer people in the right direction, and to say, this was one man and he made one heck of a contribution," Edwards said.