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National Gallery of Art Acquires 40 Works by Black Southern Artists

The acquisition adds paintings, quilts and sculptures by more than 20 African-American artists, many of them self-taught, into the collection.

Zachary Small | 30 December 2020

The National Gallery of Art in Washington has announced the acquisition of 40 works from the [Souls Grown Deep Foundation](#), a nonprofit organization that for the last decade has dedicated itself to promoting the contributions of African-American artists from the South. The purchase adds the work of 21 Black painters, quilters and sculptors to the museum's art collection.

"This is a significant acquisition for our department in terms of diversity," said Harry Cooper, senior curator and head of the modern art department at the museum. "These artists are out of the mainstream and don't have traditional training. They are Black and from the South, often facing hardships to create their work."

Dr. Cooper said the museum has worked on the purchase for three years. The arrival of the museum's new director, [Kaywin Feldman](#), in 2019 helped expedite the lengthy acquisitions process; she had previously overseen another [Souls Grown Deep](#) acquisition while leading the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

"These exciting works by artists from the American South demonstrate remarkable qualities of imaginative and conceptual daring and material inventiveness," Ms. Feldman said in a statement. "Many of these works offer powerful insights and perspectives on the compelling issues of our time."

The acquisition comes at a time when the organization's leaders are dealing with the aftermath of a petition this summer that raised allegations of sexual and racial discrimination and called for more transparency and diversity at the institution. Artworks from the acquisition include the imaginative drawings of Nellie Mae Rowe, the abstract sculptures of Lonnie Holley, and the geometric quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph and Irene Williams of the Gee's Bend community.

Other highlights of the purchase are the fraught assemblages of Thornton Dial – which commemorate the deaths of a fellow artist, Bessie Harvey, and Princess Diana – as well as his 1995 painting “Clothes Factory.”

“That painting could hang with something from Jackson Pollock without any problem,” Dr. Cooper said.

Maxwell Anderson, president of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, hopes that the acquisition will expose the public to artists who are not typically seen in a museum setting – ones who are often self-taught and underappreciated in their lifetimes. “For the artists involved here to be represented by this nation's pre-eminent gallery is a testament to their talent and their pertinence to the canon of American art history.”