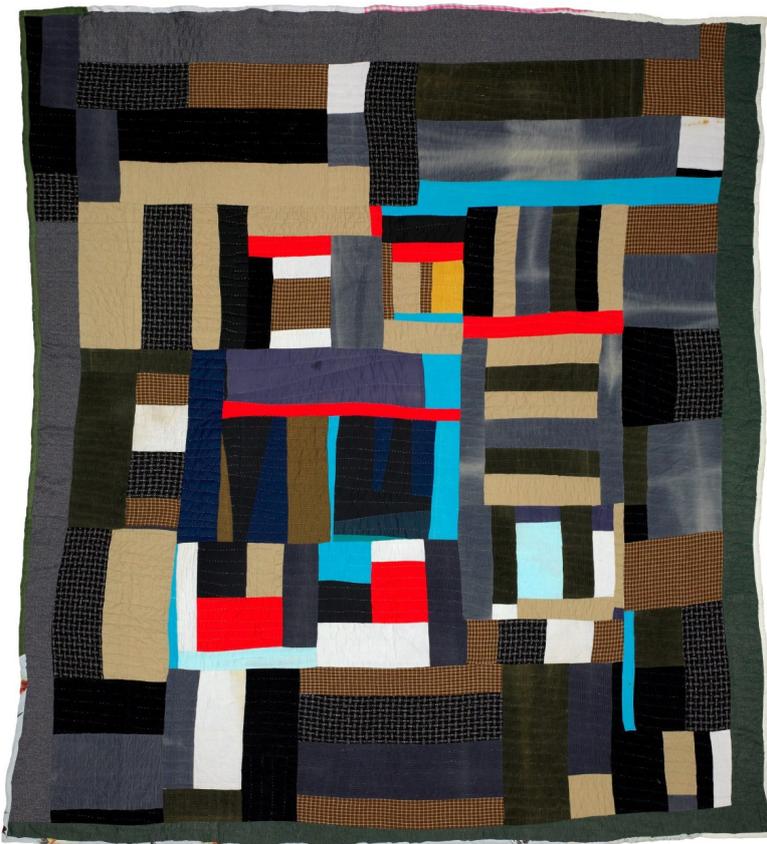


HYPERALLERGIC

The National Gallery of Art Acquires Quilts by the Women of Gee's Bend

The DC institution has expanded its holdings of work by Black artists from the American South with a recent acquisition from Souls Grown Deep.

Cassie Packard | 8 January 2021



"Blocks and Strips" (2002) by Mary Lee Bendolph of the Gee's Bend community (© 2017 Mary Lee Bendolph/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

The National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Washington, DC, has expanded its collection of modern and contemporary work by Black artists with the acquisition of 40 works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to promoting work by Black artists from the American South. The purchase, which was brokered over the course of three years, features work across media by 21 artists, including a geometric quilt by Mary Lee Bendolph, the “gumbo” clay busts of James “Son Ford” Thomas, and the drawn visions of “Prophet” Royal Robertson.

A highlight of the NGA acquisition is a group of nine quilts by women artists from Gee's Bend, a small, geographically isolated Black community in rural Alabama with a rich tradition of making bold, abstract quilts since the mid-19th century. A 2002 piece by Mary Lee Bendolph, an important and longstanding figure in the Gee's Bend community, riffs on the “Housetop” pattern – a design characterized by concentric squares – with juxtaposed swathes of wool, cotton, and corduroy. The wide range of materials used across the quilts is a testament to the community's ingenuity: a composition made c. 1980 by Irene Williams employs crepe and acetate, for example, while a piece quilted by Missouri Pettway in 1942 features cotton sacking.

The acquisition also includes three paintings, three drawings, and one sculpture by the celebrated assemblage artist Thornton Dial, who passed away in 2016. Several of the pieces are commemorative: in 1995, Dial made a sculpture in the shape of a throne using materials such as spray-painted roots and corrugated tin to honor the memory of the late sculptor Bessie Harvey, while his drawing from 1997 pays homage to Princess Diana. In addition to the works by Dial, the acquisition includes a 1988 mixed media piece by Dial's son, Thornton Dial Jr.

The purchase was finalized under the leadership of Kaywin Feldman, who joined the NGA as director in December 2018. Feldman also facilitated a major acquisition from Souls Grown Deep in her previous role as head of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, which secured 33 works from the foundation in 2019. Over the past decade, Souls Grown Deep has placed more than 480 artworks in museum collections, including those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and the Baltimore Museum of Art.

In a statement released by the NGA, Feldman said: “These exciting works by artists from the American South demonstrate remarkable qualities of imaginative and conceptual daring and material inventiveness across a wide range of media and styles. In addition, many of these works offer powerful insights and perspectives on the compelling issues of our time, and we are pleased to be able to add them to our collection of modern and contemporary art.”

Maxwell L. Anderson, president of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, was also quoted in the statement, saying: “The addition of notable works by artists from our collection to the National Gallery of Art and other leading institutions signifies their essential inclusion in

the canon of art history. Subsequent exhibitions, educational programs, and scholarship will expose new audiences to their artistic mastery and contemporary relevance.”

Anderson told Hyperallergic of his hope that acquisitions such as this one will help the art world dispense with the term “self-taught,” which he views as a negative epithet, alongside terms such as “outsider” and “visionary.” “The 21 artists included in the National Gallery’s acquisition now stand shoulder-to-shoulder with others in the collection who developed their talents in school or, like countless white artists from Leonardo to Andrew Wyeth, as apprentices, or simply lacking in formal training,” Anderson said to Hyperallergic. “The Gallery’s imprimatur should help retire the epithet “self-taught” when referring to artists of color, and instead have us calibrate creative achievements on the merits.”