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National Gallery of Art



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National Gallery of Art Acquires Forty Works by African American Artists from Souls Grown Deep Foundation



Mary Lee Bendolph
Blocks and Strips, 2002
wool, cotton, and corduroy
overall: 248.92 x 218.44 cm (98 x 86 in.)
National Gallery of Art, Washington
Patrons' Permanent Fund and Gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation
2020.28.1
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Washington, DC—The National Gallery of Art is pleased to announce a major acquisition of 40 works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation by 21 African American artists from the southern United States. The acquisition is made possible through the generosity of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation in addition to funds from the Patrons' Permanent Fund. Some highlights of this important acquisition are nine quilts by the artists of Gee's Bend, Alabama, including Mary Lee Bendolph and Irene

Williams; three paintings, three drawings, and one sculpture by Thornton Dial; works on paper by Nellie Mae Rowe, Henry Speller, Georgia Speller, and “Prophet” Royal Robertson; four sculpted heads by James “Son Ford” Thomas, which were featured in the National Gallery’s *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* exhibition (January 28–May 13, 2018); and three sculptures by Lonnie Holley. The Gallery joins other prominent museums that have acquired works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation since 2014, including the Brooklyn Museum, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Phillips Collection.

The acquisition expands the National Gallery of Art’s holdings of modern and contemporary works by African American artists. These new pieces join works already in the collection by Emma Amos, Mark Bradford, Theaster Gates, Sam Gilliam, Oliver Lee Jackson, Glenn Ligon, Al Loving, Kerry James Marshall, Martin Puryear, Lorna Simpson, Alma Thomas, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, and Jack Whitten, among many others.

“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,” said Kaywin Feldman, director, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

“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,” said Maxwell L. Anderson, president, Souls Grown Deep Foundation and Community Partnership.

About the Acquisition

The acquisition includes nine quilts made by artists from Gee’s Bend—a small African American community along the Alabama River—where artists have created quilt masterpieces from recycled clothes and dresses, feed sacks, and fabric remnants for the last 100 years. Mary Lee Bendolph (b. 1935), one of the best known and most revered quiltmakers, uses complex geometric and color structures in an ingenious elaboration on the traditional practice of quilting in strips and blocks. In a quilt she made in 2002, rectangles of brown wool and blue denim are juxtaposed with brightly colored strips and squares that play off the structural framework of the “Housetop” pattern, a conventional design of concentric squares that is popular among the quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend. According to Bendolph, her works draw inspiration from the colors, shapes, and patterns of the world around her, resulting in designs that are abstract remappings of the visual environment. Of the many Gee’s Bend quiltmakers in the Souls Grown Deep collection, others included in the acquisition are

Mary L. Bennett (b. 1942), Flora Moore (b. 1951), Lucy P. Pettway (1930–2003), Missouri Pettway (1902–1981), Sally Mae Pettway Mixon (b. 1965), Sue Willie Seltzer (1922–2010), and Irene Williams (1920–2015).

Several works by Thornton Dial (1928–2016) in a variety of media form another core part of this acquisition. *Testing Chair (Remembering Bessie Harvey)* (1995) is a throne-like chair engulfed by gold and silver roots constructed after the death of fellow artist Bessie Harvey. Other works by Dial commemorate the death of Princess Diana in 1997, including a drawing, *The Last Trip Home (Diana's Funeral)* (1997), and a painting, *Master of the Red Meat* (1997). These were executed in series in the tradition of religious art cycles that memorialize the lives of holy figures. Two paintings, *Refugees Trying to Get to the United States* (1988) and *Clothes Factory* (1995), point to the struggles of migrants and the costs of industrialization.

Also included in the acquisition is a work by Dial's son, Thornton Dial Jr. (b. 1953). *A Man Can Be a Star* (1988), made from paint, tin, carpet, sunglasses, and industrial sealing compound, depicts a figure representing Ray Charles seated in a bright red chair at a red piano against a stark white background studded with red stars.

Joe Light's (1934–2005) *Birdman Trainer* (1987) depicts a human figure with birds perched on its head and shoulders. The composite figure (a possible self-portrait, since the birdman's hair resembles that of the artist) gazes upward, becoming a kind of intermediary between heaven and earth. Purvis Young's (1943–2010) *Saints* (late 1970s), depicting abstracted figures with halos, is a painting on found pieces of wood carefully chosen for their texture, color, and form. Young's *Untitled* (mid-1980s) is an example of one of the books of collages that the artist assembled from the many drawings he made of some of his favorite subjects: buildings in the Overtown neighborhood of Miami, Florida, funerals, horses, boats at sea, and people. Paintings by Ronald Lockett (1965–1998) and Mary T. Smith (1905–1995) are also included in this acquisition.

Among the acquired works on paper are two lively, patterned drawings by Nellie Mae Rowe (1900–1982) and two drawings each by husband and wife Henry Speller (1900–1997) and Georgia Speller (1931–1988), both of whom often drew sexually charged subjects derived from popular culture and television. "Prophet" Royal Robertson's (1930–1997) *Sevenly Out of Body Travels* (1984) is an example of his drawn "visions," a mythic combination of evangelism, science fiction, mass media, advertising images, and autobiographical motifs.

Four examples of the so-called "gumbo" clay heads and busts by James "Son Ford" Thomas (1926–1993) from the later 1980s are among the outstanding sculptural works included in the acquisition. Developed after years of producing sculptures depicting the human skull, Thomas's *Untitled Self-Portrait* (1987) includes the raised eyebrow and distinct lines of the artist's own features.

Three sculptures by Lonnie B. Holley (b. 1950) and two by Hawkins Bolden (1914–2005) create a rich personal cosmos from found objects. Holley paints, carves in sandstone, and assembles cast-off objects into sculptures that are a poignant meditation on (in his words) "what we as humans have to deal with"—knowing how to wield power, finding equilibrium among life's tumults, or confronting larger-than-life forces. Holley's haunting composition of found metal, bone, and dried flowers in *The Boneheaded Serpent at the Cross (It Wasn't Luck)* (1996) is an important example. Bolden, blind since he was eight years old, collected his materials and stored them in the crawl space beneath his house in Memphis, Tennessee. When he was inspired to create, he hammered, cut, twisted, and bent these items into small, masklike objects.

About the Souls Grown Deep Foundation and Community Partnership

Souls Grown Deep Foundation holds the largest and foremost collection of works by African American artists from the southern United States, encompassing some 1,000 works by more than 160 artists. The foundation advances its mission by advocating the contributions of these artists in the canon of American art history through scholarship, exhibitions, education, public programs, and publications. In 2014, Souls Grown Deep embarked on a multiyear program to transfer the majority of works in its care to the permanent collections of leading art museums in the United States and abroad, placing nearly 500 works by 114 artists (81 of whom are women) in more than 25 institutions.

Souls Grown Deep Community Partnership is dedicated to improving the quality of life of communities that gave rise to the art in the care of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. It advances its mission by fostering economic empowerment, racial and social justice, and educational advancement in select regions across the Southeast. The partnership derives its name from a 1921 poem by Langston Hughes (1902–1967) titled "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," the last line of which is "My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

For more information, visit soulsgrowndeep.org.

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