

AUGUST 07, 2020

Acquisition: John Outterbridge, "Plus Tax: Shopping Bag Society, Rag Man Series"



John Outterbridge

Plus Tax: Shopping Bag Society, Rag Man Series, 1971

mixed media

overall: 50.8 x 34.3 x 19.1 cm (20 x 13 1/2 x 7 1/2 in.)

National Gallery of Art, Washington

Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

Purchased with funds from The Anmanson Foundation and Howard and Roberta Anmanson
2020.12.1

The Gallery has recently acquired *Plus Tax: Shopping Bag Society, Rag Man Series* (1971), the first work by the African American artist John Outterbridge to enter the collection. It is part of a series of eight sculptures made from 1970 to 1976 that were inspired by the idea of the ragman and the social fabric of 1970s south-central Los Angeles. Using recycled canvas to reimagine the model of modernist assemblage, the *Rag Man* series has literal and figurative depth.

John Outterbridge (b. 1933) grew up during the Depression in the Jim Crow South surrounded by his grandmother's handmade herbal remedies (often sewn into asafetida bags) and a playground of discarded objects from his father's junk business. In 1963 Outterbridge went to Los Angeles, where he began assembling cast-off materials to reveal and honor the cultural histories of his youth. After the 1965 Watts Riots, Outterbridge incorporated the considerable detritus left by the riots to make sense of and create a new order from the ruins of south-central Los Angeles.

In *Plus Tax: Shopping Bag Society*, Outterbridge has sewn found canvas into the form of a shopping bag, on which he has colorfully painted the ground and the words "PLUS TAX" on the left side, "BAG" repeated six times on the right, and "Shopping Bag Society" on the back. To the bag's handles the artist has attached colored paper tags, some from J. W. Robinson's, an upscale Los Angeles department store. *Plus Tax: Shopping Bag Society* questions the different values placed on such an object in a society with a wide socioeconomic range. Is this work someone's waste, or someone's treasure; who is taxed or burdened by this society, and who has it "in the bag"?

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