REVELATIONS
Art from the African American South

In-Gallery Youth Guide
de Young
FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO
REVELATIONS
Art from the African American South

“Art is a guide for every person who is looking for something.”
— Thornton Dial

This exhibition celebrates the work of artists from African American communities in the southern United States. Many of these artists transform materials found in their environment to share important ideas about American society, such as our quest for freedom and the struggle for equality. Their personal and family histories include slavery and segregation, which deprived African Americans of their liberties, even their freedom of expression. The varied experiences of these artists and the diversity of the artworks that they made illustrate the complicated history of the United States.

All of the artists in this exhibition were inspired to share their ideas and experiences. Each of their objects sends a message. Look closely to discover what the artists are saying to you.
Words to Know:

Slavery
A legalized system by which people are owned by other people and forced to work in dangerous and inhumane conditions.

Sharecropping
An economic arrangement in which a landowner rents land to others in return for a share of the crops. After the legal abolishment of slavery, this system led to forced dependency and poverty for African Americans.

Civil Rights
The rights of citizens to political and social freedom and equality.

Gallery Guidelines:

- Sit with your materials on your lap.
- No lying on the floor or leaning on the walls.
- Stand 18 inches away from the art at all times. Do not touch the art.
- Walk slowly and be aware of other visitors.
- Use pencils only in the gallery. By not using pens, you help ensure the safety of the art.
SLAVERY, SHARECROPPING,

Politicians in the 1850s used to say, “Cotton is king.” Materials made from cotton were in high demand around the world, and before the Civil War, it was slaves who planted and picked the cotton. Cotton is a time-consuming and painful crop to harvest. It is difficult to separate the cotton from the sharp plant without being cut or pricked.

Compare and Contrast

What can color tell us? What emotion does each color give the painting? Write the emotions below and then draw a line from the color to your description.

_________________________  ____________________________

_________________________  ____________________________
Discuss

A system is a set of rules that control or guide behavior. A system can be positive or negative. Which systems affect your life? Circle any of them below.

- education
- gender
- class
- religion
- justice
- race
- other

Discuss

In this painting, *Talking to the System*, three young people talk with faces that might represent their elders and community leaders.

- What tone of voice might the figures be using?
- What might the figures be talking about?
- What information or advice would you get from talking to your elders?
The patterns that you see in the quilts from Gee’s Bend, Alabama, have been passed down from generation to generation. The quilters used fabric scraps from old bed sheets, feed sacks, and clothing. Rather than throwing away old materials, they kept them and transformed them into works of art. Quilts also kept their families warm.

Discuss

Look closely at the materials used by Annie Mae Young in “Bars” Work-Clothes Quilt.

- How might it feel to be wrapped in this quilt?
- How might these materials have been used before they were made into a quilt?

What kinds of fabrics do you have at home that you might recycle? Circle the materials.

[Checkboxes for different materials: shirts, jeans, towels, curtains, pillow cases, sacks, canvas, dresses, sheets, other blank space]
"I see the barn, and I get an idea to make a quilt. I can walk outside and look around in the yard and see ideas all around the front and back of my house." — Mary Lee Bendolph

Sketch

Look around the gallery. The titles of the works describe the designs in the quilts. Find and sketch the designs below:

bars  strips  crazy quilt  house top

Create your own quilt and sketch it in the space below:
Some of the artists in these galleries made works out of found materials. The artists gave new life to natural roots and branches, and manmade recycled materials.

**Discuss**

Look at Lonnie Holley’s *Him and Her Hold the Root*.

- How would you describe the root in this piece to someone who hasn’t seen it?
- What details do you notice about the chairs?
- What more does the title tell us about this work?

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**Discuss**

Bessie Harvey transformed wood and gave it human characteristics.

“I go into the woods and listen. There is spirits in every piece of wood. I listen to them. They tell me what they want to be.” — Bessie Harvey

- What inspires you to make art?
- What materials do you like to use?
Write

Choose another artwork in this gallery and write about what you see.

Describe the artwork:

What did the artist add?  
What materials did the artist transform?
THE WORLD AT MY DOOR:

A “yard show” is an outdoor display of art that has been carefully arranged on someone’s own property. A yard show might include painting, sculpture, signs, assemblage, and more. Often a yard show includes artworks made of found materials such as trees, branches, pots and pans, tools, fabric, wire, and metal. These artists are known for their yard shows.

“The whole idea handed down to me by God is to use that which has been discarded, just as we as a people have been discarded, made invisible. That what is invisible, thrown away, could be made into something so it demonstrates that even what gets thrown away, with a spirit in it can survive and grow.” — Joe Minter

Mary T. Smith painted on plywood and metal. She encouraged people passing by to admire her outdoor art gallery.

Joe Minter called his yard show the “African Village in America.” His art tells the story of four hundred years of African American history.

Write

If you could visit these yard shows, what questions would you ask the artists? Write them below.

______________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________
SOUTHERN YARD SHOW

Discuss

To create this painting, *Rainy Sunshine, Cats and Dog, Drum Beater*, Mose Tolliver painted with a board in his lap and rotated it after adding each section.

Imagine rotating the painting so that the top is at the bottom. Does the story change?

Sketch

1. Think of a memory of your family.

2. Draw the place where it happened and then rotate the paper.

3. Draw the people who were there and then rotate the paper.

4. Add other details.

5. Give your drawing three titles, one for each rotation.
Thornton Dial titled this artwork *New Light*. In Dial’s hometown of Emelle, Alabama, the African American community got access to electric power almost thirty years later than the surrounding white community. Segregation laws allowed for this kind of inequality.

“All truth is hard truth. We’re in the darkness now and we got to accept the hard truth to bring on the light. You can hide the truth but you can’t get rid of it. When truth come out in the light, we get the beauty of the world.” — Thornton Dial

**Discuss**

- What parts of the sculpture, *New Light*, are dark?
- What parts are light?
- How has Dial connected the dark and the light?
- How would living without electricity be different from living with electricity?
FROM THE MARGINS TO MAINSTREAM: 
The ART OF THE DIASPORA

Sketch

Look around this gallery. Sketch an artwork.

Discuss

The artworks you’ve seen in the previous galleries are all by American artists. The artwork in this gallery was created by artists all over the world.

• How is this art similar to the art that you’ve seen today?
• How is it different?

The artwork that you have seen today is about important parts of American history.

• List the ideas that you explored today:
Thoughts from noted journalist, Belva Davis  
- Vice President, Board of Trustees, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and member, San Francisco Chapter of The Links Inc.

In museum galleries around the country, stories are told that reveal the accomplishments, pains, and creative talents of Americans from a variety of backgrounds. However, only recently have major museums started to recognize a duty to correct the major absence of African Americans, whose own stories are so integral to the nation’s development, history, and character. This exhibition depicts the pain of slavery, the struggles of the civil rights movement, the joy of music, the beauty of the earth, and the exhilaration of society’s ongoing transformation by new generations of heroes.

With society at a critical juncture, when we are seeking ways to better understand one another and confront stereotypical images, Revelations: Art from the African American South could not have arrived at a more opportune time. The exhibition invites us to venture forward and talk about our differences, appreciate them, and get to know each other better. Museums are one of the safest places to calm our minds, contemplate, and absorb the messages of others. All is revealed before our eyes, and our minds are allowed the time to absorb and to think. Museums are indeed the perfect places to see the truth of the past and sort out the challenges of the present. To be where so much is revealed—where we are enabled to talk about something as explosive as our racial dilemmas—is a powerful and transformative experience. That is why the de Young is so proud and excited to have acquired this historic collection from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation and to present it to Bay Area audiences and to the world. Please take a moment to read the text on the following pages written by the curator about the historic importance of this exhibition.

*The complexity of the text on the following two pages may require adult support for young readers.
An excerpt from Timothy Anglin Burgard’s catalogue essay, “New Light: Art From the African American South”

The artists and artworks represented in this collection exemplify the flowering of an integral—and exceptional—chapter in the history of American art, one that has shed new light on the diversity and complexity of African American cultures in the United States. Embodying the promise and progress of freedom in the modern civil rights era, these visual traditions bring a unique perspective to bear on some of the most profound and persistent issues in American society, including race, class, religion, and gender.

These artists also offer cautionary reminders that the prevailing definitions of art—and art history—often are inadequate to encompass or elucidate some of the most remarkable aspects of our nation’s cultures. Historically marginalized, patronized, or promoted with reductive terms such as “folk,” “naive,” or “outsider,” only recently have these artworks commenced a great migration from private homes and yards across the South to public galleries and museums throughout the country. Yet, while embodying many universal human and artistic values, these works cannot be simply assimilated within traditional narratives of American art.

The artists’ unique biographies and artistic identities counter reductive notions of African American art as the product of a single culture, aesthetic, or worldview. Indeed, these artists are speaking a visual language, but one with numerous dialects and distinct voices. Originally created as expressions of individual identity and communal solidarity in the African American South, these eloquent objects are now powerful testaments to cultural continuity and survival—and to difference and resistance. In keeping with their extraordinary origins, these artworks will continue to function as provocative catalysts to transform both American and global art history.
Captions + Credits

IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE:

Lonnie Holley, *Him and Her Hold the Root*, 1994. Rocking chairs, pillow, root, 45 1/2 x 73 x 30 1/2 in. (115.6 x 185.4 x 77.5 cm). FAMSF, Museum purchase, and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2017.1.27. © Lonnie Holley

Robert Gwathmey, *Cotton Picker*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 40 1/8 x 30 1/4 in. (101.9 x 76.8 cm). FAMSF, Museum purchase, Mildred Anna Williams Collection, 1951.26


Mary T. Smith in her yard, ca. 1987. Photo by William Arnett. Courtesy of the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill


Youth guide developed by Ariana Bayer and designed by Anneliese Salgado, senior teaching artists at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco
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