

Subversive
Skilled
Sublime

FIBER ART
BY WOMEN

SUBVERSIVE, SKILLED, SUBLIME: FIBER ART BY WOMEN

Cotton, wool, polyester, silk—we feel fiber in every aspect of our lives. The more than thirty artists in *Subversive, Skilled, Sublime: Fiber Art by Women* mastered everyday materials, subverted conventions, and transformed humble threads into sublime creations.

Fiber has long inspired women artists, although their ingenuity with threads and cloth was often dismissed by art critics as inconsequential within twentieth-century American art. The artists in this exhibition refuted the marginalization of fiber art and asserted its validity as a powerful and expressive medium. Dating from 1918 to 2004, the thirty-three works in this exhibition range from sewn quilts, woven tapestries and rugs, and beaded and embroidered ornamentation, to twisted and bound sculptures and mixed media assemblages. Each work carries the story of its maker, drawing on personal experiences and skills passed down for generations as well as textile traditions from around the world.

Placing artworks alongside the artist's own words, the exhibition shows the complex influence of domestic life, shared knowledge of historical and experimental techniques, feminist strategies for upending the art world status quo, and the perceptions and possibilities of fiber art. A gallery of archival materials deepens insight into their creative processes.

All artworks are drawn from the Smithsonian American Art Museum collection; archival materials and interviews are selected from the Archives of American Art. The project is curated by Laura Augustin Fox, SAAM curatorial collections coordinator; Virginia Mecklenburg, SAAM senior curator; and Mary Savig, the Lloyd Herman Curator of Craft at the Renwick Gallery.

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GALLERY #1: INTRO GALLERY

Object labels, Gallery 1:



Claire Zeisler
Coil Series III—A Celebration
1978
natural hemp, wool, and galvanized wire

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1984.163

I wanted to see how far I could stretch the fiber and still have it say fiber.
—Claire Zeisler

A Celebration is a free standing and free flowing structure that declares fiber art is fine art. The artwork is made from 136 ½ balls of hemp and forty skeins of “jockey red” yarn. Using off-loom knotting and wrapping techniques, it took 597 hours for Claire Zeisler and her assistants to meticulously wrap the threads around galvanized wire.

Zeisler collected art before she created it. She was particularly enthusiastic about modern paintings by German Bauhaus luminaries from the 1920s and Indigenous and African masks, baskets, and textiles by unnamed artists. In the 1940s, her artistic practice began at the loom, where she made wall hangings inspired in part by the ancient textiles and baskets in her collection. In the 1960s, she abandoned the loom but not threads.



Emma Amos
Winning
1982
acrylic on linen with handwoven fabric

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the Catherine Walden Myer Fund, 2019.15

I've just always loved yarn. I've loved paint. I've loved anything that could rely on color or just line.

—Emma Amos

Emma Amos threaded the fleeting moments of her everyday life as a Black woman into poignant artworks. *Winning* is a snapshot of the moment a leaping woman becomes airborne. The exultant figure, made of a patchwork of woven swatches, threads, and ribbons, celebrates Amos's commitment to fiber art even as she gained widespread recognition for her paintings and prints. From 1961 to 1973 she worked for famed textile designer Dorothy Liebes, and in the 1970s she taught weaving at Threadbare Unlimited in Greenwich Village and the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Art. Amos even produced the Boston public television program *Show of Hands* about crafts. *Winning* is more than just a moment: it indicates Amos's deliberate leap to elevate women's work in her art.



Else Regensteiner
Red and Blue
1969
wool

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Helga Regensteiner Sinaiko, 2006.29.2

Perfect form, perfect proportion, perfect rhythm, perfect color surrounds us, if we will only pay attention.

—Else Regensteiner

Red and Blue emphasizes the texture of fiber in sections of plain weaves (interlacing weft threads and vertical warp threads), exposed warps, and tufts of fringe. A closer look reveals how the artist used burgundy, ruby red, magenta, sapphire blue, and light blue threads to create squares of “red” and “blue.” Else Regensteiner is a star among the constellation of modern textile designers. In 1940 she began an unpaid apprenticeship at the Institute of Design, a Chicago-based school known for its progressive workshops that centered on the German Bauhaus idea of combining design with art. By 1945 Regensteiner was teaching her own courses at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Like many Bauhaus-influenced women, Regensteiner became a weaver, and she went on to become an inventive artist, a commercially successful designer, and a compelling educator.

GALLERY #2: PERCEPTION AND POSSIBILITY OF FIBER ART

Object labels, Gallery 2:



Lenore Tawney
Box of Falling Stars
1984
cotton canvas, linen thread, acrylic paint, and ink

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1992.83

The truest thing in my life was my work. I wanted my life to be as true.
—Lenore Tawney

Box of Falling Stars represents the culmination of Lenore Tawney's journey to give shape to light. The work is an example of Tawney's *Clouds*, a series of ethereal sculptures conceived in 1977. Tawney called the *Clouds* "vertical weavings in volume" and "weavings without weaving" because they were not made on a loom, the device used to hold threads to weave into fabric. First, she drew a grid on the canvas support. At every intersection, she pulled a single linen thread through the canvas and secured it with a knot. She repeated this simple task thousands of times. The tedious process yields a cosmic effect. The fall of shimmering threads emulates the ways in which clouds (and stars) hold and diffract light. *Box of Falling Stars* heightens perception and mindfulness to the elements of life that often go unseen.



Lenore Tawney
In the Dark Forest
ca. 1959
woven linen, wool, and silk

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the James Renwick Alliance and museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1992.90

I left everything in Chicago. I just brought a couple things . . . a refrigerator and my cat and my loom. And I didn't know whether I'd stay but I stayed. I immediately felt free.
—Lenore Tawney

In the Dark Forest represents Lenore Tawney's "open warp" technique. She pulled fiber through the vertical threads (the warp) by hand to create painterly, gestural forms. Tawney created this work at a crucial transition in her career. In 1957 she moved from Chicago, where she trained as a weaver, to New York City to embrace life as an artist. Her loom became a means to shape new dimensions of fiber art.

Here, Tawney achieved the transcendental effect of sunlight filtering through a shadowy forest. The open warp weavings like this one seeded Tawney's lifelong experimentation with light, scale, and volume, which eventually reached the sky in her *Cloud* series (see *Box of Falling Stars* on view nearby).



Cynthia Schira
Reflections
1982

woven and bound resist-dyed cotton and dyed rayon

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible in part by the James Renwick Alliance and Roberta Golding, 1985.29A–D

When I started working from what I really loved, from the land, then my work became stronger because it was more honest.
—Cynthia Schira

The ethereal surface of *Reflections* is created by the added wefts (the horizontal threads) to form non-structural surface patterning and twining, a technique in which two or more strands of the weft continuously twist around the warp (the vertical threads). The delicate sheen of the subtly dyed first layer conjures a misty atmosphere. The horizontal orientation suggests the flatness of the artist's Kansas environment.

Cynthia Schira fuses the essence of a landscape within the structure of her fiber works. She uses the woven materials to affect the perception of the work, rendering aspects of both her medium and subject invisible and creating an ease between the two. Her works poetically evoke deep feelings related to a space.



Olga de Amaral
Cal y Canto
ca. 1979
linen and gesso

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift from the collection of Dr. and Mrs. Isidore M. Samuels, 1991.109

The weaving tradition—at least in Latin America—seems unseparable from the concept of sacred landscape . . . one must ask what landscape is inhabited by the weavers.
—Olga de Amaral

Cal y Canto is a play on words derived from the idiom “cerrado a cal y canto,” which means “under lock and key” or “locked tight.” The earth-colored linen strips are woven together to create a somber barricade, reminiscent of ancient Incan stonework. The white gesso, irregularly applied, suggests the weathered face of the ancient structures. For Olga de Amaral, the rugged landscape of the Andes is deeply linked with her Colombian identity. Her woven walls assertively claim the space they inhabit. Her unique style is influenced by her early education in architecture, ancient American weaving traditions, and experimental techniques. Weaving, in the artist’s view, is a way of building one’s way of life.



Mariska Karasz
Breeze
ca. 1958
embroidered linen, plastic, and mixed fibers

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Solveig Cox and Rosamond Berg Bassett in memory of their mother, Mariska Karasz, 1991.132.1

Embroidery is to sewing what poetry is to prose; the stitches can be made to sing out as words in a poem.
—Mariska Karasz

Mariska Karasz was deeply inspired by the colors, textures, and lines of the natural landscape. Her process began by selecting thread from her extensive collection, and she often incorporated unusual materials like cello strings, hair, plastic, and clothesline in her work.

Karasz began her career as a clothing designer. She achieved great success for using traditional Hungarian embroidery and appliqué in modern looks. Following a tumultuous period in the early 1940s during which she divorced her husband and suffered a studio fire, Karasz shifted her focus toward other forms of art. Her early embroideries were densely stitched works that reflected her family and home environment, but she soon experimented with abstraction. No longer planning her designs in advance, she created works that spontaneously evolved with each suture.

GALLERY #3: DOMESTIC KNOWLEDGE (INFLUENCE OF FAMILY, COMMUNITY, HOME)

Object labels, Gallery #3:



Carolyn Mazloomi
The Family Embraces
1997

machine–reverse appliqué, hand-stitched, and quilted cotton

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 2002.20

The beauty of something being handmade brings us closer to our own humanity.
—Carolyn Mazloomi

Carolyn Mazloomi taught herself to quilt in the 1980s. Her quilts often narrate the strength of family in its many expressions. She explained, “I like to depict the family theme in a lot of my quilts just to remind me how precious family is, how important family is in the overall scheme of things.” *The Family Embraces* celebrates African ancestors as conduits between Earth and the cosmos. Mazloomi emulated the look of a linoleum block print with the technique of reverse appliqué, cutting the designs in the top layer and allowing the bottom layer to show through. As Mazloomi sewed her own story quilts, she also tirelessly expanded the universe of African American quilting. In 1985 she founded the Women of Color Quilters Network to convene and support thousands of fiber artists. Together, Mazloomi’s art and scholarship illuminate the diversity, spirit, and ingenuity of the American quilting tradition.



Ed Johnetta Miller
Rites of Passage II
1998

machine-pieced, machine-quilted, and embroidered batik cotton with cowrie shells

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 2002.40

The cloth conveys my sense of how the cultures of the world can be woven into patterns that are both harmonious and unsettling.

—Ed Johnetta Miller

Rites of Passage II distills the artist's memory of watching a performance by Sankofa Kuumba African Dance Ensemble, an arts program for children in Hartford, Connecticut. She explained, "I wanted to create a quilt for them to dance under, dance on, and embrace as they go through the 'rights of passage' into adulthood." Miller selected the hand-printed batik leaf pattern and indigo fabrics to instill feelings of peace, love, and regeneration. Although Ed Johnetta Miller was a weaver for twenty-five years, when she began to feel limited by the loom, she made a radical decision. She cut up the woven cloth and restitched the pieces back into improvised patterns. No longer bound by the warp and weft—the horizontal and vertical threads required by using a loom—Miller felt free. She layers multitudes of colors, textures, and patterns to spark contemplation and inspiration. She is also a notable member of the Women of Color Quilters Network (founded by Carolyn Mazloomi, whose quilt is adjacent).



Agueda Martínez
Tapestry Weave Rag Jerga
1994

woven cotton cloth on cotton yarn warp

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool and the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1995.46

I draw on the loom . . . just what I feel like at the moment.

—Agueda Martínez

Agueda Martínez wove traditions, ideals, and her own ebullient spirit into rugs that are contemporary in design. Here, concentric diamonds, hourglasses, and chevrons echo Chimayó

patterns of her Mexican American community. Martínez and her husband, also a weaver, supported their family of ten children as subsistence farmers during the day and weavers at night. They gathered plants for dye and spun scraps of worn clothing into yarn to make rugs. At first, they sold them through blanket dealers, and later, as their work became well-known, from their home.

By the 1970s, “Doña Agueda” Martínez was nationally renowned. In 1975 she received the New Mexico Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts. The 1977 documentary film *Agueda Martínez: Our People, Our Country* about her relationship with the land and her family was nominated for an Academy Award.



Judith Scott
Untitled
1994
mixed media and string

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.67

Judith’s hands move deftly, without pause . . . powered by a deep internal vision.
—Joyce Scott

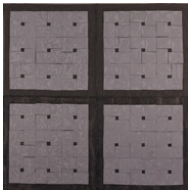
Judith Scott used fiber to carry her voice. She developed a process of weaving, tucking, and binding colorful threads around found items, making sculptures that express feelings she could not otherwise convey.

Scott was born with Down syndrome, institutionalized at seven years old, and belatedly diagnosed as deaf; for much of her life, she was presumed incapable of language. In 1985, amid shifting attitudes about people with disabilities, Judith’s twin sister, Joyce (not to be confused with the artist of the same name in this exhibition), brought her to live at home. Judith then enrolled at the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, California, a community program that supports creative expression of artists with developmental disabilities. Once she discovered fiber, Scott dedicated herself to wrapping, concealing, containing, and transforming objects, seemingly reflecting her feelings of isolation and then her renewed life and path to art.



Judith Scott
Untitled
ca. 1990-2005
mixed media, shoe section, and thread

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.66



Maria Emilia Faedo
A Matter of Trust
1994
paper and fiberglass screen with cotton thread

Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of the artist, 1995.21

Trust is the confirmation of courage, the gaze of wonder, the passion to surrender. . . . Still, I never jumped into a dark body of water or trusted a predator.
—Maria Emilia Faedo

Maria Emilia Faedo arranged ordinary envelopes in a traditional quilt pattern to create a statement about intimacy and trust. Friends, family members, and even acquaintances each sealed a deeply personal secret in an envelope and gave it to Faedo, who promised that the envelopes would never be opened, nor the piece sold. She then sewed the envelopes between sheets of fiberglass screening, preventing the secrets from being revealed without the total destruction of the work.

Faedo, who came to the United States unaccompanied as a fourteen-year-old after the Cuban Revolution, organizes multidisciplinary collaborations and community partnerships to promote diversity and inclusion in the arts. In her artwork, she transforms the stuff of ordinary life—paper envelopes, photographic negatives, steel wire, images from popular culture, and other unlikely media—to explore human relationships and cultural preconceptions.



Lia Cook
Crazy Too Quilt
1989

acrylic paint on dyed rayon woven with pressed abaca paper

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the James Renwick Alliance and Bernard and Sherley Koteen and museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1991.199

I wanted to push the boundaries of weaving. What could I make weaving do that no one had done before?

—Lia Cook

In the 1980s, San Francisco Bay Area artist Lia Cook used paint to simulate the look of historical women's work like drapery, crochet, and quilting. Here, Cook was inspired by her great-grandmother's Crazy quilt—a nineteenth-century style that stitched together assorted patterns and textures into elaborate, asymmetrical blankets. Cook explained, "I remember her talking about the different fabrics within it, like my grandfather's top hat. So, I decided to create these imitation Crazy quilts." She painted the appearance of patterned fabric by applying strokes of acrylic paint onto woven abaca paper (a fibrous paper made from banana plant leaf stalks). She then pieced together the swatches into a flashy hybrid quilt-weaving-painting work of art.

The process reveals Cook's wily feminist politics. She flattened and spliced together traditionally feminine domestic techniques with the historically male-dominated modern expressionist painting style, demanding that all forms of art be appreciated.



Consuelo Jiménez Underwood
Virgen de los Caminos
1994

embroidered and quilted cotton and silk with pencil

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1996.77

Of course, I'm going to do threads. I'm going to do threads. Every indigenous culture, the women do the thread work. They all do thread work. Why would I want to change now?

— Consuelo Jiménez Underwood

Consuelo Jiménez Underwood stitches pain, history, and hope into richly nuanced personal narratives about immigration at the US-Mexico border. Her father was an undocumented field-worker in California, and her family regularly crossed the border.

Jiménez Underwood intended to make this quilt for her baby granddaughter. She began embroidering beautiful flowers and, toward the end of the project, realized the quilt was also meant for all little girls who crossed the border. The central figure in *Virgen de los Caminos* (Virgin of the Highways) is the Virgin of Guadalupe. Her face is represented as a skull, and she is bordered by flowers and crisscrossed by embroidered barbed wire. In nearly invisible white quilting thread, Underwood has sewn the outline of a running family—father, mother, and little girl—more than two dozen times across the surface. The image comes from huge caution signs that alert motorists to migrant families traveling on foot along the San Diego Freeway leading north from the border. Underwood made the quilt as a memorial to all the little girls who perished trying to cross the freeway to safety.



Faith Ringgold
The Bitter Nest, Part II: The Harlem Renaissance Party
1988
acrylic on canvas with printed, dyed, and pieced fabric

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1997.18

Everybody out there has a story to tell.
—Faith Ringgold

Faith Ringgold learned to quilt and sew from her mother and sometime collaborator, Madame Willi Posey. Ringgold transforms African American quilting traditions into story quilts, performances, and installations that blend elements of history and culture to create parables about contemporary life.

The Bitter Nest, Part II: The Harlem Renaissance Party is the second episode in a six-part narrative that traces the life of an imaginary family in which Ringgold serves as both narrator and alter ego of the main character. This painted quilt presents Cee Cee, an artist and free spirit, dancing at a dinner party given by her husband, a distinguished dentist, for Harlem Renaissance luminaries. Her straitlaced daughter Celia, seated to Cee Cee's left, is mortified by her mother's colorful clothing and unconventional behavior. The side panels detail the story of the family dynamic. In the sixth and final episode of this story of generational conflict and mismatched expectations, the family reunites, affirming the beauty of Cee Cee's independence and creativity.

Transcript of The Bitter Nest, Part II: Harlem Renaissance Party

1. Cee Cee was meticulous about the house. Everything had a place. Cee Cee collected boxes and empty containers to put things in. Her mother sent her handwoven and hand-dyed fabrics from Africa, which inspired her to sew an endless array of bags that she now used as containers for everything. Her method of working was always the same.

2. First she selected colors and patterns of the brightly dyed fabrics and cut them into squares. And then she sewed the squares together in a random order to form long strips. And then she sewed the strips together to form large lengths of fabric out of which she made the bags, covers, drapes, costumes, et cetera.

3. Celia was very disturbed by Cee Cee's off-looking patterns. She learned in drawing to match colors tastefully and to select one pattern and repeat in some way to create a balanced harmonious design. Cee Cee had not gone further than the eighth grade in school when she married the dentist.

4. Her education in the subtleties of refined coloration and design was cut short or was never learned. At any rate, Cee Cee, shall we say, turned a "deaf ear" to any talk that her bags were "tacky," as they said in those days, and that she was a "tasteless low class hussy to clutter up the dentist's fine house with all that 'Mammy-made' stuff."

5. From the time Celia was a little girl, she took on the responsibility to keep a conversation going at the dinner table. Since Cee Cee was deaf and never spoke in public, it would put the guests at ease to hear another voice other than the dentist's.

6. Celia became quite eloquent on the important topics of the day. She often vied with Cee Cee's scrumptiously prepared dinners by talking too much and interrupting the guests' praise of Cee Cee's food.

7. Cee Cee's roast duck and fricasséed chicken, macaroni and cheese, candied sweets, peach cobbler and at Christmas time, Cee Cee's fruit cake, drenched in 200 proof Jamaican rum you could set fire to, were unsurpassed in southern cooking.

8. Hardly a week went by that the dentist did not have a dinner party of 20 or more people in the large dining room. Almost every night there were two or three drop-in dinner guests. And on Sunday, after church, there was the family—Cee Cee's cousins and her aunts and uncles and the dentist's brothers and their wives and children.

9. So Cee Cee prepared a large dinner almost every night. She loved to cook—but what she loved even more was to sew and dance. After dinner, Cee Cee put on a show of sorts that topped off the evening and put the conversation of such frequent visitors as Alaine Locke, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes and Aaron Douglass at a standstill.

10. Dressed in her oddly pieced and quilted costumes, masks and headdresses of her making, she moved among the illustrious guests to music only she could hear. Strange as it seemed, they looked forward to Cee Cee's unusual presentations and thought of her as an eccentric undiscovered original.

11. The times pressed the artists of the Harlem Renaissance into a regiment of social and political propaganda for the elevation of Race People. But what was Cee Cee doing? Was this art? No one dared ask that question, knowing full well that the interrogator would only look like a fool and the one who answered would be one.

12. And furthermore, no one wanted to offend the dentist or Cee Cee. Celia sat through these performances like an old man at a church tea. She hated Cee Cee's unusual display and made it a point to let the guests and Cee Cee know it. "My mother is a family disgrace."

13. "The only hope I have of not becoming the laughing stock of everybody is to get out of here and follow in my father's footsteps and become a doctor. I cannot relate to her. As far as I am concerned, she is crazy like her quilts." The dentist accepted Cee Cee's shows as a peculiarity associated with her deafness.

14. "Cee Cee is just trying out something to express herself," he'd say. "She will be going for sewing lessons as soon as Celia is older and off to college and she can get out of the house." Celia got older and went off to college and came home a doctor and Cee Cee was still right there making bags and dancing to music only she could hear.



Joyce Scott
Necklace
1994
beads, fabrics, leather, and thread

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Dale and Doug Anderson, 1996.31

I want these objects to be specific mysteries. They glow and sparkle; you are pulled toward them, compelled to approach and see them.

—Joyce Scott

Joyce Scott's beadworks are emotive explorations of racial, feminist, and spiritual matters. Her oversized jewelry is intended to be worn, and often features satirical imagery that shows the artist's wit and humor. This necklace conveys the Native American, African American, and West African influences that permeate her work. It incorporates needlework techniques she learned from her mother, and the peyote stitch, a beadwork technique she learned from Sandy Fife Wilson (Muscogee [Creek]) at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, Maine in 1976. Speaking of the humble bead, Scott said, "Beadwork for me was about extending my family's techniques of needle and thread, and I put a bead on it."

A lifelong resident of Baltimore, Maryland, Scott is deeply connected to her community. She draws on her neighborhood, the politics of the city, and familial history for inspiration, and urges those who confront her work to contemplate the humanity in these experiences and histories. Scott is the recipient of the 2019 Smithsonian Visionary Award, a testament to the impact of her work with jewelry.



Joyce Scott
Birth of Mammy #4
2004
glass, beads, wire, thread, and wood

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Sara M. & Michelle Vance Waddell in honor of Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi, 2022.42.1

Birth of Mammy #4 humanizes the racist stereotype of a “mammy,” a Black caretaker of white children. Joyce Scott combines a clear glass vessel and vivid beadwork to craft a notably tactile, visceral portrait of a Black woman in the immediate aftermath of childbirth. The newborn holds a pair of scissors, presumably severing connection to the mother. The subject challenges caricatures of so-called mummies as happy and loyal to their white families at the expense of their own children. Scott says, “I believe in messing with stereotypes, prodding the viewer to reassess, inciting people to look and then carry something home—even if it’s subliminal—that might make a change in them.”

Scott has created a *Birth of Mammy* series to imagine origin stories for the women behind the racist trope, turning the stereotype on its head and demanding the restoration of the woman’s connection to her body, her child, and her own narrative.



Katherine Westphal
Unveiling of the Statue of Liberty
1964
cotton with cotton embroidery thread

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Katherine Westphal Rossbach, 1972.15

For me the most important thing is the creativity, the invention, the imagination, not perfecting the thing and making it right.
—Katherine Westphal

Katherine Westphal assembled this patchwork quilt from snippets of fabric printed with designs she created for the commercial textile industry. The image is a riff on American artist Edward Moran’s patriotic painting of the Statue of Liberty’s 1886 dedication, in which the statue towers

above a harbor crowded with boats and American flags. Westphal's Lady Liberty seems appalled as she gazes at the chaos below, a comment perhaps on the meaning of liberty at the height of the Civil Rights Movement.

Westphal, who described herself as a "free spirit," spent eight years designing fabrics for the apparel industry and taught for over a decade at the University of California, Davis. In the late 1950s she began making quilts and was soon transferring images from her own photographs and mass media sources to fabric in clever transformations of conventional quilting practice.



L'Merchie Frazier
From a Birmingham Jail: MLK
1996
silk, photo transfer, gel medium, dyes, and beads

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of L'Merchie Frazier in memory of Watty and Alberta Frazier and James and Merchie Dooley (grandparents), 2002.41

The narrative that we've created in America doesn't contain enough of the everyday people . . . who are ordinary . . . but doing extraordinary things.
— L'Merchie Frazier

L'Merchie Frazier documents history and recovers memory. She celebrates greatness and excavates the stories of long-forgotten individuals whose accomplishments offer models of strength to those living today. In her art and poetry, she provides answers to the dual questions: Whose voices are not being heard? Whose stories have been erased?

In *From a Birmingham Jail*, which is titled after one of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s most famous writings, Frazier chronicles episodes in the life of Dr. King (1929–1967) using the format of a traditional African strip quilt. Clips from the memorial issue of *Jet* magazine intermingled with symbols and images of Central and West African masks celebrate King as, in her words, "an activist, peacemaker, and tireless leader of humanity."



Matilda Damon
Diné (Navajo)
Protected in Bliss
1991
handspun wool with plant and vegetable dyes

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak and museum purchase made possible by Ralph Cross Johnson, 1997.124.186

Matilda wanted to explode what was expected of a traditional rug weaver. She wanted to open doors of creativity.

—Shaundina Watson, eldest daughter of Damon

Protected in Bliss is a round rug depicting an eagle protecting a Diné (Navajo) couple. The artist learned to weave from her mother, Mary Ann Damon, whose sought-after rug designs supported the family. Mary Ann taught Matilda all the skills involved with weaving, many of which began long before they sat down at the loom: Matilda cared for a flock of sheep, then sheered, cleaned, spun, and dyed the wool, and gathered plants for the dyes. Mary Ann also encouraged Matilda to find her own artistic voice, and the artist distinguished herself with the rounded form and pictorial designs. In turn, Matilda devoted her summers to sharing her knowledge with her young children, whether by teaching them to read or weave rugs. From start to finish, this artwork carries the joy and love of family.



Marguerite Zorach

My Home in Fresno around the Year 1900

1949

wool embroidered on linen

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift from the Collection of Tessim Zorach, 1970.65.12

These works are built out of my life and the things that have touched my life.

—Marguerite Zorach

Marguerite Zorach's "pictures in wool" are bold and vibrant explorations of color that often incorporate imagery from her own life. *My Home in Fresno around the Year 1900* is a portrait of the artist's childhood. In a 1956 essay, she described planning this work, to include "a large white gingerbread house, light and airy and delightful in stitches; the magnolia trees and palms, fences and flowers; [and] children at night playing hide and seek under the street lamp."

Following the birth of her two children, Zorach turned to embroidery to adapt to the realities of juggling both her household and her work as an artist. Painting required periods of uninterrupted time, but with fiber she could pick up and put down the work as needed, as well as visualize and plan a composition while accomplishing other tasks.



Sheila Hicks
The Principal Wife Goes On
1969
linen, silk, wool, and synthetic fibers

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc., 1977.118.2A–F

It would be ideal if you can just become conscious of how the environment nourishes you and to find your own way with your own voice, your own material, and your own method of speaking.
—Sheila Hicks

The Principal Wife Goes On is one of the artist's earliest modular "ponytail" works. It comprises eleven ponytails—coils of wrapped and grafted threads—that can be arranged for installation in response to the surrounding environment. Here, Sheila Hicks shows off the boundless possibilities of threads. The title alludes to her experience at rug workshops in Morocco, working with women who were engaged in polygamous marriages, in which multiple wives navigate complex relationships with one man.

Hicks's curiosity for the world has led her across the globe. As a child in Hastings, Nebraska, she learned needle arts from her mother and grandmother. When she began studying painting at Yale University, a lecture on Peruvian textiles piqued her interest in weaving. On a Fulbright award in 1957 and 1958, she studied Andean weaving in Chile. She established a workshop in Mexico in the late 1950s, where she began to shape her weavings into sculptures. Her continued exploration of color and texture were fueled by trips to South America, North Africa, Asia, and her eventual home in Paris.



Marguerite Zorach
Untitled (Embroidered Bedspread)
ca. 1918
tabby weave with plied wool yarn and chain stitch embroidery on linen

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Helen Miller Obstler, 1985.52

They [the embroideries] are like symphonies that move and develop and change and contain a lifetime of growth, of power, and tenderness; of sharp contrasts and delicate nuances.
—Marguerite Zorach

Here Marguerite Zorach used delicately colored threads to illustrate an intricate motif depicting personal familial scenes based on her own life. She holds her baby daughter Dahlov at lower left. Within the bottom right scene, she depicts her baby son Tessim with Dahlov as a child. She created this work at the request of Mrs. Nathan J. Miller, who let Zorach choose the themes and imagery. Zorach's many sales, like this one, helped support her young family and even allowed them to purchase a summer home in Maine in 1923.

Zorach began experimenting with embroidery after her travels abroad as a young artist. Influenced by the avant-garde artists she met in Paris and their exploration of color, she found paint's colors to be tired and dull. Wool, in contrast, was a new world of brilliant colors with more possibilities—the artist would search through her collection of wools to find the perfect hue.



Miriam Schapiro
Wonderland
1983
various fabrics, acrylic paint, and plastic beads on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of an anonymous donor, 1996.88

The fabric—which is really, in a larger sense, the fabric of my life—was so important to me.
—Miriam Schapiro

Wonderland is a celebration of home life. In the center, the embroidered image of a woman inside a home welcomes us inside. The surrounding swirl of quilt blocks, aprons, and cutouts of teacups represent pieces of domestic life.

Miriam Schapiro's feminine collages—what she called “femmages”—use traditional crafts, such as embroidered handkerchiefs, and painted whimsical imagery, like hearts and flowers, to challenge sexist perceptions of sentimentality. By turning these seemingly frivolous objects and pastimes into large-scale, intentional works of art, Schapiro empowers and legitimizes women's experiences, femininity, and creativity within domestic work.



Clementine Hunter
Melrose Quilt
ca. 1960
cotton, polyester, brown paper, and craft paper

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Barbara Coffey Quilt Endowment, 2014.5

Clementine Hunter's bold color choices harmonize with the shapes of the landscape. Her quilts, like her paintings, illustrate everyday stories she felt historians overlooked—especially those of Black workers in the South. *Melrose Quilt* depicts buildings at the Melrose plantation in Natchitoches Parish, in Central Louisiana, where Hunter and her family moved to work as sharecroppers. She represents the Big House in the center, Yucca House above, and African House in the bottom right, where in 1955 Hunter painted a mural of plantation life.

At the plantation, Hunter worked first as a field hand and later as a cook and housekeeper. When the owner of Melrose died, his wife made the plantation a retreat for visiting artists. Hunter's exposure to artists there and her resourcefulness with leftover paints led to the beginning of her artistic practice.



Alice Eugenia Ligon
Embroidered Garment
ca. 1949

embroidered muslin, cotton crochet, pencil, cotton embroidery thread, and cotton rickrack trim

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill Jr., 1989.78.2

The colorful embroidery covering nearly every bit of fabric depicts religious, political, and personal motifs. Adam and Eve appear near the bottom, the preamble to the Constitution is in the center, and portraits and names of family members are placed throughout. This is the only known artwork by Alice Eugenia Ligon. Born in Boone County, Missouri, Ligon stayed in the area her whole life, working as a telephone operator and hospital attendant while raising at least five children. Ligon was admitted to a state hospital in Fulton, Missouri, on two occasions. Records suggest that she made this gown during her first stay, when she was interested in sewing, crocheting, and quilting. She gave it as a Christmas gift to her children to remember her while she was away.



Louise Nez
Diné (Navajo)
Reservation Scene
1992
commercial yarn

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak and museum purchase made possible by Ralph Cross Johnson, 1997.124.189

Louise Nez, a renowned Diné (Navajo) matriarch, weaves scenes inspired by her own life and culture. Here, a trio of buttes in the distance places *Reservation Scene* in the Southwest. The community hums with activity. A hogan, the octagonal structure on the right, represents the traditional home and ceremonial space of Navajo families. A covered wagon drawn by two horses seems to have just arrived. Women below spin and card wool and weave geometric rugs at the upright loom, while livestock mill about across the scene. Along with geometric patterned textiles, pictorials have been a creative tradition for generations of Navajo weavers. The longstanding Navajo rug trade enticed many cultural tourists throughout the twentieth century and led to the development of a new and growing market. Diné women continue to compel cultural respect and economic compensation for their work.

Benoya Palm Court/Gallery #4: PERCEPTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES OF FIBER

Object labels, Gallery #4:



Susan L. Iverson
Ancient Burial IV—Night
1989
wool on linen warp

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Ellen Jane and Rogers Hollingsworth, 2003.23A–C

Making art requires looking back and looking forward while maintaining a strong presence in the current cultural world.

—Susan L. Iverson

Susan Iverson's tapestries thrive by the rules of the loom, or the structure provided by the warp and weft. In the late 1970s, she traveled to Peru to study ancient textiles and architecture. A series of tapestries, including *Ancient Burial IV—Night*, reflect her perception of a culture separated from her by time and distance. The resulting work pays homage to commonalities among the art forms, such as geometric abstraction, how color and light appear on surfaces, and the way the weaving process itself guides the outcome. This tapestry is not a simple reproduction of a Peruvian design. Iverson has fragmented the original source material and obscured it with shadowy figments and glints of light. These interventions question how the meaning of an artwork is altered by time, place, and an artist's intention.

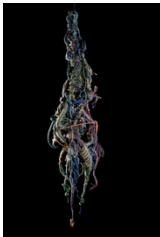


Kay Sekimachi
Nagare VII
1970
woven nylon monofilament

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1972.183

I love the calm that my work brings to me.
—Kay Sekimachi

Nagare is the Japanese word for “flow” or “river,” a reflection of Kay Sekimachi’s intuitive weaving style. She first learned the fundamentals of weaving in the early 1950s at the Berkeley Adult School where she studied fashion design. Later, at the California College of Arts and Crafts, she studied under Trude Guermonprez, a weaver trained in the German Bauhaus style that combines art and design. These courses shifted the trajectory of her career by opening her eyes to the artistic possibilities of weaving. Inspired by the structured elegance of calligraphy, origami, and lacework, Sekimachi created hanging sculptures with a multilayered weaving technique. She situated her work at the forefront of the fiber arts movement by dressing her loom with monofilament, or fishing line. The modern material allowed her to shape each woven layer by hand to create the natural effect of a rippling stream.



Neda Al-Hilali
Medusa
1975
sisal, iute, linen thread, wool, and gold wire

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Phyllis Mael, 2002.54

The more time I spend tying these little knots, and concentrating on doing each knot, I’m injecting positive energy. It definitely flows through our hands.
—Neda Al-Hilali

Neda Al-Hilali's artworks often take on personalities of mythic figures. *Medusa* recalls the serpentine hair of the Greek demigod known for her magical gaze that could turn an enemy to stone, and ward off misfortune and harm. Neda Al-Hilali was born in the Bohemian region of Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic) and immigrated to southern California in 1961. She was among the weavers of her generation, such as Lenore Tawney and Sheila Hicks, who pulled her threads from the loom and twisted, knotted, looped, and braided them into three-dimensional sculptures. As Al-Hilali worked with her hands, she honored the beauty and history of women's fiber work, especially its central role in spiritual traditions, rituals, and myths. She stated in 1979, "I am trying to make accessible the flavor of certain memories past and future."

Gallery #5: ARCHIVES/READING AREA

Gallery Panel, Gallery #5:

Neda Al-Hilali

born 1938, Cheb, Czechoslovakia (now Cheb, Czech Republic)

When Neda Al-Hilali studied art at the University of California, Los Angeles, she was immediately drawn to the material and symbolic qualities of fiber. She developed a systematic process of knotting, twisting, and plaiting threads into sculptures that subtly insinuate myths and rituals. Among her subjects were female Greek figures Cassiopeia and Medusa (on view in this exhibition), and the allegorical city of Atlantis. In the 1980s, she expanded her storytelling toolkit with flattened shards of aluminum. She explained, "Even the most beautiful and glorious fiber basically hangs. This is alright for the hero's shirt and for the royal mantle for your mythological man, but to complete the adornment of your hero lover, you need the crown." Metal allowed Al-Hilali to defy gravity and enhance the personality of her elaborate structures.



Fiber samples in red, orange, and blue, ca. 1970s. Neda Al-Hilali Papers, ca. 1960–95. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



Sketch for a metal wall sculpture, ca. 1980s. Neda Al-Hilali Papers, ca. 1960–95. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



Studies for metal sculptures, 1989. Neda Al-Hilali Papers, ca. 1960–95. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

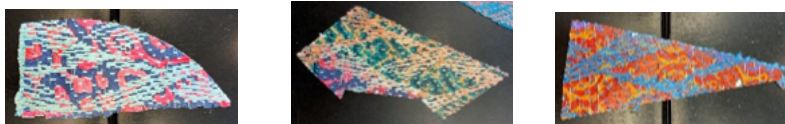
Lia Cook

born 1942, Ventura, CA

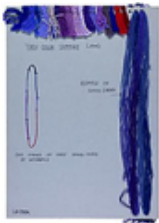
Lia Cook’s Crazy quilts of the 1980s demonstrate her provocative approach to weaving. First, the artist copied details of fancy fabrics inspired by Victorian-era Crazy quilts—a nineteenth-century style that stitched together assorted patterns and textures into elaborate, unique blankets. She painted individual strips of abaca paper and wove them together with dyed rayon. Next, she pressed the vibrant weavings, cut them into asymmetrical shapes (exemplified in the samples here), and collaged the new pieces together into an intensely layered textile. Cook explained, “I like to see the weaving as the central medium which ties things together. And I feel like there’s a lot of room for experimentation and play within that structure.” As Cook made textiles the primary process and subject, she flattened the distinction between contemporary painting and historical women’s work.



Design sketch for a Crazy quilt, 1980s. Lia Cook papers, 1968–2012. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



Samples for *Crazy Quilt* series, 1980s. Created using linen, rayon, abaca, and paint. Lia Cook papers, 1968–2012. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

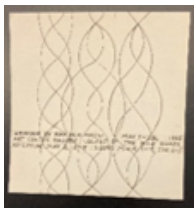


Study for Tapestry, ca. 1975, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the General Services Administration, 1977.47.46

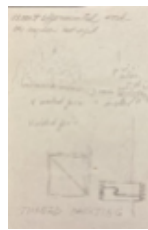
Kay Sekimachi

born 1926, San Francisco, CA

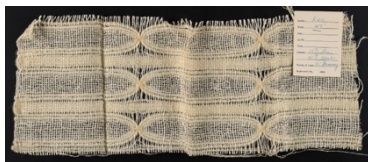
As a child in San Francisco, Kay Sekimachi dreamed of becoming an artist. In 1942, when Sekimachi was fifteen, her entire family was unjustly incarcerated at the Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno, California. They were among the 120,000 Japanese Americans living on the West Coast who were forcibly moved into concentration camps during World War II as part of the federal government's Executive Order 9066, a violation of human rights and constitutional protections. Sekimachi saw her dreams delayed, but not crushed. When she returned home to Berkeley, she enrolled in weaving courses and developed expertise in diverse techniques, from card weaving to quadruple weaves. At the loom, Sekimachi created light and lyrical designs. In 1963 she began using monofilament she received from a fellow student at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, Maine. This simple fishing line proved transformative, as shown in the woven sculptural hanging, *Nagare VII*, on view in this exhibition. Like her earlier loom studies with natural fibers, Sekimachi continued to experiment with varying weights and colors of synthetic fibers.



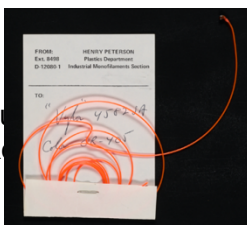
Flyer design for *Weaving by Kay Sekimachi*, exhibition at the Art Center Gallery, College of the Holy Names, 1965. Bob Stocksdale and Kay Sekimachi papers, ca. 1900–2015. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



Sketch and notes on mylar monofilament experiments, ca. 1970s. Bob Stocksdale and Kay Sekimachi papers, ca. 1900–2015. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



Weaving sample in linen and wool, ca. 1962–63. Bob Stocksdale and Kay Sekimachi papers, ca. 1900–2015. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



Vylor monofilament sample, ca. 1970–76. Bob Stocksdale and Kay Sekimachi papers, ca. 1900–2015. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

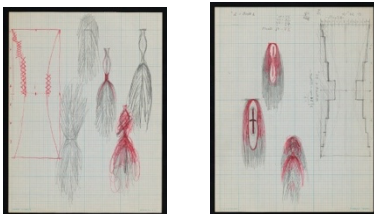


Polyester mesh sample, ca. 1970–76. Bob Stocksdale and Kay Sekimachi papers, ca. 1900–2015. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

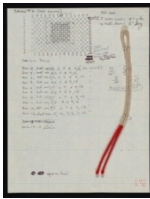
Claire Zeisler

born 1903, Cincinnati, OH
died 1991, Chicago, IL

Claire Zeisler's sculptures are meticulously constructed to look spontaneous. She explained, "I conceive my pieces, I think, differently than most. Because what I really tried to do is to give a shape to the raw threads." Many of her artworks began with a loose sketch and consideration of materials and colors. Then, she created diagrams and detailed instructions. As her notes suggest, Zeisler preferred to combine natural fibers and pops of color with relatively simple techniques like square knotting, wrapping, and twisting. When scaled up, the mundane fibers form exuberant sculptures, like *A Celebration*, on view in this exhibition. Large installations demanded hundreds of hours of labor by Zeisler and her assistants.



Sketches of design for hanging, undated. Claire Zeisler papers, 1941–92. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

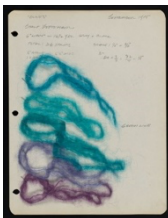


Study for *Nine Square*, 1987. Claire Zeisler papers, 1941–92. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

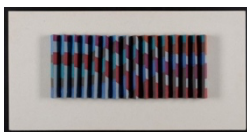
Adela Akers

born 1933, Santiago de Compostela, Spain

Adela Akers earned a degree in pharmacy in Havana, Cuba, before she discovered weaving. When she decided to become an artist, and not a pharmacist, she enthusiastically imported her scientific knowledge into her process. She explained, “I love math and chemistry and always will—as much as weaving. There is an organized way of solving problems, a linear process. When a piece doesn’t work, I start again, step by step, till I reach the end.” Akers’s drawings, color studies, and maquettes (small, three-dimensional preparatory models) demonstrate her disciplined methods. Together, these steps helped Akers emulate the ever-changing interplay of shadows and light across landscapes, as seen in *By the Sea*, on view in this exhibition.



Project notes and color samples for *Dunes*, September 1985. Adela Akers papers, 1960–2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



Maquette of a commission proposal for Galman Lepow Associates, ca. 1980s. Adela Akers papers, 1960–2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

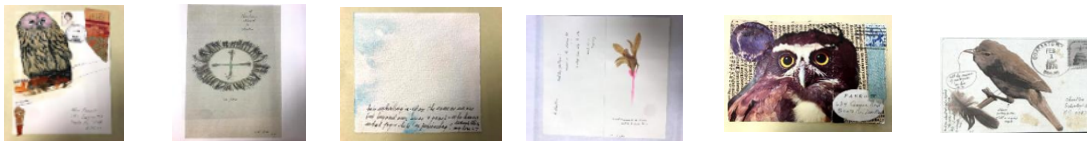


Weaving sketchbook, ca. 1980. Adela Akers papers, 1960–2009. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Lenore Tawney

born 1907, Lorain, OH
died 2007, New York City

In the 1960s, fiber artist Lenore Tawney began to make mail art. She was a collector of things—feathers, stones, antique books, and lines of poetry. With these multifaceted sources at hand, she cultivated a unique visual vocabulary in her mail art for close friends. Repeated motifs include eggs, birds, flowers, stones, clouds, and fragmented text, layered with exquisitely small handwritten quotes, drawn lines, and symbols of time and infinity. The layers of these collages harbor many secrets. Tawney explained, “the postcards came from wishing to communicate with friends, but not knowing what to say—you don’t want to say anything but you want to be a friend. . . . There was a message, but it was invisible.” Tawney’s mail art illuminates how the artist approached her daily life with tenderness and curiosity for even the smallest of details. This selection includes art sent to fiber artist Alice Kagawa Parrott, filmmaker Maryette Charlton, and painter Lillian Kiesler, now in the collection of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



- Mail art to Alice Kagawa Parrott, December 5, 1980
- Mail art to Maryette Charlton, December 20, 1969
- Mail art to Alice Kagawa Parrott, November 22, 1972
- Mail art to Maryette Charlton, May 18, 1982
- Mail art to Alice Kagawa Parrott, undated
- Mail art to Maryette Charlton, February 1, 1978