Thornton Dial

*History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Press
Thornton Dial Takes Fifth Ave

by Aleesa P. Alexander
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Twenty-five years ago, Thornton Dial (1928 – 2016) received his first solo exhibition at a New York City museum, Thornton Dial: Image of the Tiger. More precisely, he received two; the show dually debuted at the American Folk Art Museum and the New Museum of Contemporary Art. Provocative and polemical, the exhibition(s) was a physical manifestation of current art world debates surrounding terms like “outsider,” “self-taught,” and “folk,” and the relationship of those terms to mainstream art. Was Dial, an institutionally uneducated black man who grew up in the trenches of Jim Crow Alabama, an “outsider” artist, or a contemporary one? In 1993, no one could quite settle on an answer, which is partially how Dial’s debut exhibition ended up at two venues so ideologically distinct from one another.

Dial’s work makes a forceful New York City return in the exhibition History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls
Grown Deep Foundation Gift, now on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art until September 23, 2018. In 2014 the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, at the life–long behest of its founder William S. Arnett, gifted fifty–seven works of art from the African American South to the museum. Selections from this historically important gift are now occupying three galleries in Modern and Contemporary Art. The title of the exhibition is drawn from a 2004 Dial assemblage of the same name, an imposing object made of welded metal, woven fabric, and nested okra stalks. At the time of writing, a banner featuring an image of Dial’s History Refused to Die graces The Met’s façade.

Thornton Dial was and was not a self–taught artist. While he received little in the way of formal education, this was the norm for Southern black Americans in the early twentieth century. Born to a family of sharecroppers, Dial became a laborer at a young age. Schooling was an unaffordable and impossible luxury. However, through the many occupations he held over the course of his life, he learned how to work with a variety of materials. As a carpenter and steel worker, Dial learned how to build things out of wood and manipulate metal. This is clearly evident in works such as the monumental Victory in Iraq (2004) which currently hangs adjacent to paintings by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Clyfford Still. Victory’s swirling masses of barbed wire, found objects, and painted textiles make the other works in its vicinity seem clinical, subdued in comparison.

As a Jane and Morgan Whitney Fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art whose specific research interests concern Dial and his artistic peers, I was able to assist curators Randall Griffey and Amelia Peck in the organization of this exhibition for the greater part of a year. Putting Dial in conversation with Pollock is a curatorial gesture meant to challenge the conventional narrative of modern and contemporary art in the United States. His work, as well as the work of every other artist in the show, disrupts what we think is true about the history of modern art forms like found object assemblage and nonrepresentational painting. Dial belongs to a forgotten, and mostly undocumented, lineage of black American artists inventing and developing their own modern art forms outside of the gaze of the mainstream art world.

If we are to believe in the value of encyclopedic museums—which are currently being called out (rightfully so) as institutions historically entrenched in colonialism and cultural imperialism—then how do we interpret the presence of Thornton Dial in The Met’s collection? Some may claim that this exhibition amounts to little more than tokenism, or the fulfillment of a diversity quota. I can say, however, that there are future plans for the display of his work at The Met beyond this show—more opportunities for disruption and historical reconsideration. Rather than do away with encyclopedic museums altogether, we may give them a chance to do their, if very belated, due diligence to history.

We must also remember that, while Dial’s work benefits from this display, it is museums and the discipline of art history—two intellectual institutions that are still predominantly white—that receive the greatest benefits. Who is represented in a museum’s collection is just as important as who gets to make decisions about those collections. Fixing the structural inequities within museums and academia is a much more difficult task than placing great work in the collections of art museums.

That being said, perhaps we can harness the cultural capital of The Met to help put one debate to rest once and for all: when asked what kind of art institution the work of Thornton Dial belongs, the answer is now simple. Any art museum would benefit from having his work in its collection. And if The Met can make room for him, I suspect many other museums can, too.
Does Being Labeled an ‘Outsider Artist’ Stall a Market? Thornton Dial, Now a Museum Sensation, Is Poised to Break Out

The market has never quite known what to do with the self-taught artist, who figures prominently in a current Met exhibition.

by Eileen Kinsella
June 29, 2018

At what point does an artist become so thoroughly absorbed into the mainstream art world that the term “outsider artist” no longer applies? And is it even a useful term in the first place, or does it only constrain our understanding of an artist’s work?

These questions are at the heart of the current conversation around self-taught artist Thornton Dial, who was born into poverty in Alabama in 1928 but lived to see his work acquired by some of the most august museums in the world.

The artist, who died in 2016, figures prominently in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exhibition “History Refused to Die: Highlights From the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift” (through September 23). The show takes its title from one of Dial’s monumental assemblages.
Dial had almost no formal schooling and was sent to live with relatives in Bessemer, Alabama, when he was 12. Later on, he worked as a metalworker at a local railroad car plant. All the while, he was making drawings and, later on, increasingly ambitious assemblages. He fused painting with found objects such as rope, buckets, and other discarded quotidian artifacts like those he saw on front lawns growing up in the south.
In the early ’80s, after the factory where he was working shut down, Dial dedicated himself to art full time. His fortunes took a turn when he was introduced to William Arnett, a colorful curator, dealer, and art collector who became one of Dial’s greatest patrons and fiercest proponents.

Although Dial’s profile has been growing steadily for the past three decades, his market is only starting to catch up. He serves as a powerful example of how sometimes arbitrary categorizations can constrain an artist’s reputation—and their prices.

Dropping the ‘Outsider’

The current Met show grew out of a hefty 57-work gift the Souls Grown Deep Foundation gave to the museum in 2014. It was the first of roughly a dozen transfers to major museums of work from the foundation, which Arnett founded in 2010. The foundation has played a major role in helping Dial gain a presence in institutions—and in making sure his work is considered as part of the postwar canon.

“Dial’s work has been presented for 30 years in different contexts,” said Max Anderson, the foundation’s president. “Several key curators have embraced the premise that Dial’s work warrants recognition as art, not as art that requires an adjective in front of it defining it as other: ‘outside,’ ‘self-taught’ or ‘vernacular’—all of these terms that put artists in a box.”

For an artist of Dial’s stature, however, his auction history is notably thin, even if it’s just one part of the larger picture. There are just 58 results in the artnet Price Database, most from specialized “vernacular,” “outsider” or “folk” art sales. Only seven works sold for prices over $20,000.

Anderson contends that although the label “outsider artist” purports to describe anyone who did not receive formal training, it is often applied selectively to artists of color, and black artists in particular. He describes the practice as “a habit that was formed years ago because [these artists] didn’t perform in the market. So I look at this as very much connected with their tepid reception in the market. And I think that is going to change.”

It is already changing. Fourteen of Dial’s top 15 auction prices were set in the past four years. His auction record, $41,250, was set at Christie’s in January for the mixed media work Equal Opportunity: Holding the Line (2002).
The lowest auction price on record, meanwhile, is $90, paid for the painting *Masonic Couple* (1999) at a folk art auction in Georgia in 2014. Of the 58 Dial auction results listed in the artnet Price Database, seven works failed to sell and one was withdrawn before the sale.

“Dial has been around for quite some time and he’s known as being the godfather or grandfather of a lot of the Southern vernacular artists,” said Cara Zimmerman, vice president and head of sale for outsider and folk art at Christie’s. But he has only developed an auction market over the past five years, as his profile has grown exponentially in the museum world.

“The fact that his work is at the Met right now is a tremendous opportunity for new audiences to understand more about it as well as the work of other artists operating in similar spheres,” she added.

**On the Private Market**

Dial’s presence on the primary market has been similarly spotty. Galleries including New York’s Ricco Maresca and Andrew Edlin, known for showing self-taught and outsider artists, organized a handful of shows over the years.

In 2015, toward the end of Dial’s life, high-profile contemporary art gallerist Marianne Boesky announced representation of the artist. She organized two shows before dropping him the following year, sources say. (A spokeswoman said that the gallery no longer works with Dial but would not confirm when or why they parted ways.)

Now, the New York–based David Lewis Gallery is working closely with the Dial family and expects to represent the estate once a formal entity is officially established. Earlier this year, the gallery organized a small survey show, “Mr. Dial’s America.”

The broader curatorial push to consider outsider artists alongside titans of the 20th century has done much to expand interest in Dial’s work, Lewis said. The artist “has always had dedicated collectors,” he told artnet News. But “interest was limited to a small circle of enthusiasts and prominent collectors, most of whom were not otherwise patrons of contemporary art.”
Now, that’s beginning to change. “As Dial is now widely understood to be a major American artist, we are seeing a rapid expansion of his circle of collectors to include patrons of contemporary art of all kinds, and at all levels,” Lewis said.

Dial is also unique among self-taught artists. Because so many start working late in life, their practices often don’t have time to evolve and form distinct periods. But Dial “was still a relatively young man when he came into contact with Bill Arnett and was convinced that he should be devoting more attention to his art, and not hiding it,” said Katherine Jentleson, a curator of folk and self-taught art at Atlanta’s High Museum of Art. (The museum was an early and enthusiastic supporter of Dial and currently has one of the largest holdings of his work.)

Dial’s oeuvre can generally be broken up into three periods, according to experts: the early allegorical works (1989–1993), of which tigers—symbolizing the resilience of African Americans in the face of oppression—are emblematic; modernist assemblages (mid-’90s–2008), which often function as history paintings; and, as Lewis describes it, “the very sculptural, very poetic late phase” from 2008 to 2016.

The price for major collages and mixed-media assemblages—none of which has made it to the auction block—averages around $200,000 to $300,000, Lewis told artnet News. Some major works, he said, have likely sold for more.

**The Foundation’s Place**

While Dial’s work was slowly gaining steam in the marketplace, it was already making waves in institutions. Starting with that major gift to the Met in 2014, the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, which owns more than 1,200 works by self-taught artists, began a multi-year program to transfer the majority of its holdings to leading American and international art museums.

The foundation took a cue from the “playbook that the Rauschenberg Foundation perfected, which is the gift/purchase model,” Anderson said. The foundation favors a combination of gift and sale “so that the museums that are acquiring works are committing themselves financially and with their board’s participation in a way that a straight gift doesn’t necessarily presume.”

While the foundation’s approach has quite successfully carved out a place for Dial and his peers in art history—the nonprofit’s priority—it has also, perhaps counterintuitively, constrained his private market. The most important, spectacular, and representative Dial works are all owned by the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, which plans only to place them with institutions.

To date, museums including the Met, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art have acquired more than 200 works by 75 artists from the collection. “In the next handful of years, we’ll have hundreds more works in dozens of museums,” Anderson said.

He credited a number of like-minded curators—including the Met’s Sheena Wagstaff and the National Gallery of Art curator Lynne Cooke, who organized the recent exhibition “Outliers and American Vanguard Art”—who have recognized the importance of Dial’s work and presented it without limiting labels.

However, not everyone believes these labels should be stripped out. “There is a challenge for us to think that self-taught is not a four letter word,” Jentleson said. “We’re entering an era where those kinds of modifiers are less and less necessary, but I don’t think they’re totally going to fall away. The modifier of being self-taught shouldn’t prevent them from entering Modern and contemporary art collections.”

This debate is hardly new. When Dial was included in the Whitney Biennial in 2000, “there was so much controversy even then about what to call” the work, Jentleson said.

**A Legacy Coming Into Focus**

More than three decades have passed since Arnett was first struck by Dial’s use of found materials in 1987. The curator first showed the work out of his house in Buckhead, Georgia, but the number of visitors he was receiving soon required him to rent out larger spaces.

In 1993, a significant turning point in Dial’s career, the artist had a two-venue solo museum show at the New Museum and the Museum of American Folk Art in New York. A steady stream of major museum and gallery shows followed, including one in Atlanta in 1996 (which overlapped with the Summer Olympics there) and a traveling retrospective, “Hard Truths,” that premiered at the Indianapolis Museum of Art in 2011.

As far back as 25 years ago, experts were already anticipating the challenge of how to characterize Dial. In an essay for his New Museum show, curator Lowery Stokes Sims wrote: “It will be increasingly difficult to classify him simply as ‘folk,’ or ‘naive,’ or ‘outside,’ and thus Dial will forcefully challenge the hierarchical language that we bring to the discussion of various genres of art. A quiet revolution may indeed be in process, a revolution that may very well effect a reexamination and reconsideration of the centrality of the ‘outsider’ experience to mainstream art experience, namely the black experience to that of the American experience.”

While this shift was already in motion two decades ago, experts say it is picking up speed now. And while the art market has historically been more reluctant than institutions to give up on rigid categorization, this quiet revolution may find its way there soon, too.

“At long last [Dial is] being canonized as major American artist—and, crucially, on terms equal to any other major American artist,” Lewis said. “He is no longer ‘merely’ a heroic but marginal figure. Dial’s *Victory in Iraq* is hanging at the Met alongside Clyfford Still and across from Jackson Pollock.”
An Invaluable, Incomplete Show of Black Southern Art at the Met

by Andrea K. Scott
June 18, 2018

On the last night of his life, Martin Luther King, Jr., gave an impassioned speech in which he imagined God asking him which historical period he’d most like to live in: “I would take my mental flight by Egypt and I would watch God’s children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather across, the Red Sea, through the wilderness, on toward the Promised Land. And, in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn’t stop there.” He would visit ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, the Renaissance and the Reformation, and then the United States, in the eras of the Emancipation Proclamation and the New Deal. But if he had only one choice, King said, he’d opt for the second half of the twentieth century, to see people like the striking sanitation workers, whom he was addressing in Memphis that night, at the front lines of the human-rights revolution.

Visitors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art have long had access to “the panoramic view of human history” that King described in his speech, from the ancient-Egyptian Temple of Dendur to the Renaissance gems in the Lehman Collection and the Depression-era mural panel of cotton pickers, by Thomas Hart Benton. But, until the museum accepted a gift from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, in 2014, it had turned a blind eye to the black artists, born during Jim Crow, making magnificent work across the Deep South. The driving force behind the foundation is the white collector William Arnett (he was the subject of a Profile in The New Yorker, in 2013, when the donation was still being negotiated). Arnett’s collection numbers in the thousands, and is now being dispersed to museums around the country. But the Met was given first dibs, and it chose fifty-seven pieces, by thirty artists. An exhibition was planned for 2016, but it has been delayed until now.
Installed in two small rooms, on the second floor of the modern-and-contemporary wing, “History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift”—a trove of twenty-seven paintings, sculptures, drawings, and textiles, on view through September 23rd—is at once an invaluable introduction and a bit of a missed opportunity. Many of the artists making their début at the Met in this show are already renowned in other parts of the art world. The exhibit includes a selection of the vibrant quilts, made by several generations of women in Gee’s Bend, Alabama, which graced the walls of the Whitney, in 2002, in a show that was received as a revelation. The show is titled after a piece by Thornton Dial, another Alabama-born artist of such expressive finesse and audacity that critics have compared him to both Robert Rauschenberg and Willem De Kooning. But it’s precisely that kind of equivalence—validating “outsider” black artists by comparing them to “insider” white ones—that creates a sticking point before the show is given enough room to breathe.

The curators have installed Dial’s 2004 piece “Victory in Iraq,” a coruscating eleven-foot-long panel, on an exterior wall, outside the exhibition proper and in the company of works by other great American mid-century men. Dial’s piece, a hybrid of picture and sculpture, is a morass of materials—barbed wire, toy cars, the head of a mannequin, old clothes, wheels, cutlery, stuffed animals, tin, and that’s only a partial list—which is optically anchored by an ironic red-white-and-blue “V.” The work’s title suggests an indictment of the policies of President George W. Bush and a commentary on the endless quagmire of war. But the Met’s decision to install the piece adjacent to Jackson Pollock’s “Autumn Rhythm,” from 1950—one of the jewels of its modern collection—has the unintended effect of overemphasizing the formal attributes of the panel, as Dial’s tangles of wire play a game of call and response with the skeins of Pollock’s paintbrush. It also feels like an unnecessary legitimizing strategy for a piece that soars on its own merits.

Perhaps, now that the Met has introduced its visitors to the exceptional work of Lonnie Holley, Purvis Young, Ronald Lockett, Joe Minter, Nellie Mae Rowe, and others, it will consider another show—perhaps a whole floor at the Met Breuer—expanding on the conversation between Dial and Pollock, and inviting a more colorful chorus of voices. Wander the African galleries on the ground floor, after seeing the works from the Souls Grown Deep show and imagine seeing “Victory in Iraq” in the company of the Kongo N’kisi power figure, studded with nails, beads, shells, and arrows, or the majestic textiles of Linda Diane Bennett, and Lola, Loretta, and Lucy T. Pettway alongside a royal display cloth from Cameroon or the shimmering, crazy-quilt-like bottle-cap works of the contemporary Ghanian artist El Anatsui.

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‘History Refused to Die’ Review: A Visual Equivalent of Jazz

The Met is exhibiting donations from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation—which preserves the legacy of self-taught contemporary African-American artists—including works by Thornton Dial and Gee’s Bend quilts.

by Karen Wilkin
May 30, 2018

In the mid-1980s, William S. Arnett, a writer, curator, entrepreneur, Georgia native, and collector of African art, turned his attention closer to home—the efforts of self-taught African-American artists of the rural South. Mr. Arnett became a passionate collector and advocate of this work, characterizing it as the visual counterpart of jazz, a uniquely American, improvisational art form forged from African roots and the troubled history of American black experience: slavery, the Civil War, emancipation, reconstruction, Jim Crow segregation, lynchings, the civil-rights movement. In 2010, Mr. Arnett created the Souls Grown Deep Foundation—the name comes from a Langston Hughes poem—which, among other things, has supported artists in the collection, organized exhibitions, and published handsome volumes. Recently, the foundation has made donations to museums across the U.S., including, in 2014, 57 works to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“History Refused to Die,” a sharply focused, elegantly installed selection of 29 stellar works, celebrates this important gift. Organized by Randall R. Griffey, curator in the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Amelia Peck, a textile expert, curator of American Decorative Arts, the show was originated by the former Met curator Marla Prather. The title comes from Thornton Dial’s spectacular, tall, freestanding 2004 assemblage, a layered, ambiguous accumulation, at once seductive and disquieting, of unlikely found materials (okra stalks and roots, tin, wire, Masonite, steel chain, clothing, collaged drawings, enamel, and spray paint) modulated by rich, unexpected, broken color that creates counter-rhythms to the aggressively irregular surface.
Thornton Dial (1928–2016), a powerful and deservedly celebrated artist whose work resists categorization and needs no qualifying labels, is the star of the show, represented by six major collage-paintings and three large drawings, spanning 1998 to 2013. He has competition from a fierce 1995 sculpture by Joe Minter (born 1943), in which worn, rusted shovels are transformed by placement and the artist’s will into confrontational, accusatory figures. Three works by the musician, artist and theorist Lonnie Holley (born 1950), made between 1982 and 2003, demonstrate his range, from a tall, linear assembly of found materials to a blocky seated couple carved in discarded casting material from a foundry. And there’s a gritty, geometric assemblage by Ronald Lockett (1965–1998), who was inspired and mentored by Dial, his older cousin.

While most of the works first read as abstractions, they are, in fact, commemorative, symbolic, or triggered by specific events, and often animated by coded references. Witness Dial’s haunting “The End of November: The Birds That Didn’t Learn How to Fly” (2007), a flickering expanse of dull ocher and gray on a puckered fabric ground with a row of dead black birds suspended against it. The “birds” prove to be clusters of tattered fabric and work gloves. Dial, typically, presents us with a complex, purely visual metaphor with his cryptic imagery and scavenged materials, here one that provokes associations with the brutality of poverty and hard labor, as well as the horror of lynching.

Despite their playful energy, the crisp, brilliantly colored paintings of Nellie Mae Rowe (1900–1982), with their stylized figures, ambiguous creatures, and mutable scale, prove to have been similarly triggered by specific, sometimes uncomfortable allusions, from horrific child murders to her own impending death. Other obsessions are embodied by a visionary 1972 image by Purvis Young (1943–2010), a vernacular icon, with rows of figures and angels against a lush red ground, and two enormous white horses, symbols, for Young, of power and freedom.

Ten stunning quilts made between 1935 and 1976 by women, many of them related, from Gee’s Bend (now Boykin), Ala., may be the best known inclusions, thanks to an earlier traveling exhibition seen at the Whitney and other museums across the U.S. They range from intensely colored demonstrations of wonky geometry to subtly orchestrated, severe arrangements of blocks and bars of faded denim—worn-out work clothes, repurposed, out of necessity, as bedcovers and sometimes as intimate memorials to the people who wore them. Like Dial’s reverberant works, the quilts are first-rate works of art, testimony to their makers’ creativity and inventiveness, but they are also poignant reminders of the demands of poverty and domesticity. Far from being modernist abstract paintings manqués, they are utilitarian objects designed by gifted women with exacting eyes. An excellent catalog essay by Ms. Peck rehearses the vexed history of the Gee’s Bend quilts, their reception and reputation. (There are also informative essays by Mr. Griffey, Cornell University Prof. Cheryl Finley, and the writer Darryl Pinckney.)

At one entrance, “History Refused to Die” is announced by a radiant, engagingly asymmetrical quilt made around 1960 by Loretta Pettway (born 1942). Beside the opposite entrance, there’s a terrific, angry Dial, installed near paintings by Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell, among others. Dial looks right at home, as good as any of his fellow artists and better than most. As I said, no special qualifying label needed.

Original article: https://www.wsj.com/articles/history-refused-to-die-review-a-visual-equivalent-of-jazz-1527712388?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=1&ns=prod/accounts-wsj
Outsider Art Comes to the Metropolitan Museum

The entry of works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation into the Met’s collection has prompted the museum to rethink the way it presents 20th-century art history.

by Edward m. Gomez
May 26, 2018

Outsider art is having another big moment in the United States, marked by plenty of talk about the heroic and the historic, and hailed with hosannas of the “It’s about time!” variety.

That’s because, after several years in the making, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, one of the world’s most renowned, encyclopedic museums, has just opened History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift. This new exhibition, which will remain on view through September 23, features 30 pieces from a donation the museum received in late 2014 of 57 works by contemporary, self-taught artists of African descent, all of whom lived and worked in the Deep South of the United States, from the William S. Arnett Collection of the Atlanta-based Souls Grown Deep Foundation.

That headline-making gift, which the Met’s curatorial staff had a hand in selecting, included drawings, paintings,
and mixed-media works by Thornton Dial, Joe Minter, Nellie Mae Rowe, Lonnie Holley, Joe Light, Ronald Lockett, John B. Murray, Mary Proctor, Mose Tolliver, and other art-makers. Twenty quilts created from the 1930s through 2003 by female artists from the area around Gee’s Bend, Alabama, were also part of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation’s donation. With a title taken from a sculpture by Dial, which is on display in the exhibition, History Refused to Die features works by several, but not all, of the artists whose works are represented in the 2014 gift. Among others, they include Dial, Minter, and Holley. Ten of the Alabama quilts are also on view.

Concurrently with the Met’s exhibition, Shrine, a gallery in downtown Manhattan, will present Annex (from May 30 through July 29), a selection of works by several artists from the Souls Grown Deep donation who are not featured in the Met’s exhibition, along with others not included in the gift; among them are Light, Tolliver, Hawkins Bolden, Bessie Harvey, and Mary T. Smith.

For William ("Bill") S. Arnett, the founder of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, and his collaborators, the Met’s acceptance of his organization’s donation and, now, this high-profile exhibition, represent a validation by the cultural establishment of overlooked or unknown self-taught artists whose work they had steadfastly championed. The SGDF team firmly believed that these artists’ accomplishments had long been deserving of serious institutional and critical attention. (Arnett had been researching, documenting, and collecting their works for many decades. In 2010, he established the SGDF to serve as an archive and educational-promotional outlet for the art he had amassed.)

As History Refused to Die suggests, the entry of these works into the museum’s permanent collection has prompted the Met to rethink the way in which it presents the history of 20th-century art. This development may also be seen as institutional recognition of Arnett’s in-depth research and advocacy on behalf of this art over many years. (In the more than three years since the Met received its big donation, through combined gift-and-purchase arrangements, other US museums, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art (Atlanta), the New Orleans Museum of Art, and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco have also acquired works from the SGDF.)

At times, Arnett and his associates carried out their work in the face of unsettling resistance from well-placed art-world or media players who felt uncertain or threatened by such off-the-radar, unfamiliar material. Sometimes the responses they encountered seemed to carry a current of racism, not to mention a whiff of snobbery. After all, such reactions implied, how could poor, uneducated, black tinkerers in the rural South possibly create anything worthy of being called “art”?

In fact, many of the pieces on view seem to feel right at home alongside better-known, canonical works of modern and contemporary art, considering, for example, the formal affinities between the Gee’s Bend quilts and modernist geometric abstraction, or the Souls Grown Deep artists’ inventive handling of found materials in ways that seem to parallel (or unwittingly presage) quite a few modernist or postmodernist gestures.

Randall Griffey, a curator in the Met’s department of modern and contemporary art organized History Refused to Die along with Amelia Peck, a curator from the American decorative arts department (the show had originated with Marla Prather, a former modern and contemporary art curator at the Met). Griffey, standing near one of the two entrances to the galleries in which History Refused to Die is being shown, said, “The placement of these works right next to works by some of the best-known modern artists sends a strong message — that these self-taught artists’ works are not apart, spatially or conceptually, from other works in the collection.”

At one end of the exhibition space, visitors will be greeted by a panel displaying “Medallion” (circa 1960), a quilt by Loretta Pettway with patches of multicolored, vertical and horizontal stripes set against a black ground. Those entering the galleries from the opposite door will pass through a room with an Isamu Noguchi sculpture and monumental Clyfford Still paintings before coming upon Dial’s “Victory in Iraq” (2004), a mixed-media tableau featuring painted found materials tucked in and around V-shaped metal rods. Here, Dial, a former welder in a railway-carriage factory, used rusty metal cans, stuffed animals, a mannequin’s head, crumpled steel, and metal
mesh to evoke a battlefield’s chaotic atmosphere — and credibly portray a slice of its landscape of destruction. (Nearby looms a Jackson Pollock drip painting whose real and suggested surface textures seem almost subdued in comparison with Dial’s material-capturing tour de force.)

In his art, Dial, who died at his home near Birmingham, Alabama, in early 2016, examined such big subjects as slavery, racism, human rights, war, injustice, and nature’s forces. Despite the hardships and racism he experienced in his own life, his message was one of hope — and of beauty, too. Here, his “History Refused to Die” (2004), a freestanding, mixed-media sculpture whose title neatly summarizes the artist’s worldview, commands a room filled with numerous quilts, as well as such works as Lonnie Holley’s “African Mask” (2003), made with old car tires, electrical outlets, a welder’s mask, and lace; Ronald Lockett’s “The Enemy Amongst Us” (1995), a composition of vertical slats of rusty metal; and Purvis Young’s painting on wood, “Locked Up Their Minds” (1972), depicting a crowd of people rallying around two long-necked horses. Some of Young’s figures carry large padlocks, about which the artist once remarked, “I put locks in some of my paintings. A lot of people are locked up, struggling. The lock is playing a key part. It means mostly something’s wrong.”

Curator Peck, a quilts specialist, proposes something of a fresh take on the fabric works from Gee’s Bend, which in recent decades have been featured in exhibitions of their own, winning critical praise. “For so long, these quilts have been looked at in relation to a certain kind of abstract art,” Peck told me, adding, “but I’d like viewers to keep in mind that they were made by women, not only to be beautiful but also, literally, to cover their loved ones.” She suggested that the deeper African textile-arts heritage of the Gee’s Bend quilts is another subject that merits research attention.

Sheena Wagstaff, the head of the Met’s modern and contemporary art department, played a key role in arranging the museum’s acquisition of the SGDF gift. Of this first presentation of selections from the donation, she noted, “I hope that visitors encountering these works for the first time will have a revelatory experience. They are works that will stand the test of time, despite the fact that they did not have opportunities to be acknowledged back when they
were first being created."

Texas-reared Scott Ogden, who opened Shrine just over two years ago, came to art dealing after many years as a researcher and collector in the field of outsider art, with a special interest in the works of black artists of the American South — varieties of which he had seen while growing up in the region. In the past, he has collaborated with the SGDF on exhibition projects.

About his Annex show, Ogden told me, "In addition to extending the scope of the Souls Grown Deep artists whose works are being presented at the Met, I'd like to try to contextualize this work as contemporary art and also help stimulate a new dialog about it, looking at it as an authentic example of what might be called 'American art brut.' To date, art brut has mostly been associated with Europe and the past, but how and where would we find it in the US?" In the months to come, some of Shrine's programming will explore this theme. Of special note in Annex are a Bessie Harvey sculpture made from a tree root, into which the artist carved several totem-like faces, and several house-paint-on-board pictures by the Alabaman Mose Tolliver, featuring some of his portraits' signature details — exaggerated body parts and mouths filled with steel-trap teeth.

Some viewers may be struck by how easily the works in History Refused to Die seem to slide into the art-historical tracks the Met's presentation is proposing for them. Others may be impressed by how the artists represented here managed to squeeze so much expressive power out of the most humble materials, from fabric scraps to old shovels and Dial's endless supply of delectable junk. Ultimately, though, given its strengths and singularities, whether or not this kind of art is endorsed by a high-art temple like the Met may well be beside the point. After all, the artists and the kinds of works that are being showcased in this exhibition are unique unto themselves, speaking and revealing their own aesthetic truths. They defy familiar genre labels.

Still, Dial's art certainly holds its own alongside examples of "heroic" American Abstract Expressionism. Works like Dial's or Minter's, with their uncompromising allusions to slavery and racism, those indelible scars upon America's soul, demonstrate that, in the hands of such artists, whose lives were shaped by a firsthand understanding of the legacy of a painful past, abstract art could be made to break out of its precious, hermetic-aesthetic zone and say something about the real world, too. To be able to make just this kind of discovery, in any museum, is worth more than a few hallelujahs.
Thornton Dial’s two-sided relief-painting-assemblage, “History Refused to Die” (2004), also gives this Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition its title. His work is in conversation with quilts by, from left, Lola Pettway (“Housetop,” circa 1975); Lucy T. Pettway (“Housetop” and “Bricklayer” blocks with bars, circa 1955); and Annie Mae Young (“Work-clothes quilt with center medallion of strips,” from 1976). Credit 2018 Estate of Thornton Dial/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Agaton Strom for The New York Times

American art from the 20th and 21st centuries is broader, and better than previously acknowledged, especially by museums. As these institutions struggle to become more inclusive than before, and give new prominence to neglected works, they rarely act alone. Essential help has come from people like William Arnett and his exemplary Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Their focus is the important achievement of black self-taught artists of the American South, born of extreme deprivation and social cruelty, raw talent and fragments of lost African cultures.

The foundation is in the process of dispersing the entirety of its considerable holdings — some 1,200 works by more than 160 artists — to museums across the country. When it is finished, it may well have an impact not unlike that of the Kress Foundation, which from 1927 to 1961 gave more than 3,000 artworks to 90 museums and study collections.
The Met was the first of the foundation’s beneficiaries, receiving a gift of 57 artworks by 30 artists in 2014. Now, the museum celebrates its fortune with “History Refused to Die: Highlights From the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift.” A selection of 29 pieces, many of them rarely if ever shown, it is suffused by an electrifying sense of change.

The Met’s curators (and conservators) took nearly two years and several trips to Atlanta to finalize their selection, and they chose astutely. The show seems nearly perfect in art, installation and irrefutability of greatness. It has been organized by Randall R. Griffey and Amelia Peck, curators, respectively in the Met’s modern and contemporary department and its American Wing.


Credit 2018 Lonnie Holley/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; 2018 Estate of Thornton Dial/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Agaton Strom for The New York Times

The effect is majestic. The show validates the art’s stature, but even more it transforms the Met’s encyclopedic footprint while also being of a piece of its longtime efforts to collect African art and American folk art.

Nine of Thornton Dial’s characteristically fierce, self-aware works are here, mostly his rangy relief paintings as well as three extraordinary drawings that in wildly different ways commemorate Sept. 11, Florence Griffith Joyner and Barack Obama’s 2009 inauguration. A dozen of the 18 geometric quilts in the gift are here. Both muted and boisterous, they challenge the conventional history of abstraction and reflect the talents of the Gee’s Bend collective, especially those of the Pettway family. There are also various assemblage reliefs and sculptures by Lonnie Holley and Ronald Lockett. And the most extensive conversation — in their endless intricacies and shared uses of fabrics, textures and the grid — is between the works of Dial, who died in 2016, and the quilters. The Dials start to seem like crazed, dimensionalized quilts, the quilts like flattened, more orderly Dials.

Nearly everything included is made from scavenged objects and materials, scraps redolent of the shameful history of black labor in the South — before 1865, of course, but also in the Jim Crow era — transformed by aesthetic
intelligence and care into forms of eloquence and beauty. One of the most valuable lessons here is the works’ inherent formal and material sense of defiance, and of beauty itself as an act of resistance.

The show’s two hypnotic galleries have very different emotional and visual tones. After beckoning you from down the corridor with the bright colors and joyful asymmetry of Loretta Pettway’s “Medallion” quilt (circa 1960), the exhibition starts with an elegiac room of works nearly devoid of color.

Dial’s “Shadows of the Field” (2008) evokes haunted expanses of cotton plants with the help of strips of synthetic cotton batting. Along one wall, the “work-clothes” quilts of Lucy Mingo and four other Gee’s Benders reflect lives of hard labor and scrimping: their fabrics are almost exclusively blues and gray denim whose worn textures and faded colors are masterfully played off one another.

Emma Lee Pettway Campbell’s “Blocks and strips work-clothes quilt” from around 1950 may bring to mind Robert Rauschenberg’s “Bed,” from 1955, which conspicuously incorporates an old quilt. Joe Minter’s 1995 symmetrical arrangement of rusted shovels, rakes, hoes and chains, seems to bless the whole room. Regal and severely gorgeous, it suggests both a group of figures and an altar. Its title pulls no punches: “Four Hundred Years of Free Labor.” Yet I also found myself thinking of the beguiling offering stand once called “Billy Goat and Tree,” from Sumer around 2600 B.C., one of the first full-page color reproductions in H.W. Janson’s “History of Art.”

The second gallery erupts in color, delivered foremost by seven Gee’s Bend quilts as brilliant in palette as in use of materials, especially Lucy T. Pettway’s woozy full-spectrum interplay of the traditional “housetop” and “bricklayer” patterns in a quilt from around 1955. Annie Mae Young’s 1976 work brings together the two quilt sensibilities here, surrounding a medallion of burning stripes of contrasting corduroy with a broad denim work-clothes border. It
may evoke, rather fittingly, a small striped abstraction that Robert Motherwell made in 1941-44 and titled “Little Spanish Prison.”

Blessing the artworks here is a jaw-dropping Dial: a two-sided relief-painting-assemblage, and source of the exhibition’s title, “History Refused to Die.” One side shows a couple chained to, yet sheltered, by a white metal structure and surrounded by a turbulent expanse: pieces of fabric deftly knotted that seem to billow and blow like a stormy sea or clouds. The other side is a rough weaving of the straight stalks of the okra plant, which came to the United States from Africa during the slave trade. Its scattered colors are primarily the red, black, green and yellow of the 13-striped Afro-American flag and, at the upper right, the simple silhouette of a white dove of peace or freedom. At the top, a row of short steel angle beams, spray-painted with horizontal dashes of browns and black, flips in suggestion between good and bad, from a crown or headdress, to the top of a tall fence or chain-gang garb.

Several other works here are similarly simply masterpieces. In “Locked Up Their Minds,” Purvis Young offers his own version of James Ensor’s “Christ’s Entry Into Brussels in 1889.” Young’s large painting on wood shows a group of black figures, some with halos, others holding up padlocks signifying their freed minds to flocks of angels, while two immense white possibly rampant horses add to the drama. The show’s coda is Dial’s ironically titled “Victory in Iraq,” a relief-painting from 2004. It hangs just outside the second gallery, its barbed wire and twisted mesh against a field of fabric and detritus defines and holds space as lightly and powerfully as Jackson Pollock’s “Autumn Rhythm,” displayed nearby.

It is de rigueur when writing on exhibitions of this kind to review the shortcomings of the terms used to allude to the vast body of art, emerging in the 20th century, created by people limited by racial inequities, poor education,
mental or physical challenges, or poverty. “Outsider” was superseded by “self-taught,” which didn’t work since many artists are self-taught in some way. (Quilters, for example, learn their art from their female relatives.) The latest term is the more elastic “outlier” — put in play by an enormous survey seen recently at the National Gallery of Art in Washington that argued for the integration of such work with supposedly “insider” art while also undermining that position — since the outlier works often overwhelmed everything else.

At this point I think of the words of the little boy refusing to eat his vegetables in the famous New Yorker cartoon: “I say it’s spinach, and I say the hell with it.” Let’s just call all of it art and proceed.

Let’s see the rest of the Met’s gift. Let’s see Mr. Arnett’s foundation, now headed by the experienced museum director, Maxwell Anderson, complete its task. So far it has dispersed around 20 percent of its holdings to seven museums, with the most recent gift — 34 works to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond — announced this week. By these numbers, another 40 or so museums should benefit. Every thinking American understands the suffering these artists and their ancestors have endured and should grasp the meaning of Dial’s poem of a title. History has indeed refused to die, and some of its greatest art is also very much alive.
‘History Refused to Die’ Review: A Visual Equivalent of Jazz

The Met is exhibiting donations from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation—which preserves the legacy of self-taught contemporary African-American artists—including works by Thornton Dial and Gee’s Bend quilts.

by Karen Wilkin
May 30, 2018

In the mid-1980s, William S. Arnett, a writer, curator, entrepreneur, Georgia native, and collector of African art, turned his attention closer to home—the efforts of self-taught African-American artists of the rural South. Mr. Arnett became a passionate collector and advocate of this work, characterizing it as the visual counterpart of jazz, a uniquely American, improvisational art form forged from African roots and the troubled history of American black experience: slavery, the Civil War, emancipation, reconstruction, Jim Crow segregation, lynchings, the civil-rights movement. In 2010, Mr. Arnett created the Souls Grown Deep Foundation—the name comes from a Langston Hughes poem—which, among other things, has supported artists in the collection, organized exhibitions, and published handsome volumes. Recently, the foundation has made donations to museums across the U.S., including, in 2014, 57 works to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“History Refused to Die,” a sharply focused, elegantly installed selection of 29 stellar works, celebrates this important gift. Organized by Randall R. Griffey, curator in the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Amelia Peck, a textile expert, curator of American Decorative Arts, the show was originated by the former Met curator Marla Prather. The title comes from Thornton Dial’s spectacular, tall, freestanding 2004 assemblage, a layered, ambiguous accumulation, at once seductive and disquieting, of unlikely found materials (okra stalks and roots, tin, wire, Masonite, steel chain, clothing, collaged drawings, enamel, and spray paint) modulated by rich, unexpected, broken color that creates counter-rhythms to the aggressively irregular surface.
Outsider Art Comes to the Metropolitan Museum

The entry of works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation into the Met’s collection has prompted the museum to rethink the way it presents 20th-century art history.

by Edward m. Gomez
May 26, 2018

Outsider art is having another big moment in the United States, marked by plenty of talk about the heroic and the historic, and hailed with hosannas of the “It's about time!” variety.

That’s because, after several years in the making, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, one of the world’s most renowned, encyclopedic museums, has just opened History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift. This new exhibition, which will remain on view through September 23, features 30 pieces from a donation the museum received in late 2014 of 57 works by contemporary, self-taught artists of African descent, all of whom lived and worked in the Deep South of the United States, from the William S. Arnett Collection of the Atlanta-based Souls Grown Deep Foundation.
That headline-making gift, which the Met’s curatorial staff had a hand in selecting, included drawings, paintings, and mixed-media works by Thornton Dial, Joe Minter, Nellie Mae Rowe, Lonnie Holley, Joe Light, Ronald Lockett, John B. Murray, Mary Proctor, Mose Tolliver, and other art-makers. Twenty quilts created from the 1930s through 2003 by female artists from the area around Gee’s Bend, Alabama, were also part of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation’s donation. With a title taken from a sculpture by Dial, which is on display in the exhibition, History Refused to Die features works by several, but not all, of the artists whose works are represented in the 2014 gift. Among others, they include Dial, Minter, and Holley. Ten of the Alabama quilts are also on view.

Concurrently with the Met’s exhibition, Shrine, a gallery in downtown Manhattan, will present Annex (from May 30 through July 29), a selection of works by several artists from the Souls Grown Deep donation who are not featured in the Met’s exhibition, along with others not included in the gift; among them are Light, Tolliver, Hawkins Bolden, Bessie Harvey, and Mary T. Smith.

For William (“Bill”) S. Arnett, the founder of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, and his collaborators, the Met’s acceptance of his organization’s donation and, now, this high-profile exhibition, represent a validation by the cultural establishment of overlooked or unknown self-taught artists whose work they had steadfastly championed. The SGDF team firmly believed that these artists’ accomplishments had long been deserving of serious institutional and critical attention. (Arnett had been researching, documenting, and collecting their works for many decades. In 2010, he established the SGDF to serve as an archive and educational-promotional outlet for the art he had amassed.)

As History Refused to Die suggests, the entry of these works into the museum’s permanent collection has prompted the Met to rethink the way in which it presents the history of 20th-century art. This development may also be seen as institutional recognition of Arnett’s in-depth research and advocacy on behalf of this art over many years. (In the more than three years since the Met received its big donation, through combined gift-and-purchase arrangements, other US museums, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art (Atlanta), the New Orleans Museum of Art, and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco have also acquired works from the SGDF.)

At times, Arnett and his associates carried out their work in the face of unsettling resistance from well-placed art-world or media players who felt uncertain or threatened by such off-the-radar, unfamiliar material. Sometimes the responses they encountered seemed to carry a current of racism, not to mention a whiff of snobbery. After all, such reactions implied, how could poor, uneducated, black tinkerers in the rural South possibly create anything worthy of being called “art”?

In fact, many of the pieces on view seem to feel right at home alongside better-known, canonical works of modern and contemporary art, considering, for example, the formal affinities between the Gee’s Bend quilts and modernist geometric abstraction, or the Souls Grown Deep artists’ inventive handling of found materials in ways that seem to parallel (or unwittingly presage) quite a few modernist or postmodernist gestures.

Randall Griffey, a curator in the Met’s department of modern and contemporary art organized History Refused to Die along with Amelia Peck, a curator from the American decorative arts department (the show had originated with Marla Prather, a former modern and contemporary art curator at the Met). Griffey, standing near one of the two entrances to the galleries in which History Refused to Die is being shown, said, “The placement of these works right next to works by some of the best-known modern artists sends a strong message — that these self-taught artists’ works are not apart, spatially or conceptually, from other works in the collection.”

At one end of the exhibition space, visitors will be greeted by a panel displaying “Medallion” (circa 1960), a quilt by Loretta Pettway with patches of multicolored, vertical and horizontal stripes set against a black ground. Those entering the galleries from the opposite door will pass through a room with an Isamu Noguchi sculpture and monumental Clyfford Still paintings before coming upon Dial’s “Victory in Iraq” (2004), a mixed-media tableau featuring painted found materials tucked in and around V-shaped metal rods. Here, Dial, a former welder in a railway-carriage factory, used rusty metal cans, stuffed animals, a mannequin’s head, crumpled steel, and metal
mesh to evoke a battlefield’s chaotic atmosphere — and credibly portray a slice of its landscape of destruction. (Nearby looms a Jackson Pollock drip painting whose real and suggested surface textures seem almost subdued in comparison with Dial’s material-capturing tour de force.)

In his art, Dial, who died at his home near Birmingham, Alabama, in early 2016, examined such big subjects as slavery, racism, human rights, war, injustice, and nature’s forces. Despite the hardships and racism he experienced in his own life, his message was one of hope — and of beauty, too. Here, his “History Refused to Die” (2004), a freestanding, mixed-media sculpture whose title neatly summarizes the artist’s worldview, commands a room filled with numerous quilts, as well as such works as Lonnie Holley’s “African Mask” (2003), made with old car tires, electrical outlets, a welder’s mask, and lace; Ronald Lockett’s “The Enemy Amongst Us” (1995), a composition of vertical slats of rusty metal; and Purvis Young’s painting on wood, “Locked Up Their Minds” (1972), depicting a crowd of people rallying around two long-necked horses. Some of Young’s figures carry large padlocks, about which the artist once remarked, “I put locks in some of my paintings. A lot of people are locked up, struggling. The lock is playing a key part. It means mostly something’s wrong.”

Curator Peck, a quilts specialist, proposes something of a fresh take on the fabric works from Gee’s Bend, which in recent decades have been featured in exhibitions of their own, winning critical praise. “For so long, these quilts have been looked at in relation to a certain kind of abstract art,” Peck told me, adding, “but I’d like viewers to keep in mind that they were made by women, not only to be beautiful but also, literally, to cover their loved ones.” She suggested that the deeper African textile-arts heritage of the Gee’s Bend quilts is another subject that merits research attention.

Sheena Wagstaff, the head of the Met’s modern and contemporary art department, played a key role in arranging the museum’s acquisition of the SGDF gift. Of this first presentation of selections from the donation, she noted, “I hope that visitors encountering these works for the first time will have a revelatory experience. They are works that will stand the test of time, despite the fact that they did not have opportunities to be acknowledged back when they were first being created.”
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The Met Unpacks its Souls Grown Deep Gift

An excellent show adds new strands to our understanding of what makes American art uniquely American

by Brian Allen
May 23, 2018

It is a salve to see an exhibition as succinct, as purposeful, intelligently designed and filled with good art as the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s new show History Refused to Die (until 23 September). It highlights a generous, recent gift of 57 works from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation and powerfully affirms the vibrancy of America’s visual culture beyond the coasts and big cities.

The objects go from strength to strength. The gifted Thornton Dial is the biggest star and his two-sided multimedia construction, History Refused to Die (2004), is gorgeous. It is polemical and overwrought, done toward the end of Dial’s long career and a new take on the long tradition of history painting—if we can call it that since it’s much more than paint. It is dense, jagged, puzzling, lush, inscrutable, and, like the past itself, open to different interpretations. Dial is an abstract artist given to patterns and unorthodox, found materials. He is also a realist, faithful to the look and feel of a world close to the land, where people are scrappy, poor and stubborn. It is as grand as an altarpiece. A big gallery also shows Dial’s large, abstract drawings, one of chaotic swirls entitled, Interrupting the Morning News (2002), a memorial to the 11 September attacks, flanked by a set of brightly coloured, abstracted...
figure drawings by Nellie Mae Rowe on one side and a wild, totemic mask made of junk by Lonnie Holley nearby. I did not realise until I looked at the label that the notorious series of child murders in Atlanta in the 1970s inspired one of Rowe’s figure drawings. It is an unsettling work, as if a child tried to convey something scary he could neither understand nor explain with words. The blue skinned beast that stands in the middle has both a childish simplicity and a medieval menace, with sharp teeth and hooves.

On the other side of the gallery is a selection of Gee’s Bend quilts showing different palettes and patterns. The best quilts are the monochromatic ones, often with shades of blue from found fabric, mostly faded denim cut in geometric shapes and irregularly stacked. It is tonalism but the aesthetic is different from what an artist would get from paint. The quilts with lots of red, white, and black are jazzy and buoyant but these have a cool, serene elegance. Every quilt has contrasting textures among pieces of fabric, some more subtle than others and this unpredictability is integral to their beauty.

Together, these objects show the range and depth of the Met’s gift. They also say plenty about the curators’ skill in putting them together. They play well, however disparate they are, because the artists broadly share the same roots and experiences.

The show’s catalogue is also great. In three sensible essays, the scholars pry the work from the heavy baggage some of it has carried, especially the quilts. I thought the big 2002 Gee’s Bend traveling show introducing these objects both overplayed their merit and saddled them with the unrelated vocabulary of post-war painting. Linking them to Kenneth Nolan, Stuart Davis, or Joseph Albers is understandable. We puzzle out things we do not know by finding similarities with things we do. These quilts come from a different world. As an alternative, critics sometimes tried to tie them to carried down African traditions, consciously observed by the makers or deployed by unwitting habit. That is subtle colonialism and unfair. The artists are from families here for hundreds of years.

The curators and I agree that calling them “craft” as opposed to “fine art” is also meaningless. The makers intend to give visual pleasure. They show great skill in judging nuance in colour and material. That the objects are used to keep people warm adds to their sensual allure. American art is unusually practical, so we can leave at the door thoughts of boundaries and classifications, among them the walls that separate self-trained from credentialed artists. This lovely show and its fine scholarship add new strands to our understanding of what makes American art uniquely American.