

Threads: Artists Weave their Worlds

October 12, 2023–October 13, 2024 | Bowdoin College Museum of Art | Brunswick, Maine
Exhibition Labels

People have been creating textiles for millennia. Textiles have offered comfort, warmth, and protection. They have served as currency, a form of economic empowerment, and as the foundation for political empires. They have provided avenues for creative expression, social community, and technological innovation. Textile production has also relied on chattel slavery, contributed to environmental degradation, and sustained systemic inequalities. Inspired by recent acquisitions by artists such as Jeremy Frey, Jeffrey Gibson, Jo Sandman, Theresa Secord, Sarah Zapata, and Hong Zhang, this exhibition brings together works from the Museum’s collection that trace significant shifts in the ways that textiles have been understood and valued over the last 150 years. Many of the artworks on view explicitly engage with this complex history of textile arts, raising questions about gender, labor, memory, identity, and cross-cultural encounters. Other artists demonstrate how the techniques and materials of textile manufacture can transform artistic trajectories and challenge prevailing conventions, including the distinction between fine art and traditional craft. Collectively, the works on view enable the artists to weave powerful and intimate stories—about themselves, their identities and experiences, and the worlds that they inhabit.

The exhibition is supported by the Karl R. Philbrick Art Museum Fund, Bowdoin College.

ESTHER EMILY LESLIE

Birthplace unknown

American, 1859–1924

Fancy Quilt, ca. 1880s

silk and velvet with painted and embroidered decoration

Gift of Donald E. Hare ’51 and Ann F. Hare

2019.38

Quilting has constituted an important part of the American textile tradition since the eighteenth century. Like other needlework practices such as sewing and cross stitch, quilting was associated with women’s work and the domestic sphere. However, it also allowed women to express their creativity, innovate new artistic forms, and sustain strong social bonds through quilting bees and sewing circles. Emily Esther Leslie created this quilt in Kingfield, Maine, during the late nineteenth century, a period of heightened experimentation in American textile arts. Here, Leslie has pieced together silk and velvet fabric and ribbon to create a “fancy” or “crazy” quilt, a popular style in the 1870s and 1880s. Embellished with silk embroidery and paint, Leslie’s quilt would have been admired as decoration and not used for warmth, reflecting her commitment to creating “art for art’s sake,” an attitude popularized by the Aesthetic Movement in the late nineteenth century.

SARAH ZAPATA

Born Corpus Christi, Texas, United States

Peruvian-American, 1988

Towards an ominous time I, 2022

handwoven cloth, natural and synthetic fiber

Museum Purchase, Laura T. and John H. Halford Jr. Art Acquisition Fund

2022.44

In *Towards an ominous time I*, Sarah Zapata juxtaposes labor-intensive techniques of handweaving and latch-hooking with methods of industrialized carpet manufacture to explore gender and labor. This sculpture comprises two textile panels enveloping a columnar substructure. The handwoven elements appear both as flat panels and protruding, three-dimensional shapes that emerge from fluffy latch-hooked patches. As a fiber artist, Zapata engages in a history that positions textile production as “women’s work.” She deliberately uses bright colors, soft textures, and organic forms to create objects that she considers feminine and that bear evidence of their hand-made nature. Yet she also subverts expectations of what a textile is, challenging the patriarchal

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political systems that have sought to oppress and constrain women, especially Queer women of color. Zapata's work is, in essence, a celebration of the intersectionality of identity and existence.

CHRISTO (CHRISTO VLADIMIROV JAVACHEFF)

Born Gabrovo, Bulgaria

American and Bulgarian, 1935–2020

Running Fence, 1976

graphite, pastel, charcoal, and fabric collage

Museum Purchase, George Otis Hamlin Fund with the aid of a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., a federal agency

1976.38

For ten days in September 1976, a large-scale public art project entitled *Running Fence* stretched more than 24 miles across Sonoma and Marin Counties in northern California before terminating in the Pacific Ocean. Realized by artist Christo and his partner Jeanne-Claude, the large-scale intervention comprised 200,000 square meters of woven white nylon fabric suspended by steel cables. The white fabric, which cut a striking but simple line across rolling farmland and pastures, caused fervent debate at the time, when new land-use policies and environmental impact studies in northern California were hotly contested. Christo created this collage, which incorporates the same nylon used in the installation, to help envision and advocate for the finished project. Preparatory materials such as this were sold to help fund *Running Fence*.

JEFFREY GIBSON

Born Colorado Springs, Colorado, United States

Choctaw, Cherokee, and American, born 1972

The Anthropophagic Effect, Garment no. 3, 2019

mixed media with cotton, brass grommets, nylon thread, artificial sinew, dried pear gourds, glass and plastic beads, nylon ribbon on canvas

Museum purchase, Lloyd O. and Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund

2021.63

Jeffrey Gibson's oversized tunic references the Ghost Dance, a Native American ceremony in which participants don special garments that protect the wearer from violence enacted by white settler-colonists. Here, Gibson reclaims the ghost shirt to make a poignant statement about Indigenous identity. He embellishes the cuffs, collar, and torso with mass-produced and widely available plastic beads and dried pear gourds. The sleeves have been screen-printed with an image from the 2016 Standing Rock protests, situating the work within a long history of violent confrontation between tribal communities and the United States government. Within this context, Dionne Warwick's lyrics "Don't Make Me Over" take on a profound significance in asserting Indigenous sovereignty. For Gibson, working with textiles has allowed him to articulate a visual language that encapsulates his experiences, drawing from "powwow regalia, different movements in clothing worn by various subcultures, and fashion."

UNIDENTIFIED YORÙBÁ ARTIST

present-day Nigeria

Àdìrè cloth with oloba (coronation or jubilee) design, 1962

cotton, indigo dye

Gift of Dorothy A. Hassfeld made in memory of the Otun Shoun, Chief N.D. Oyerinde, OBE

2014.31.18

Yorùbá women in southwest Nigeria are renowned for creating àdìrè cloth, or indigo-dyed textiles decorated using resist-dyeing techniques. The earliest examples of àdìrè were created on handspun and handwoven cotton cloth, requiring a significant investment of labor. By the early 1900s, the widespread import of European

shirting material into West Africa created opportunities for entrepreneurial women to establish the production of àdìrè cloth as a cottage industry. This example uses imported green cotton fabric as a base for the stenciled pattern, which is popularly known as the *oloba* motif. Featuring two royal individuals in a cartouche, these commemorative textiles first emerged in 1935 to honor the silver jubilee of King George V and Queen Mary. Here, a more traditionally attired West African couple occupies the scene, demonstrating how textiles continue to communicate political events and power dynamics among the Yorùbá.

UNIDENTIFIED YORÙBÁ ARTIST

present-day Nigera

Àdìrè cloth, 1962

cotton, thread indigo dye

Gift of Dorothy A. Hassfeld made in memory of the Otun Shoun, Chief N.D. Oyerinde, OBE

2014.31.19

Yorùbá women have created *àdìrè* (Yoruba for “tie and dye”) for at least two hundred years. These indigo-dyed textiles were embellished with various resist-dye techniques, including the two seen in this example, known as *oniko* and *eleko*. In the former, artists tie raffia around individual pebbles, shells, beans, or seeds to create small white circles. Here, the dyer has used *oniko* to create undulating, zig-zagging, or spiraling lines of miniscule crescent shapes in alternating squares. In the other blocks, the dyer painted cassava paste onto the fabric to create a pattern, possibly with the aid of a metal stencil. Although Yorùbá textile traditions continue to evolve, indigo dyeing has been practiced for at least seven centuries in Nigeria, which is home to some of the oldest indigo dye pits in the world.

TAMARA GONZALES

Born Madera, California, United States

American, born 1959

Untitled, 2016

alpaca and wool

Gift of the Alex Katz Foundation

2017.25

Tamara Gonzalez explores her interest in the Indigenous cultures of the Americas through her paintings, drawings, and multimedia collages. In 2016, she created a new series of drawings featuring blocky human and animal figures surrounded by patterns that combine her own practice of mark-making with artistic traditions of the Andes Mountains in South America. To create this artwork, Gonzales collaborated with Quechua weavers from Pisac and Ayacucho, two settlements in highland Peru. Here, the artisan has interpreted one of Gonzales’ drawings as a tapestry that reflects Quechua artistic sensibilities. She used wool and alpaca fiber, the two most common materials for weaving in the Andean highlands, and employed a color palette and motifs that resonate with her own cultural traditions.

JUDITH SHEA

Born Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States

American, born 1948

Untitled Studies [409], ca. 1993

iron, wax, wool, bronze, and steel

Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection

2013.21.260.1–4

Trained as an artist and fashion designer, Judith Shea’s sculpture practice explores the relationship between the geometry of garments and the human form. Shea was exposed to clothing from around the world while working as a designer at the United Nations. She was fascinated to note that despite different styles, colors, and fabrics,

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the shapes used to construct garments—squares, rectangles, triangles—are essentially the same. For Shea, this geometry uses the same vocabulary as abstraction and minimalism; the human figure and its movement are what activates and transforms garments into supple, pliant materials. In these sculptural studies, the artist evokes the unmistakable curving lines of a human body draped in soft fabric.

ANNE RYAN

Born Hoboken, New Jersey, United States

American, 1889–1954

untitled, ca. 1948–1954

untitled, ca. 1948–1954

untitled, 1951

paper and fabric collage

Bequest of Hilton and Esta Kramer

2021.73.108, 2017.73.109, 2017.73.110

Anne Ryan was an American novelist, poet, and self-taught artist who worked in painting, printmaking, and collage. In the 1930s, Ryan moved to Greenwich Village and mingled with artists such as Hans Hoffmann and Tony Smith, who encouraged her to paint. She did not begin creating visual art in earnest until 1941, when she joined the printmaking workshop Atelier 17 and made woodcuts, monotypes, and intaglios featuring semi-abstract figures and rich, layered surface textures. Ryan transformed her practice in 1948 after seeing German artist Karl Schittwers' collages, which impressed her with their tactility and the integration of complex abstract forms into a condensed space. From then until her death six years later, Ryan created nearly four hundred small-scale collages incorporating fabric, found media, and hand-made paper. In these examples, Ryan creates linear compositions of woven fabrics and textured papers, their frayed and sometimes torn edges evoking the gestures of Abstract Expressionism, a movement with which she was associated.

JO SANDMAN

Born Boston, Massachusetts, United States

American, born 1931

Untitled (Folded Drawing), ca. 1970–1971

folded and pressed white duck fabric

Gift of the artist

2020.36.9

Jo Sandman was trained by the artist Hans Hoffman who became famous for his theory of “push and pull,” or the construction of pictorial space with contrasting colors and lines that exert pressure upon one another. A talented abstract painter, Sandman began to test the visual language of Abstract Expressionism in the 1960s by experimenting with new ways of using raw canvas. This work reflects Sandman's use of an industrial press to produce crisp lines on white duck canvas, thereby relying upon light and shadow rather than pigment to generate a geometric pattern. The artist noted: “This process of making the material mark itself alters the surface; light striking the folds and creases creates a remarkable range of value shifts.” Works such as this defy easy categorization: crafted from fabric, it might well be understood as a textile. However, the artist considers it a drawing, even though she relies on pressure—a technique of printmaking—rather than pencils or ink.

HONG ZHANG

Born Shenyang, China

Chinese American, born 1971

The Eye of the Tornado, 2023

Chinese ink on Italian Alcantara fabric

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Museum Purchase, Greenacres Acquisition Fund
2023.38.3

For more than twenty years, Hong Zhang has used hair to explore femininity, memory, and cross-cultural connections. Here, Zhang transforms long, entangled strands of hair into an iconic representation of her adopted home in Kansas: a twirling tornado. In this work, she also complicates the relationship of western and eastern art forms, a way of exploring her own identity as an American artist of Chinese descent. For instance, the format of the hanging scroll is a staple in the Chinese landscape tradition, as it accentuates an Eastern philosophy of spatiality as fluid and unfixed. Yet the dynamic brush strokes equally evoke the gestural provocations of American Abstract Expressionist painting. Such hybridity is also apparent in her recent embrace of Italian Alcantara fabric as a support for her drawings. Employed to line the interiors of automobiles and airplanes, the use of this material for artmaking demonstrates Zhang's engagement with materials, technologies, and innovations in a global context.

NANCY SPERO

American, 1926–2009

Born Cleveland, Ohio, United States

El Salvador, 1986

collage

Museum Purchase with Funds Donated Anonymously
2019.2

Feminist and anti-war activist Nancy Spero dedicated her artistic career to chronicling social issues, political concerns, and the experiences of women on a global scale, often in collaboration with her husband and fellow artist Leon Golub. In the 1970s and 1980s, Spero cast a critical lens on the violence unfolding in many Latin American countries, including El Salvador, which was embroiled in a civil war from 1979–1992. In this collage, Spero depicts a mother crouching protectively over her child. The triple-repeated image conveys a sense of motion, suggesting that they are fleeing or escaping danger. In the top left corner, a seated woman wails, perhaps lamenting the atrocities taking place. Spero's focus on women and children emphasizes the human costs of war, powerfully serving to denounce violence and demand change.

The Indigenous communities of Maine, the Canadian Maritimes, and portions of Quebec are known today as the Wabanaki Confederacy, which includes the Abenaki, Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac. Wabanaki artists have woven baskets since time immemorial. With European colonization and the forced removal of Wabanaki communities from their ancestral homelands, basket making emerged as a source of economic independence and resistance to assimilation. Baskets continued to serve utilitarian purposes, but nineteenth-century weavers also innovated new forms, known as fancy baskets, to meet collectors' tastes. Today, basket making remains a powerful vehicle for expressing artistic creativity and sharing traditional knowledge with new generations of weavers.

UNIDENTIFIED ARTIST, PENOBSCOT NATION
OF THE WABANAKI CONFEDERACY

present-day Maine

Mini Knitting Basket, ca. 1950–1960

ash and sweetgrass

Anonymous Gift

2018.13.35

UNIDENTIFIED ARTIST, WABANAKI CONFEDERACY

present-day Maine

Open Sewing basket, ca. 1900

ash

Anonymous Gift

2018.13.38

These two baskets not only demonstrate traditional Wabanaki weaving techniques, but they also evince other textile practices such as knitting and sewing. The lidded basket, which was used to store small amounts of wool and knitting needles, combines strips of black ash and braided sweetgrass, two of the most common Wabanaki basketmaking materials. Its interior features a bright raspberry dye, indicating that it was once a vibrant red. The open basket may have been used to hold thimbles, spools of thread, and other sewing tools. It is also made of split ash and features decorative strip curls around its neck and porcupine curls at its base. Although the exterior is faded, its interior shows signs that it was created with purple and orange dyes as further embellishment.

UNIDENTIFIED ARTIST, PENOBSCOT NATION OF THE WABANAKI CONFEDERACY

present-day Maine

Depression Glass Basket Vase, ca. 1930–1940s

ash and Hong Kong cord over depression glass

Anonymous Gift

2018.13.5

Leo and Florence Shay, as well as their extended family, became one of the most prominent basketmaking families of the Penobscot Nation in the early twentieth century. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Shays began weaving baskets over depression glass jars to create unique forms, like this example. Shay family weavers decorated these forms with Hong Kong cord, an imported rope of twisted sea grass, rather than traditional sweetgrass. This example features round handles on the side and the Hong Kong cord woven into a chevron pattern, details that further suggest it was made by a member of the Shay family in the mid-twentieth century.

JEREMY FREY

Born Passamaquoddy Indian Township Reservation, Maine, United States

Passamaquoddy and American, born 1978

Permanence, 2023

black ash, cedar bark, birch bark, and synthetic dye

Museum Purchase, Jane H. and Charles E. Parker Jr. Art Acquisition Fund

2023.41

One of the most celebrated Wabanaki artists of the twenty-first century, Jeremy Frey creates baskets that are as much contemporary sculpture as they are functional objects. Frey learned basket making from family members and mentors in the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance. *Permanence*, one of Frey's most recent works, is a point basket woven from undyed black ash that contrasts with the deep navy and cool slate blues. A scalloped collar of birch bark surrounds the neck, and cedar bark coils help construct the neck and lid. Standing nearly twenty inches tall, this basket requires a mastery of weaving on a large scale that few artists have achieved. As its title suggests, Frey is committed to asserting the presence of Indigenous people in the past, present, and future. His baskets have revitalized this Indigenous artform and created new possibilities for emerging Native American artists to innovate their craft.

THERESA SECORD

Born Portland, Maine

Penobscot and American, born 1958

Pasokos (Sturgeon) Basket, 2023

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ash, birch bark, sweet grass, and commercial dye
Museum Purchase, Anne Dorsey Loth Art Acquisition Fund
2023.40

Penobscot artist, activist, and educator Theresa Secord has dedicated her artistic career to preserving and teaching traditional Wabanaki basket making to new generations of Indigenous weavers. This basket represents a new phase of creative experimentation for Secord, who combines ancestral techniques and materials with her interest in art, science, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge. The basket evokes *pasokos*, the Penobscot word for sturgeon, its gray body and triangular curls representing the animal's armor-like scales, or scutes. The birch bark and red, orange, and yellow accents on the lid represent her Penobscot ancestors' use of torches to hunt *pasokos* at night from birch bark canoes. Although they once thrived in the rivers and estuaries of coastal Maine, sturgeon populations have since declined precipitously as a result of overfishing, damming, industrialization, pollution, and climate change.