

The Object Tells A Story

African-American Folk Art From Florida

The Object Tells a Story: African-American Folk Art from Florida brings together the work of four prominent African-American folk artists from around the state of Florida, alongside artworks, textiles, ceramics and other ephemera created and collected by members of St. Augustine's African-American community.

The term “folk art” means different things to different people, and it’s meaning has changed over time. In a broad sense, folk art is an umbrella term for a wide variety of artistic expressions, including, but not limited to, paintings and drawings; sculptures and wood carvings; needlework, quilting, and other textiles; ceramics and basketry; and an almost endless parade of other utilitarian objects – created at least in part by hand by untrained or partially trained artists. Such work has been identified by a myriad range of terminology, much of it now out of favor; the semantic chain includes the descriptors “art brut,” “primitive,” “naïve,” “isolate,” “visionary,” “intuitive,” “outsider,” and “self-taught,” amongst others.

In recent years, many curators and collectors have preferred the term “vernacular” to describe the distinct community and identity of artists living and working in the South. However, it is important to acknowledge that the makers and meanings of folk art created in the United States are as varied as the American experience itself. Folk art is not a genre limited to African-American artists, nor is it solely the provenance of artists working in Florida, nor even in the South, and this exhibit in no way attempts to be a comprehensive survey of the work of any such group. Yet as we celebrate a number of important historical milestones here in St. Augustine, including this year’s 50th anniversary of the passage of the Civil Rights Act, it is imperative to pay heed to the distinct contributions African-American folk artists in Florida have made to the field of American art during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

For years, the role of many diverse groups of American artists working outside the mainstream academic and critical purview went unacknowledged. The artists selected for this exhibit include: Alyne Harris, Mary Proctor, Ruby C. Williams, and Purvis Young, each of whom is now recognized as significantly contributing to what is identified as American art. The works included here are as original and diverse as the artists themselves, yet the collective body of work illustrates a continuity of tradition the artists share with one another, as well as with other innovative vernacular artists from the greater southern region.

At the same time, this exhibit also brings attention to the rich cultural heritage of African-Americans in the St. Augustine community, and its vital role in the larger framework of the history of African Americans in the South. The artworks and objects included were created by living members of this community, as well as passed down through multiple generations. While many of these objects are familiar to any home, they also tell the particular story of

individuals and their families living in this very distinct place. In acknowledgement of the importance of oral tradition within African-American culture, the exhibit includes filmed interviews conducted by students at Flagler College with the creators or inheritors of many of the pieces included here. The subjects of these interviews not only provide the context for the folk art and other ephemera shared in this exhibit, but also frequently reveal accounts of little known pieces of local and regional history and reaffirm a strong sense of community. Finally, in the spirit of passing this deeply traditional art form down to younger generations, the exhibit includes paintings and filmed interviews with local school children created during three workshops taught by Ruby C. Williams last November. Fifth-grade students from Osceola Elementary School attended the first workshop at Fort Mose Historic State Park, the site of the first legally sanctioned free African settlement in the United States. Second and Third-grade students also participated in a two-day workshop at Ketterlinus Elementary School.

By illuminating the ties between a diverse array of objects created and cared for by multiple generations of St. Augustine community members, and the work of internationally-recognized vernacular artists from Florida and the greater South, this exhibit serves to demonstrate the critical artistic contributions of African-Americans from the state of Florida, including those from our own community. Furthermore, we hope that the stories contained within these objects, reflecting both personal and collective truths, will resonate with visitors through their own **diverse experiences.**

The Object Tells a Story: African-American Folk Art from Florida exhibition is part of the *Journey: 450 Years of the African-American Experience Passport Program* created by the City of St. Augustine and the St. Augustine 450th Commemoration.

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