

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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**VMFA Acquires Two Comprehensive Collections of Works by
Virginia Artists Benjamin Wigfall and Willie Anne Wright**
The Wigfall and Wright Collections Reflect the Important Intersection Between Art and Archive



(Image credits are included below.)

Richmond, Virginia — The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) has acquired two comprehensive collections of works of art and archival materials by important Virginia artists Benjamin Wigfall and Willie Anne Wright.

“We are excited to add these remarkable works by Benjamin Wigfall and Willie Anne Wright to the museum’s permanent collection. Many of these works will go on display this year at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in special exhibitions devoted to these artists,” said Alex Nyerges, VMFA’s Director and CEO. “The museum continues to support artists from the Commonwealth of Virginia and expand our collection to show the full breadth of human experience and artistic achievement.”

Benjamin Wigfall

Born and raised in the Church Hill neighborhood of Richmond, Benjamin Wigfall (American, 1930–2017) began his long career as an abstract painter and printmaker in the 1950s.

“Wigfall credits seeing a painting by German artist Lyonel Feininger on display at VMFA during a museum visit in 1948 as an awakening to abstract art that would inform the rest of his career,” said Dr. Sarah Eckhardt, VMFA’s Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

Wigfall proceeded to win two VMFA student fellowships to study at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) in 1949 and 1951, followed by a fellowship from an anonymous donor in 1952 to fund his final year at Hampton.

Three years after Wigfall saw Feininger’s painting at VMFA, the museum acquired for its collection one of Wigfall’s first abstract works, *Chimneys*, which he painted when he was only 21 years old. The painting is one of the institution’s earliest acquisitions of a work by an African American artist. By 1958, Wigfall was teaching at Hampton Institute when his abstract painting, *Corrosion in Blue*, was also acquired by the museum. That same year, VMFA’s Director Leslie Cheek commissioned Wigfall to design the museum’s Christmas card, an honor Cheek bestowed annually on one leading Virginia artist.

In the early 1960s, Wigfall moved to New Paltz, New York, to teach at the State University of New York at New Paltz. Printmaking became his central medium while teaching at the university. Wigfall established a print studio in a close-knit Black neighborhood in nearby Kingston to address the inequities of art education that he had personally experienced growing up in Richmond’s Church Hill. By making his studio accessible to the youth, Wigfall’s practice as a printmaker quickly merged with his philosophy as an arts educator. In 1973, he founded Communications Village in Kingston. Dedicated to bringing exceptional Black artists to Kingston, Wigfall saw this as a unique space where leading African American artists of the era could engage with the local community while experimenting with printmaking as an art form.

VMFA’s recent acquisition includes 37 paintings, assemblages and prints by Wigfall. Additionally, the museum has acquired 18 works of art by other artists connected with Communications Village, including Benny Andrews, Jayne Cortez and Melvin Edwards, Charles Gaines, Diane Hunt and Mary Lou Morgan.

“This significant body of work by Wigfall and his colleagues will enable VMFA to tell his story to a large audience and serves as an important resource for further scholarship,” notes Eckhardt. “Alongside the Louis Draper collection and archive, this acquisition demonstrates the museum’s sustained commitment to significant Virginia artists who, in addition to developing their own art, also focused on supporting other African American artists and mentoring youth.”

The Wigfall family generously donated the artist’s archive to VMFA’s Margaret R. and Robert M. Freeman Library to accompany the museum’s collection of his art. A National Endowment for the Humanities grant, The Preservation Training Initiative, has funded an archives graduate intern position to catalogue the archive, portions of which will be digitized and made available online.

Many of these newly acquired works will be featured in the upcoming exhibition, *Benjamin Wigfall and Communications Village*, which will be on view at VMFA from June 17 to September 10, 2023. The exhibition is the first retrospective of Wigfall’s art from the beginning of his career in Virginia to his founding of Communications Village. In addition to works of art, the story of Wigfall’s legacy and artistic development will be told through letters, notes, photographs, sketchbooks, printing plates and ephemera generously donated to the museum by the Benjamin Wigfall Estate.

Willie Anne Wright

Though primarily considered a photographer, Willie Anne Wright (American, born 1924) has worked in a wide range of media, including painting, drawing and printmaking, for more than seven decades. Newly acquired works by Wright — eight paintings and 236 photographs — have been added to 43 works by the artist already in VMFA’s collection.

Born and raised in Richmond, Wright attended the College of William and Mary, where she audited art classes while pursuing a degree in psychology. Although she exhibited a few paintings as a student, Wright did not pursue art

seriously until 1964 when she — by then a married mother of three — enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts program at the Richmond Professional Institute (now Virginia Commonwealth University).

Through this acquisition, VMFA can now represent the range and depth of Wright’s work, which includes paintings informed by Pop art, mass media, television and popular music; photographs of her family, friends and surroundings made with a pinhole camera; and works made with alternative photographic processes, including sun-printed photograms (lumen prints) and direct-positive prints on Cibachrome paper, a material normally used to make prints from color slides.

The collection also includes works from Wright’s extended series of photographs of pregnant women, in which she explored the physical, psychological and social burdens of motherhood. Also included is her landscape series *Southland*, made in Virginia, North Carolina and Louisiana, in which she explored the layered mythologies and vexed history of these Southern states. Another series captures the backyard pools, beaches and boardwalks in Virginia with a humorous and sympathetic eye.

“Through her work, Wright embraced contemporary culture and sensibilities and reflected on gender roles and expectations, while channeling historical themes, mythology and imagery,” said Dr. Sarah Kennel, VMFA’s Aaron Siskind Curator of Photography and Director of the Raysor Center. “What unites Wright’s broad body of work is her curiosity, playfulness and experimental attitude to both seeing and reimagining the world around her.”

Wright’s entire archives have also been donated to the Margaret R. and Robert M. Freeman Library at VMFA. This collection of papers, preliminary drawings, source materials, correspondence and other items sheds light on the artist’s life and career. The museum now possesses the largest and most comprehensive museum collection of Wright’s works. Highlights of the collection will be featured in an exhibition, which opens in October 2023 and coincides with the artist’s 99th birthday, that will travel to statewide partner museums throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia.

VMFA Identified as Field Leader in Burns Halperin Report

In December 2022, VMFA was identified by Charlotte Burns and Julia Halperin, the authors of the [2022 Burns Halperin Report](#), as a field leader for acquisitions and exhibitions of Black American artists, female-identifying artists and Black American female-identifying artists. The museum was cited as one of five leaders in the museum field operating above the national average across these three data sets. Since 2015, VMFA has spent an average of 34 percent of its endowed acquisition funds each year to purchase works of African and African American art.

“VMFA actively seeks to address the historical under-representation of Black American and women artists in our permanent collection,” said Dr. Michael Taylor, VMFA’s Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Art and Education. “The landmark acquisition of artworks and archival materials by Benjamin Wigfall and Willie Anne Wright also exemplifies our mission as an agency of the Commonwealth of Virginia to support important Virginia artists by collecting, displaying, conserving and digitizing their works and archives so that they can be enjoyed by our visitors for generations to come.”

Image Credits

First row from left to right: *Chimneys*, 1951, Benjamin Wigfall (American, 1930–2017), oil on canvas. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, General Endowment Fund. © Benjamin Wigfall; *Untitled*, ca. 1957–1963, Benjamin Wigfall (American, 1930–2017), assemblage and polymer. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, General Endowment Fund. © Benjamin Wigfall; *Untitled*, ca. 1952, Benjamin Wigfall (American, 1930–2017), etching. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, General Endowment Fund. © Benjamin Wigfall

Second row from left to right: *To O.G. Rejlander and Diana Ross*, 1967, Willie Anne Wright (American, born 1924), Liquitex on canvas. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, General Endowment Fund. © Willie Anne Wright; *Willie at Ruth’s Farm #2*, 1984, Willie Anne Wright (American, born 1924), Cibachrome print, exposed directly in pinhole camera. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, General Endowment Fund. © Willie Anne Wright; *Gracie with Dress*, 2005, Willie Anne

Wright (American, born 1924), lumen print on Cibachrome paper. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, General Endowment Fund. © Willie Anne Wright

About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass nearly 50,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris and one of the nation's finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened the James W. and Frances G. McGlothlin Wing I after a transformative expansion, previously the largest in its history.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts has begun its more than \$190 million expansion and renovation project led by the international architecture firm SmithGroup. Tentatively scheduled for completion in 2027, the project consists of adding a new wing of nearly 170,000 square feet and renovating 45,000 square feet of existing spaces, while maintaining four acres of green space in the Sculpture Garden. Visitors will experience a seamless journey through the collections in the new wing, which will house contemporary art, African art, American art, a new suite of galleries for rotating special exhibitions and a special-events space. The expansion and renovation will enable the museum to display more art, welcome more visitors and provide more enjoyment.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804.340.1400 or visit www.VMFA.museum.

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