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FEBRUARY 23, 2018

VMFA Acquires Three Major Works of African American Art

Acquisitions further VMFA goal of becoming a leader in the field

Richmond, Virginia – The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) recently added three major works of African American art to its collection: David Drake’s *Two-Handled Jug*, Archibald Motley Jr.’s *Town of Hope* and Sanford Biggers’ *Overstood*.

These acquisitions add to VMFA’s growing collection of African American art, a major focus of the museum’s acquisition strategy since 2015 as part of its five-year strategic plan.

“The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is committed to establishing a leadership role in the collecting and display of African American art,” said Alex Nyerges, VMFA director. “These three works are a significant step toward that goal and represent three distinct periods in African American history as well as important works of art that will delight and inspire our visitors for generations to come.”

These recent acquisitions join Romare Bearden’s landmark 1967 collage *Three Folk Musicians*, added to VMFA’s collections last year, and are among a total of 52 new works recently approved for acquisition by the VMFA’s Board of Trustees.



Two-Handled Jug, 1840, David Drake (American, c. 1800 – c. 1875), Lewis J. Miles Factory (Horse Creek Valley, Edgefield District, South Carolina), stoneware with alkaline glaze. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; Floyd D. and Anne C. Gottwald Fund and partial gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Hoar.

David Drake, *Two-Handled Jug*

Inscribed “January 29th 1840”, this rare ceramic jug is believed to be the earliest signed and dated poem piece produced by the enslaved Edgefield, South Carolina, artisan David Drake, popularly known as “Dave the Potter.” The jar stands 18 inches tall with two top handles, a form designed to store and pour molasses and other staples. It is inscribed in flowing script with a rhyming couplet, “Ladys & gentlemens Shoes = Sell all you can: & nothing you’ll loose!” and is signed “Dave.” The jug is among 29 identified poem-inscribed storage vessels made by the skilled artisan and is the first he signed with his own name.

An exceptional example of southern pottery, David Drake’s *Two-Handled Jug* is also important as evidence of individual slave resistance. Literacy—particularly writing—was rare, and even illegal, among slaves in the decades preceding the Civil War. By signing his own name to the piece, Drake was making a public declaration of individuality in blatant disregard of South Carolina’s strict anti-literacy laws, raising questions about his place and degree of autonomy within the community. It also speaks to the relationship between Drake and his owner, Lewis Miles, whose name is inscribed next to “Dave” on the work.

“The singular nature of this jug,” said Dr. Susan J. Rawles, VMFA’s associate curator of American painting and decorative art, “both as a work of art and as a lens on a world largely muted by bondage—makes it one of the most compelling objects in VMFA’s collection.”



Town of Hope, 1927, Archibald Motley, Jr. (American, 1891-1981), oil on canvas. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; J. Harwood and Louise B. Cochrane Fund for American Art.

Archibald Motley Jr., *Town of Hope*

This 1927 painting is considered to be a masterwork by one of the most acclaimed African American artists of the 20th century. Motley was born in New Orleans and lived for most of his life in Chicago where he trained at the Art Institute of Chicago. Motley's work is not only desirable because of the rarity of his major paintings—he was not a prolific painter—but also because his works explore African American life between the two World Wars. *Town of Hope* is one such exploration, evoking a scene from The Great Migration of 1915–1945 when 6 million African Americans left the rural South for better lives in northern cities, including Chicago, to which the artist's own family relocated.

“The painting depicts a group of figures departing a small town and walking wearily into a verdant landscape,” explained Dr. Leo G. Mazow, the Louise B. and J. Harwood Cochrane curator and head of the department of American

art at VMFA. “The otherworldly, spectral greens and seemingly vengeful clouds with three birds—a sign of the holy trinity—suggest that this exodus is divinely mandated. We are thrilled to add such an important masterpiece to our collection of American painting.”

Town of Hope will be installed alongside VMFA's other paintings by American scene painters such as Edward Hopper, Thomas Hart Benton and Eldzier Cortor, and will become one of the centerpieces of the mid-20th-century American gallery.



Overstood, 2017, Sanford Biggers (American, born 1970), sequins, canvas, fabric, tar, glitter, polystyrene, and Aqua-Resin. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; Pamela K. and William A. Royall Jr. Fund for 21st Century Art.

Sanford Biggers, *Overstood*

Overstood is one of two major artworks by Sanford Biggers that VMFA has acquired (the other being *Khemestry*, a 2017 wall relief featuring antique quilts). In *Overstood*, which Biggers also completed in 2017, the artist appropriates Ernest Bennett's photograph of a press conference held in the wake of student-led protests over the suspension of George Mason Murray, an English professor at San Francisco State University in the late 1960s. Murray was later fired for promoting the Black Panther party and its platform among his students. At the press conference, which took place in Oakland, California, on November 21, 1968, Murray is shown in the center with dark glasses, standing beside the head of the Black Student Union, Ben Stewart; Bobby Seale, chairman of the Black Panther Party; and another, as yet unnamed, figure. *Overstood* features these figures in a crystalline moment—they stand larger than life in a monumental wall-mounted silhouette that glitters with sequins, while also being connected through cast shadow lines to the four diminutive African power figures on the floor in front of them. Covered in a tar, polystyrene, glitter and Aqua-Resin, these small statues cast enormous shadows that connect them with Murray and his fellow protesters, thus referencing the trajectory of time and struggle from the continent of Africa to a turbulent moment in recent American history.

“The title, *Overstood*, provides a linguistic context for the moment of enlightenment in which one understands all too well the implications of words

and actions,” said Valerie Cassel Oliver, the Sydney and Frances Lewis Family curator of modern and contemporary art at VMFA. “Biggers reminds us in this powerful work that the pursuit of equality and social justice remains just as relevant today as it was fifty years ago.”

Biggers is a conceptual artist who works in a variety of materials and across disciplines. His work explores the cultural confluences that shape the public's imagination around black culture and art production. He is currently an associate professor at Columbia University's Visual Arts in New York. He has taught at Virginia Commonwealth

University and was a visiting scholar at Harvard University's VES Department in 2009. He is the cousin of the late artist John Biggers, whose 1944 painting *Coming Home From Work* was also acquired by VMFA in December.

About VMFA Acquisitions

The VMFA Board of Trustees approved these works on December 14, 2017. VMFA is a state agency and a public/private partnership. All art is purchased with private funds.

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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 40,000 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 its doors to the public after a transformative expansion, the largest in its history.

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.

Publicity Images for Acquisitions

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