

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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VMFA Presents *A Return to the Grand Tour: Micromosaic Jewels from the Collection of Elizabeth Locke*
Rare Collection Features Micromosaics Remounted by Renowned Jeweler in Contemporary Settings



Parrot, Rome, 19th century, unidentified artist, micromosaic set in gold as a pendant with tsavorites and demantoid garnets on bezel. Collection of Elizabeth Locke

Richmond, Virginia—The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is pleased to announce the upcoming exhibition *A Return to the Grand Tour: Micromosaic Jewels from the Collection of Elizabeth Locke* on view in the Works on Paper Gallery Apr. 27–Sept. 2. Including 92 examples dating from the late 18th and 19th century, the exquisite and intricately crafted works feature subjects such as Renaissance paintings, architecture, animals, and landscapes, many reset as jewelry in designs by Elizabeth Locke. The designs are inspired by ancient goldsmithing techniques revived by artisans in the early 19th century and reflect the sophisticated tastes of elite European travelers for whom the Grand Tour was a rite of passage. Curated by Dr. Susan J. Rawles, VMFA’s Associate Curator of American Painting and Decorative Arts, the exhibition is free to the public.

“The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts enjoys particular acclaim for its extraordinary holdings of decorative art,” says VMFA Director Alex Nyerges. “Singular assemblages like the Sydney and Frances Lewis Collection of Art Nouveau and Art Deco, the Lillian Thomas Pratt Collection of Fabergé and the Jerome and Rita Gans Collection of English Silver have positioned VMFA at the forefront of museum holdings in these areas. It therefore seems fitting that we should showcase another leading collection of astonishing craftsmanship: the Elizabeth Locke Collection of Micromosaic Jewels. We are grateful to Elizabeth for sharing these exquisite works and to her and her husband, John Staelin, for his service on VMFA’s Foundation Board of Directors and their enduring commitment to VMFA.”

Micromosaics have their origin in the ancient world, when artisans from Iraq first applied decorative blocks of clay as architectural details on stately buildings. Centuries of technical innovation resulted in further refinements and the establishment of the Vatican Mosaic Studio, where mosaicists began replicating Renaissance paintings in durable tiles of enameled glass.

By the late 18th century, highly intricate small-scale works were being produced. Unlike large-scale mosaics, which could take a decade to produce, micromosaics could be marketed to locals and tourists as gifts and souvenirs of the Grand Tour. For an English traveler to Rome, Venice, or Milan, for example, a micromosaic of an Italian Renaissance painting or ancient architectural monument captured the journey in a portable memento. Today, such works serve to recall an era’s fascination with the classics and society’s rarefied travel to the “cradle of western civilization.”



Roman Forum, Rome, 19th century, unidentified artist, micromosaic set in gold as a pendant, with cabochon and faceted aquamarines. Collection of Elizabeth Locke

“This exhibition of works from the Locke collection provides a lens on the continuity of the ancient art form of the mosaic into the modern era,” says Rawles. “These artisans catered not only to the Vatican’s needs but also to the transient patronage of primarily British tourists whose curiosity lured them to the Eternal City. For these visitors, furnishings and pictures were crafted with effects that were, according to one contemporary author, ‘so near to painting that it is literally a deception.’” Moreover, Rawles continues, “like the Grand Tourists of centuries past, Elizabeth’s appreciation for micromosaics was inspired by travels abroad, and her talent for setting micromosaics as the featured ornament in her jewelry designs continues a tradition begun by her predecessors more than two hundred years ago.”

“As much as I admire the micromosaic boxes and tables, I love the diminutive pieces the most because they can be worn,” says Locke. “I always imagine how pleased a nineteenth-century lady would have been on a gray London day when she looked at her wrist and saw a bracelet depicting the famous sights of Rome that she had visited in a previous summer. They are special pieces and I can’t imagine a better venue to debut them than at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts—a world-class institution that has inspired me for many years.”

A Return to the Grand Tour: Micromosaic Jewels from the Collection of Elizabeth Locke will travel to the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, SC, in 2020. Accompanying the exhibition is an illustrated 118-page catalogue written by Rawles, featuring an interview with Locke and foreword by esteemed playwright John Guare. The catalogue can be ordered online (vmfa.museum/shop) or by contacting the VMFA shop at 804.340.1525.

Sponsorship Information

Organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, *A Return to the Grand Tour: Micromosaic Jewels from the Collection of Elizabeth Locke* is sponsored by Pam and Bill Royall and the Peachtree House Foundation.

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 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.

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