

## Tanya Crane: Embodied Histories— Exploring the Legacy of African Jewelry

*New England...has recently posited itself as a grand signifier in my existence as a jewelry artist. It is learning about New England's seminal history as the seat of the American Industrial Revolution, the undeniable gravity to the founding of this nation, its growth and ultimate dissolution, and the remnants and detritus that are informing my current work. My formative years were spent in southern California where cultural imprints positioned me in a liminal existence between prejudice and privilege. I am half Black and half White. Living in a middle-class suburb of Los Angeles and visiting my father in socio-economically and racially divided South Central Los Angeles impacted my identity as a young person searching for which culture to occupy and how. Ultimately, I realized the choice itself provided me with a tool of social leverage.*

—Tanya Crane



**Tanya Crane**  
*Stacked*, 2019  
Shibuishi, sterling silver,  
copper, enamel, and steel  
5 x 3 x 1/2 inches  
Collection of the Artist  
Photo: Tyler Potter

Responding to her own biracial background, Tanya Crane imbues her enamel, metal, and found object jewelry with reflections on history, resiliency, migration, community, adornment, humanity, identity, family, and heritage. As she considers how traditions shift across space or through time, Crane creates patterns that echo designs of global Indigenous makers. This exhibition features jewelry inspired by historical adornment in RAM's permanent collection—specifically, incised metal bracelets and neckpieces from West Africa that were used as currency. Objects like this were exchanged within trade or barter networks, not only for local agricultural and luxury products, but also in transatlantic slave trade negotiations. This potential compelled Crane to cautiously move forward with her explorations.

As she states, “The research for my jewelry encompasses both a response to my immediate landscape and my family stories relative to the impacts of the Great Migration. It is through this lens that I interact with and respond to the museum’s collection, contextualizing that historical work through a contemporary lens and providing a dynamic framework to investigate the past in the present.”

Crane’s artwork metaphorically embodies the many layers of human existence—specifically, history, race, class, and culture. Through her practice, she reaches into the past to better understand the present and, potentially, the future. As a contemporary jeweler, Crane centers mark-making, patterns, and material choice to build the content in her individual pieces, and doesn’t shy away from using scale to create bold statements. The *sgraffito* technique she often employs means she carves through one layer of information to get to another—literally uncovering and exposing what has come before.

**Tanya Crane**  
*Topsy Turvy*, 2025  
Copper, enamel, silver,  
brass, and beads  
Collection of the Artist  
Photo: Courtesy of the Artist



In 2022, RAM invited Crane—who was teaching at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, and has since moved back to her home state of California—to consider making work in response to a small selection of historical African pieces in the museum’s collection. Crane’s personal investment in using jewelry to make connections and her stated interest in the history of adornment made her a good candidate for this provocative project—she was ready to consider tackling the metaphorical weight of these metal historical objects that once functioned very differently than they do in a museum collection. Crane addresses her work and her motivations for accepting the invitation in the following interview.

### Interview with Tanya Crane

Conducted by Lena Vigna, RAM Director of Exhibitions and Collections  
September 2025

**Tanya Crane**  
*New Trade I*, 2017  
Copper, enamel,  
sterling silver, and steel  
5 1/2 x 1 1/2 x 1 inches  
Collection of the Artist  
Photo: Tyler Potter



**Lena Vigna:** What materials do you prefer to work with and why?

**Tanya Crane:** Enamel and copper are at the center of my practice. Enamel allows me to push both its physical and aesthetic boundaries, layering color and texture until the surface tells its own story. I’m also drawn to natural materials I collect—shells, bark, stones—because they carry time, memory, and place within them. Pairing these found objects with fabricated metal creates a dialogue between what is made by hand and what is shaped by nature. The conversation between fragility and resilience is what keeps me returning to these materials.



**Vigna:** Why create jewelry/adornment?

**Crane:** Jewelry is intimate. It sits on the body, moves with the body, and becomes a vessel for storytelling that is both personal and shared. Adornment allows me to translate narratives—whether about family, migration, or identity—into tangible forms that people can wear, hold, or experience close to themselves. While I sometimes make larger objects or 2D explorations, jewelry remains central because of that immediate connection to the body and to human presence.

**Vigna:** Please describe your process—do you start with a sketch?

**Crane:** My process is less about sketching and more about conversation—with material, memory, and environment. Often, I begin with a collected object or a repetitive gesture in the studio, like cutting or *sgraffito* mark-making. Patterns emerge through doing. I enjoy allowing the piece to unfold, letting accidents and discoveries guide me rather than imposing a fixed outcome. Occasionally, as in woven pieces like *Pangea*, planning is essential. But more often, I work through touch, repetition, and intuitive assembly.

**Vigna:** Who you are—your background, heritage, education—factors into what you explore in your work. Please share more about this and how it shapes your practice.

**Crane:** My background as a biracial Black woman growing up in Southern California deeply informs my practice. As a child, I was shielded from stereotypes, but I quickly learned how narrow society’s portrayals of Black Americans could be. My work resists those limited images and creates alternative narratives rooted in family stories, cultural history, and lived experience. Education also shaped me—graduate studies introduced me to critical theory, artists of color, and material histories that continue to ground my practice. Each piece I make is an act of reclaiming space and telling stories often overlooked.

**Vigna:** Please describe your initial thoughts when RAM reached out to ask if you were interested in responding to African adornment from the permanent collection. Did your thoughts shift as you worked on the project?

**Crane:** When RAM reached out, I was immediately aware of the gravity of the invitation. The history embedded in African adornment, particularly manillas and objects tied to the transatlantic slave trade, is inseparable from legacies of violence and survival. My first reaction was cautious respect—I wanted to be certain I could engage the



(above)  
**Tanya Crane**  
*North II*, 2025  
 Copper, enamel, and sterling silver  
 Collection of the Artist  
 Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

(right)  
**Tanya Crane**  
*North I*, 2025  
 Copper, enamel, sterling silver, and brass  
 Collection of the Artist  
 Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

material responsibly. As I worked, my approach shifted from hesitation to dialogue. These objects began to act as collaborators, reminding me that stories of migration, exchange, and resilience are not only historical but ongoing. The project allowed me to both honor their weight and imagine how they might inform new narratives for the future.

**Vigna:** How does the body of work you produced in response relate to your previous work? Did this/how did this dialogue with historical objects drawn from a specific cultural context impact your work?

**Crane:** This body of work extends ideas I've been pursuing for years—connection, storytelling, and collaboration with material. But the dialogue with RAM's collection added a sharper historical context. My earlier pieces often used personal or environmental memory as a starting point; here, I had to contend with shared cultural trauma and a history of adornment that was simultaneously currency, shackle, and ornament.

Bringing those histories into conversation with enamel and contemporary jewelry pushed me to rethink how material carries meaning. It also deepened my commitment to making work that acknowledges the past while creating space for imagining new futures.

**Vigna:** How does your work respond to/expand upon enamel adornment?

**Crane:** Enamel adornment has a long lineage, but my work aims to stretch its possibilities. I use enamel not only for surface decoration but as a tool for storytelling—layering, scratching back, and repeating patterns until memory and time emerge from the surface itself. By combining enamel with natural materials, found objects, and historical references, I expand the language of enamel beyond ornament into narrative. In this way, enamel becomes less about embellishment and more about voice—capable of addressing identity, history, and resilience.

**Vigna:** What role do you see jewelry playing in contemporary society? Why is it a format you favor?

**Crane:** Jewelry remains one of the most powerful, intimate forms of expression. Unlike many art objects, jewelry is worn, carried, and lived with. In contemporary society, where images move faster than ever, jewelry offers slowness and presence—it anchors us to the body, to touch, and to memory. I favor this format because it allows me to embed personal and collective stories into objects that travel with people, becoming part of their own narratives. Jewelry's intimacy and mobility make it a unique site for both personal reflection and cultural dialogue.



**Tanya Crane**  
*Continued Decay*, 2019  
Copper, enamel, steel, and brass  
12 x 16 x 1/4 inches  
Collection of the Artist  
Photo: Tyler Potter

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