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RAM Showcase: Objects

December 15, 2021 – April 23, 2022

The unifying theme of this exhibition is that the works presented are objects—sculptural, functional, or both—made by artists from diverse backgrounds, all residing within the United States. Subject matter varies—from material exploration to personal narrative to function. While these works are not directly issue-oriented, the fact that the makers themselves, as artists of color, have experienced a wide range of implicit and explicit biases is a subcontext worthy of consideration. Seen through that lens, the story these objects tell is even more complex.

For example, **Art Smith**, currently represented by two rings in RAM's collection, was a successful jeweler in New York City during the second half of the twentieth century. Born in Cuba to Jamaican parents who migrated to Brooklyn, New York, Smith showed artistic talent early on. Unusually for the time, he was encouraged with a scholarship to Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. Eventually, Smith achieved success with bold jewelry inspired by indigenous African art forms as well as American and European modernist abstraction. His work is characterized by playful explorations of materials and curvilinear forms that emphasize the body of the wearer. Smith's experiences were marked, however, by racism that forced him out of his first studio and encouraged his sister to say that, at times, he would "rage against social injustice."

In 1990, Smith offered thoughts about how artists might address their heritage:
I would say that really any artist, any craftsmen should see what they have to offer personally outside of labels, nationalistic labels, religious labels, or racial labels. There is a very good chance that as a member of a certain group you may have characteristics that may come through in the course of your work if you allow yourself to remain free and just work, rather than saying to yourself, I am black, so I'll do black art or African art, or I'm gonna be black, and shocking and bold and primitive. Try to avoid the pitfall of labeling and see what you have and develop it. There's nothing that says you can't be conscious of a heritage, and call on it, but don't let it be a restriction.

While the jewelry that Smith creates offers a narrative both independent of and enriched by his biographical details, the above information adds to his individual story as well as to the collective history of how language and social dynamics impact the creation and reception of artwork.

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About RAM Showcase Exhibitions

Launching in spaces at both RAM and Wustum, **RAM Showcase** exhibitions highlight the work of contemporary artists of color.

In this moment in time, it is critical that RAM spotlights voices of those who have been historically underrepresented, such as women and artists of color. Artists of color are identified in this context as non-white and non-European. This simplification, which is arguably a flawed starting point, does not account for the nuances and variations of society. It is a beginning—a way to direct those who want to educate themselves about what is possible when new perspectives are encountered.

While the work of artists of color has been and will continue to be shown in a variety of contexts at both campuses, the **RAM Showcase** series highlights conversations around inclusion, equity, and social justice. This means underscoring the presence of the work of artists of color, primarily from the collection as well as, at times, featuring artists addressing critical social and cultural issues across a broad spectrum.

Further, as an educational institution rooted in the humanities and using art as a catalyst, the museum wants to encourage inquiry and exploration about the world in which we live. RAM hopes spotlighting artists of color spurs further engagement with these artists and their ideas.

RAM is committed to supporting diverse voices—whether that diversity reflects race, gender, sexuality, age, ability, social standing, or world perspective.

Biographies of featured artists and links for further investigation

Jeweler **Mike Bird-Romero** developed a love for art at an early age, surrounded by both his mother, **Lorencita Bird**, and grandmother, **Luteria Atencio**—significant artists in their own rights. Bird-Romero learned basic metalworking skills during middle school, yet did not put them to work until the 1960s when he began to pursue jewelry making. By the 1980s, he emerged as a significant creator of contemporary Native American jewelry. Today, Bird-Romero is known for creating bold, sculptural interpretations of traditional indigenous American designs.

<https://wheelwright.org/artists/mike-bird-romero/>

<https://sarweb.org/iarc/native-american-artist-fellowships/2002-artists/michael-bird-romero/>

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Basket maker **Mary Jackson** creates her work from natural materials such as sweetgrass, palmetto, pine needles, and bulrush. Raised in South Carolina, Jackson initially learned about making baskets from her mother and grandmother who taught her West African traditions handed down to them through generations. In addition to carrying on Gullah basket-making traditions, Jackson is an innovator—creating new designs and adding contemporary elements. Her formal twists include angles built into the body of the basket, baskets that are almost flat, and baskets that have long grasses left unincorporated, hanging over the side.

Videos courtesy of *Craft in America*

<https://www.craftinamerica.org/short/mary-jackson-segment>

<https://www.craftinamerica.org/short/mary-jackson-explains-how-rice-is-separated-from-chafe>

<https://gardenandgun.com/feature/a-lowcountry-legend-mary-jackson/>

Cliff Lee was born in Vienna, where his father was Taiwan’s ambassador to Austria. Lee was raised in Taiwan, and came to the United States in 1968 at the age of 16 to study at Eastern Mennonite College (now University), Harrisonburg, Virginia. He initially worked as a neurosurgeon and—at the behest of a patient—turned to ceramics to ease stress. Lee is particularly known for his revival of ancient Chinese glazes, such as imperial yellow, oxblood, celadon, and kuan (or guan) ware glaze, a bluish-gray pigment used during the Song Dynasty (960–1279).

Videos courtesy of *Craft in America*.

<https://www.craftinamerica.org/short/the-lees-segment>

<https://www.craftinamerica.org/short/potter-cliff-lee-on-his-career-change>

<http://cliffleporcelain.com/>

Self-taught artist **Emma Lewis Mitchell** (1931–2013) learned to make ceramic pieces by watching her mother, renowned artist **Lucy M. Lewis**. Following in the footsteps of other Acoma Pueblo potters, Lewis Mitchell gathered natural pigments and clays from clay pits found in the pueblo. After gathering needed materials, she would clean the clay by hand to remove impurities. Next, she mixed, coiled, painted, and fired her works—typically vessels. Lewis Mitchell produced pieces made in the Acoma tradition with rounded vessel forms and various design motifs including deer with a heart line, lightning bolts, and repeating mimbres (non-figurative) patterns.

<https://www.pueblodirect.com/pages/emma-lewis-mitchell>

<https://www.eyesofthepot.com/acoma/emma-lewis.php>

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Mexican ceramicist **Gustavo Pérez** first studied engineering at the Autonomous National University of Mexico, Mexico City, Mexico, before attending the School of Art and Design, also in Mexico City. The Veracruz native's interest in mathematics is evident in his elegant vessels. Working only with stoneware, Pérez creates works that are influenced by ancient Meso-American forms as well as minimalism.

Video courtesy of Museo Del Palacio De Bellas Artes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpfNVek0J5c>
<https://galeriaatotonilco.com/gustavo-perez/>

Known for her use of unusual materials, jeweler **Yuka Saito** has been working primarily in polypropylene since 1996, combining the manmade medium with more traditional jewelry elements, such as platinum and gold. She is concerned with how her works interact with the wearer. As a result, Saito creates colorful pieces that embody an abstract, organic aesthetic, and often have parts that move.

<https://www.craftcouncil.org/magazine/article/sum-substance-yuka-saito>

Perhaps best known for her beaded sculpture and adornment—though ultimately not bound by media—**Joyce Scott** does not shy away from addressing complex social, cultural, and political issues in her work. Scott's heritage—she identifies African Americans, Native Americans, and Scots as ancestors—as well as her familial connections to quilters, basket weavers, storytellers, and other makers are cited as both resources and inspiration.

Video courtesy of the MacArthur Foundation.

<https://www.macfound.org/fellows/class-of-2016/joyce-j-scott>
<https://www.culturetype.com/2018/10/26/joyce-j-scott-employs-the-beauty-of-beads-to-raise-issues-such-as-violence-and-racism-my-best-voice-is-as-an-artist/>
<https://sandikleinshow.com/joyce-scott-artist-performance-artist-lecturer/>

Music lover and member of the Duke Ellington Society at the time of his death, **Art Smith** (1917–1982) blended musical inspiration with artistic insight throughout his career as an art jeweler. Born in Cuba to Jamaican parents, Smith moved with his family to Brooklyn, New York, when he was three years old. While he formally studied sculpture, Smith gravitated toward jewelry-making and opened a shop in New York City in 1946.

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Video courtesy of *Craft in America*.

<https://www.artsatl.org/from-village-vogue-modernist-jewelry-art-smith/>

<https://www.ganoksin.com/article/art-smith-goldsmith-silversmith/>

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/2EunHtoX4Fb5kMwHMW1ABU>

<https://www.craftinamerica.org/episode/jewelry>

Smith featured: 21:25 – 32:07

Sculptor, glass artist, and painter **Therman Statom** is known for his life-size glass ladders, chairs, tables, box-like paintings, and small-scale houses. His works are assemblages built from industrial window glass panes—that he sandblasts and paints with vibrant colors—as well as found components. During the latter half of his career, Statom has shifted his focus to the importance of educational programming within the arts. He employs hands-on workshops as catalysts for social change within communities.

Video courtesy of *Craft in America*.

<https://www.craftinamerica.org/short/therman-statom-segment>

<https://thermanstatom.com/>

<https://talkingoutyourglass.com/therman-statom/>

Women Artists at RAM

RAM acknowledges the efforts of self-identifying women in the art world consistently and sincerely at all times. The museum highlights how women are inextricably woven—and often the foundation—of creative endeavors and discourse. By current count, 41% of the artists in RAM’s collection are women. This percentage—which is continuously increasing—is already substantially greater than the ratios calculated at other organizations with permanent collections and active exhibition programs. At RAM, work made by different genders is considered for inclusion in the museum’s holdings on equal terms. And notably, because RAM relies on gifts of artwork to build the collection, this policy has been reinforced by open-minded donors who have collected, and then donated, quality work regardless of the gender of the artist.

The following is a list of women whose works are included in this exhibition. Because of the light-sensitive nature of some of the materials used, not all works/artists are featured during the entire exhibition. Visitors are encouraged to take note and research these artists via the internet to find out more about their biographies and larger bodies of work. This effort—similar to efforts to highlight artists of color at RAM—is not meant to single out artists to stigmatize them but to magnify and cast a spotlight on their

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significance. It reflects intention, goodwill, and an attempt to reckon with years of historical underrepresentation. RAM hopes this provides opportunities for audiences to learn more about these artists and their ideas.

Mary Jackson
Emma Lewis Mitchell
Yuka Saito
Joyce Scott