



Maryland Center for History and Culture acquires quilt made by Elizabeth Talford Scott

by Helen Bezunch | October 30, 2023



When Catherine Arthur, vice president of collections and chief curator at the Maryland Center for History and Culture (MCHC), first laid her eyes on “Abstract #1,” a quilt made by African-American folk artist Elizabeth Talford Scott, she knew it belonged at the MCHC.

“The general idea was we were supposed to borrow it and work with student curators in an exhibition development seminar to create this exhibition that would open in early 2024,” said Arthur. “I looked at it and it looked like a super cool, crazy quilt and I’m like ‘well that looks like ones that I know are already in our collection.’ I didn’t know any more than that other than, why wouldn’t we want this here permanently? We need to buy this.”

Before making the purchase, MCHC took a look at their own collection to determine if any artworks created by Talford Scott or her daughter, artist and sculptor Joyce J. Scott, were already part of their

collection. The answer was no, but what stood out even more prominently was the absence of any other fiber arts associated with African American creators, at least as far as they could tell.

“That was another driving point for us as an institution that has recently rebranded and reimagined our role in Baltimore and in the state of Maryland and are really pushing to be more inclusive and to be more relevant and to be more in tune with the conversations that are happening around us,” said Katie Caljean, president and CEO of MCHC.

It was an easy and exciting choice, then, to finally purchase the quilt from Goya Contemporary in September, adding it to their collection of over 350,000 objects.

As a quilt-maker, Talford Scott’s legacy serves as a perpetual source of artistic inspiration for Joyce Scott, who has an unwilting admiration for her mother.

“My mother and I lived together until she passed away at 95,” said Baltimore native, Joyce Scott, who is currently represented by Goya Contemporary. “She was my first teacher. We quilted together and have exhibited and lectured together. My mother was a rascal and she did not believe that—in regard to her artwork—she should be denied or directed or told ‘this is the right way to do it’ or ‘this is real art and that’s something that negroes do.’ My mother saw this as her vehicle and her best voice.”

She understood, like in this piece and others, that laying form next to form, color next to color would make your eyes dance and would soothe the savage beast in you. She understood that everybody didn’t have to have it written out for them, that they could find their way in her work that’s deemed to be abstract like this piece.

- JOYCE SCOTT

Joyce Scott described “Abstract #1” as “a festival of textures and colors and layers,” exemplary of her mother’s bright personality and commitment to her artistic autonomy.

“It’s a hip-hop song and a Black spiritual and something from Yiddish theater,” she said. “My mother was not consumed or subsumed in what technique was, she created techniques for herself. People revel in the artwork because of the freedom. There’s an unabashed potential for this kind of work because it says ‘take a look, you may think it’s easy, it is not. You may think it’s silly cause it’s got something in there you would never use, but it’s not. I challenge you to see its worth.’”

“That piece, like many of her pieces, was someone who was just suave and swallowed in color and texture; playing with forms and re-edifying what form could be on this surface. She was specific in her improvisation,” said Joyce Scott. “She was a singer in her life. She understood, like in this piece and others, that laying form next to form color next to color would make your eyes dance and soothe the savage beast in you. She understood that everybody didn’t have to have it written out for them, that they could find their way in her work that’s deemed to be abstract like this piece.”

Born in South Carolina, Talford Scott worked as a sharecropper with her family on the Blackstock Plantation, where her grandparents had been enslaved. Coming from a line of crafters and quilt-makers, she grew admiration for quilting and its storytelling capacities, like many other African Americans at the time.

“Quilt-making is one of those things that everybody did, but African Americans were specific because they were used in the Underground Railroad as flags and cautionary tales,” said Joyce Scott. “The quilts have a long, long history of having many different stories and different personalities in their use. My mother was born in 1916, that means her father was born in the 1800s. And she knew her grandfather, who had been a slave. She inculcates all of these materials with those family songs and histories and that stuff is subliminal— you don’t even know you’re doing it half the time!”



Those at the Maryland Center for History and Culture (MCHC) and Goya Contemporary comment on the significance of MCHC’s acquisition of “Abstract #1,” a quilt made by folk artist Elizabeth Talford Scott. Courtesy of Dyane Moses

“Her quilts were unbound,” she added. “They were stories and they were reckonings about dreams, happenstance and things that may or may not happen. And they were done in a way that was not always figurative or uber-realistic. She believed in the realm of prayer and she believed that she could shape the viewer’s ideas by the way she laid down shapes and forms, hues, how dynamic they were, and her use of materials that were seen by others to be uncommon— like rock, button, beads and stone.”

“These quilts that are made by upscaled, upcycled, recycled things and that are stitched by hand, are diaries for preliterate people,” said Joyce Scott. “One stitch is a word and stitches become sentences and paragraphs in that personal story and revelation that the person makes.”

In an era when African Americans were denied literacy and education, quilts were an opportune mode of self-expression, said Amy Raehse, executive director and partner at Goya Contemporary.

“Brilliant people were not necessarily always afforded the ability to learn to read and write,” said Raehse. “So if you didn’t have that skill set, how do you pass on the family story? Well, quilts did that.”

Talford Scott received some attention for her work at the time despite the common marginalization of craftspeople, and particularly Black craftspeople, in the realm of art, said Raehse. However, her work

eventually went quiet, in part due to her declining health. She passed away in 2011, not too long before Goya Contemporary took over her estate in 2019.

“ started this long-term legacy plan to start thinking through how we might recontextualize and tell the stories of this incredible storyteller who truly did document the history of her time through visual practice,” said Raehse.

Many of Talford Scott’s works were accompanied by a poem or short story, helping viewers better understand them. “Abstract #1” comes along with words that describe what the quilt is made of.

“We had a material that was called butcher’s cloth,” Talford Scott wrote. “And that was what they packed food in. Flour, corn, sugar, anything. This is a family quilt, all something from the family. Everything that I didn’t wanna throw out, I saved a piece of it. These are the things that Joyce used to drag around with her doll.”

Talford Scott is likely referencing a blanket her daughter used to drag around as a child, Arthur told the AFRO. Though Joyce Scott doesn’t remember if her blanket is indeed included in the piece, she is “sure it would be.”

“We recycled everything,” she said. “We lived in a house where there wasn’t a lot of money, that’s a story that a lot of Black people have. But nothing was tattered and torn. She always embroidered or quilted or beaded or did something on this odd work.”

As for MCHC’s acquisition of *Abstract #1*, Joyce Scott said it’s “high time.”

“My mother and I both attended there, I’ve exhibited there and she did exhibit in the past,” she said. “I think that as one of the elders of this city, although she wasn’t born here, she lived here most of her adult life. And as an institution that talks about history and communities and in Baltimore city, I think they’re absolutely right to do this.”

The acquisition of the quilt speaks to the MCHC’s aspirations to diversify their collection.

“Since we are an institution that has been collecting since 1844, and oftentimes the collections that come to us are given to us,” said Caljean, “ to be more proactive in the types of materials that we are seeking out and connecting with communities to be able to tell stories more fully and to tell them from other perspectives rather than the staff that are currently at the institution.”

“There’s no secret that museums historically have really not told the full story of our history. Even a museum of and about history has left out the stories of many people and many people in American history,” said Raehse. “Those who have been marginalized or left out typically have been either persons of color or women or, in the case of artists, artists who worked with materials that were more historically considered ‘craft-based.’”

“That’s sort of a hidden language for ‘domestic’ and ‘female’ practices,” continued Raehse. “I think it’s really important that museums identify that this did occur in the past and make the effort to actually actively make those changes.”