

BALTIMORE BEAT

SOMETHING TO HAVE FAITH IN: REMEMBERING ELIZABETH TALFORD SCOTT

THE LUMINARY'S WORK WILL BE ON VIEW AT VARIOUS MUSEUMS, COLLEGES, AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS THROUGHOUT BALTIMORE THROUGH MAY 2024.

By Angela N. Carroll
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In *Grandfather's Cabin/Noah's Ark* (1993-1996), a masterful and densely tactile tapestry designed by the late visionary Elizabeth Talford Scott (1916-2011), stars float in the stratosphere above a familial scene that honors her childhood home in South Carolina. Upcycled objects, mixed repurposed fabrics, buttons, knickknacks, and intuitively placed clusters of rocks, are sewn into ornate, ethereally abstract bursts. Bold wall text from a historic interview between the artist and curator George Ciscle describes the quilt:

"This is a family. The man, the woman, the baby. That's a family of sea creatures. Tadpoles and lizards. You see the snake? He's to protect it, anyone from coming in."

Grandfather's Cabin/Noah's Ark (1993-1996) has not been exhibited since 1998, when Ciscle organized the retrospective exhibition, *Eyewinkers, Tumbleturds, and Candlebugs*. This year marks the iconic show's 25th anniversary. This milestone will be celebrated with a reimagined exhibit featuring rare works that span Talford Scott's celebrated career. Then and now, Ciscle worked collaboratively with the MICA Exhibition Development Seminar to realize the show for the Baltimore Museum of Art. The entire exhibition is staged in the BMA's contemporary wing.



Grandfather's Cabin/Noah's Ark (1993-1996). Image courtesy of Robin Thompson and Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore.
© The Estate of Elizabeth Talford Scott at Goya Contemporary / TALP

Ciscle and EDS brainstormed ways to make BMA's exhibition more accessible. Benches are now available in every gallery, and artworks are installed at a slightly lower level so they are viewable for wheelchair-dependent guests. A glowing braille portrait of Talford Scott is featured, as well. All accessibility offerings are noted in a handy guide positioned at gallery entrances.

Additionally, under educator and archivist Deyane Moses' direction, EDS organized the project *No Stone Left Unturned: The Elizabeth Talford Scott Initiative*, which selected five museums and four universities as satellite exhibition sites. The initiative sought to place the artist's work in conversation with audiences at Coppin State University, MICA, Maryland Center for History and Culture, Walters Art Museum, The Peale, Reginald F. Lewis Museum, Johns Hopkins University, and Morgan State University. Free public programming is planned for varying sites through April 2024.



Curator George Ciscle. Photo credit: Sydney J. Allen

Talford Scott did not consider herself to be an artist until late in her life. Even then, after years of pushing the bounds of quilting, some still considered her work more craft than fine art. How absurd that anyone could view her conceptually and compositionally intricate genre-defying creations as anything but genius works of art.

“It was at a time, of course, when people weren't talking about this kind of work in the context of art,” Ciscle explained. “Back then, it was all framed as either women's work, quilting, craft, textiles, African American, local... The list goes on and on. I really wanted people back then to look at that question in terms of what was going on in art history and the art canon. Keep in mind, that was four years before Gee's Bend at the Whitney, [chuckle] which, of course, helped those conversations come forward.” The Quilts of Gee's Bend is the most famous ongoing series by Black quilters who descend from Gee's Bend, Alabama. This is an important context for Talford Scott's late rise as an artist, as Gee's Bend legitimized quilting as “art.”

Talford Scott grew up on the Blackstock Plantation in South Carolina. Her father was a sharecropper. She learned how to “piece quilts” by watching and assisting the matriarchs in her family while they worked. Over the years, she developed a talent for the tradition. Stitching beautiful and durable quilts was a source of great pride and a necessity; the skill ensured her family of little means had blankets in the winter and wares to barter for other staples with members of their community. Education was more praxis-based than formal — she learned by doing.

“So, mom, did you used to make the things that you needed when you were on the plantation?” Talford Scott’s daughter, artist and MacArthur Fellowship recipient Joyce J. Scott, asks her in the 1990 documentary *The Silver Needle: The Legacy of Elizabeth and Joyce Scott*. The film is screened in tandem with other remarkable interviews as part of the exhibition.

“We made everything that could be made by hand, like food, shoes, and clothes,” Talford Scott responds.

Floatin’ On A Thread, a commissioned composition from musicians Bashi Rose and Adam Holofcener, offers another conceptual layer to the revamped exhibition. Inspired by Talford Scott’s iconic quilt *My Dreams* (1987-1998) and her childhood home, Rose and Holofcener spent a week traveling through Chester, South Carolina, gathering field recordings to better assess the ways that environment shaped Talford Scott’s vision. In collaboration with performers Michelle Blu, Bobbi Rush, Cheyanne Zadia, Scott Patterson, Rose, and Holofcener, completed a lush 10-minute, two-channel soundscape. Visitors can sit at an intimate station near *My Dreams* to listen to the composition.

“Spirit appears in the thread of the night,” Rush whispers. “Imagination, imagination, imagination,” Talford testifies. “Cover me with memories. Cover me,” Zadia coos. “My ancestors, stay on the run,” Patterson intones. “When I was a child, we had a rock at every door,” Talford affirms. “Understand? It was for luck. And we had a horseshoe over the door and had a shotgun under the horseshoe.” Rocks, as referenced in biblical verse, are often allegories of God’s transformative and protective power.

Isaiah 33:16, NIV

*He will dwell on the heights,
his refuge will be the impregnable rock,
his bread will be given him,
his water will be sure.*



Rocks in Prison (1993), Fabric, thread, rocks. Image courtesy of The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of George Ciscle, Baltimore, BMA 2024.1.

If God is omnipresent and can activate anything in service to his will, even inanimate objects can function as miraculous mediums. This perspective informs the recurring philosophical premises and aesthetic gestures in Talford Scott's quilts that elevate her tapestries beyond only their utility. Encoding textiles with intergenerational archival information is a way of both marking time and transcending it. The sale and trade of enslaved Africans in America separated families from each other. Despite geographic displacement, anyone who maintained any scraps of inherited fabric from their loved ones could retain and share the history of their bloodline by piecing quilts. Quilts are not just accumulations of cloth; they are "family albums for preliterate people," notes Joyce. Quilts act as an apparatus for remembrance every time their owner or creator shares a story about the origin of its material matrices. Remembering encourages psychic, spiritual, and corporeal restoration by intentionally honoring what came before.



My Dreams (1987 – 1998), Fabric, thread, mixed media. Image courtesy of Robin Thompson and Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore. © The Estate of Elizabeth Talford Scott at Goya Contemporary / TALP

Talford Scott, lovingly called Mother Scott by her friends and family, imparted knowledge to all willing to receive it. Every quilt she made was customized with a unique design suited to the specific needs of those for whom the quilt was being made. Some were crafted to be draped across the back to alleviate aches and pains. Others were made to ease worry and assist with affirming dreams. She intuitively arranged objects, including stones, pebbles, colored thread, bric-a-brac, beads, and the like, into rhythmic patterns that dance across textiles, like jazz singers gliding through the scales.

Quilts featured in this retrospective come from the family's private collection and on loan from friends who knew and loved Mother Scott. Each lender was asked to contribute a personal narrative about their cherished artworks, which informed all descriptive wall text. For Robin Thompson's contribution, *Another Time* (1992), a textile made from fabric, thread, and mixed media, she ruminated on her 20-year friendship working with the artist in the Green Card Crew quilting community.

“Mother Scott presided over us and allowed our creativity, love, and unique outlook. Her engagement and encouragement guided us to become the best of ourselves and to share this gift with others. This is a part of her incredible legacy.”



Joyce J. Scott for *The Baltimore Beat*. Photo credit: Sydney J. Allen

The power of collective remembrance is evident in Mother Scott’s prolific practice. She gifted members of her community with tokens of her love. Through the exhibition of those offerings, a broader community can now witness the monumentality of Mother Scott’s career.

For Talford Scott, piecing quilts was both a modality for fine art and a curative. “This design is usually for people who have faith. You’ve got to have something to have faith in.” Talford Scott shares with Dr. Leslie King Hammond in another excerpt from *The Silver Needle*. The two sit across from each other, separated by a vast quilt that drapes Mother Scott’s thighs. She describes her intuitive way of working as “wild” because the features in her quilts did not conform to the schemas of traditional designs.

“If you were going to do quilts or designs or something, you couldn’t make it wild. If you wanted to use strips, see how those strips are together there?” She pauses and leans forward to point out a particular feature on the quilt.

“One, two, three.” She points to strips that form a love knot, a standard, symmetrical design used in traditional quilt patterns. Instead of adhering to this structure, Mother Scott’s quilts break the taut geometry of the ornamental design. Dense strips blend, blurring the static square, and bloom as amorphous warps of cotton, wool, and stones. The textile transcends its bounds and becomes a galaxy map.

***Eyewinkers, Tumbleturds, and Candlebugs: The Art of Elizabeth Talford Scott* is now on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art, November 12, 2023 – April 28, 2024**