

# The New York Times

## How an Artist Became the Queen of Baltimore

Joyce J. Scott's 50-year retrospective at the Baltimore Museum of Art draws inspiration, beauty and humor from her hometown and its people.

By Aruna D'Souza | June 13, 2024



Joyce Scott at the purple door of her home in West Baltimore. "Mama Joyce," as she is known, uses humor every bit as much as art to open up difficult conversations, but never fails to engage. Credit: Shan Wallace for The New York Times

Joyce J. Scott is not an easy woman to interview. It's not that she is reticent. It's just hard to get a word in edgewise because practically every person we passed during our day together in Baltimore stopped to talk to her, shouting out "The Queen!" or "Mama Joyce!" whenever we entered one of her local haunts.

She responded with enthusiasm, warmth and a comedic gift for working the crowd, slipping into different characters (a spoiled child, a haughty intellectual, a tough guy), bantering, wisecracking and generally making people laugh.

These interactions speak volumes about Scott, 75, who uses humor, every bit as much as art — weaving and quilted textile work; elaborate beaded jewelry; sculptures that combine beads, glass and found objects; intricately constructed clothing; printmaking, installation and performance art — to open up difficult conversations about race and inequality and to build community in her hometown.

“It might not be an exaggeration to say she’s the defining artist of Baltimore,” said Lowery Stokes Sims, her longtime friend and curator of her work, in a recent phone call. “She was born here, raised here, went to school here, went out into the world but always had this place as a base — she never left.”

For the past several months, the city has been in full-on celebration mode for this MacArthur “genius” award-winning artist. The Baltimore Museum of Art (known as the B.M.A.) has mounted a 50-year retrospective of Scott’s work, titled “Walk a Mile in My Dreams,” which runs through July 14 before traveling this fall to the Seattle Art Museum, its co-organizing institution. It includes nearly 140 objects from the 1970s to the present, a new installation, a music video, as well as freshly unearthed documentation of her performance work. (Scott’s first B.M.A. retrospective was in 2000.) Additionally, two exhibitions at Goya Contemporary, her longtime art gallery, focus on Scott’s printmaking and a large-scale glasswork made in collaboration with the Washington D.C.-based artist Tim Tate.



Installation view, “Joyce J. Scott: Walk a Mile in My Dreams,” at the Baltimore Museum of Art, includes a 1970s public wooden loom from the artist’s collection for visitors to try. Credit: Mitro Hood



Small works in beads, blown glass and thread from Joyce J. Scott's career survey that are typical of her practice. From left, "Aloft, 2016-2017; "Shhhhh!," 2012; "Inkisi: St. John the Conqueror," 2009/2023; and "Everywoman's Harriet," 2017. Credit: Mitro Hood

The retrospective has been augmented by eight satellite exhibitions around town devoted to her mother, Elizabeth Talford Scott (1916-2011), a textile artist who drew upon and expanded African American traditions of quilting, and who was an essential influence on her work. Organized by students from the Maryland Institute College of Art, Joyce Scott's alma mater, partners included the Reginald F. Lewis Museum, the Maryland Center for History and Culture and JELMA, the Morgan State University, among others.

Talking about the number of exhibitions, Scott said, with a self-deprecating laugh, "We have bum-rushed my hometown in true Baltimore style!"

### **Roots Running Deep**

Joyce Scott has traveled the world, completing her master's degree in Mexico, doing residencies at a Murano glassmaking studio, learning appliqué techniques from Indigenous Kuna women on the San Blas islands in Panama, teaching beading workshops in South Africa — but her Baltimore roots run deep. Her parents both were born into sharecropping families in the Carolinas, her mother on land where her grandparents had been enslaved; they migrated to West Baltimore where they met, married, and had Joyce in 1948. Elizabeth Talford Scott was employed in private homes as a housekeeper and nanny, doing her own creative work in her spare time.

Joyce would sit under a quilting frame set up in the living room as a child, pushing needles back up to her mother, grandmothers, grandfather and godmother as they stitched, listening to their conversations. She learned about the craft this way — its long history, stretching back to West Africa and a time before the horrors of the slave trade; its techniques; its communal nature; its value not only as a means to create beautiful and utilitarian textiles, but to record cultural



histories. She often refers to these lessons, as well as the connection she feels to traditions that linked her to ancestors in Africa, as her “inheritance.”



The exhibition includes a room in which visitors can take part in collective weaving projects. Here, Scott demonstrates a simple weaving technique. Credit.: Shan Wallace for The New York Times



Quilt by Joyce J. Scott and her mother, Elizabeth Talford Scott, “Monsters, Dragons, and Flies,” 1982. Credit...Joyce Scott, via Goya Contemporary

Joyce has lived in Upton, on the city's west side, for 50 years, in a rowhouse she shared with her mother until the elder Scott's passing in 2011. The two worked side by side in adjoining studios. "Our entire house was festive — if a washcloth was torn she would embroider it to make it beautiful," she said. "This comes from people who make their way where there is no way, have-nots making something out of nothing." A quilt the women worked on together, "Monsters, Dragons, and Flies" (1982) is featured in the retrospective, as are a number of Scott's weavings and textile works that riff on the assemblage nature of quilt-making.

When they first arrived, she said, Upton was safe, thriving and vibrant, but like many predominantly Black neighborhoods in big cities it was especially hit hard by the loss of jobs in the 1970s and 1980s. Signs of economic distress are everywhere, including abandoned rowhouses and boarded-up businesses, but so are hints of persistence and revival. Nearby is Druid Hill Park, the site of two of Scott's public art works, including one in which she filled in a formerly segregated swimming pool with dirt and grass, and embellished it with tiles.

The stoop of her house has a bright purple door and her beadwork sculptures hang in the front window. Neighbors come by to say hello, and to tell her how great she looks as a Times photographer takes her portrait. "The pictures are for my parole officer," she shot back, teasing. She was matter of fact when she pointed out the group of young people gathered on the corner selling drugs. "I've always worked within my community, I'm not afraid of my peeps," she said.



In 1996, Scott was commissioned to transform a formerly segregated swimming pool in Druid Hill Park in Baltimore into a public artwork. She filled the pool with dirt and grass, and applied blue tiles to the perimeter, turning it into a gathering place. Credit: Shan Wallace for The New York Times





In 2010, Scott created a glass tile mosaic called “Bright Palms” in front of the H.P. Rawlings Conservatory and Botanic Gardens in Druid Hill Park, Baltimore. Credit: Shan Wallace for The New York Times

## The Trickster

Humor is key to how she engages both personally and artistically. Leslie King-Hammond, an art historian and longtime champion of Scott’s art, calls her “a trickster in the West African mold.”

“The beauty or the humor in her work draws you in, and while you’re in there having a good time, she drops the mic on you,” she said. “Laugh if you want, but understand there is a price to be paid in that laughter.”

Indeed, looking at Scott’s tiny, 8-inch-long beaded sculpture “Man Eating Watermelon” (1986), you may marvel at her skillful use of a Native American beading technique called the peyote stitch, which she learned from the Muscogee (Creek) artist Sandy Fife Wilson in the 1970s. You may laugh at the work’s punning title: What we have here is not in fact a man eating a watermelon but a *man-eating* watermelon. Then the discomfort sneaks up on you. The fruit, at the heart of many racist tropes, is a recurring object of Scott’s scathing critique. She is also nodding to tchotchkes, still available for purchase in parts of the country, that “humorously” showed Black babies being used as alligator bait.

Other beaded sculptures in the show address the long history of “mammy” imagery, lynching, the killing of Rodney King, the persecution of people with albinism in Tanzania, and gun violence. Some of these incorporate blown glass, a medium Scott adopted after working with artisans at the Pilchuck Glass School in Washington State and in Murano, Italy. Combining glass with beading, found objects and other materials allowed her to work on a larger scale and introduce qualities of transparency and reflection.



Scott learned the “peyote stitch,” a Native American beading technique, which allowed her to work in three dimensions to create small sculptures that combine humor and pathos in works like “Man Eating Watermelon” (1986). Credit...Joyce Scott, via Goya Contemporary



Scott’s “Head Shot,” 2008, addresses the issue of gun violence with beads, thread, glass and bullet casings. It is featured in the Baltimore Museum of Art survey. Credit: Joyce Scott, via Goya Contemporary



Scott’s “Run Down on the Highway of Love,” 1986, is a necklace composed of glass beads, polychrome, plastic, photographic print and leather. Joyce Scott, via Goya Contemporary

Her intricate necklaces, which often represent social justice issues, brought her early recognition. “If you wear something about racism, about hunger in Africa, then you have to be prepared to have a conversation,” she said. “The viewer’s going to ask you about it.” Some of her collectors welcome such conversations. “Others tell me that they leave their pieces at home because they can’t handle it.”

And then there is “Thunder Thigh Revue,” Scott’s theatrical collaboration with the actor and director Kay Lawal-Muhammad, modeled after early-20th-century vaudeville shows — part feminist activism and part slapstick comedy. (Their tagline was “Comedy at Large/Pathos Thinly

Veiled.”) The pair traveled throughout the U.S. and in Europe between 1985 and 1990, offering up skits that addressed such topics as fatphobia, white beauty standards, date rape. The film critic Roger Ebert was among their fans. Speaking of what accounted for the venture’s success, Lawal-Muhammad said, “I think the truthfulness of it, the exaggerated humor of it, but most of all the poignancy of it. ”

Scott has said that her work in performance was an attempt to convey her message in a new medium. It also had a practical dimension. “We were taught to never depend upon one line of income,” Scott said.



Kay Lawal

Joyce Scott

Kay Lawal and Joyce J. Scott in a publicity photo for their performance project “Thunder Thigh Revue,” 1985. Credit...Joyce Scott, via Goya Contemporary; Photo by Peggy Fox

### Art as a Way of Living

In 2015, protests erupted in Upton after the killing of Freddie Gray while in police custody. “I could look out from my second-floor window and see the people marching down North Avenue and the preachers in a circle praying,” Scott recalled. “That was very deep.”

The events spurred her to action. “The next morning, I gathered up the kids on the block and went to ‘the Bishop’ — Scott’s nickname for a property owner in the neighborhood — “and said, ‘Do you have a house I can use?’ He put a big table and chairs in one of his places, and I got people in the community to come in and do beadwork with me” Together, they processed the momentousness of the events — and connected across generations.



Scott is constantly thinking about how to manage the contradiction between making art that is trying to effect social change and showing it in places like museums and art galleries, where many people may not feel comfortable or welcome, King-Hammond, the art historian, said. “Joyce is not happy unless she has community involvement.”



Scott with “Lynched Tree,” a sculptural work from 2011/2024 that addresses what she considers as interrelated issues: racial violence, women’s subjugation and ecological devastation. Back wall, works with sequins, fabric, thread, glass beads. Credit...Shan Wallace for The New York Times

Recently Scott invited neighbors to come see her show; some had never gone to the museum before. “She was a bridge for them to feel like they belonged in this space,” said Cecilia Wichmann of the B.M.A., a curator of the retrospective.

It features a room where visitors can contribute to collective weaving projects; they will be finished by Scott before being auctioned to support a scholarship in her name at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Two of the looms are simply upturned schoolroom tables, with the legs supporting the warp and weft threads — a trick Scott used over the years while teaching in after-school programs with shoestring budgets.

“She sees her life as an artist as modeling for others another way of being and living,” said Catharina Manchanda, a curator at the Seattle Art Museum. “She has an incredibly strong conviction that every artwork has a role in bringing people together and offering people an opportunity to learn together, but she also models a whole new way of being an artist within a community. It’s not as much a career for her as a way of life.”

**Joyce J. Scott: Walk a Mile in My Dreams** Through July 14 at the Baltimore Museum of Art.