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The Work of Elizabeth Talford Scott in Good Company at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum

Black Woman Genius Features Ten Intergenerational Fiber Artists from the Chesapeake Area

By Chelsea Lemon Fetzer | July 10, 2024



Elizabeth Talford Scott, *Prayer Quilt*, 1995, collection of Leslie King Hammond
© Estate of Elizabeth Talford Scott at Goya Contemporary Gallery | TALP

Before we get to telling stories, have a seat. Make yourself at home. This is how the entrance to the *Black Woman Genius* exhibit at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture welcomes visitors: an open wicker peacock chair with a furred pillow seat before a larger-than-life photograph of Elizabeth Talford Scott and her daughter, Joyce Scott on the wall.

Elizabeth, sitting with one of her quilts spread across one knee, looks at you expectantly. A young Joyce leans behind, crowned with beaded braids, one of her arms draped along the back of her mother's chair. The photograph was taken in the early 80s, but the moment you sit in the chair—entering this family portrait—Elizabeth and Joyce become continuous. And those soaring words on the wall beside them, “Black Woman Genius,” they offer themselves to you too.



Black Woman Genius: Tapestries of Generations, Reginald F. Lewis Museum. Photo: Brian O'Doherty.

Brilliantly curated by Imani Haynes (2020 MICA graduate), *Black Woman Genius: Elizabeth Talford Scott—Tapestries of Generations* at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum is a powerful, cross-generational conversation between ten Black women fiber artists from the Chesapeake area and what Haynes describes as an upswell of visitors.

The show features contemporary works by: Kibibi Ajanku, Aliana Grace Bailey, Aliyah Bonnette, Mahari Chabwera, Dr. Joan M.E. Gaither, Murjoni Merriweather, Glenda Richardson, Joyce J. Scott, and Nastassja Swift. Elizabeth Talford Scott, who passed in 2011, is the key ancestor in the room.

“She was marvelous and wise like an old sage,” recalls Dr. Leslie King Hammond, artist, founding director of the Center for Race and Culture at MICA, and long-time friend of the Scott family. “She was our guidepost.”



Left to right: Aliyah Bonnette, Joyce Scott, Aliana Grace Bailey, Nastassja Swift, Imani Haynes, Kibibi Ajanku, Glenda Richardson, Dr. Leslie King Hammond, and Mahari Chabwera at the exhibit opening February 1, 2024.



Black Woman Genius. Photo: Brian O'Doherty.

Born in 1916, Elizabeth was the daughter of sharecroppers in Chester County, South Carolina where her family had previously been enslaved. Having very little, ingenuity and imagination were a matter of survival honed by her elders. They hand-made bedding, clothes, even shoes from what was available. As a matter of course, Elizabeth learned to quilt around the age of nine.

“When she moved north during The Great Migration, she became a caretaker for a family in Baltimore. She didn’t have time to sit and stitch,” Dr. King Hammond describes. “And she had Joyce to take care of—not an easy child!”

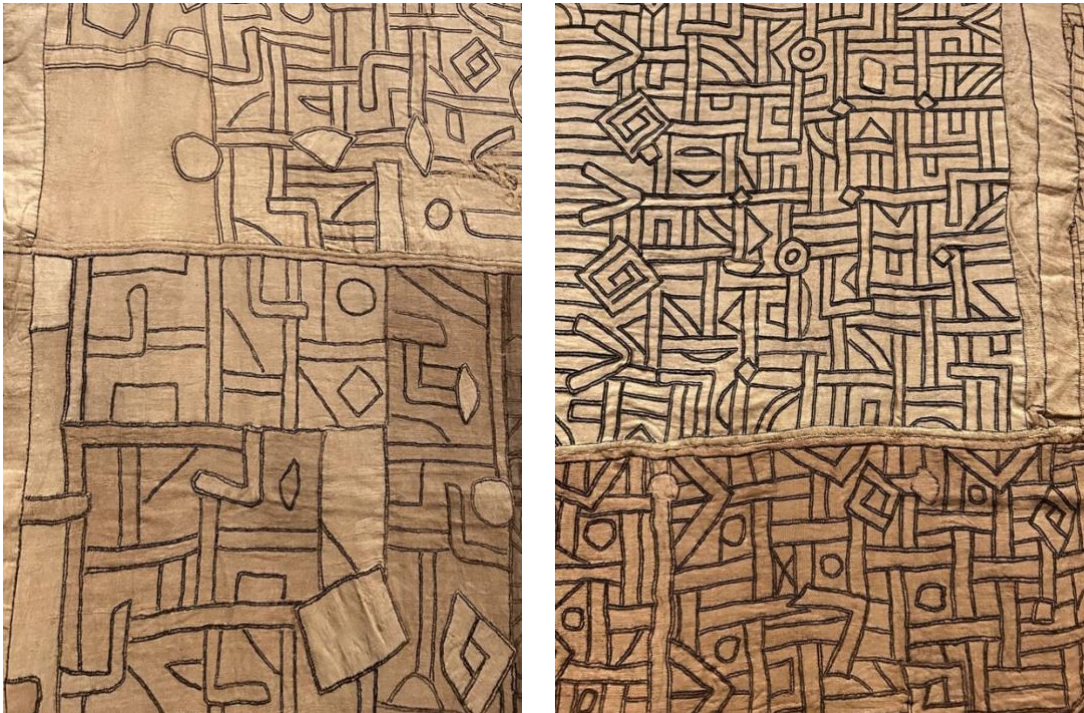
As her daughter would grow to pursue art in grad school and abroad, Elizabeth’s sense of purpose had come untethered. She was in her sixties the day Dr. King Hammond recalled bringing her a bag of fabric scraps left over from clothes she had made for her husband and nudged, “Joyce told me you used to quilt.”

Stamps and Flags II (1980), Elizabeth’s earliest work on view in *Black Woman Genius*, incorporates these scraps from Dr. King Hammond. Squares and stripes—in plaids, florals, cheetah print, and contrasting solids—describe a collision of vertical and horizontal energy like arable landscapes spiraling inward.

“[*Stamps and Flags II*] is very special to me,” recalls Dr. King Hammond, “It tells the story of how Elizabeth came back to her vision and creativity which was now different, expressive—imbued with all kinds of stories of growing up in South Carolina.”



Elizabeth Talford Scott, *Stamps and Flags II*, 1980, fabric, thread, mixed media, collection of Leslie King Hammond via The Estate of Elizabeth Talford Scott at Goya Contemporary (TALP).



Kuba Cloth, appliquéd and stitched fibers, Genevieve McMillan and Reba Stewart Foundation, collection of the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture.

As curator of *Black Woman Genius*, Haynes is listening to these stories woven within the work as she too is stitching seams. Guided by themes which came to surface across the exhibit—ancestry, tradition, fiber narratives, and healing—she draws our attention to the artists' matching points and shared threads.

Stamps and Flags II hangs near examples of the Central African textile called Kuba Cloth where, on woven Raffia palm tree fibers, the methods of appliqué and geometric patterns have a familial resemblance.

“A lot of Elizabeth’s earlier practices and, of course, Southern roots are closely connected to West African and Central African practices,” Haynes describes. “I’m not sure if that was a conscious thing for her or if it was just, ‘this is tradition, and this is how we know how to quilt.’ But I always want to make that connection to the continent, because you can’t talk about the Black American experience without talking about our African heritage.”

Kibibi Ajanku, who describes her practice as “layered with and entrenched in indigenous folkways” leaves no question on intentionality in how her quilt, *Indigo Pathways*, remembers the continent. A trail of cowrie shells map the way through a night landscape of batik and hand dyed indigo; the plant that produces that royal, dreamy blue was cultivated and prized for centuries in precolonial Africa and would become one of the commodities fueling chattel slavery in the Americas.

The cowrie path seems to continue from Ajanku’s quilt into a young woman’s crown on Aliyah Bonnette’s *Wading in the waters of Oshun* (2024) from a series that explores self-love. The woman—painted in oil on blocks of gold, white, and African print fabric—is otherwise unadorned, wearing just underwear, hair loosely piled on top of her head. She appears to embody the artist just as she does the Yoruba river goddess. Currents of glimmering blue spill from her hands and beyond the quilt’s edge.



Left to right: Kibibi Ajanku, *Indigo Pathways*, 2021, batik and hand dyed indigo on hand stretched denim embellished with traditional currency; *Indigo Magic*, 2019, cotton rag doll, Gambia indigo dyes, fabric, upcycled denim, traditional currency, glass beads; *Azur*, 2020, cotton and leather rag doll, Senegal indigo dyed fabric, traditional currency, ceramic, glass, brass; Aliyah Bonnette, *Wading in the waters of Oshun*, 2024, quilt with oil, beading and applique; *Trust turns to mud in my hands*, 2023, quilt with oil and beading. Photo by Brian O'Doherty.



Aliana Grace Bailey, *of labor and love*, 2024, collage on 100% cotton, water-based pigment inks and dyes, thread, blessing notes, family cloth, hand dyed cotton. Collection of the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture. Photo by Brian O'Doherty.

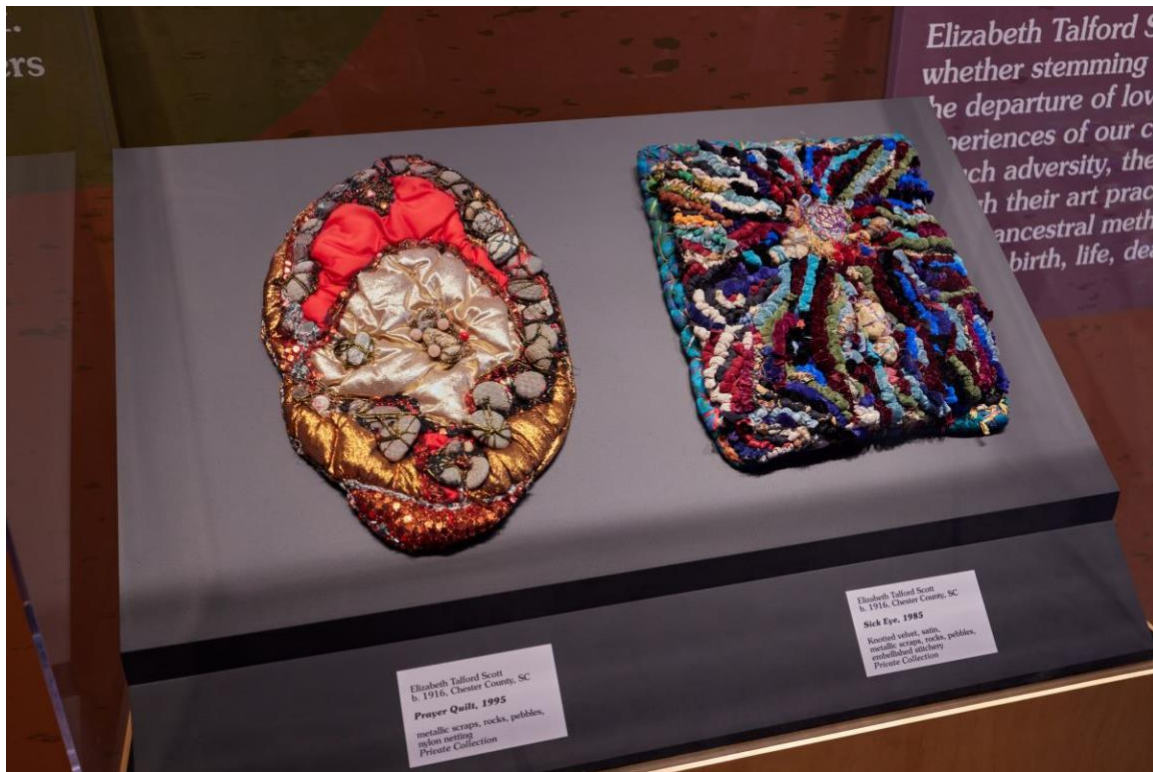
As Elizabeth Talford Scott developed an eye condition and began to struggle with her sight, she scaled down her work to what she could make on her lap. At the same time, her pieces and the materials she used grew more intricate and experimental. *Sick Eye* (1985) is pillow sized; binds of knotted velvet, satin, metallic scraps radiate from a center of bound pebbles and stones.

In *Prayer Quilt*, adorning bright red and gold satin, the stones are encased in netting like the kind you might find your onions in at the grocery store.

“Her work tells the story of how you manipulate materials from the mundane. Casual, manufactured items, broken, worn out things—from her kitchen and community. They are not on the hierarchy of what we are supposed to value. We tend to ignore them until someone takes that and positions it in another fashion. Now it is seen,” Dr. King Hammond describes. “She was a brilliant technician. She was masterful at doing that.”

“When I look at my mother’s work, I believe I’m looking for her shadow.” A young Joyce Scott speaks from the video, *The Silver Needle: The Legacy of Elizabeth and Joyce Scott* playing behind a beaded curtain in a room adjacent to the artwork. “I believe I’m seeing the essence of my mother. When I say her shadow, I mean an alter ego or another potent part of herself... art is beyond what it is popularly considered to be. It can be a life force.”

As a sharecropper’s daughter, as a Black woman, as a domestic worker in Baltimore—Elizabeth knew what it was to be undervalued. Her ways of alchemizing every day, overlooked objects into masterpieces had come beyond the ingenuity she had inherited by necessity; they were awakenings, resistance, a force. She began to call herself an artist.



Left to right: Elizabeth Talford Scott, Prayer Quilt, 1995, metallic scraps, rocks, pebbles, nylon netting; Sick Eye, 1985, knotted velvet, satin, metallic scraps, rocks, pebbles, embellished stitchery. Photo by Brian O'Doherty.



The Silver Needle: The Legacy of Elizabeth and Joyce Scott playing at the Black Woman Genius exhibition, 1990, directed by Rebecca Crumlish. From the MICA Makes Moving Image Media Collection. Photo by Brian O'Doherty.



Imani Haynes and Dr. Leslie King Hammond at the exhibit panel discussion February 1, 2024.

The Reginald F. Lewis Museum offers a sound home for Elizabeth's work. Standing apart from institutions across the US who are only in recent years working to make up for the seismic under-representation of artists of color, The Lewis has dedicated itself to African American art, history, and culture within Maryland since its founding in 2005. "We felt a personal connection to this exhibit..." President Terri Lee Freeman says. "We try to always uplift and highlight the genius that African Americans demonstrate on a daily basis and in their daily lives. We want people to recognize the genius that often is overlooked."

Black Woman Genius goes further in the ways it is also toppling the status differential between craft and fiber arts, between function and fine art. Nastassja Swift's (b. 1992) *Passage, when momma lets my braids flow down my back* is a show-stopping bust made of pink wool. Eyes closed as if in a good dream, the young girl faces one of Elizabeth's especially intricate and untitled works. Just below her lips, the heads of ancestors encircle her like jewelry, and then, decadently long pink braids hang in place of her body—the rite of passage she has been waiting for.

Murjoni Merriweather (MICA 2018) also incorporates synthetic hair as she centers and amplifies Black beauty. In *MONICA* (2021) and *TORA* (2021) braids cover the sculpted faces and long necks of women. In *RYE* (2023), green braids whirl like epiphanies behind a mask of resin.

"I never thought of myself as a fiber artist before. I always thought—I'm a sculptor or ceramist. But synthetic hair is fiber," Merriweather describes. "Elizabeth Talford Scott makes me think about the different materials I am using in those non-traditional ways. How it makes people think outside of what they know. I'm just happy to be here."



Left to right: Elizabeth Talford Scott, *Quack*, 1995, mixed media fiber scraps; Nastassja Swift, *Passage, when momma lets my braids flow down my back*, 2021, wool, synthetic braiding hair, wood, plaster, resin, satin; Mahari Chabwera, *Ancient Astral Fire and the Ocean of Being; A Portrait of Bobbi Rush*, 2024, mixed media tapestry painting, collection of the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture. Photo by Brian O'Doherty.



Left to right: Nastassja Swift, *Passage, when momma lets my braids flow down my back*, 2021; Murjoni Merriweather, *MONICA*, 2021; *RYE* 2023; *TORA*, 2021. Photo by Brian O'Doherty.



Left to Right: Glenda Richardson, *Black Lives Still Matter*, 2018; *I am an Artist*: Joyce Scott, 2021. Murjoni Merriweather, *MONICA*, 2021; *RYE* 2023. Photo by Brian O'Doherty.



Joyce J. Scott, *New Hammond Family*, 1981, vintage cotton doilies, leather gloves, beads, photographs, Mola appliqué and raffia fiber.

In two of the exhibition's particularly striking moments, the works speak personally to the community of artists in the room. Glenda Richardson's quilt, *I am an Artist: Joyce Scott* (2021) reads like a letter of appreciation, friend to friend. It centers a portrait of Elizabeth's daughter Joyce—now a nationally renowned MacArthur Fellow and with her own 50-year career retrospective currently on display at the Baltimore Museum of Art—along with her words, "I AM AN ARTIST everything is available to me."

One of Joyce Scott's works, *New Hammond Family*, 1981, she made as a personal gift to Dr. King Hammond. In it, collaged photographs of Dr. King Hammond, her husband, and newborn son are wreathed with Raffia fiber, doilies, and appear in the hold of stuffed leather gloves. "I created this family embrace," Joyce describes, "Knowing we would grow to be loving rascals together."

Black Woman Genius at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum—exhibiting through September 30th, 2024—is one site of a city-wide tribute taking place throughout this year: *No Stone Left Unturned: The Elizabeth Talford Scott Initiative*. Organized by Maryland Institute College of Art's Exhibition Development Seminar and the Baltimore Museum of Art with the Estate of Elizabeth Talford Scott at Goya Contemporary, this initiative brings Scott's work to nine Baltimore Museums and Universities.

Starting with *Eyewinkers*, *Tumbleturds*, and *Candlebugs*, which opened at the BMA November 12 of 2023, Elizabeth Talford Scott's work is also currently on exhibition at the Peale, The Walters Art Museum, Decker Gallery at MICA, James E. Lewis Museum of Art at Morgan State University, Maryland Center for History and Culture, George Peabody Library at John Hopkins University, and Cryor Art Gallery at Coppin State University.

"To my knowledge, this has never been done before," says Amy Raehse, Executive Director of Goya Contemporary. "I don't know of a single city that has truly wrapped itself around one particular artist involving ten of its top institutions."

How else could Baltimore properly honor the legacy of Elizabeth Talford Scott, but with radical unconventionality, centering community and accessibility? Elizabeth's dedication to her creative vision and practice, under-acknowledged as it was prolific in the last chapters of her life, now reverberates. The limitations we may find placed in our lives as creatives, like all things, can be transformed. Perhaps the work begins—as the *Black Woman Genius* exhibit reflects—with the power of a seat in the room and the collective reclamation of one's singular genius.