

ART MUSEUMS *of* Colonial Williamsburg

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HIGHLIGHTS OF *“I MADE THIS...”: THE WORK OF BLACK ARTISTS AND ARTISANS* TO BE ON VIEW AT THE ART MUSEUMS OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG IN FALL 2022



Williamsburg, Va. (Sept. 19, 2022)—When *“I made this...”: The Work of Black American Artists and Artisans* opens on Oct. 22, 2022, at the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, one of the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg, 28 examples of decorative art and folk art from The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation’s renowned collections will go on view in a groundbreaking exhibition to be seen in the Museum’s Miodrag and Elizabeth Ridgely Blagojevich Gallery. Never before have the Art Museums exhibited together objects made exclusively by Black artists and artisans from the 18th to the 20th centuries across so many genres in both decorative and folk arts. Focusing on the makers, this unique assemblage of paintings, furniture, textiles, decorative sculptures, quilts, ceramics, tools, metals and more will help illuminate their stories.

Among the highlights to be seen in “*I made this...*” is a ceramic jar made by Thomas W. Commeraw (b. ca. 1775- d.?) in New York, New York between 1797 and 1798. Commeraw was a free Black businessman who operated a stoneware pottery in lower Manhattan from 1797 to 1819. He made utilitarian vessels, some of which sold to businesses along the waterfront, many managed by other free African Americans. While networking within the Black community, he campaigned for abolition as well as rights for free Black citizens including the right to vote. Not only was Commeraw successful as a businessman, he was also arguably an even more interesting citizen with numerous and varied civic interests. Unfortunately, it became increasingly challenging for Commeraw to operate his business while networking within black and white communities in what was also becoming an increasingly racially charged climate. When he was unable to find a way around the racial divide, he sought to go elsewhere. In 1820, Commeraw and his family emigrated to Sierra Leone with the American Colonization Society, a move precipitated by the loss of his home and pottery. The family returned to America in 1822.

Portrait of Marian Anderson by Elijah Pierce (1892-1984), a brightly colored, wooden relief carving of the heralded vocalist, is another featured work in the exhibition that celebrates not only the subject but also its maker. Pierce was born on a family farm in Baldwyn, Mississippi, and started carving wood at the age of nine when his older brother gave him a pocketknife. Finding farming life not to his liking, he left home as a teenager and was interested in barbering, although in the late 1910s and early 1920s, he lived a transient existence working as an itinerant railroad laborer. When he would visit his mother on the farm, she encouraged him to follow his religious calling, and in 1920, he received his preacher’s license from his home church, Mt. Zion Baptist Church. After moving to Columbus, Ohio, and marrying in 1923, he found work as a barber and began to carve wood seriously in his spare time believing his woodcarvings were a manifestation of his spirituality. By the early 1930s, Pierce began mounting his three-dimensional figures onto cardboard or wooden backgrounds, such as in this example. In 1951, he opened his own barber shop, which became a gathering spot in the community. His secular carvings showed his love of sports and entertainment as well as his interest in national politics and his appreciation for American heroes who fought for liberty and justice; these carvings expressed his own life story while chronicling the African-American experience, such as with his *Portrait of Marian Anderson*. Like many of her peers, Anderson’s singing career was stymied by racial discrimination. In 1939, after being denied a chance to perform at Washington’s Constitution Hall, the talented contralto sang at the Lincoln Memorial at the invitation of Eleanor Roosevelt. This carving of the triumphant moment shows Anderson wearing the dress she wore on the occasion, her hands modestly clasped in front of her just as she was about to sing. Her wide-eyed, unfixed gaze commands attention, suggesting that she is drawing on inner resources to weather the effects of her successive affront and acclaim.

Another featured object in the exhibition is a ca. 1970 quilt by Arlonzia Pettway (1923-2008) of Gee’s Bend, Alabama. The Gee’s Bend quilters’ story is uniquely a “women’s story” of family legacies and community,

although an individual quilt and the work of its maker is personal. Twentieth-century quilts from this Alabama vicinity are especially well documented and famous for their strong designs, innovative use of color and pattern, asymmetry and free adaptation of traditional quilt patterns; each design is unique and the fabrics are often recycled from family clothing and household textiles with personal meaning. Arlonzia Pettway, the maker of this example, grew up and quilted in the Gee's Bend community where she learned to quilt from her mother. When she was a teenager, she helped to make a memory quilt using her deceased father's clothing and recalled tearing up his pants and shirts and cutting them to shape for the quilt. Here, she combined rectangles of cotton and silk velvets, textured polyester double knits, plain-woven and patterned cottons and a print that incorporates portions of the phrases "Coca-Cola" and "It's the real thing," the Coke motto from 1969. The rectangles are set on angles to create a lively zigzag pattern known as Coat of Many Colors.

William Edmonson of Nashville, Tennessee, was known to be a creative tinkerer who could fix anything. When he began cutting limestone as directed (he said) by God without instruction or experience, many laughed. However, in 1937, not even a decade into his carving career, Edmondson was recognized with a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and yet he remained relatively unknown for many years. His tombstones and assorted figural pieces are characterized by a minimum of representational detail as seen in the simplified facial features, hands and feet of this crucifix made of limestone that will be included in *"I made this...."* The sculpture, an early example of his work probably made between 1932 and 1937, is one of four known versions of the crucifixion theme attributed to Edmonds. It differs from the others in size (it is nearly 25 inches high and 17 inches wide, which is larger than other figures) and in the contrast between the smoothly finished figure of Christ and the rough, chiseled cross and base. Just as other artists and artisans believed their talent and their work was inspired by God, Edmundson also incorporated spiritual expression in his pieces like this one.

These objects are but a few of the works of decorative and folk art that will be on view in *"I made this...": The Work of Black American Artists and Artisans*. The exhibition was generously funded by The Americana Foundation.

Additional information about the Art Museums and Colonial Williamsburg as well as tickets are available online at colonialwilliamsburg.org, by calling (855) 296-6627 and by following Colonial Williamsburg on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/colonialwilliamsburg) and @colonialwmsburg on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/colonialwilliamsburg) and [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/colonialwilliamsburg).

About the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg

The Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg include the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum and the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, both of which are housed in their newly expanded building that offers an additional 65,000-square-feet of space, 25-percent more gallery space and numerous enhancements to the visitor experience. The Abby Aldrich

Rockefeller Folk Art Museum is home to the nation's premier collection of American folk art, with more than 7,000 folk art objects made up to the present day. The DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum exhibits the best in British and American fine and decorative arts from 1670–1840. The Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg are located at 301 South Nassau Street in Williamsburg, Va. Open daily from 10:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M.

About The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Colonial Williamsburg operates the world's largest American history museum, preserving Virginia's 18th-century capital as a fully functioning city. Fun, engaging experiences transport guests back in time and highlight the relevance of America's founding era to contemporary life. The Colonial Williamsburg experience includes more than 600 restored or reconstructed buildings, historic trade shops, renowned museums of decorative arts and folk art, extensive educational outreach programs for students and teachers, lodging, culinary options from historic taverns to casual or elegant dining, the Golden Horseshoe Golf Club featuring 45 holes designed by Robert Trent Jones Sr. and his son Rees Jones, a full-service spa and fitness center managed by Trilogy Spa, pools, retail stores and gardens. Philanthropic support and revenue from admissions, products and hospitality operations sustain Colonial Williamsburg's educational programs and preservation initiatives. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation is a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization; philanthropic support and revenue from admissions, products and operations sustain its educational programs and preservation initiatives.

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Images: Jar, Thomas W. Commeraw (1775-d.?), New York, New York, 1797-1798, ceramic, 2009.900.2; *Portrait of Marian Anderson*, Elijah Pierce, Columbus, Ohio, 1975-1976, wood, cardboard, paint, and glitter, Museum Purchase, 1995.701.1; Quilt, Arlonzia Pettway (1923-2008), Gee's Bend, Alabama, ca. 1970, cotton and polyester, Museum Purchase, Dr. and Mrs. T. Marshall Hahn, Jr. Fund, 2008.609.11; Crucifix of Carved Stone, William Edmondson, Nashville, Tennessee, probably 1932-1937, limestone, Museum Purchase, 1971.907.1.