

# ART MUSEUMS of Colonial Williamsburg

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## THE FIRST-EVER EXHIBITION AT THE ART MUSEUMS OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG TO CELEBRATE THE ARTISTRY AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF BLACK ARTISTS AND ARTISANS WILL OPEN IN OCTOBER 2022



Williamsburg, VA (Sept. 19, 2022)—For the first time, the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg will display a wide range of works from their heralded decorative arts and folk arts collections made exclusively by Black artists from the 18th to the 20th centuries. The exhibition will include nearly 30 examples of paintings, furniture, textiles, decorative sculptures, quilts, ceramics, tools, metals and more, including new acquisitions, and will focus on the makers and their stories. *“I made this...”: The Work of Black American Artists and Artisans* will open on Oct. 22 in the Miodrag and Elizabeth Ridgely Blagojevich Gallery of the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum and will remain on view through Dec. 31, 2025. Among the objects to be on view are works by noted Black artists and artisans including David Drake, Bill Traylor, Thornton Dial, Sr., Cesar Chelor, Clementine Hunter, William Edmondson, members of the Gee’s Bend, Alabama, quilting community, as well as those who are less known or anonymous.

“Colonial Williamsburg has long sought to acquire objects that illustrate the diverse nature of early American society,” said Ronald L. Hurst, the Foundation’s Senior Vice President, Education and Historic Resources and The Carlisle H. Humelsine Chief Curator. “The documented works of gifted Black artists and artisans have long been included in our exhibitions, but we have rarely had the opportunity to mount an exhibition that looks solely at this rich body of material. This is an important and timely undertaking.”

The curation of *"I made this..."* is also an important first for the Art Museums. Colonial Williamsburg employees from across the Foundation's various disciplines assembled to assist with the exhibition. The diverse advisory group, comprised of Black and white staff from the historic trades, museum theater, orientation, historic sites, curatorial services, archaeology and conservation departments, met over the course of several months to discuss exhibit themes and to help with object selection. The outcome of their individual experiences, backgrounds and perspectives guided important conversations, among them the decision to emphasize the personal stories of Black artists and makers alongside their objects in the exhibition. Committee members also worked with input from Foundation curators and conservators to refine a list of 140 objects from Colonial Williamsburg's collections down to nearly 30 pieces in addition to several rotations of light-sensitive material.

A central concept of the exhibition is the idea to highlight makers from various circumstances and backgrounds in a way that celebrates their achievement, artistry and craftsmanship over the course of three centuries. This was done by placing a diverse grouping of objects from various time periods alongside one another. While the creation of a multi-media, cross-disciplinary exhibition on African American art is new for Colonial Williamsburg, the acquisition and exhibition of Black-made objects goes back at least 75 years. The Foundation's commitment to telling the larger story of American craft is also evident in the recent acquisition of important objects by Black artists and artisans. Nearly one third of the objects in *"I made this..."* are comprised of pieces acquired within the past five years.

One exciting outcome of this project is new discovery. Ongoing research in the areas of furniture, textiles, mechanical arts and painting has led to renewed scholarship, updated maker attributions and groundbreaking findings on artists painting techniques. A symposium planned for November 2023 will feature scholars speaking on a variety of these topics related to African American art and craftsmanship.

The exhibition's title quote, "I made this..." comes from David Drake (ca. 1801-ca. 1875), among the more well-known artisans whose work will be featured. Drake is one of the few enslaved potters in 19th-century America whose work can be specifically attributed to him. Working in the Edgefield district of South Carolina, Drake is one of the very few enslaved potters known to sign and date his wares at a time when literacy for the enslaved was illegal. He often inscribed verses on his pots; several began with the words, "I made this..." Drake may have learned to read and write from his first enslaver, Harvey Drake.

A five-gallon jug, made by Drake of ash-glazed stoneware and on view for the first time at the Art Museums, is among the highlights of *"I made this..."*. Very few two-handled Drake jugs are known, and even fewer are signed and dated. This example, made at Stoney Bluff plantation in Edgefield, is the tallest of his recorded jugs at nearly 20 inches and is a monumental example of his outstanding potting techniques. It is dated "April

26, 1842” on one side and reads “L. Miles Dave” on the other, referencing Lewis J. Miles and Drake himself. Drake began working for Lewis Miles in 1840, while enslaved by John Landrum who died in 1846. In 1849, Miles became Drake’s enslaver.

Another featured work that will delight visitors is a 1993 watercolor on paper by Thornton Dial, Sr. (1928-2016), simply titled *Painting* and made in Bessemer, Alabama. The artist lived his entire life around Bessemer. Always interested in working with his hands, Dial toiled at odd jobs ranging from carpentry to iron work. In his spare time, he made sculptures from recycled materials. He worked for 28 years for the Pullman Standard Company where he learned about drawing from studying machine illustrations. Once Dial began to draw, he was prolific in the production of his pictures using them as a means for expressing his ideas and feelings. Tigers symbolized empowerment for him and were often a subject in his art as exemplified by this painting. As Dial said in 1995 and 1996 interviews, “Art is like a bright star up ahead in the darkness of the world. It can lead peoples through the darkness and help them from being afraid of the darkness. Art is a guide for every person who is looking for something. That’s how I can describe myself: Mr. Dial is a man looking for something.”

One of the notable textile examples to be seen in this exhibition is a sampler made in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1818 by Sarrah [sic] Ann Pollard (dates unknown), a student at the Salem African School. The primary goal of African schools was to provide religious instruction to Black children. Making samplers provided instruction for girls in arithmetic and spelling in addition to stitching. Sarrah’s teacher was Clarissa Lawrence, who presided over the school from 1807 to 1823. In 1832 Lawrence became a charter member of the Salem Women’s Anti-Slavery Society, established by free Black women, and served as chair for the Society’s committee for the Salem African School, helping to underwrite the teacher’s salary and provide substitute teaching when necessary. Lawrence was chosen in 1839 as a delegate to the third annual Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women. During a discussion about improving education for Black children, Lawrence addressed the convention saying in part, “We meet the monster prejudice everywhere ... we are blamed for not filling useful places in society; but give us light, give us learning, and see what places we can occupy.”

New to the Foundation’s furniture collection and included in “*I made this...*” is a side chair made by Thomas Day, a free Black craftsman from Milton, North Carolina. Day learned the art of cabinetmaking from his father, later operating his own shop from the early 1820s until his death in 1861. Day employed free Black, white and enslaved workers in the production of furniture and architectural woodwork. He was well-regarded by local society, often described by customers and neighbors as “steady and industrious,” and considered to be a “first rate workman,” and a “highminded [sic], good, and valuable citizen.” His attendance at The Fifth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour in Philadelphia in 1835 and ties to

national abolitionist leaders suggests he quietly harbored anti-slavery sentiments that he likely dared not share outside his family. This chair may have been originally owned by Day's neighbors and fellow Presbyterian parishioners Samuel and Elizabeth Watkins, owners of the building that Day purchased for his shop and home in 1848.

*"I made this..."* is generously funded by a grant from The Americana Foundation.

Special programming at the Art Museums related to the exhibition will include "Expert Insights" talks with Colonial Williamsburg curators and educators who will offer an in-depth look at the Black artists and artisans featured in *"I made this..."* on Tuesdays at 10:30 a.m. Oct. 25, Nov. 1, 8 and 15. On Wednesday afternoons at 3:00 p.m. (Oct. 26, Nov. 2, 9 and 16) visitors can join "Works by Black Artists and Artisans" tours, in which they can tour the museum galleries, including this exhibition, to explore decorative arts and folk art made by Black artists and artisans. Additionally, "*"I made this..."*: Works by American Black Artists and Artisans Conference" will be held Nov. 10-11, 2023, and will feature keynote lectures from founding members of the *Black Craftspeople Digital Archives*: Dr. Tiffany Momon, visiting assistant professor at Sewanee: The University of the South, and Dr. Torren Gatson, assistant professor, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and an opening dinner and presentation specially designed by James Beard Award-Winning Author Michael Twitty. Dr. Bernie Herman, the George B. Tindall Distinguished Professor of Southern Studies and Folklore at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, rounds out the lineup of guest lecturers. For further information about the conference, please visit at [www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/learn/conferences](http://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/learn/conferences) or call 800.603.0948.

For anyone who appreciates decorative and folk art and who celebrates Black artistry, *"I made this..."*: *The Work of Black American Artists and Artisans* will be a must-see exhibition.

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

#### *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 (left to right): Five Gallon Jug, David Drake (1801-ca. 1875), Stoney Bluff Plantation, Edgefield, South Carolina, April 26, 1842, ash-glazed stoneware, Museum Purchase, The Friends of Colonial Williamsburg Collections Fund, 2021.900.24; Painting by Thornton Dial, Sr. (1928-2016), Bessemer, Alabama, 1993, watercolor on paper, 1996.301.1; Sampler by Sarrah Ann Pollard (dates unknown), Salem, Massachusetts, 1818, flat silk embroidery threads on a linen ground, 2011-103; Side Chair, Thomas Day, Milton, North Carolina, 1845-1855, mahogany, yellow pine, tulip poplar, linen, and curled horsehair, Gift of Ronald and Mary Jean Hurst in honor of Leroy Graves, 2022-71.