

A woman with reddish-brown dreadlocks, wearing a red long-sleeved shirt, is focused on her craft. She is using a wooden tool to work on a piece of light-colored fabric laid out on a table. The fabric features a dark, intricate geometric pattern. In the background, there are metal wire shelving units filled with various items, and a banner with the word 'Roc' and 'the bloc' is visible. The entire image has a semi-transparent red overlay.

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AFRICAN AMERICAN CRAFT INITIATIVE

—— 2020 Program Description

AFRICAN AMERICAN CRAFT INITIATIVE 2020

Background and Context

African Americans have played an important role as makers since the dawn of the American experiment. As primary makers in all areas of craft during slavery, their skills and knowledge have contributed tremendously to building this nation even though, for most, their labor and skills were not compensated. After emancipation, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, African American craft artists and artisans continued to produce, often with scant recognition of their participation or equal access to the resources of the craft establishment in the United States.

The participation of African American artists in the wider crafts community today is undercounted. The voices of individual creators have historically been hidden or muted. This is due in part to a lack of documentation of contemporary African American makers and their production. Relatively few art historians, folklorists, and other cultural documentarians have focused on African American crafts. When they have done so, attention has been typically restricted to genres such as quilts, basketry, blacksmithing, and other heritage crafts. The resulting lack of understanding of culture-based aesthetics leads to fewer opportunities and access to resources for African American makers. Because of these dynamics, opportunities to hear contemporary makers' voices and to see the work in context have been rare.

Today, the craft sector in America continues to evolve. In the twenty-first century, both the nature of and context for studio arts have changed somewhat and artists are choosing to realize their visions through textiles, ceramics, metal, and other craft mediums. The separation between "design," "contemporary crafts," and "fine arts" becomes less and less significant for artists and their audiences.

On front: Textile artist Sehar Peerzada applies block prints to textiles that she then makes into her distinctive apparel.

Photograph by Diana N'Diaye,
Smithsonian Center for
Folklife and Cultural Heritage

This page: Multimedia artist Cinnamon Willis works on a small-scale sculpture at her studio in the Bronx. Since 2010, Willis' sculptural work has focused on the art of tiny-doll making.

Photograph by Ignacio Soltero

Further, the events of the first half of 2020 brought attention to the COVID pandemic's disproportionate impact on African Americans, and the belated recognition of the devastating effects of systemic racism and state-sanctioned violence. The richness and depth of African American cultural production and its essential role in the social, spiritual, and economic survival of the United States have never been more evident.

The 1979 National African American Crafts Conference and Jubilee

The first--and most recent and comprehensive--National African American Crafts Conference and Jubilee took place at Shelby State Community College in Memphis, Tennessee, in May 1979. Bennetta Nelson West, an arts activist, administrator, and potter, led the organization of the event that convened African American makers and scholars to consider the history, significance, and contemporary expression of crafts by African Americans. Though the conference was a precursor to the National Black Arts Festival and an adjunct to the National Conference of Artists, both major gatherings of African American artists, there has not been a convening specifically devoted to African American crafts since then.

Leather bags designed by expert leather craftsman Marvin Sin hang on display at the 2013 Folklife Festival. Sin's work is recognizable for its vibrant colors, powerful imagery, and immaculate detail.

Photograph by Karen Kasmauski,
Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives

The African American Craft Initiative

Building on the legacy of the 1979 Conference and Jubilee, the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage is launching the African American Craft Initiative to expand the visibility of African American artists and makers by highlighting the importance of their practices as essential to community economic and social health. Critically, the Initiative aims to broaden the understanding of contemporary craft in the United States and demonstrate African American craft's contribution to pride in cultural heritage. Through collaborative research, documentation, and public programming, the African American Craft Initiative will create and nurture new models for a cultural ecology of craft production and learning. These efforts will contribute to the continuity of these vital arts, adapted to local settings in ways that consider new environmental, social, and cultural factors.

The Initiative will bolster the efforts of African American makers who have made significant progress in increasing the visibility and understanding of their work. Additionally, while many organizations supporting craft in the United States have historically excluded African American makers, the Initiative's partner organizations have established commitments toward inclusive practice and the Initiative will support their efforts.

Through increased dialogue and collaboration, the Initiative will build upon the relationships between craft and community by amplifying and supporting efforts of African American makers to sustain their craft practice, advocate for equitable access to markets and resources, and improve understanding and recognition of the history, cultural background, and aesthetics of African American craft. Additionally,

the Initiative aims to increase opportunities for connection and exchange between makers in the United States, Africa, and the diaspora. These relationships provide an important source of inspiration and motivation for continued practice while building a bridge between the efforts of the African American Craft Initiative and the Center's *Will to Adorn* and *Crafts of African Fashion* Initiatives, which launched in 2010 and 2018 respectively.

As a starting point, the Initiative will engage African American craft practitioners, scholars, thought leaders, and influencers in a series of conversations on issues central to the African American craft community. These initial conversations, complemented by surveys, interviews, database building, engagement of scholars, and partnerships with national craft organizations will culminate in a series of activities and online content that showcase the histories and amplify the voices, practices, and productivity of African American makers through the Center's digital platforms. A series of virtual meetings with key stakeholders will be held in early Fall 2020 in preparation for a larger summit in 2021. The meetings and summit can also inform institutions on the existence and potential for expanding artist development collaborations and initiatives for African American makers.

The methodology and work plan for the African American Craft Initiative builds on that of *The Will to Adorn* program, the larger Smithsonian Artisan Initiative, and observations of successful projects that bring together several stakeholders in craft, design, and local communities for community-based action research and network building. Research and activities began in June 2020, with initial stakeholder meetings scheduled for October, and additional activities planned during Fiscal Year 2021.

Improved and increased research and documentation of African American makers and their craft

We commit to documenting and presenting the stories and works of African American makers and their roles as educators and culture bearers. This includes exploring the concept of how makers define themselves in the United States and the blurred boundaries between crafters, makers, artisans, fine artists, and more.

Activities include:

- Build a database of African American makers, artists, curators, academics, and educators, noting relevant institutions, other stakeholders, cultural organizations, design-oriented organizations, and design programs at universities.
- Compile a research bibliography, filmography, and webography of African American makers.
- Design and distribute a survey to the people identified in the database to gauge interest in a convening regarding issues of African American makers in the American craft community and initial topics and areas of interest for those discussions.

Washington D.C.-based milliner Vanilla Beane (left) sits at a table displaying her custom-made hats. She is best known for her work worn by civil rights activist Dorothy Height.

Photograph by Pruitt Allen, Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives

New and renewed networks linking African American makers to support organizations

Convene stakeholder groups to create and strengthen networks of support and provide an opportunity to build upon information exchange between makers and support organizations. These discussions will be the foundation on which to create programs that benefit individual crafts persons and the broader community of makers while also building public understanding.

Activities include:

- Host an online summit with African American makers to discuss issues most pertinent to the African American craft community. The summit will form recommendations based on a needs assessment for how to address those issues. The summit will also serve as an opportunity to build and strengthen networks among participants. The discussions will determine the next phase of the project and funding proposals and will help to refine and finalize the Initiative's phases and activities.
- Produce a report on the summit that outlines participants, synopses of the key topics, recommendations, and a resource list.
- Organize a meeting with key stakeholders based upon the input and topics discussed during the summit. The stakeholder meeting will utilize the information gathered during the summit to guide key areas of interest and to address the issues presented through discussions and collaborations between makers and support organizations.

Increased public awareness of African American craft

Utilize the information gathered from the research and meetings to create activities, platforms, and programming and to support the development of new relationships that will bring visibility and resources to artisans. These opportunities will highlight the work of African American makers while providing context into their historical, social, cultural, and economic impacts.

Activities include:

- Produce a digital story circle programming series that builds on the major themes discussed during the summit meetings with a focus on presenting and discussing the topics with a public audience.
- Curate a public digital festival featuring African American makers. Participating makers could “open” their workshops for virtual, facilitated visits with small groups of the public for a demonstration, conversation and follow up retail opportunities.

Harlem-based master barber Denny Moe demonstrates his skillful cutting techniques at the 2013 Folklife Festival Program, *The Will to Adorn*.

Photograph by Karen Kasmauski,
Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives

Our Team

Lead Curator and Project Director, Dr. Diana Baird N'Diaye

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