

# MMFA

Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **MONTGOMERY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS TO PARTNER WITH THE “SEW THEIR NAMES” PROJECT**

On October 6, take part in the memorialization of enslaved persons from Alabama’s Black Belt through quilt making.

**Montgomery, AL, September 20, 2022** – In conjunction with an exhibition devoted to the works of Alabama quilt maker Yvonne Wells, the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) is honored to be the first venue to display a special quilt commissioned by the Lowndes County Community Life Center (LCCLC) at Mount Willing, Alabama. The quilt, *Worshippers at Mount Willing Church*, is an element of the “Sew Their Names” project.

On Thursday, October 6, the MMFA and the LCCLC, will host an event at the Museum that celebrates the art of quilt making and memorializes “unnamed” souls, many of whom have been lost to history.

### **Quilting Circle | 4–5 PM**

The public is invited to join the quilters of Mount Willing in the Museum’s Lowder Gallery, among the quilts of the *Yvonne Wells* exhibition, in sewing quilt pieces with the names of enslaved people found in the records of Black Belt churches. Pieces from this quilting session will be used to create a second “Sew Their Names” quilt. The public may choose to honor the names of enslaved individuals from their history or from the church records using the provided fabric and thread or bringing personal textiles. Sewing expertise is not required.

### **Speakers + Reception | 5:30–7 PM**

Following the quilting circle, speakers will discuss the “Sew Their Names” project in the Museum’s Wilson Auditorium. Project organizer Judge Susan Russ Walker will speak about how she, along with



Photograph by Jon Cook; Image courtesy The Hopewell Church Project | Lowndes County, Alabama, website

the Director of the LCCLC, the Reverend Dale Braxton, conceptualized this memorial to the enslaved people of the Black Belt region. Reverend Braxton will introduce quilters Wini McQueen of Georgia and Yvonne Wells of Alabama, both of whom will speak about the quilts they created in response to this project and the impact of storytelling through textiles. Gail Andrews, former director at the Birmingham Museum of Art, will talk about how quilts have been used over the years as commemorative and memorial pieces, highlighting the connection between national works and the “Sew Their Names” project.

After the presentations, attendees are invited to return to the Lowder Gallery with the quilters and organizers for a reception and the reveal of these two new quilts.



Photograph by Jon Cook; Image courtesy The Hopewell Church Project | Lowndes County, Alabama, website

### **Lowndes County Community Life Center and the “Sew Their Names” Project**

In 2019, Susan Russ Walker, Federal Magistrate Judge for the United States District Court for the Middle District of Alabama, was awarded a Post-Doctoral and Faculty fellowship from the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Abolition, and Resistance at Yale University to study the history surrounding her ancestor’s Hopewell Baptist Church in Lowndes County. Judge Walker is the great-great-granddaughter of Reverend David Lee, a plantation owner and slaveholder. Reverend Lee was the founder of the antebellum Hopewell Church in Mount Willing and served as the moderator of the Alabama Baptist Association for 40 years. Today, the 1843 Hopewell Church building is owned by the Snow Hill Christian Church, a historically Black church just down the road, which has been pastored for nearly 40 years by Reverend Dale Braxton.

Working together through the Lowndes County Community Life Center (LCCLC), Judge Walker and Reverend Braxton conceived the “Sew Their Names” quilts as a way to honor and memorialize the many enslaved people who worshiped in rural Southern churches. Center members who commissioned the Yvonne Wells quilt also participate in a weekly quilting circle that was and remains a cornerstone of life in rural communities across the U.S. These quilters and the participants in “Sew Their Names” events literally sew the names of individuals with whom they have personal or ancestral ties or those included on church rolls from Central Alabama’s Black Belt. Previous events have produced pieces of cloth embroidered with enslaved peoples’ names that have been incorporated into a second commissioned quilt by Georgia-based quiltmaker, Wini McQueen.

MMFA Director Angie Dodson says, “I had the opportunity to sew the name ‘Charlotte’—my late mother’s name—in Lowndes County earlier this year. It was a powerful and meditative act. Ever since I’ve been envisioning hosting a ‘Sew Their Names’ session at the Museum. We encourage all who wish to come and join us and the Mount Willing quilters as we continue to remember these members of our extended community by sewing their names.”

The identities of enslaved individuals from the mid-1800s are largely unknowable. The names that they were given—frequently by those who held them in bondage—were rarely recorded in official documents. One notable exception was church membership rolls, where enslaved persons were allowed to participate in segregated religious services like those at the Hopewell Church in Mount Willing. LCCLC-sponsored research has uncovered scores of enslaved people’s names in local church records from across the Black Belt of Alabama. By bringing awareness to the existence of the critical records that exist in Southern Baptist Church archives, the “Sew Their Names” project has been able to give names to previously anonymous enslaved people and memorialize them through community art programs that enrich the lives of Lowndes County residents.

Reverend Braxton says, “quilting is a way in which people are inspired to express deep feelings and emotions, through sewing, designing, and matching colors. When a group of people are involved in this process, it becomes a way to fellowship, verbally communicate, sing, and have fun. The finished product becomes a masterpiece with all kinds of emotions sewn and woven together.”

The Snow Hill Christian Church community and Reverend Braxton envision a revitalized local center for history and culture emerging from the “Sew Their Names” project. A permanent exhibition based on the local traditions of quilt making is planned for the Hopewell Church, which is in the process of being restored with support from the Alabama Historical Commission. This restored space is intended to build awareness of the often-unacknowledged presence of Black people in historical communities and their contributions to community history.

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### **Yvonne Wells Exhibition**

Yvonne Wells (American, born 1939) is an African-American folk artist and quilter from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. She is best known for her self-taught style and her story quilts depicting scenes from the Bible and the Civil Rights Movement. Wells describes herself as a “storyteller first and a folk quilter second.” She is recognized among the latter generation of African American self-taught artists from the Southeastern U.S. who came to prominence in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and she continues to work daily on the creation of the applied narrative quilts for which she is known.



Photograph of the 2022 *Yvonne Wells* installation at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, Alabama

This exhibition features a selection of quilts from the MMFA permanent collection, which holds 18 significant works by this important Alabama artist. Among them will be the latest acquisition, *Amistad* (1998), which tells the story of a rebellion aboard a ship transporting African captives in July of 1839, along with other works that are central to the story of the Civil Rights struggle in the twentieth century.

In conjunction with the above exhibition, the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts is honored to be the first venue to display *Worshippers at Mount Willing Church* (2022), a special quilt commissioned by the LCCLC. Speaking about Wells' quilt, Judge Walker called it, "a powerful work of art that directly confronts the difficult history of the Southern antebellum church and its foundational role in racial segregation and discrimination. It's impossible to understand the later Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights movement without recognizing that every part of church-going was already determined by race well before the Civil War—from where Black worshipers were permitted to sit in the sanctuary; to whether they could preach, teach, or vote in conference; and even to the question of whether heaven itself was segregated or perhaps just entirely unavailable to Blacks. Ms. Wells' work takes on the critical pieces of this history."

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## **SUPPORT AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Support for the "Sew Their Names" project is provided by grants from the Alabama Humanities Alliance, the Alabama State Council for the Arts, the Black Belt Community Foundation, the Central Alabama Community Foundation, and the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition.

Annual support for exhibitions at the MMFA is provided by lead sponsors Alabama Power Foundation and Lamar; with additional support from sponsors Mr. Will Hill Tankersley and Dr. Kristin Tankersley; and co-sponsors AmeriFirst Bank; Balch & Bingham, LLP; Captrust; Mr. and Mrs. Marvin H. Campbell

II; Ms. Camille Elebash-Hill and Mr. W. Inge Hill, Jr.; Mr. and Mrs. L. Daniel Morris, Jr.; Dr. and Mrs. Alfred J. Newman, Jr.; River Bank & Trust; Valley Bank, and Warren Averett, LLC.

Annual support for programs at the MMFA is provided by lead sponsors The Daniel Foundation of Alabama, Lamar, Porch Band of Creek Indians, and Regions Bank with additional support from sponsors BCBS Caring Foundation, Central Alabama Community Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Runkle, The S. Adam Schloss Foundation, and State Farm, and co-sponsors Dr. and Mrs. Sanders M. Benkwith, International Paper, and Trustmark.

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## **ABOUT THE MMFA**

The Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts was founded in 1930 by a group of local artists as a place for both exhibiting art and a space for art education. The original intentions of the founders—to exhibit and teach—continue to inspire and inform every action and activity at the Museum. Since 1988, the MMFA has shared the 175-acre Blount Cultural Park with partners across the lake at the celebrated Alabama Shakespeare Festival.

Today’s MMFA visitors stroll through art-studded grounds and permanent collection galleries. They see compelling changing exhibitions and learn about art by playing in the interactive gallery, ArtWorks; making art in the bustling studios, and by participating in other engaging events and programs. In addition, MMFA visitors can relax and recharge in the serenity of the Museum’s stunning three-acre John and Joyce Caddell Sculpture Garden.

While the Museum’s collection is still home to the art of many of the regional artists who first established it, over time, it has become known for its strengths in American art and Old Master prints. Recent, important acquisitions of art made by African American and Asian American artists and works inspired by images and themes related to the experiences of these groups represent the breadth and depth of the lives and concerns of those who call Montgomery and the River Region home. Through the exhibition of these works and the programs and events that help connect our communities with it, the MMFA has become recognized as a leading arts and cultural resource here in the state and Southeastern region.

The MMFA is a department of the City of Montgomery and is supported by funds from the City of Montgomery, with additional funds from the Montgomery County Commission and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts Association. Programs are made possible, in part, by grants from the Alabama State Council on the Arts.

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## **GENERAL INFORMATION**

**WHAT:** **Open Quilt Circle**  
4–5 PM

**Speakers + Reception**  
5:30–7 PM

**WHEN:** Thursday, October 6, 2022

**WHERE:** Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts  
Wynton M. Blount Cultural Park  
One Museum Drive  
Montgomery, AL 36117

**INFORMATION:** mmfa.org  
334.625.4333  
@MontgomeryMFA

**HOURS:**  
Galleries, Mondays, Closed  
Sculpture Garden, Tuesdays–Sunday, 10 AM–5 PM  
Terrace, and Store: Last entry at 4:45 PM

**ADMISSION:** Free! With ample, free parking.

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**MEDIA CONTACT**

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