

MMFA

Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MONTGOMERY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS KICKS OFF A SERIES OF SPOTLIGHT EXHIBITIONS AS PART OF A COLLECTION-SHARING PARTNERSHIP

Beginning this Spring, three Southern Museums and the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art will begin an intimate series of exhibitions funded by the Art Bridges Foundation.



Yvonne Wells (American, born 1939), *Helen Keller*, 2006, cotton/polyester blend, cotton, plastic buttons, embroidery thread, and lace, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts Association Purchase, 2012.11

quilt holdings in its permanent collection—objects traditionally classified as craft rather than fine art. *Spotlight: Yvonne Wells* challenges this notion and uses as an example a quilt by African-American quiltmaker and Alabama native Yvonne Wells. The artist initially approached her work with a practical purpose in mind; using found scraps of fabric, she took up quilting during the cold winter months of

Montgomery, AL, March 20, 2023 – This spring, the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) will embark on a series of intimate exhibitions highlighting a signature work by individual artists. The *Spotlight* series tell new and innovative stories about American art by expanding notions of art and design to include functional objects and their unique contexts. Featuring objects from the nineteenth century to the contemporary moment, and representing an impressive array of materials and makers, each of the exhibitions will feature art collectively curated by the **MMFA** and our three partner museums: the **Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art** (Hartford, CT), the **Columbia Museum of Art** (Columbia, SC), and the **Mobile Museum of Art** (Mobile, AL). Together, the four institutions are known as the *American South Consortium*. This project, part of the [Art Bridges Cohort Program](#), is made possible by a \$2 million grant from the Art Bridges Foundation.

The first *Spotlight* exhibition, on view from March 23 through June 4, 2023, dives into the MMFA's extensive

1979 to keep her and her children warm. With no prior sewing experience, Wells experimented with different techniques rather than using existing patterns. After determining that following a pattern did not provide enough creative freedom, in 1984, Wells began creating quilts to visually address her experiences during the Civil Rights Movement as well as religious, historical, and sociopolitical concerns.

For this exhibition, the MMFA will present two quilts by Wells. Her portrayal of one of Alabama's most celebrated former residents, Helen Keller, and a quilt commemorating the Negro Baseball League.

Originally, from the town of Tuscumbia, Alabama, Helen Keller—who was born Deaf and Blind in 1880—gained renown for her writings, lectures, and activism for disability rights, women's suffrage, and labor rights, among other issues. In *Helen Keller*, 2006, Wells includes a wide range of symbols reflective of Keller's life. She depicts Keller reading a book or tablet that features the alphabet written in Braille. There are four handkerchiefs at the left that feature embroidered words with Braille elements that describe Keller: Alabamian, humanitarian, writer, and lecturer. Also included in the image is Keller's cane and seeing-eye dog. The four-pointed sun at the top right of the quilt is a common component in all of Wells' quilts featuring activists; the sun's small rays are a way for Wells to share that progress has been made, little by little, but there's still work to do.



Yvonne Wells (American, born 1939), *The Great American Pastime: The Negro Baseball League*, 2009, cotton, cotton/polyester blend, burlap, rickrack, and plastic buttons, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts Association Purchase, 2017.5.3

The Great American Pastime: The Negro Baseball League, 2009, is typical of Yvonne Wells' art in that it speaks to a moment in history that she felt needed to be recorded. In it, she portrays a game in action, with spectators on the sidelines, and men on the field waiting for the next batter.

The Negro Baseball League provided the opportunity for Black and Latin American men to play professional baseball beginning in the 1920s. These men were excluded from major league baseball due to the segregationist policies of the time. The League consisted of seven competitive traveling teams and enjoyed great success for many years until 1947. At that point, Jackie Robinson broke the color line to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers, beginning the integration of baseball. After that, the leagues began to decline, fully collapsing by the 1960s.



Jerry Siegel (American, born 1958), *Yvonne Wells*, negative 2013; printed 2014, digital inkjet print on paper, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts Association Purchase, 2014.3.6

Spotlight: Yvonne Wells will also feature a portrait of the artist by Alabama artist Jerry Siegel (American, b. 1959) and contextual materials, including a tactile experience that helps visitors engage with and learn about the different methods and materials of quilting.

Upcoming *Spotlight* exhibitions at the MMFA will feature:

- From **July 13 through October 22, 2023**, the work of Dusti Bongé (American, 1903–1993) from the Mobile Museum of Art. Bongé, a woman, was a prolific modern artist from Mississippi, and the exhibition highlights her large-scale abstract expressionist painting *Distillate of the Past (Fragment of the Past)* (1958).
- From **November 16, 2023 through March 17, 2024**, *Bureau* (about 1855), made by Thomas Day (American, 1801–about 1861), from the Columbia Museum of Art’s collection. This remarkable object demonstrates the accomplishments of a free Black cabinetmaker in the face of restrictive conditions in the pre-Civil War era.
- And from **April 11 through August 11, 2024**, a rarely seen textile from the Wadsworth: a stunning hooked rug designed by Alexander Calder (American, 1898–1976) and hooked by Leslie and Rufus Stillman that was made for a Marcel Breuer-designed modernist home in Connecticut.

THREE YEARS OF TRAVELING EXHIBITIONS

The *American South Consortium* is part of the Art Bridges Cohort Program, a national program committed to supporting multi-year exhibition partnerships among museums. The cohort program builds on Art Bridges’ mission to expand access to American art across the United States and to empower museums to broaden traditional definitions of American art. The Wadsworth Atheneum joins peer institutions such as the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Los Angeles County Art Museum, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, who are all leading unique cohort programs.

Paul Provost, Art Bridges CEO, stated, “Expanding access through collaboration and collection-sharing is at the heart of the Art Bridges Cohort Program. These four cohort partners are exploring new ways of storytelling and presenting American art and material culture from different regions of the country for their respective communities.”

It will launch in spring 2023 with the *Spotlight* installations. These installations will highlight the stories behind these singular objects through an in-depth presentation of its artistic, social, and historic contexts. Every *Spotlight* object will be displayed at each venue. and conclude in early 2026. The second phase of the project (2024 to early 2026) will be a larger, midsize exhibition shown at every venue. Currently in development, the exhibition will bring together works from each partner museum in conversation with a core group of loans from the Wadsworth’s collection.

RELATED PROGRAMS

Artful Conversations – Alexander Calder: Collaborative Creations with Erin Monroe and Laura Leonard, from the Wadsworth Atheneum

Tuesday, April 4, 2023 | 6 PM | Virtual, thewadsworth.org

Get an inside look at the Wadsworth's newest *Spotlight* exhibition featuring Alexander Calder textiles from the collection, the first project formed by the Art Bridges Cohort Program. Exhibition co-curators Erin Monroe and Laura Leonard discuss how these rarely seen textiles expand the story of modern design and reveal a range of influences on Calder's materials and motifs, from early New England textiles to Latin and South American designs.

Why is this Art?

Yvonne Wells and Textile Arts | Saturday, May 13, 2023 | 1–2 PM

Dusti Bongé and Painting | Saturday, September 9, 2023 | 1–2 PM

Additional Dates TBA

Led by a curator or educator and a local artist, *Why is this Art?* will instruct Museum novices and regulars alike on how to approach a work of art and find deeper meaning and appreciation.

Participants will use Visual Thinking Strategies to discuss the art fundamentals while looking closely at the works and exploring hands-on elements.

Featured Artists Program

Textile Artist | April 29–June 3, 2023 | Times TBA

Painter | July 1–October 20, 2023 | Times TBA

Additional Dates TBA

The Museum will host local artists throughout the run of the *Spotlight* exhibition series. These artists will work in the MMFA's studios, engage with the public, and host instructional demonstrations and workshops. Visitors will also have the opportunity to contribute to a multi-part assemblage that will be installed in the temporary exhibition space. Please visit mmfa.org for more information and details about how to participate.

SUPPORT AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is one in a series of American art exhibitions created through a multi-year, multi-institutional partnership formed by the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art as part of the Art Bridges Cohort Program.



Annual support for exhibitions is made possible by the following sponsors and grantors. Lead sponsors and grantors Alabama State Council on the Arts, Alabama Power Foundation, The Ford Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Barrie H. Harmon III, Lamar, Medical Properties Trust, Inc., MGMWERX, Poarch Band of Creek Indians, Regions Bank, and Rheem Manufacturing, with additional support from sponsors Dr. and Mrs. Mark H. LeQuire, PowerSouth, The S. Adam Schloss Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Ken Williams, and Laurie J. Weil, D.V.M. and Dr. Tommy Wool, and co-sponsors AmeriFirst Bank, Balch & Bingham, LLP, Borganier Davis Williams Architects Associated, AIA, Captrust, Nick Drollette Photography, Ms. Camille Elebash-Hill, Mrs. Ann Hubbert, Jernigan & Jernigan, LLC., Morgan Stanley Wealth Management, Mr. and Mrs. L. Daniel Morris, Jr., Harmon Dennis Bradshaw, Inc., Dr. and Mrs. Alfred J. Newman, Jr., River Bank & Trust, Russell Construction of Alabama, Inc., Ms. Micki Beth Stiller, Valley Bank, and Warren Averett, LLC.

Annual support for programs is made possible by the following sponsors and grantors. Lead sponsors and grantors Alabama State Council on the Arts, Central Alabama Community Foundation, Ms. Caroline J. Crook, The Daniel Foundation of Alabama, The Ford Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Barrie H. Harmon III, Lamar, Medical Properties Trust, Inc., MGMWERX, Poarch Band of Creek Indians, and Regions Bank with additional support from sponsors Mr. John A. Caddell, Central Alabama Community Foundation, Drs. Gerri and Stuart Hendon, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Runkle, and Cathy Caddell and Charlie Warnke, and co-sponsors Dr. and Mrs. Robert A. Avery, Dr. and Mrs. Sanders M. Benkwith, Goodwyn Mills and Cawood, Inc., and Hodges Warehouse + Logistics.

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 founders' original intentions—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 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, 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 them, the MMFA has become recognized as a leading arts and cultural resource here in the state and the 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.

GENERAL INFORMATION

WHAT/WHEN: *Spotlight: Yvonne Wells*
March 23 through June 4, 2023

Spotlight: Dusti Bongé
July 13 through October 22, 2023

Spotlight: Thomas Day
November 16, 2023 through March 17, 2024

Spotlight: Alexander Calder
April 11 through August 11, 2024

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, ArtWorks, Sculpture Garden, Terrace, and Shop
Mondays, Closed
Tuesdays–Sunday, 10 AM–5 PM
Last entry at 4:45 PM

ADMISSION: Free! With ample, free parking.

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MEDIA CONTACT

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