

ART MUSEUMS of *Colonial Williamsburg*

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**A GROUNDBREAKING 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 (April 19, 2022)—For the first time, the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg will exhibit 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 28 examples of paintings, furniture, textiles, decorative sculptures, quilts, ceramics, tools, metals and more and focus on the makers and their stories. *“I made this...”: The Work of Black American Artists and Artisans* will open on Oct. 1 in the Miodrag and Elizabeth Ridgely Blagojevich Gallery of the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, one of the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg, and will remain on view through October 2024. 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 Carlisle Humelsine chief curator and vice president for museums, preservation and historic resources. "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. Patricia Balderson, Colonial Williamsburg's manager of museum visitor services and special programs, assembled an inclusive advisory committee comprised of colleagues from across The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's various disciplines. Charged with refining object selections for the exhibition, the committee included Black and white staff members from the historic trades, museum theater, orientation, historic sites, curatorial services, archaeology and conservation departments. The committee met with Ms. Balderson in subsets over three months, which she said facilitated productive discussions as "everyone brought their own experiences, backgrounds and personal opinions to [their] meetings." The committee refined an initial object list of 140 pieces down to the 28 that at first will be on view with an additional 13 alternate objects that will be rotated in during the exhibition's run to protect fragile and light-sensitive objects. All the advisory committee members agreed on a central concept when considering the material: presenting side-by-side stories of different makers from different time periods with different life experiences while aesthetically mixing folk art and decorative arts.

"From the start, it was important to have a Black perspective on the objects and their makers," said Ms. Balderson, "but we quickly learned that gender and professional experience also guided the input. Final decisions were made based on this diverse approach."

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 also the only enslaved potter known to sign and date his wares at a time when literacy for the enslaved was illegal. On 27 of his known pots are verses he inscribed, and three 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 1933 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 produced pictures prolifically 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 interviews that he gave in 1995 and 1996, “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 numbers 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.”

“*I made this...*” will also shed light on artisans whose stories have never been told. Johnathan [sic] Moss is virtually unknown, yet his work as a free Black cabinetmaker is important. Born free around 1778 in Buckingham County, Virginia, little is known about his early life. Between 1802 and 1809 he was likely fully trained in his craft and may have had his own small shop, because he was taxed intermittently in Albemarle County for having apprentices and owning enslaved persons. In 1814, he relocated to Lynchburg, Virginia, where he likely worked as a journeyman in a larger cabinet shop until around 1820 when he transitioned to farming. The fashionable sideboard to be exhibited was made and signed between 1810 and 1820 in Lynchburg of mahogany, yellow pine and tulip poplar. This career transition may not have been a profitable choice initially; in 1827 Moss was one of the “free persons of colour ... ordered to be sold pursuant to the act of assembly for failing to pay [his] taxes.” Moss managed to avoid this fate as after 1827 he continued to be taxed as a free man. During the 1830s, Moss and his family moved to Shelby County, Ohio, where he remained as a farmer until his death in 1863.

“*I made this...*” is generously funded by a grant from the Americana Foundation.

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.

Protecting the health and safety of guests, employees and the local community has been one of Colonial Williamsburg’s highest priorities through the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the guidance of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued Feb. 25, Colonial Williamsburg no longer requires guests to wear masks during their visit. Please note that the Federal Transportation Security Administration still requires masks for passengers on all buses including Colonial Williamsburg shuttle buses. The foundation’s latest COVID-19 health and safety policies are available at colonialwilliamsburg.org.

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](#) 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 9:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M.

About The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Colonial Williamsburg operates the world's largest living 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.