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The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Acquires Powerful Quilt by Sara Sonié Joi Thompson-Ruffin

by Alice Thorson  September 22, 2020  Articles , [Visual](#)



"20 Odd," by Sara Sonié Joi Thompson-Ruffin is made from cotton fabric with netting and cotton batting, machine and hand quilted. (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art)

For 30 years, Kansas Citians have been entranced and educated by the quilts of Sara Sonié Joi Thompson-Ruffin in exhibits at the American Jazz Museum, Grand Arts, the KCAI Crossroads Gallery, Leedy-Voulkos Art Center and many other venues. She has exhibited at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the White House Rotunda as well as in Africa and Europe. Now her work is represented in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

Thompson-Ruffin's craftsmanship is exquisite, reflecting her upbringing in a family of seamstresses. Her mastery of design and color endows each quilt with visual allure. But it is her choice of themes, chronicling the African American struggle, that makes a searing and lasting impression on the viewer.

Last fall, a quilt by Thompson-Ruffin made just such an impression on a group from the Nelson-Atkins when they visited her exhibit, "Journey: 400 Years 1619-2019," at the Carter Art Center. The group included the museum's director, Julián Zugazagoitia, who contacted Thompson-Ruffin about having the museum acquire "20 Odd," a roughly 4-by-12-foot quilt depicting slaves, shackled and chained, leaving Africa for a future of enslavement in America.

Hands behind their backs, bodies bent forward from the waist, these men are captives, joined in a relentless rhythm of suffering. Thompson-Ruffin presents them silhouetted against a background of commercial cloth printed with images of ships alluding to their terrible journey and bordered by images of drums from the culture of the land they are forced to leave behind. At right, other figures shadow their footsteps within an idyllic depiction of Africa.

"When you see my work, you see my soul," says Thompson-Ruffin, who is the great-great-granddaughter of a slave. She began work on "20 Odd" in 2015 and finished it in 2019, 400 years after the event she chronicles in her quilt.

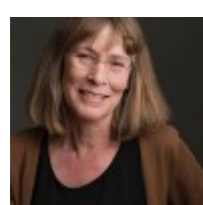
As the text on the museum's website explains, "In 1619 the crew of The White Lion brought 20 enslaved African people to the British colony Jamestown, Virginia. This marked the start of 250 years of slavery in North America. The 20 silhouetted figures in the center of this quilt are cut from different fabrics with African countries printed on them — a signal that although their individual identities have been lost, these men may not have all come from the same place."

Powerful and succinct, "20 Odd" is a magnificent addition to the Nelson-Atkins collection, enabling the museum to tell the African American story from its inception, although, as Thompson-Ruffin notes, "There is of course a debate afoot as to when Africans arrived on the shores of America, however, my artwork addresses one period in time."

The title, "20 Odd," reflects her thoughts about the fate and significance of the men on board, as expressed in her narrative, "Child of the Diaspora," for the Carter Art Center show: "20 Odd' Africans that were on the ship's (White Lion) manifest as cargo of 1619, no physical description, or names, 20 African men stripped of everything. As a proud African American woman, the '20 Odd' represents a powerful sense of pride that none too many will ever understand. There is respect and grace that is all sustaining with their courage and sacrifice, for you see their journey across the transatlantic became the legacy of 300 million today, we are the children of Diaspora."

The museum plans to display "20 Odd" when it reopens.

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Alice Thorson is the editor of KC Studio. She has written about the visual arts for numerous publications locally and nationally.

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