Of her subjects, Martin says, “I don’t choose them, they choose me.” For a long time, Martin felt that men were not part of the conversation taking place in her work. However, after the loss of her nephew, Martin began depicting men. In these images, she applies the same approach to pattern and color, incorporating the circular shapes that symbolize female presence.

All of Martin’s subjects are self-possessed and exude a presence that is magnified by the large scale of the work. Like modern-day icons, the figures are conduits for the spirituality that Martin has fashioned from blending multiple traditions and iconographies. Her physical layering of techniques and materials echoes her layered influences, visually manifesting the convergence of time, history, and place.

Virginia Treanor is the associate curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

Delita Martin: Calling Down the Spirits, presented in the Teresa Lozano Long Gallery of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, is organized by the museum and made possible through the generous support of the Belinda de Gaudemar Curatorial Fund. Additional funding is provided by the members of NMWA.

"The iconographical elements appeared very early in my work. I think I owe this to my maternal grandmother. She was a quilt maker and a storyteller, and as a child I would help her make quilts.”
Subjects and Symbols

Martin’s work frequently explores connections between past and present generations. She conveys these connections through symbols that recur throughout her art. In Martin’s work, circles represent the moon and the female; birds signify the human spirit. Masks, inspired by the Sowei and Ife masks of West Africa, appear in many of Martin’s works, signifying transition and communication between this world and the spirit world.

Technique

Martin uses a variety of techniques to make her work. In any one piece, she may combine up to six or seven processes, including different methods of printing (collagraph, gelatin, relief), drawing in ink or charcoal, and stitching various materials onto the surface of the paper. This combination of drawing and printing skills, honed during years of professional training, along with sewing and quilting techniques learned from her grandmother in childhood, is a hallmark of Martin’s work. The physical blending and layering create and signify the liminal space between the physical and spiritual worlds in which Martin’s subjects exist.

“My ears were pierced when I was six months old with tiny gold hoops. I still wear hoop earrings. This style of earring has become a symbol of inclusion in my work. Not only is it a circle, thus symbolizing the female, but it represents notions of totality, wholeness, the infinite, eternity, timelessness, and all cyclic movement.”—Delita Martin

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