

National Museum of Women in the Arts
Selections from the Collection
Guide by Cell Audio Guide Transcripts



202-747-3417

Welcome to the National Museum of Women in the Arts' audio guide for selected artists and artworks on view in the third-floor collection galleries. To listen to the commentaries, look for the blue cell phone icon on the labels in the galleries and press the item number followed by the pound (#) key.

Interrupt any audio recording simply by pressing another item number and the pound (#) key. Press the star (*) key for instructions. We hope you enjoy this guide and your visit to the museum.

Hannah Shambroom, exhibition coordinator, National Museum of Women in the Arts, discusses Sarah Bernhardt's Après la tempête (After the Storm), ca. 1876

(1:33)

1#

Hello, I'm Hannah Shambroom, and I'm the exhibition coordinator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Many know Sarah Bernhardt as one of the most popular French stage actresses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But Bernhardt was also an accomplished painter and sculptor. Though she received awards for her work at the Paris Salon, she was criticized by the press and other male sculptors, who accused her of pursuing an activity inappropriate for a woman of her time. Existing sculptures by her are quite rare, and fewer than fifty have been documented.

Après la tempête reveals Bernhardt's mastery of the medium, particularly in her rendering of soft textures like fabric, netting, and hair in the hard marble. The work also hints at her knowledge of art history, as the arrangement of figures and the woman's expression of grief are suggestive of Michelangelo's marble sculpture, Pietà. Après la tempête depicts a true event that Bernhardt witnessed. Walking by the seashore one day, she saw an older woman cradling the body of her grandson, who had drowned after being caught in a fishing net. Though the real-life scene ended in tragedy, Bernhardt hints at hope in her depiction—the child's right hand grips the woman's cloak, perhaps suggestive of a happier ending.

Bernhardt was an eccentric figure who had an obsession with death and burial throughout her life. As a young girl

at convent school, she was admonished for holding a funeral for her pet lizard, complete with a procession and Christian burial ceremony. Later, she claimed to own a letterbox made of a human skull, which she called Sophie. She also kept a coffin in her bedroom, which she was rumored to have occasionally slept in.

Hannah Shambroom, exhibition coordinator, National Museum of Women in the Arts, discusses Sonya Clark, Hair Wreath, 2012 (1:33)

2#

Hello, I'm Hannah Shambroom, and I'm the exhibition coordinator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Sonya Clark uses hair as a material and motif to address issues of race, class, history, and identity. In Hair Wreath, she has gathered and bound together strands of human hair and wire into a crown-like form. While a wreath typically adorns the head as a decorative

ornament, in this artwork, Clark celebrates hair itself as a worthy embellishment.

Born here in Washington, D.C., to a Jamaican mother and Trinidadian father, Clark recalls childhood afternoons spent having her hair braided by family members. Often, her grandmother, a tailor, would visit, and they would sew together and tell stories.

Appreciating the artistry she saw in black hair styling and the careful attention required for stitching, Clark began to understand that hairstylists and fiber artists practice a very similar craft. She says, “I grew up braiding my hair and my sister’s hair, so in one sense, like many black women, I had been preparing to be a textile artist for a long time.”

Hair's connection to the individual body as well as ancestral traditions is precisely why Clark embraces it as an essential fiber material. A strand of hair possesses a person's entire DNA sequence, representing one's own identity as well as a genealogical connection to the past. Clark says, "My hair is the glory of all my ancestors who have come before me, and it is a great material for artists to work their magic in."

Katie Wat, chief curator, National Museum of Women in the Arts, discusses Zanele Muholi's Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta, Ext. 2, Lakeside, Johannesburg, 2007 (1:04)

3#

Hello, this is Katie Wat, chief curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Just a few months after

the museum acquired this joyous photographic image of a young couple by South African artist Zanele Muholi, the artist said to an interviewer, “I am just...human.” So, not female, not a binary gender. At first, staff here thought, “Can we still have this work in this museum’s collection?” Then we remembered that our museum’s reason for being has always been to create an art history that includes artists often marginalized because of their gender.

The first time I spoke about Muholi’s photograph during a museum tour after the artist’s comment to the interviewer, I had to really concentrate on getting the artist’s preferred pronouns right (they/them/their). But getting it right—honoring creative people and honoring their self-determined identity—is at the essence of the work we do here at the museum.

Ginny Treanor, associate curator, National Museum of Women in the Arts, discusses Mildred Thompson's Magnetic Fields, 1990 (1:32)

4#

Hello. My name is Ginny Treanor, and I am the associate curator here at the museum. Mildred Thompson is an artist that you need to know about, full stop. No ifs, ands, or buts. Her exuberant, abstract paintings, like Magnetic Fields here in front of you, are not only beautiful, but indicative of her intense interest in scientific phenomena like magnetism. Thompson embraced the language of abstract painting as a way to visualize the invisible. Not only forces like magnetism, but sound waves and radiation also inspired her. Thompson's paintings seem to vibrate thanks to her gestural brush strokes and bold colors juxtaposed to create visual vibrations.

Although born in Florida, Thompson has strong ties to D.C. In 1957, she earned her B.A. in fine arts from Howard University. Twenty years later in 1977, Thompson returned to Howard as an artist in residence. In 1963, the Museum of Modern Art in New York purchased two prints by Thompson, yet she consistently struggled to find gallery representation. Tired of gender and racial discrimination, she spent much of her life in Europe, particularly Germany, where she taught the art of painting, printmaking, and sculpture. Thompson eventually settled in Atlanta in the mid-1980s, where she taught at the Atlanta College of Art and was an associate editor at Art Papers magazine.

Ginny Treanor, associate curator, National Museum of Women in the Arts, discusses Rachel Ruysch's Roses,

Convolvulus, Poppies and Other Flowers in an Urn on a Stone Ledge, ca. late 1680s (1:38)

5#

Hi, I'm Ginny Treanor, the associate curator here at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, and I'd like to tell you a little bit more about the incredible artist who created this amazing floral still life in front of you. Let's start with her name. English speakers have a variety of ways to pronounce the last name of this artist: the most common being "Roish" and "Rowsh." The actual Dutch pronunciation is closer to "Rouse" (rhymes with house) although with a more guttural R and pronounced diphthong. I prefer "Rowsh," but it's a little bit of a potayto-potahto situation. Ruysch's first name is also frequently anglicized to Rachel [Ray-chel] instead of the Dutch "Rock-el." It's a tricky name all around for non-native Dutch speakers, but you shouldn't let this prevent you

from knowing about this truly incredible woman and artist.

Ruysch [Rowsh] was arguably the most famous floral still-life painter of her day. She was the daughter of a very famous scientist, Frederick Ruysch, who, among other things, was the head obstetrician for the city of Amsterdam and a professor of botany at the city's botanical gardens. As the eldest daughter, Ruysch spent countless hours assisting her father preparing and arranging specimens in his collection, which included medically preserved body parts, fetuses, skeletons, and other oddities. Collections of such curiosities were highly popular at the time, and Frederick Ruysch had one of the best. This early training in scientific observation and the close looking at various organisms explains why [Rachel] Ruysch was such a virtuoso in rendering even the minutest detail in paint.

Orin Zahra, assistant curator, National Museum of Women in the Arts, discusses Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's Indian, Indio, Indigenous, 1992 (1:44)

6#

My name is Orin Zahra, and I'm the assistant curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith is an enrolled member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation in Montana. Deeply connected to her heritage, Smith creates work that is rooted in storytelling. Her politically charged and humorous imagery combines texts and popular culture alongside desert landscapes, horses, maps, and petroglyphs. Smith refers to paintings like Indian, Indio, Indigenous as narrative landscapes. We see pictographs of the natural world, like bear, coyote, and deer, juxtaposed with mocking inscriptions such as, "It

takes hard work to keep racism alive” and “Money is green: it takes precedence over nature.” Smith sharply critiques the destruction of the environment and Native American culture as a result of Euro-American influence and corporate greed.

Smith calls herself a cultural arts worker. Not only is she an artist, but she is also an educator, curator, and activist. While training in the arts, she recalls being told by a professor that women could not be artists, and later discovered that only Native American men exhibited in galleries. Smith became dedicated to championing Native American women artists and has consistently organized and curated exhibitions since the 1970s. Through her artwork, activism, lectures, and writings, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith has continually strived for greater understanding of Native American culture and its inclusion in the American mainstream.

Katie Wat, chief curator, National Museum of Women in the Arts, discusses Chakaia Booker's Acid Rain, 2001 (1:05)

7#

Hello, this is Katie Wat, chief curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Chakaia Booker made her exuberant sculpture called Acid Rain in her 30,000-square-foot studio space. She works in a big industrial space, she often creates big sculptures like this, and visitors to the museum often ask, "How in the world did you get this sculpture through the small doorway into this gallery?" The work is actually formed from smaller components—a grid of twelve square panels, stacked three high and four across. But each panel is still really heavy, and the work is tricky to install, so we move the sculpture as little as possible.

In fact, in 2007, when we hosted a special temporary exhibition in this gallery, we actually built a twelve-foot-tall wall around the sculpture rather than disassemble it. Every few years, per the artist's request, we also spray WD-40 onto the sculpture. The oils in the lubricant keep the rubber pliable, but it does smell pretty strongly in here for a few weeks after the treatment.

Hannah Shambroom, exhibition coordinator, National Museum of Women in the Arts, discusses Faith Ringgold's Jo Baker's Bananas, 1997 (1:17)

8#

Hello, I'm Hannah Shambroom, and I'm the exhibition coordinator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Artist and activist Faith Ringgold is known for her narrative story quilts that pay tribute to important Black

cultural figures throughout history. Jo Baker's Bananas honors renowned dancer Josephine Baker, who rose to fame performing in France in the 1920s. The quilted artwork, created by painting acrylic onto canvas with a sewn fabric border, depicts Baker wearing her signature stage costume—a skirt made of artificial bananas. Ringgold portrays the dancer in five overlapping poses, illustrating her fast-paced moves.

Both Baker and Ringgold were vocal civil rights activists. Baker, already internationally famous by the mid-twentieth century, refused to perform at segregated clubs in the United States. In 1963, she spoke alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the March on Washington. Ringgold, too, was a champion for racial and gender equality. The artist's "American People" series, begun in 1963, explored the civil rights movement from a woman's point of view. In 1971 she co-founded the

“Where We At” Black Women Artists collective, a group that advocated for exhibition opportunities for Black women.

Orin Zahra, assistant curator, National Museum of Women in the Arts, discusses Joana Vasconcelos’s Viriato, 2005 (1:52)

9#

My name is Orin Zahra, and I’m the assistant curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Preoccupied with ideas of womanhood, nationality, and family, Joana Vasconcelos frequently incorporates crafts like knitting and crochet into her art. She also uses common Portuguese household items like ceramic figures. Viriato is one such example of a mass-produced lawn ornament, a ceramic German shepherd, which the artist

has swathed in green handmade crochet. This is a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the conditions of domesticity—the yarn fabric covering the dog symbolizes the simultaneous imprisonment and protection of women in the domestic sphere.

Vasconcelos was born in Paris after her family fled the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal and sought refuge in France. They returned to their home country following the Carnation Revolution that overthrew Portugal's authoritarian regime in 1974. Vasconcelos trained in Lisbon, where she now lives and works. The artist often incorporates elements from her cultural background into her art. Her works possess a decorative and sensual visual language that borrows from the seventeenth-century Portuguese Baroque style of art and architecture. She has also been heavily inspired by the ceramic artwork of Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro, one of the

most renowned Portuguese artists of the nineteenth century. And the sculpture of Viriato refers to the important Portuguese general who resisted Roman invasion in the second century B.C. His persona as a skilled, strong, military commander may be reflected in the upright and alert stance of the ceramic figure.