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The Renwick Gallery became the home of the museum’s American craft and decorative arts program in 1972. The gallery is located in a historic architectural landmark on Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street, NW, in Washington, DC.

For more information, contact:
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Contents

9 Donors to the Campaign
13 Director’s Foreword Stephanie Stebich
18 Acknowledgments
24 A Foundation for the Future: The Renwick at 50 Nora Atkinson
42 This Present Moment Mary Savig
97 Artists Reflect David Chatt Kelly Church Sonya Clark Alicia Eggert Steven Young Lee Wendy Maruyama Myra Mimilitsch-Gray Connie Mississippi Judith Schaechter

137 The Bernstein–Chernoff Collection of Sculptural Wood Art Mary Savig
170 Respect, Reciprocity, and Responsibility: A Way Forward Anya Montiel
182 Selected Acquisitions from the Renwick Gallery’s 50th Anniversary Campaign
228 50th Anniversary Campaign Checklist
241 Index
245 Image and Quotation Credits
Artist Carla Hemlock offered this premonition of the art being created during the COVID-19 pandemic—especially art by Indigenous women—in October 2020 during a curator and artist conversation organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum for the *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* exhibition, then on view at the Renwick Gallery. Hemlock, a textile and multimedia artist from the Kahnawake Mohawk territory along the St. Lawrence River, explained that many artworks in the exhibition were created during terrible hardships, such as forced removal from homelands, massacres, denial of religious freedoms, and catastrophic epidemics. Despite repeated widespread trauma, Indigenous artists made works of beauty with absolute care, resolve, and fearlessness. Now, as I write this essay in the spring of 2021, the coronavirus pandemic continues to bring sickness and death, while nationwide protests have reignited calls for social justice and equity as systemic racism and structural violence have been made more and more apparent. How will artists move forward in this difficult moment and shape the future?

Living in a melancholic and unpredictable time makes the future seem almost impossible to imagine. One aspiration is for people to emerge from this present moment creating spaces and works that are therapeutic and synergistic and kinder. If so, what will American craft look like in the future? More importantly, what should guide the future of craft? American craft and art have their origin stories and locales, but this land has memory, and this continent holds ancient, interconnected knowledge systems from Indigenous observations of the flora, fauna, and cosmos. Indigenous scholars have articulated Indigenous knowledges, worldviews, and methodologies to counter dominant “Western” paradigms and advance other ways of knowing. Scholars Cora Weber-Pillwax (Métis/Woodland Cree) and Shawn Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree), in particular, have proposed three principles essential to Indigenous research and learning: Respect, Reciprocity, and Responsibility. Known as the three R’s, they “are key features of any healthy relationship,” Wilson notes, and are valuable for non-Indigenous people as well. Respect, reciprocity, and responsibility are principles that will provide a restorative framework for American craft moving forward.

There are artists and craftspeople who already follow these ways of knowing throughout their practice and with others, and by examining the principles along with examples of their work, each principle’s purpose becomes clear. The first principle, respect, extends beyond humans to all living beings and life-forms. Weber-Pillwax explains, “All forms of living things are to be respected as being related and interconnected…. It means believing and living that relationship with all forms of life and conducting all interactions in a spirit of kindness and honesty.” Respect acknowledges this connectedness between all beings and life-forms. Artists Kevin and Valerie Pourier (Oglala Lakota) live and work on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and create works of art from buffalo horn, a material used by their Lakota ancestors for countless
**CAT. 82**  Vicki Lee Soboleff, *Yellow Cedar Face Mask*, 2020, yellow cedar and sinew, overall: 4 × 5 1/2 × 3/4 in.

**CAT. 83**  Marlana Thompson, *Ononkwashon:a (Medicine Plants)*, 2020, black velvet with red flannel, Czech seed beads, sweetgrass, sage, and leather, overall: 5 × 51 3/4 × 1 7/8 in.

**CAT. 84**  Kevin and Valerie Pourier, *Monarch Nation*, 2019, carved bison horn with inlaid orange sandstone and white mother of pearl, 3 1/4 × 3 × 11 1/4 in.
generations. The Lakota name for themselves, Pte Oyate, translates as “buffalo people,” and the buffalo is a respected relative integrated into everyday and ceremonial life. Monarch Nation (CAT. 84), the Pouriers’ buffalo-horn spoon with inlaid orange sandstone and mother of pearl, continues a long-ago artform and ensures that little of the buffalo is wasted. Likewise, the overlapping pattern of monarch butterflies on the spoon’s surface pays tribute to the “small ones” (the insects) and to the annual migration of monarch butterflies from Canada to Mexico. All forms of connection are acknowledged with respect and care.

Respect also centers on being a good relative and descendant. Ancestors struggled and endured so that the succeeding kin might thrive. Saint Louis–based artist Basil Kincaid comes from seven generations of quilters and creates quilted paintings that reflect ancestral connections, collective memory, and healing. He feels his art is “a way to honor my predecessors while addressing the questions and concerns of where I am—we are—today. It’s a way towards restoring and reconstructing with the resourcefulness born within us.” For Riverside Revival: Lift Every Voice and Sing (CAT. 85), Kincaid collected old choir robes from local Black churches to construct the central figures with arms extending upward in praise. He then assembled the multichromatic background from pieces of vintage quilts, donated clothing, and Ghanaian fabric and embroidery. The work offers both personal and collective connections. Kincaid’s paternal grandparents met at a church revival, and the power of spirituality and song was ever-present in their lives. The subtitle, Lift Every Voice and Sing, pays tribute to the poem-turned-song by brothers James Weldon Johnson and John Rosamond Johnson that became the canonical song of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and is often referred to as the Black national anthem. Written more than 120 years ago, Lift Every Voice and Sing contains lyrics of hope and strength in the face of injustice. Kincaid’s work, likewise, provides another story of ancestral resilience and respect carried forward.

The second principle to guide American craft is reciprocity. Michael Anthony Hart (Fisher River Cree), whose work focuses on Indigenous knowledges and social work, defines reciprocity as “the belief that as we receive from others, we must also offer to others,” and further states that, “Since all life is considered equal, albeit different, all life must be respected as we are in reciprocal relations with them.” Reciprocity centers around a mutually beneficial exchange while incorporating the first principle of respect. Aram Han Sifuentes is a Chicago-based artist who practices reciprocity through her art and social action. She learned to sew at a young age to assist her mother’s work as a seamstress. Through sewing, Sifuentes, who identifies as an immigrant of color, challenges notions of “identity politics, immigration and immigrant labor, possession and dispossession, citizenship and belonging,
dissent and protest, and race politics in the
United States.” Discontent with the 2016 US
presidential election results, Sifuentes used her
medium to protest and build community. She
established the Protest Banner Lending Library
as a space for people to meet in a sewing circle,
make their own banners, and “check out”
banners to borrow (CAT. 86). The banners,
carrying different messages and phrases—some
elaborate, others purely textual—are taken to
protests, returned, and then used by someone
else. The library allows the works to circulate
and travel, thereby offering their messages far
and wide. By prioritizing reciprocity, Sifuentes’s
artistic practice is a generative offering, bene-
fitting everyone.

Quilt artist Carolyn Mazloomi also manifests
reciprocity with socially engaged practices and
community building. In 1985, she founded the
Women of Color Quilters Network to support
and preserve quiltmaking among women of
color. Mazloomi, with a career spanning forty
years, explained her purpose as an artist: “to
create work, to educate people, and to take the
viewer to another place in the hope that they’ll
be educated and learn.” During the COVID-19
pandemic, many quilt and textile artists, like
Mazloomi and her Quilters Network members,
shifted to making face masks to protect family,
friends, and health care workers from the virus.
Mazloomi then sponsored an “Unmask Your
Creativity Contest” so quilters could create
artful masks as creative expressions for fun
and reprieve. Entries came in from around the
world, including from Houston-based artist
Carolyn Crump, who submitted several masks,
like BLM-4 (CAT. 87). Crump, who is known
for her three-dimensional quilts, made this
figurative mask, stitched of multiple pieces of
fabrics, with a Black woman emerging from it.
The woman wears a BLM (Black Lives Matter)
mask and holds several signs, including “STOP
Killing Us” and “I Can’t Breathe.” Crump uses
quilts to tell stories that often speak to current
events. While the Quilters Network educates
others about the history and traditions of quilt
making, another essential feature of the orga-
ization is the socio-economic empowerment
of its members through workshops on market-
ing, pricing, and selling. It is not surprising
then, that when Mazloomi received a United
States Artists Fellowship in early 2021 with
a $50,000 cash prize, she donated the award
money to the Quilters Network to expand their
work and outreach.

The final principle, responsibility, works in
concert with respect and reciprocity. Scholar
Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) best explains how the three intertwine:

Our nationhood is based on the idea that the earth gives and sustains all life, that “natural resources” are not “natural resources” at all, but gifts from Aki, the land. Our nationhood is based on the foundational concept that we should give up what we can to support the integrity of our homelands for the coming generations. We should give more than we take. It is a nationhood based on a series of radiating responsibilities. Simpson adds that the radiating responsibilities reach inward as well as outward. A person cannot practice respect and reciprocity without a healthy body, spirit, and mind. Responsibility is a reminder that all principles are equally important in building and sustaining relationships.

Hemlock, the artist who provided a premonition for artmaking during the current moment, created a work that exposes a deterioration in responsibility. Entitled Our Destruction (CAT. 88), the textile work is a hand-appliqué quilt on black and red wool. On the left, top, and right sides of the border are the words, “Our Heart — Our Home — Our Soul.” Inside the border is a vibrant scene of beaded flowers, vines, birds, and dragonflies in the raised Mohawk beadwork style. The very center holds a pair of sequined ruby-red slippers identical to the ones worn by Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. The toe of one slipper reads “tic” and the other “toc.” The “tic toc” warning repeats, echoing in each corner of the quilt. Despite its outward beauty, Our Destruction speaks to the current state of the planet and global climate change. On the reverse of the quilt, Hemlock writes, “Our Destruction. Our Natural world is an environmental ticking time bomb on the eve of destruction. Time is running out. Our inaction will soon redefine those Ruby Red Slippers to symbolize ‘No Place to Call Home.’” The quilt is a shrouded harbinger of what humans cannot lose—Our Heart, Our Home, Our Soul. But we can look toward a daily practice that engages body, spirit, and mind to acknowledge the interconnectedness of all beings (respect), create mutually beneficial offerings (reciprocity), and be accountable to these intertwining relationships (responsibility).

By centering and prioritizing these Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing, American craft has a framework to imagine a future that benefits the artist, the community, and every being—one with respect, reciprocity, and responsibility joined together in a network that sustains and nurtures at each step. Simpson proposes that, “to survive and flourish the next four hundred years, we need to join together in a rebellion of love, persistence, commitment, and profound caring and create constellations of coresistance.” Such a path ahead connects all beings and holds up the world.
CAT. 88 Carla Hemlock, Our Destruction, 2019, wool strand cloth with wool, glass beads, Swarovski crystals, and sequins, 34 1/8 x 30 1/6 x 1/8 in.

NOTES


6. While bison is the scientific term used for the animal found in North America, buffalo is the colloquial usage and best translation in this context.


13. Ibid., 9.