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Textiles and Islamic Prayer Beads Focus of Recent Minneapolis Institute of Art Acquisitions



Sonya Clark (American, born 1967), *Cornrow Chair*, 2011, upholstered chair, thread. Gifts of funds from Mary and Bob Mersky, Ellen Michelson, and David Crosby

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MINNEAPOLIS, April 11, 2022—The Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) has acquired three important works of textile-based art, across three centuries and three different cultures, as well as a sculptural rendition of Islamic prayer beads.

Sonya Clark's *Cornrow Chair* (2011), the first work by this important contemporary American artist to enter Mia's collection, uses an awkwardly proportioned chair—with rococo arms but plain legs, all reupholstered by Clark—as a metaphor for the uncomfortable history of race relations in the United States. The second work is a late-19th-century robe from the Ainu people of northern Japan, made of fiber from the bark of the Manchurian elm; this piece will be on view in the museum's special exhibition "Dressed by Nature: Textiles of Japan," opening this summer. The third textile work is a late-18th century palampore from China, a large and exceptional example of the use of silk as a decorative canvas beyond its role in clothing. The last acquisition is *Tasbih*, a sculptural piece by the late contemporary Indian artist Zarina (1937–2020) that evokes Islamic prayer beads (known as *tasbih*) on amplified scale, carved from wood and gilt in 22-karat gold leaf.

"In building Mia's collection, we seek to share artworks with our audience that enrich our understanding of the diversity of the human experience," said Katie Luber, Nivin and Duncan MacMillan Director and President of Mia. "Acquiring our first work by Sonya Clark, whose art is both beautiful and thought-provoking, helps us connect our extensive Asian textile collections with the long history of textile-based art among the African American and Afro-Caribbean communities. And Zarina's sculpture evokes the kind of jewelry that would be right at home with many of our textiles, but its massive scale transforms it from a common object used during Islamic prayer into a work that reminds the viewer of how powerful spiritual experiences can be."

Mia

Sonya Clark (American, born 1967)

Cornrow Chair, 2011

Upholstered chair, thread

Gifts of funds from Mary and Bob Mersky, Ellen Michelson, and David Crosby

According to artist Sonya Clark, her *Cornrow Chair* started with an unexpected encounter of a found object: an awkwardly proportioned chair with curvaceous arms but very plain legs. To Clark, the chair was an opportunity to create a work signifying the uncomfortable history of race relations in the United States. The contrast between the chair's well-decorated arms (a part actively used and seen) and its simple legs (which hold the chair up but are perhaps taken for granted) reflects America's deeply entrenched practice of devaluing the labor that props up the economy and the wealthiest members of white society. To underscore these metaphorical links, Clark recovered the chair with a showy velvet and striped ticking—a durable industrial textile often used as an upholstery underlining or mattress cover. She then embroidered the back of the chair with stitched cornrows, forming a cascading mass of braids that appear to support the chair itself.

An artist, professor, and social activist, Clark has been practicing art for over 25 years. According to her studio, her maternal grandmother, a tailor from whom she learned to sew, and maternal grandfather, a skilled woodworker and furniture maker, provided inspiration, while her Jamaican mother and Trinidadian father of Yoruba descent informed her appreciation of diasporic and Afro-Caribbean traditions. Over several decades, she has studied with craftspeople in Australia, Brazil, China, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Indonesia to better understand the mediums, tools, techniques, and cultural associations that people bring to the making and use of textiles—all of which enrich her work.

Clark is best known for artwork that honors contemporary craftspeople like hairdressers and notable African American figures, including entrepreneur and activist madam C.J. Walker and former President Barack Obama. Clark has received the Anonymous Was A Woman Award (2016), ArtPrize Juried Grand Prize (co-winner, 2014), and Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship (2010 and 2011). She was a distinguished research fellow in the School of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University, where she served as chair for the Craft/Material Studies Department 2006–17. Her work has been exhibited in over 350 museums and galleries in the Americas, Africa, Asia, Europe, and Australia. She is currently a professor of art and art history at Amherst College in Massachusetts.

Painted silk palampore, late 18th century

Artists' names not recorded, China

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund

Palampores were large, painstakingly painted or printed textiles, initially made in India and later elsewhere in Asia. They were marketed to an elite European and North American clientele, who used them for bed or wall furnishings, at a time when "Chinese rooms"—often decorated with an array of Chinese and Indian decorative arts, such as Indian chintz, Chinese painted or embroidered silk, and Chinese wallpaper—was considered the height of taste. While painted silk palampores from this period are very rare, this example is even more exceptional because a nearly identical one is in the collection of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. The two likely constituted a pair, but with the central fields in reverse, suggesting that these two panels may have once served as curtains for a large state bed, or were intended to be hung as wall panels.

Made in China, the palampore acquired by Mia is distinguished by its use of silk satin— as opposed to the more commonly used cotton—and for its pastel color. Hand-painted on a cream satin ground, this palampore preserves the vibrant riot of color that characterized painted Chinese export silks. Select motifs were printed in ink on the prepared silk, but many components were drawn by hand in ink or liquid silver. In this example, the field is dominated by a stand of green and blue-green bamboo shoots and mature stalks issuing from a verdant green mount, intertwined with a lone tree whose sinuous branches sprout a variety of blue, pink, purple, and orange flowers that fill the sky. Smaller flowering and fruiting trees roughly dispersed in pairs flank the central group in the

foreground. The wide border represents more trees of varying type growing from an alternating series of blue, orange, and brown rocky clusters.

Attush robe with exceptional decoration of fish bones and tassels, 18th century

Ainu woman, name not recorded

Elm bark fiber cloth; cotton appliqué and embroidery, silk, wool, sturgeon scales, shells, bird bones, silk tassels, metal, stone; cotton lining

The Mary Griggs Burke Endowment Fund established by the Mary Livingston Griggs and Mary Griggs Burke Foundation

The Ainu are the Indigenous people of a series of islands in the northernmost part of the Japanese archipelago. In Ainu society, women traditionally made clothing, and from generation to generation they passed down design patterns meant both to beautify and to protect the bearer and to please the *kamuy* (gods). Among the clothes made, their heavily decorated robes—often featuring intricate appliqués and embroidery—were valued garments to be worn at formal occasions. The robe acquired by Mia is an exceptional example of an *attush* (Ainu for elm bark) robe, made of bast fiber from the bark of the Manchurian elm. This work is unusual in that it is embellished with various talismanic pendants created from sea creatures (mostly sturgeon scales), as well as silk tassels. Researchers in Japan believe that the robe itself dates from the 18th century and was embellished later after it was traded with neighboring communities.

This new acquisition will be on view at Mia in “Dressed by Nature: Textiles of Japan” (June 25–September 11, 2022), which highlights clothing and other textile objects made by the diverse cultures across the Japanese archipelago. As with this Ainu robe, the exhibition will emphasize the resourcefulness of humans to create textiles from local materials like fish skin, paper, elm bark, nettle, banana leaf fiber, hemp, wisteria, deerskin, cotton, silk, and wool. It will showcase rare and exceptional examples of robes, coats, jackets, vests, banners, rugs, and mats, made between around 1750 and 1930, including the royal dress of subtropical Okinawa, ceremonial robes of the Ainu from northern Japan and the Russian Far East, and folk traditions from throughout Japan.

Zarina (Indian-American, 1937–2020)

Tasbih, 2016

Sheesham wood, 22-karat gold leaf, nylon coated copper wire, gold thread

This striking work by Zarina might, at first, be seen as an oversized gold necklace. About 90 inches long, made of Indian rosewood (*sheesham*), and covered in gold leaf, its tactile surfaces are intended to evoke a Muslim’s ritual handling of each of 99 prayer beads, respectively enunciating the 99 names of Allah. The work connects to the artist’s early experience of loss felt when her Muslim family was uprooted from India and temporarily fled to Pakistan. By covering the wooden beads in shimmering gold, Zarina also evokes the Sufi Muslim concept of *noor*, or divine light—a symbol of spiritual union with God.

Zarina Hashmi (the artist preferred to go by her first name) was one of the most prominent South Asian artists of the past half-century. Born in 1937 to a Muslim family in Aligarh, India (near Delhi), she was traumatized by the Partition of India in 1947, which divided people and lands along religious lines, during which some 10–12 million people were displaced and up to a million died in sectarian violence. This sense of perpetual exile deeply informed her artwork, which often draws in imagery borrowed from her early childhood in India: the heaps of paper in her father’s library, stargazing with her sister in their garden, or restringing her aunt’s prayer beads (tasbih).

Informed by her training in mathematics and interest in architecture, Zarina’s five-decade artistic practice resulted in works that maximized the emotive potential of minimal forms. She is primarily known for her innovations as a printmaker, and in 2019 Mia acquired *Homes I Made/A Life in Nine Lines* (1997), an important suite of Zarina’s prints that chronicle her itinerant “homes” and her artistic development working in many avant-garde circles of the late 20th century, including the feminist art circles in New York in the late 1970s. This sculptural piece, made by the artist a few

years before her death, brings forward a different understanding of her work, including her increasing interest in spirituality later in life.

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About the Minneapolis Institute of Art

Home to more than 90,000 works of art representing 5,000 years of world history, the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) inspires wonder, spurs creativity, and nourishes the imagination. With extraordinary exhibitions and one of the finest art collections in the country—from all corners of the globe, and from ancient to contemporary—Mia links the past to the present, enables global conversations, and offers an exceptional setting for inspiration.

General admission to Mia is always free. Some special exhibitions have a nominal admission fee.

Museum Hours

Tuesday-Wednesday 10am–5pm

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