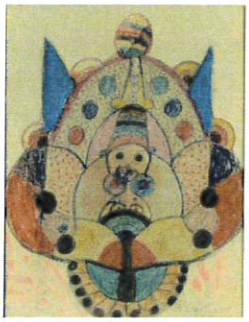
Roots and Reverence / a permanent collection gallery installation at The Columbus Museum, Georgia / open June 5, 2025–indefinitely
[Intro text]

Roots & Reverence

This one-room installation explores the profound connection between Black artistic expression and spirituality. Comprised solely of objects from The Columbus Museum's permanent collection, this project traces the development of Black traditions and beliefs, from the rich cultural heritage of African ancestral practices to contemporary interpretations of faith and identity. By drawing attention to the sacred and secular, the seen and unseen, this installation invites reflection on the ways in which visual and material culture can serve as both a means of worship and an assertion of resilience.

This project was organized by museum studies graduate student Victoria N. Larcheveaux, with oversight from Jonathan Frederick Walz, Ph.D., curator of American art.

Checklist



Minnie Jones Evans (1892—1987)
Untitled, 1944
Wax crayon and graphite on paper
The Endowment Fund in Honor of D. A. Turner G.1987.15.112

Minnie Jones Evans was an outlier artist from North Carolina. Born in a small coastal town, Evans began creating art in her mid-40s, claiming that divine visions compelled her to draw. Her work is characterized by intricate patterns, bold color, and surreal elements, blending African, Christian, and nature-inspired motifs. Evans worked as a gatekeeper at Airlie Gardens in Wilmington, North Carolina, where the lush scenery profoundly influenced her. She used pencil, wax crayon, and oil paints, producing vibrant imagery that resonates with the visionary traditions of other self-taught artists. Though the mainstream art world initially ignored Evans, her work is now celebrated for

its unique expression and intricate craftsmanship, securing her place as one of the most significant American outlier artists of the 20th century.

Betty Bivins Edwards (b. 1946)
Everybody's Church, Representing Everybody's Jesus, 1987
Acrylic and papier-mâché on polystyrene
The Endowment Fund in honor of D. A. Turner and The Georgia Council for the Arts through the appopriations from the Georgia General Assembly and the National Endowment for the Arts
G.1989.7

Betty Bivins Edwards is an artist known for her deeply personal and expressive works that explore themes of faith, heritage, and Southern culture. Born and raised in central Georgia, Edwards grew up surrounded by the foodways, landscapes, architecture, and signs that would later shape her artistic voice. She often uses vibrant colors, dynamic compositions, and a mix of realism and symbolism to tell stories about identity, spirituality, and the experiences of communities outside the mainstream. Her hybrid painting-sculptures frequently depict churches, community gatherings, and figures that emphasize the shared human experience of belief and devotion.

Pearlie Belle Adams (1894–1983)
Log Cabin Square quilt, c. 1905
Cotton
Gift of Thornton Jordan G.1992.5

Pearlie Belle Adams, the maker of this quilt, grew up near Box Springs in Talbot County, Georgia. Her maternal grandparents owned their own farm—unusual for African Americans in the early 20th century—and eventually opened a meat market. Adams learned to sew from her mother and made this quilt, her first, as a girl. Like many

quilters of her time, Adams used repurposed fabrics, transforming worn-out household textiles into beautiful, functional works of art. This bedcovering includes remnants of mattress ticking (possibly made in Columbus) and drapery, and the thread appears to have been taken from feed sacks. As a piece of material culture, this quilt gives physical form to the importance of storytelling, communal activities, and the passing of accumulated wisdom from one generation to the next.

James "Buddy" Snipes (b. 1943)
Black Boola Woman, n.d.
Wax crayon, ink, tree branches on plywood
Gift of a Friend of the Museum
G.1999.24.1

A self-taught and resourceful outlier artist from Macon County, Alabama, James "Buddy" Snipes is renowned for his inventive use of found materials and his expressive, sculptural assemblages. His work often incorporates discarded objects, transforming them into figures and scenes that reflect themes of resilience and identity, as well as the storytelling traditions of the rural South. Snipes's art is deeply rooted in his personal experiences and the cultural landscape of the American Southeast, blending humor, social commentary, and spirituality.

Stella Mae Pettway (b. 1952)
Star of Bethlehem, c. 1970
Cotton
Gift of Calynne and Lou Hill
G.2002.41.2

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Stella Mae Pettway is a quilter from Gee's Bend, Alabama, the community renowned for its unique and improvisational quilting traditions. Many Gee's Bend quilts, made primarily by African American women, are celebrated for their bold patterns, unexpected color combinations, and asymmetrical designs that challenge traditional quilting norms. *Star of Bethlehem* is an example of Pettway's ability to blend geometric precision with expressive, spontaneous composition. Raised in a family of quilters, she learned the craft at an early age, using whatever fabric was available to create intricate and dynamic quilt tops. Her work, like that of other Gee's Bend quilters, gained national attention in the early 2000s when major institutions began exhibiting these remarkable textiles as art. Pettway's quilts are now recognized as significant contributions to American culture, bridging the gap between folk tradition and contemporary abstraction. The name of this quilt pattern refers to the celestial body that led the Magi in their quest to find the new king who had been born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1–12).

John R. Mason (1900—1997)
Birds and Trees, 1991
Felt-tip marker on paper
Gift of Carl and Marian Mullis
G.2011.71.9

John R. Mason developed an early fascination with the flora and fauna of his surroundings, and they later became a central theme in his art. *Birds and Trees* exemplifies his ability to capture the intricate workings of the natural world. His work often features birds, trees, and landscapes, highlighting the interconnectivity of ecosystems and the beauty of biodiversity. Mason exhibited his drawings in regional galleries and museums, earning recognition for his ability to evoke a sense of movement and vitality. Much of Mason's career was dedicated to capturing the essence of nature, and his work also serves as environmental commentary, encouraging viewers to appreciate and protect the natural world.

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Felix "Harry" Virgous (b. 1948)
Adam and Eve in the Garden, n.d.
Acrylic on wood panel
Gift of Gail B. Greenblatt G.2013.8

Felix "Harry" Virgous is an American painter known for his vibrant depictions of biblical narratives, reinterpreted through a personal and cultural lens. Born in Memphis, Virgous was deeply influenced by religious iconography and the oral traditions of his community. His works, including *Adam and Eve in the Garden*, reflect a bold use of color and expressive, exaggerated figures that bring familiar stories to life in unexpected ways. Virgous often blends elements of folk art with more classical influences, creating a visual language that is uniquely his own.

Paul Gardère (1944–2011)
High Priest of Carnaval, 2008
Acrylic, ink, paper, colored pencil, collage, and iris print in an artist-made frame
Gift of Catherine Gardère G.2017.68

Paul Gardère was a Haitian American artist whose work blended Caribbean aesthetics with contemporary artistic practices to explore themes of colonialism, displacement, and identity. Born in Port-au-Prince, Gardère moved to the United States as a teenager and later studied at Cooper Union and Hunter College. His art often incorporated elements of vodoun symbolism, historical imagery, and modern abstraction, reflecting the dual influences of his Haitian heritage and Western artistic training. *High Priest of Carnaval* exemplifies his ability to merge tradition with innovation, using intricate line work and vibrant color to evoke the energy of Haitian festivals and spiritual practices.

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Gardère's exploration of the blending of cultural influences in contemporary art remains relevant today.

Purvis Young (1943—2010)
Saint and Horses, c. 2008
Paint on plywood with carpet additions
Gift of Trip and Teresa Tomlinson
G.2019.28.1

A self-taught artist from Miami, Purvis Young chronicled the struggles, spirituality, and resilience of his community. Growing up in the Overtown neighborhood, Young found inspiration in books about art history. He developed his own raw and expressive style, painting on discarded materials such as plywood, doors, and scrap metal. His works, including *Crying Saint* and *Saint and Horses*, often feature recurring motifs of saints, angels, horses, and cityscapes, reflecting his concerns about injustice, poverty, and hope. Horses, in particular, symbolize freedom and struggle in his work. Despite Young's early struggles to gain recognition, his art was eventually embraced by collectors and institutions, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Today, his work continues to inspire discussions on race, urban life, and spirituality.

Purvis Young (1943—2010)
Crying Saint, c. 2008
Paint on plywood
Gift of Trip and Teresa Tomlinson
G.2019.28.2

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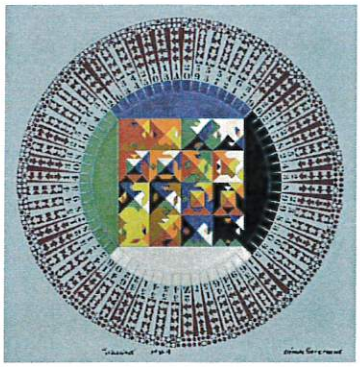

Simon Gouverneur (1934–1990)
"Nearika," 1984
Egg tempera and oil on canvas
Gift of James E. and Sally Q. Gates
G.2020.22.2

Simon Gouverneur was a painter known for his exploration of indigenous, esoteric, and visionary themes. Born in the Bronx, Gouverneur studied various spiritual traditions, including those of Native American and Mesoamerican cultures, which heavily influenced his artistic practice. Works like *"Nearika"* reveal his fascination with mystical symbolism, blending geometric abstraction with numerology. Gouverneur's paintings often refer to the art, visionary experiences, and shamanic traditions of the Huichol (Wixárika) people of Mexico who live in the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range. "Nearika" is the name for a form of yarn painting produced by the Huichol people to record spiritual truths. Though not widely known during his lifetime, Gouverneur's work has since gained recognition for its deep philosophical underpinnings and technical mastery.

Kenneth Moore (b. 1949)
The Night Before Sacred Truth, 2019
Acrylic on canvas board
The Fund for African American Art
G.2022.6

Kenneth Moore is a contemporary artist whose work explores themes of spirituality, history, and modern identity. Drawing inspiration from African American heritage, religious symbolism, and abstract expressionism, Moore creates visually striking compositions that invite deep reflection. *The Night Before Sacred Truth* exemplifies his layered, narrative-driven approach to painting, where each element serves as part of a

larger story. His paintings often feature bold colors, textured surfaces, and a mix of figuration and abstraction, creating a dynamic interplay between past and present. This composition subtly includes a cross, a Jewish star, and a domed structure, possibly a mosque.

Unknown maker
African mask, 20th century
Wood
Gift of Charles Thomas Lewis
G.2022.57.3

Unknown maker
African mask, 20th century
Wood
Gift of Charles Thomas Lewis
G.2022.57.4

Often used in rituals, ceremonies, and storytelling, African masks have deep cultural significance. Removed from their religious contexts, masks such as these inspired modern artists like Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. European and American modernists looked to such objects for their formal qualities, such as simplified or exaggerated body parts or facial features. These masks were once owned by Columbus-born artist Alma Woodsey Thomas. She likely acquired them for their "modernist" qualities as well as for their connection to Africa, an impulse that many African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s shared.