

MASTERPIECE
MINUTE





Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA. This is your host, Ladan Akbarnia, Curator of South Asian and Islamic Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. As some of you know, our mini podcasts each Friday are led by an SDMA curator spotlighting a work from the Museum's collection or a special exhibition, often within their area of expertise. *The Elephant in the Room*, an exhibition of Indian paintings from SDMA's Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, was the subject of my last two podcasts, through which I explored the rich visual traditions inspired by the reverence for elephants in Indian culture and folklore.

This week I meant to examine the equally important visual traces of contact and confrontation in South Asian culture, whether

between gods and earthly creatures, humans and animals, or colonizer and colonized.

Instead, I would like to take a pause from the usual program and reflect on the real 'elephant in the room' today: the systemic racism that has plagued America for 400 years, fueling unimaginable injustices against the Black community.

To honor the memory of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and too many other African-Americans killed by systemic racism, it felt more appropriate to search outside of my curatorial and cultural comfort zone for a work that speaks to the critical issues surrounding African-American identity and amplified by Black Lives Matter, the current pandemic, and ongoing protests. What I found was a gripping portrait of an African-American woman with bottle-topped dreadlocks and a piercing blank gaze.

The portrait is a woodcut by LA-based sculptor and printmaker Alison Saar, who explores race, gender, and identity in the African diaspora. Her artistic practice also draws from African, Caribbean, and Latin American folklore and spirituality alongside personal experience. *Delta Doo* represents one of Saar's many prints produced as a post-study reflection on her sculptures, which incorporate a variety of reused or recycled objects.

So how about I walk you through my journey getting to know *Delta Doo*?

A play on the vernacular word for 'hairdo,' *Delta Doo* references the hairstyle of the woman in the portrait but also the Mississippi Delta, considered the heart of the American south. African culture was introduced to this

region through the transatlantic slave trade, and the oppression of African-Americans continued there well after the end of the Civil War. Transparent blue and green bottles cap the figure's upward-reaching locks of hair, alluding to the southern tradition of hanging bottles on tree branches to catch, contain, and retain spirits who might otherwise cause mischief. Bottle trees could be found outside homes or, more often, at gravesites. The tradition traces back to Kongo culture in Central Africa, from where many American slaves or their ancestors were taken.

Underlying this talismanic practice was a belief in the power of ancestral spirits and the need to cultivate important bonds between these spirits and their living descendants, with the grave serving as the point of connection.

But let's return to the woman's "do" and break that down a bit further. Like the tradition of the bottle tree, dreadlocks signify black resistance in multiple contexts, their roots reaching back to Africa via the Caribbean. African-Americans were most likely introduced to the style in the 1970s by Jamaican Rastafarians, the most notable among them being singer Bob Marley. Formed in the 1930s, when Haile Selassie I became emperor of Ethiopia and leader of the only nation at the time to avoid formal colonization, Rastafarians believed that Haile-Selassie was the Messiah and Africa a paradise. Symbolizing freedom from bondage and captivity, Rastafarian dreadlocks may have been inspired by those of the Mau Mau tribe in Kenya who rebelled against the British in the 1950s.

The woman's dreadlocks in *Delta Doo* thus represent not only a spiritual connection through the metaphor of the bottle tree, but also a spirit of resistance, perhaps her own, rooted in a history of Africanity that isn't colonized or subjugated but free. Hair reaching up, bottles ready to catch the ancestral spirits, she will contain the spirits, acknowledge them, and they in turn will restore her energy and fuel her resistance.

Challenging cultural stereotypes, Saar presents an African-American woman through a gaze not mired in oppression, but instead resistant, empowering, and meditative, kept steady through the remembrance of her ancestors as she continues to resist.

This powerful print can be seen in SDMA's *Questions of Identity*, an SDMA exhibition

examining what it means to be American. But the exercise leading to its selection for today's podcast casts a sobering light on our collection's limited representation of black culture. We recognize that it is our responsibility to change this if we want to present a more accurate picture of American art. In the words of the artist, who has described her work as dark with "an element of hopefulness," "I want to make sure that we can push beyond boundaries. It's the only way to survive."

Thank you for listening, and a special thank you to my friends in the fields of Africana and Comparative American Studies, and African and American art for sharing their knowledge as I prepared for today. This has been Ladan on Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA!

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