

Bisa Butler – Portraits
Catalog from Art Institute of Chicago

Catalog description of “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” 2019
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“The caged bird sings with a fearful trill of things unknown but longed for still and his tune is heard on the distant hill for the caged bird sings of freedom.” Maya Angelou

While doing some research I came across a photograph of four young African American women sitting on the steps of Atlanta College in 1899/1900. The self-assured looks on their faces and their stylized, almost break-dancer-like poses grabbed my attention right away. The women look braggadocious and supremely confident – what a contrast to the time when they lived, in the Deep South when segregation was the new law of the land just thirty-five years after the abolishment of slavery. They were stepping out and defying boundaries.

Clothing and adornments are as important today as they were then in the African American community – an idea these young women certainly exemplify. I carefully selected each piece of fabric that makes up my figures to communicate to the viewer who these women represent to me. The Speed Bird pattern on the first figure’s hat (far left) often indicates change, property, freedom and transition. These young women were going places their parents and grandparents never could have dreamed of. They have embarked on a course that will change their families’ destinies. Moreover, the many shiny earrings on the first figure’s skirt symbolize the wealthy cultures of West Africa: the wealthier the woman, the bigger her earrings.

All four figures act out the caged-bird syndrome. They do so through their poses, their clothing, and their spirit of sisterhood. Their piercing gazes exude strength and confidence. These young women crouch in fighting stances.

This is their coming out, just like the release of the caged bird. The bird in a cage on the third girl’s arm illustrated the words of Dr. Maya Angelou’s poem – these girls have used education to set themselves free.

I choose to represent the women’s strength in the vivid red Michelle’s Shoes fabric, which symbolizes power, on the fourth figure’s skirt. Vlisco printed Michelle’s Shoes to commemorate US President Barack and First Lady Michelle Obama’s visit to Ghana in 2009. It is now accident that Michelle Obama, one of our most highly educated First Ladies, walked the same paths these young women had more than one hundred years before.

My friends call this piece “The Judgmental Aunties at the Church Picnic,” and I see these women as just that. They have paved a way for us and demand that we too step up.

Bisa Butler