

Self-Guided Tour

Celebration of African American Art

Walk through the galleries and celebrate works by African American artists that honor community and history.

View Renée Stout's intriguing use of found materials, experience James Phillips's homage to musician John Coltrane, and discover Bisa Butler's lively reimagining of a historic photograph.

Explore how artists have creatively used various media—from Gordon Parks's striking photograph of Ella Watson to Sanford Biggers's sculptural treatment of antique quilts—to comment on the African American experience throughout time.

(Gallery maps with artwork locations are on the last page.)

Scan the QR code to learn more about Black History resources at Mia.



GENERAL MILLS LOBBY
Sanford Biggers, *Semaphore*, 2019

Circle around the sculpture. What repeated patterns and colors do you see?

Sanford Biggers explores themes of cultural identity and meaning in his art, which he makes with a variety of materials. A “semaphore” is a system designed for sending messages. This work is composed of fragments of antique quilts, which Biggers incorporated into a geometric, three-dimensional frame. Biggers first began working with salvaged quilts in 2009 for a work to be displayed in Mother Bethel AME Church, a site in Philadelphia that was once a stop on the Underground Railroad. Biggers has said his quilt works refer to the popular but unconfirmed legend that quilts were used as signposts along the Underground Railroad to guide enslaved people on the path to freedom. Quilt assemblages have remained a part of his artistic practice ever since.



GALLERY 304
Renée Stout, *Soul Catcher / Regenerator*, 2015

How do you think this device might be used? What do you see that makes you say that?

Renée Stout combines found materials into sculptures that arouse the curiosity and spark questions. If you could make a device to harness the power of the spirit realm and transform the hearts of human beings so they emanate pure love, what might it look like? How would it work?

These are some of the ideas that Stout played with in making this piece. In Stout's imagining, it is a machine that works in conjunction with otherworldly forces to dispel bad thoughts and intentions. It may also create a wavelength that allows the artist to communicate with spirits, or even extraterrestrial beings.



GALLERY 303
Nellie Mae Abrams, "Housetop" quilt, c. 1970

As you look at this quilt's worn surface, what questions come to mind?

Nellie Mae Abrams developed her distinctive quilting style within a community of African American artists who lived and worked in rural Gee's Bend, Alabama. A quilt with a "Housetop" pattern consists of concentric squares, but the design is flexible and allows for innovative compositions. Abrams started her "Housetop" quilt with a block of solid blue fabric. She added strips of yellow fabric on two sides of the square and continued adding strips around the original block until she declared the quilt complete. The quilt speaks to Abrams's resourcefulness and creativity in working with scarce resources, such as used feed sacks and denim scraps, to create a beautiful abstract design.



GALLERY 302
Leslie Barlow, *Sierra and her family, on the Mississippi shore*, 2021

How might you describe the family in this portrait?

In her own words, Minneapolis artist Leslie Barlow is interested "in reimagining our relationship to our racial identities . . . and what it means to be family." In this portrait of Sierra and her family, Barlow layered complex patterns, rich colors, and lush foliage to express and amplify the family's joy and tell their story. Sierra is Navajo and Dutch American, and her partner identifies as Ghanaian American. Familial stories are acknowledged in the details—the children's clothes and the adults' jewelry. The result is a depiction of the warmth and love of a young family.



GALLERY 322
Bisa Butler, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 2019

How does this artwork convey the confidence and strength of these women?

Textile artist Bisa Butler uses vintage black-and-white photographs of African Americans as inspiration for her vivid and meaningful quilted portraits. Here, Butler was inspired by a photograph of four confident—yet unknown—young women, students at Atlanta University from around 1900. Butler's research into the subject or context of the photographs influences her choice of fabrics within each work. For the dress of the woman on the far right, for example, Butler used a fabric called "Michelle's Shoes," after Michelle Obama, to reflect strength and power. The title is an homage to the poet Maya Angelou. Look closely to discover the fabric with the caged bird flying free!



GALLERY 364
Gordon Parks, *American Gothic*, Washington, D.C., 1942

How might you describe the woman in this photograph?

On the evening he first met her in 1942, Gordon Parks created the portrait of Ella Watson that he would later title “*American Gothic*,” an allusion to the 1930 painting of the same name by Grant Wood. Made eight months after the U.S. entry into World War II, this striking photograph places Watson within the racial, professional, and economic hierarchies of the nation’s capital. It also reveals Parks’s reckoning with the realities of Black life in the racially segregated South. *American Gothic* communicates these injustices with the barest of means: a woman, a flag, a broom, and a mop. Its simplicity only strengthens the impact of what Parks described as “an indictment of America.”



GALLERY 375
James Phillips, *Cosmic Connection*, 1971

How does Phillips give visual expression to music in this painting?

James Phillips was deeply involved in movements to recognize and communicate Black and African diasporic identities and creativity through the arts. His *Cosmic Connection*, at more than 17 feet long, is a bursting, cacophonous, and rhythmic homage to visionary musician, composer, and music theorist John Coltrane. He created the painting during a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, as a backdrop to a memorial concert for Coltrane in New York. Imagining an uplifting visual counterpart to Coltrane’s music and soul, Phillips hit on light, explaining, “Sound is sound. I work with the visual manifestations of sound. The visual component to that would be light.”

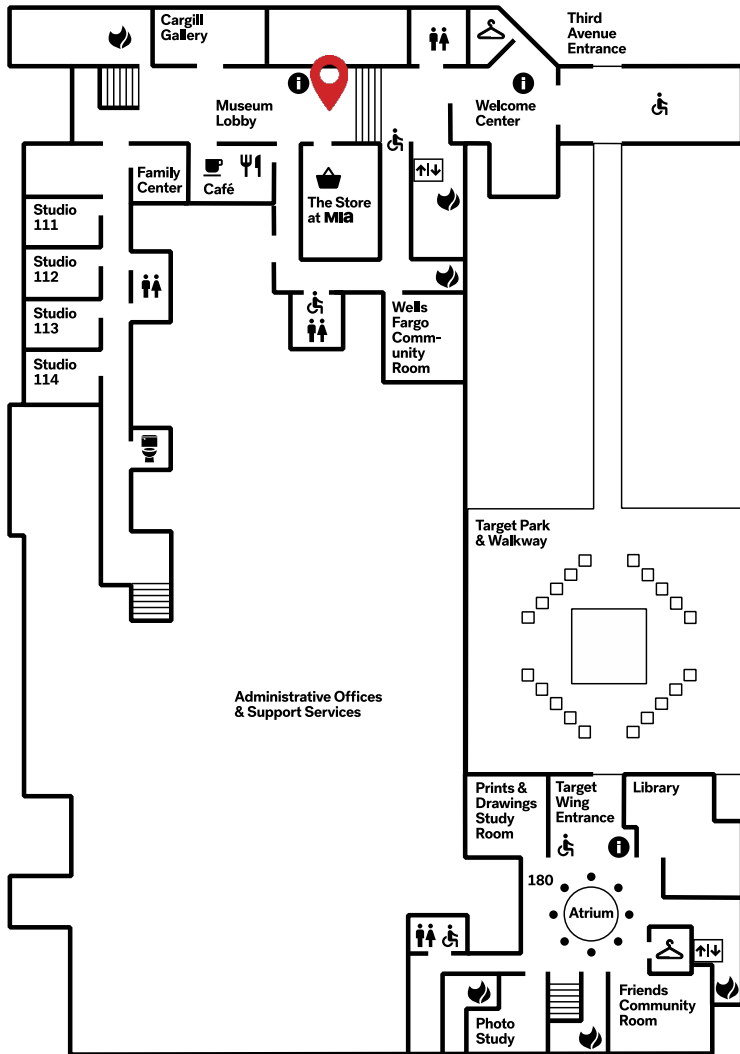


GALLERY 376
Beauford Delaney, *Jazz Quartet*, 1946, Private collection

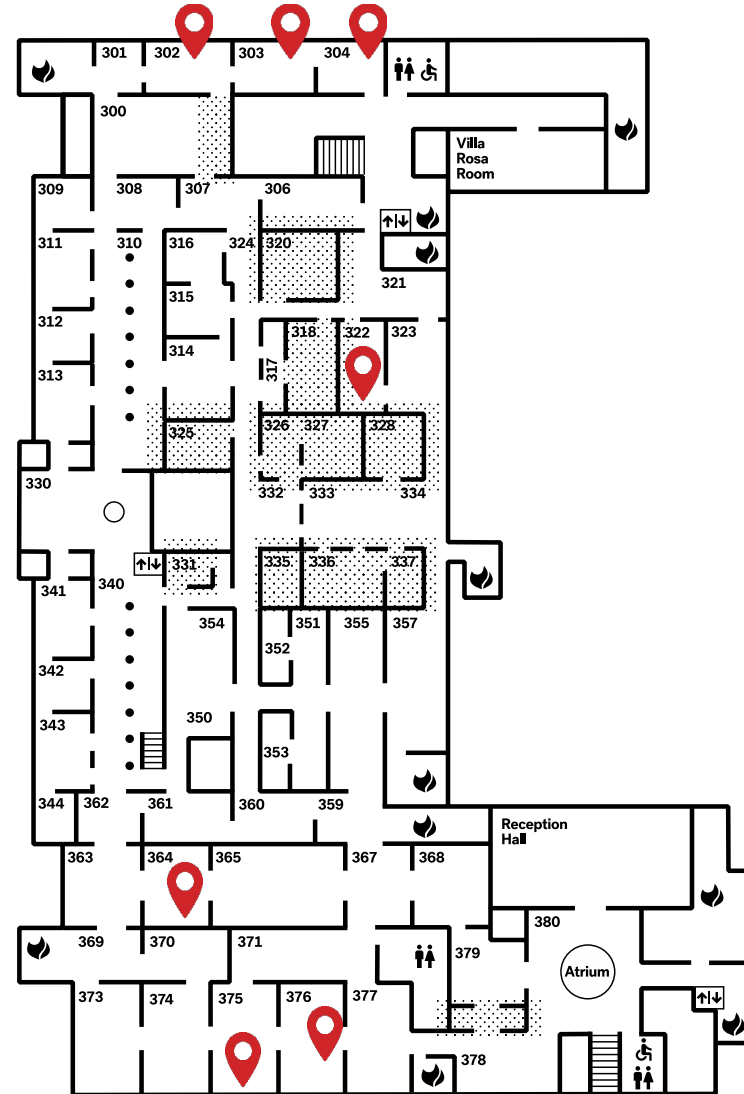
How does Jazz Quartet compare to James Phillips’ Cosmic Connection?

Beauford Delaney attended art school in Boston and then moved to New York in 1929. A lover of jazz and blues music, literature and the theater, Delaney befriended and painted many writers, actors, and musicians. He lived in Greenwich Village, inspired by the lively streets and diverse community. His paintings expressed the excitement of city life in vivid colors, energetic lines, and quick brushstrokes. As a gay African American man, he faced discrimination in the United States; Paris was more tolerant. Delaney left New York for Paris in 1953, and he spent the rest of his life working there, moving from figurative to abstract painting. (See Delaney’s “*Untitled*,” in this same gallery.)

Gallery Maps



First Floor



Third Floor