

ELIZABETH TALFORD SCOTT

Biography

Elizabeth Talford Scott (b.1916- d.2011) was born near Chester, South Carolina, on the land her parents worked as sharecroppers, and where her grandparents had previously been enslaved. The sixth of fourteen children raised on the Blackstock Plantation, she grew up within a culture of resourcefulness in which family members taught her to repurpose discarded materials for essential use.

Quilting was an integral part of Black American life in the rural South, serving as a site of innovation, survival, and storytelling. Within this tradition, Talford Scott developed an early fluency in textile construction, which she would later expand into an experimental and highly personal visual language.

She migrated to Baltimore in the early 1940s where, along with Charlie Scott Jr., she raised their daughter, the artist Joyce J. Scott. During this period, she worked in food service and as a caregiver while also raising her child, eventually as a single mother. Demands on her time limited her artistic production, and she stepped away from quilting for many years. It was not until the 1970s that she returned to art-making with renewed focus and intensity.

Talford Scott transformed quilting into an expansive, improvisational form. Moving beyond functional domestic textiles, she created sculptural wall works that incorporate stones, buttons, shells, bones, sequins, beads, knotted fibers, glass, and other found materials. These densely layered compositions reject conventional pictorial order in favor of intuitive structure and tactile accumulation, situating her work within and beyond the lineage of quilting traditions.

Embedded within these surfaces are interwoven personal and cultural narratives, as well as a symbolic visual lexicon that references flowers, animals, insects, sea creatures, celestial forms, and imagined beings. Her works evoke dream states, folklore, superstition, and systems of memory, in which everyday materials are transformed into complex fields of visual and emotional resonance. In this way, Talford Scott's practice operates simultaneously as abstraction, autobiography, and cultural archive.

Although she exhibited selectively during her lifetime, Talford Scott's work was presented in major venues including The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Museum of American Folk Art (New York), and The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York). In 1987, she received the Women's Caucus for Art Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Visual Arts. In 1998, George Ciscle

organized her retrospective *Eyewinkers, Tumbleturds, and Candlebugs: The Art of Elizabeth Talford Scott*, which opened at MICA and traveled to the Smithsonian Institution's Anacostia Community Museum in Washington, D.C., as well as additional venues in New England and North Carolina.

Despite this recognition, her visibility within the broader contemporary art field remained limited during her lifetime, reflecting the systemic marginalization of Black women working in fiber and textile-based practices. Alongside her daughter, she also led workshops and taught textile techniques to younger artists, extending her practice into pedagogical exchange. Elizabeth Talford Scott died in 2012. In 2019, stewardship of her estate was assumed by Goya Contemporary Gallery. That same year, she was the subject—together with her daughter—of the exhibitions *Hitching Their Dreams to Untamed Stars: Joyce J. Scott & Elizabeth Talford Scott* at the Baltimore Museum of Art and *Reality, Times Two: Joyce J. Scott & Elizabeth Talford Scott* at Goya Contemporary Gallery.

In 2020, Goya Contemporary presented her first solo exhibition with the gallery, *Upside-Downwards*. In 2021, her work was featured in a dedicated solo presentation at The Armory Show, NY, where it was widely noted by press coverage, including in The New York Times. Major works have since entered the collections of The National Gallery of Art, the Philbrook Museum of Art, the Toledo Museum of Art, the Mint Museum, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, among others.

Talford Scott's posthumous recognition underscores the historical exclusion of many significant women fiber artists from institutional visibility during their lifetimes. Today, her work is increasingly recognized as foundational to contemporary conversations around textile, assemblage, and material storytelling. Her influence extends across generations of artists, including her daughter. Elizabeth Talford Scott's work remains strikingly immediate—its visual language as resonant today as when it was first made.

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