

# Mining for Gold in Museum Collections

by Bruce W. Pepich

**Artists are visually voracious beings who constantly find sources of inspiration in the world around them.** Throughout history, we have examples of artists observing each other's works and reprising the same subjects one generation after another to add their own aesthetic message to age-old topics. In an effort to broaden access to permanent collections, museums have been inviting artists to sit in the curatorial seat and "mine the collection." Some exhibitions even include pieces the artist/curator creates in response to his or her experience.

Artists come from a slightly different point of view from within this curatorial discipline. By examining objects from a collection up close, they can approach this source material in ways that are not confined by timeline-driven, classic art historical dogma. Instead, they can focus on the visual impact or tangential associations the work holds for them personally. When they select items from a museum collection based on visual characteristics or for more personal interpretations, artists can encourage viewers to see new meanings and develop a better understanding of chosen objects. When they create a new piece inspired by a collection, these artists open another door for the viewer, demon-

strating how visual source material can be utilized to generate fresh ideas.

At the turn of this century, the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York inaugurated a series of shows in which important contemporary art and design figures, such as Brazilian furniture designers the Campana Brothers, British-Nigerian conceptual artist Yinka Shonibare MBE, and the California design firm IDEO, were invited to mine the cross-discipline collections of this Smithsonian Institution branch. Their explorations produced shows that were thought-provoking, unexpected arrays of artworks, antiques, and collectibles gathered around a unifying theme. In many cases, these curatorial selections also included a new work created for the exhibition.

In 2005, the third show in this series featured Dutch designer Hella Jongerius, who showcased selections from the museum's collection of over 1,000 historic samplers, along with embroidery tools and paraphernalia. Jongerius saw embroidery as an activity that works its way through society from home to factory to other media, such as wallpaper and china patterns. Her design for the exhibition's installation was unconventional, with vitrines stacked and overlapped



*LEFT: Installation view of Hella Jongerius Selects: From the Permanent Collection at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, New York, 2005. Photo: Matt Flynn.*

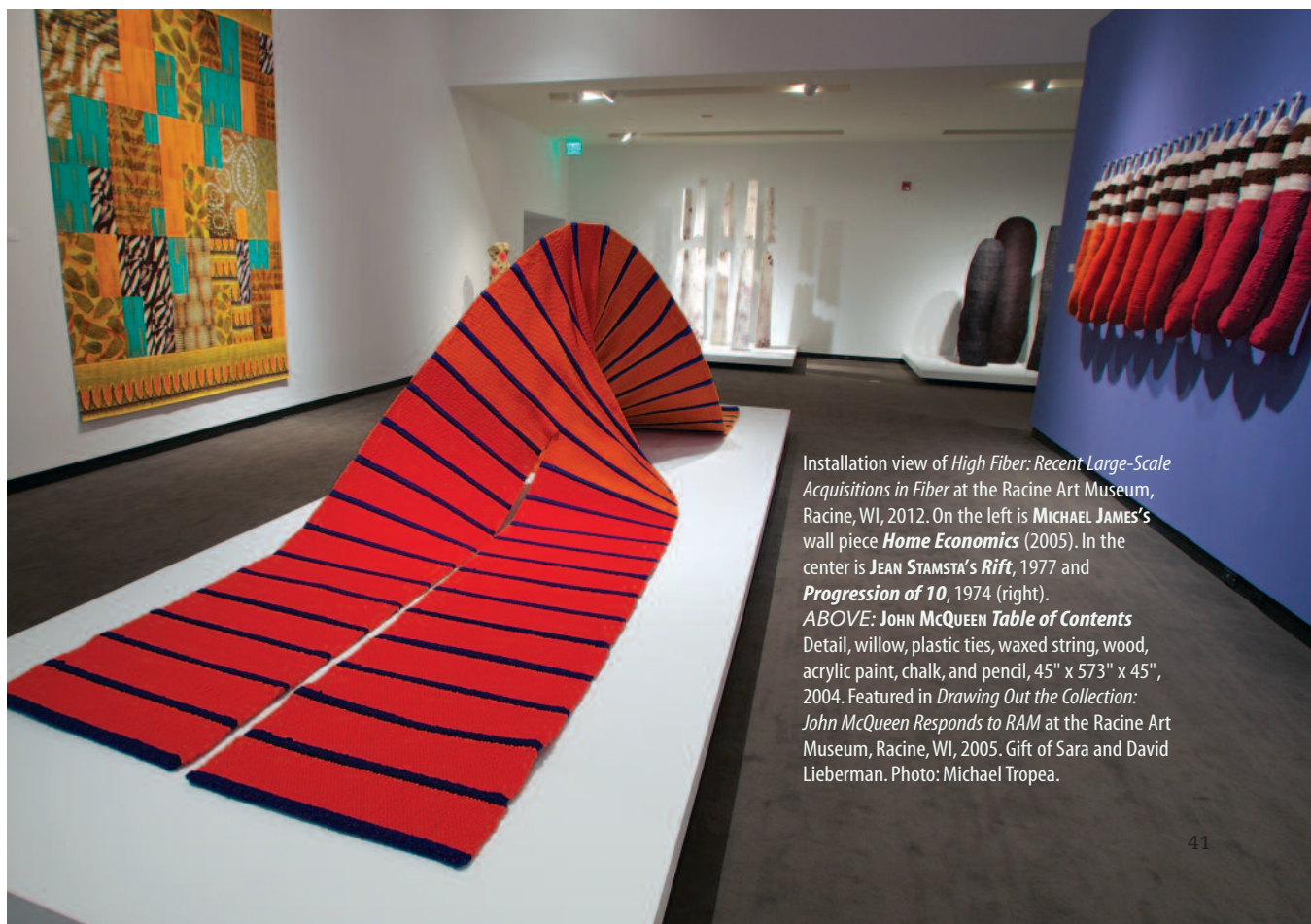
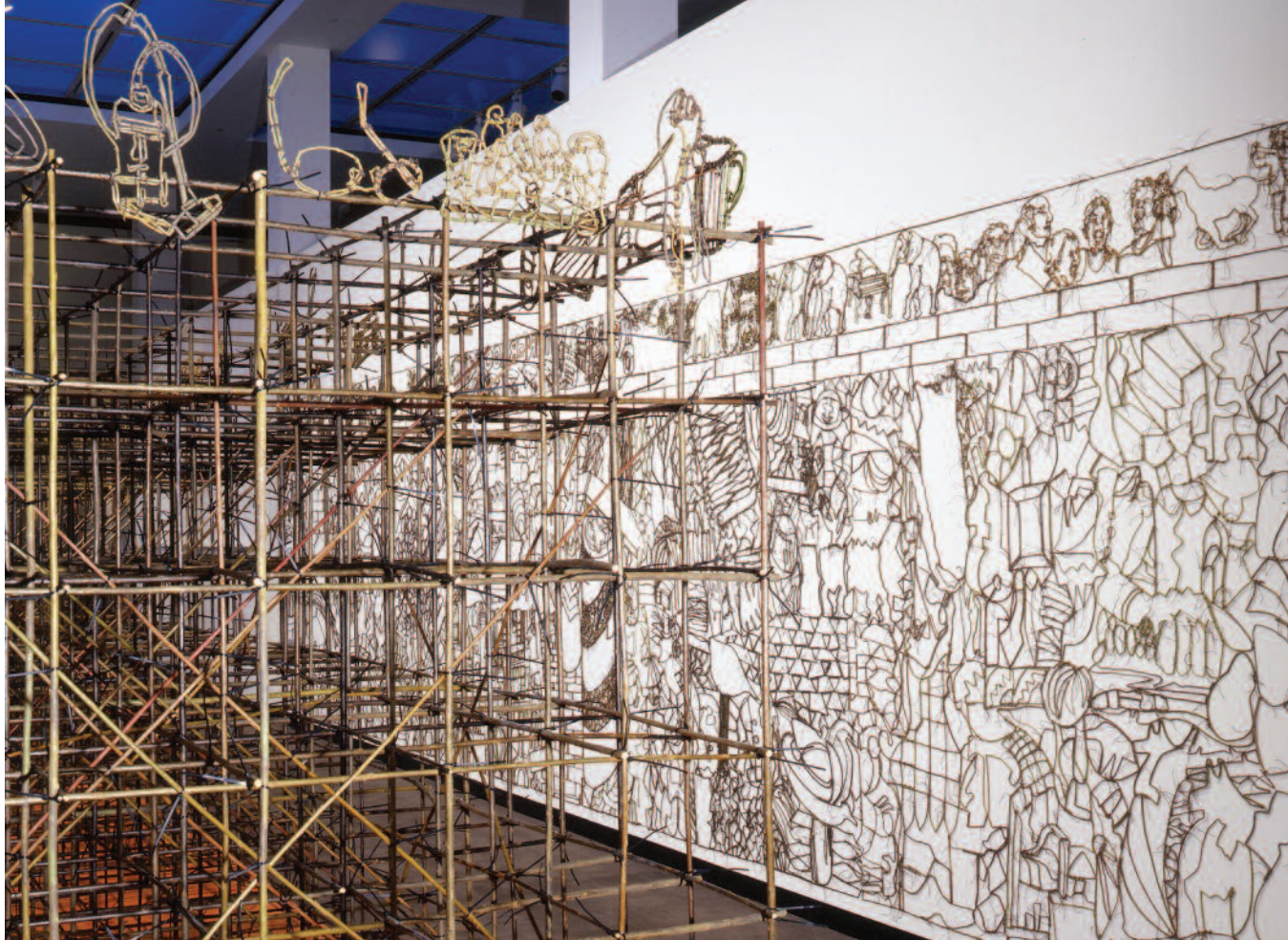
*CENTER: HELLA JONGERIUS Sample Blanket Repurposed fabrics, wool, polyester thread, needle-punch and embroidery, 2004. Shown courtesy of JongeriusLab.*



*RIGHT: Sampler (Germany or Austria) Detail, cross, back, straight, running, scotch, and tent embroidery stitches in silk on plain weave cotton, 19th century. Bequest of Marian Hague. 1971-50-156. Shown courtesy of Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, New York. Photo: Matt Flynn.*



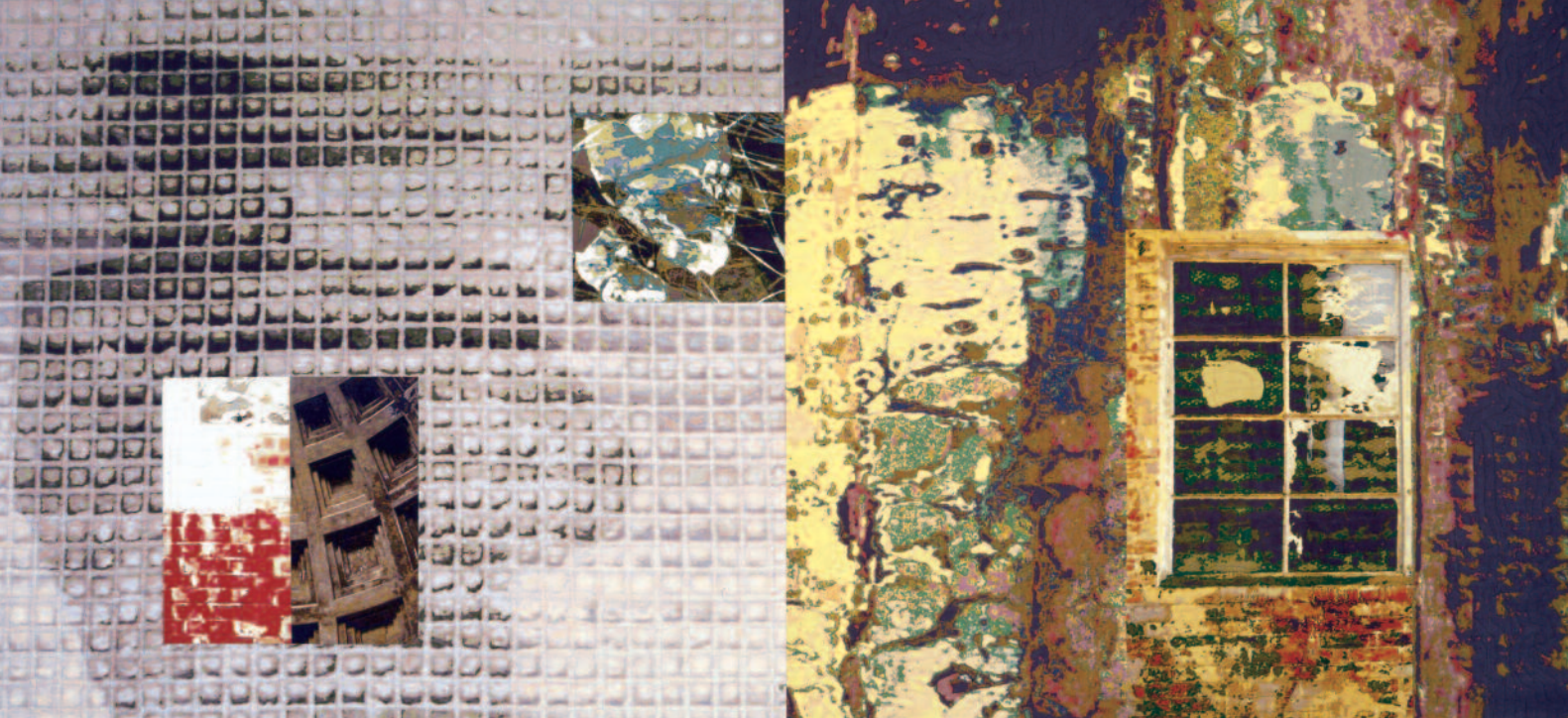




Installation view of *High Fiber: Recent Large-Scale Acquisitions in Fiber* at the Racine Art Museum, Racine, WI, 2012. On the left is **MICHAEL JAMES's** wall piece *Home Economics* (2005). In the center is **JEAN STAMSTA's Rift**, 1977 and *Progression of 10*, 1974 (right).

**ABOVE: JOHN MCQUEEN** *Table of Contents* Detail, willow, plastic ties, waxed string, wood, acrylic paint, chalk, and pencil, 45" x 573" x 45", 2004. Featured in *Drawing Out the Collection: John McQueen Responds to RAM* at the Racine Art Museum, Racine, WI, 2005. Gift of Sara and David Lieberman. Photo: Michael Tropea.





MICHAEL JAMES *Ghost Figure* Cotton, dyes, stitching, 36.5" x 78.5", 2005. Photo: Larry Gawel.

leaving some items only partially visible—as if she were still examining and sorting objects to make the final selections.

Jongerius was also commissioned by the Cooper-Hewitt to design a series of 10 original textiles titled *Sample Blanket*. These pieces featured images inspired by historic samplers that were cut out of recycled materials. The needle-punch technology used to join these collaged elements to the foundation fabric left an afterimage on the reverse. Jongerius further referenced historical handwork by embellishing the surfaces with machine embroidery.

During this time, the Racine Art Museum in Racine, Wisconsin, organized *Drawing Out the Collection: John McQueen Responds to RAM*. The artist was invited to curate an exhibition from the museum's contemporary basket collection and create new pieces that responded to this experience. McQueen selected 29 baskets by 25 artists who use varied materials and innovative techniques that appealed to him personally.

Curating inspired McQueen to create a site-specific installation of two large wall-mounted works that were topped with a frieze bearing images associated with museums and national landmarks. The centerpiece of this installation, *Table of Contents*, was a 48-foot-long sculpture consisting of willow twig scaffolding mounted on top of a series of painted museum shipping crates. Along the top of this superstructure, McQueen contrasted high culture by installing 170 realistically rendered willow sketches of everyday objects he found in an inventory of his household, including plumbing fixtures, tools,

and kitchen equipment. McQueen realized he did not collect art, but had actually collected a large number of objects for daily use. This visual inventory of the contents from his household became the actual subject of this largest sculpture McQueen had constructed to that date.

In 2006, *Material Response: Michael James at RAM* presented a grouping of large-scale textiles that resulted from James's experience mining RAM's collection. He viewed a great majority of works in all media, taking digital photographs of objects that intrigued him. In his studio, he manipulated this imagery on his computer, eventually printing cotton yardage. He pieced this fabric with other printed textiles to create a series of five quilted wall hangings. These were exhibited at RAM along with the artworks that first attracted James's interest.

The relationship between the object observed in RAM's collection and the new textile piece created by James is more direct in *Potsherds (after Ken Eastman)*, in which James's digital image of a glazed stoneware vessel by Ken Eastman from 1993 became an overall motif in his formal quilt. In other instances, such as *Ghost Figure*, he reproduced a 1981 monotype by Noboru Takayama, layering images so the original print became a visual background texture that is practically unrecognizable from its primary source. James created *Home Economics* after viewing a ceramic sculpture of stacked irons by Karen Thuesen Massaro. The quilt combines yardage of his own design depicting the soleplates of steam irons, altered photographs of plant patterns and border prints from WPA-era





ABOVE: **HELENA HERNMARCK** *Homage to Mary Kahlenberg* Wool, linen, vinyl, double weave with discontinuous tabby and manipulated inlay, 48" x 56.5", 2011.

BELOW: *Rug fragment*, tiraz, Egypt, Akhmim, 9th century. TM 73.618.

Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1950.

Shown courtesy of the Textile Museum, Washington, D.C.

textiles, along with text from a poem about ironing by Chilean author Pablo Neruda.

James's interests ranged from historical block-printed textiles to contemporary graphics to RAM's own architectural details. He was particularly pleased to locate graphics by Michael Mazur, whose print retrospective in 2000 had a major impact on him. In speaking directly about his process at the time, James said, "I'm interested in relating to the museum as a 'mine'—a place where the artist can dig and excavate, pulling out raw materials from other artists' deposits over time that reflect impulses/tendencies/attractions/affiliations the artist feels and senses, and that he/she can synthesize or reinterpret to personal ends."







*Panel* Detail, Egypt,  
9" x 3.25", 550-625. TM  
72.166B. Acquired by  
George Hewitt Myers in 1948.  
Shown courtesy of the Textile  
Museum, Washington, D.C.,  
2012.



**LIA COOK** *Coptic Manga* Cotton, rayon, handwoven on TC1 jacquard loom, double cloth variation  
and supplementary weft, 72" x 52", 2011.  
Shown courtesy of the artist and the Textile Museum, Washington, D.C.



Mining collections continues to be a popular theme for exhibitions. In 2012, the Textile Museum in Washington, DC, organized *Sourcing the Museum*. Guest curator and renowned textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen invited a diverse group of 11 major contemporary fiber artists, including Olga de Amaral, Jon Eric Riis, Warren Seelig, and Ethel Stein. Each person was asked to select one work from the museum's collection and respond to it by making a new piece. Installing these completed works alongside the historic example that served as inspiration helped demonstrate the thought process each artist undertook in adding a new subject matter, format, or technique to his or her studio practice.

As artists informed by their understanding of processes and materials, the participants in *Sourcing* were able to take pieces out of the contexts of time period and culture and more comfortably see them as purely aesthetic statements on par with contemporary works they themselves produce. A small 6th-7th century textile from Syria served as the inspiration for Lia Cook's large-scale *Coptic Manga*. Cook illustrated her jacquard work with faces that recall both figurative imagery from the Middle East and the imagery of Japanese manga comic books. Helena Hernmarck used a 9th century Egyptian rug fragment as her muse in creating *Homage to Mary Kahlenberg*, which depicts a photographically enlarged detail of this antique in a meeting of ancient and digital. Although these artists also used the museum as a visual resource, *Sourcing* was different in that it was a group exhibition in which each artist interacted with one object rather than focus on a larger number of works.

Many museums have reacted to the recession of 2008 by exhibiting more of their permanent collections to save on expenses. This move has been a gold mine for visitors who now enjoy glimpses of works long held in storage. It also bodes well for fiber artists as more are invited to delve into museum collections. This spring, the results of a new mining expedition will be on display at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. For *An Errant Line: Ann Hamilton–Cynthia Schira* (March 2–August 31, 2013), both artists will create room-sized, site-specific installations in the museum's galleries. They will respond to the way museums organize and maintain their material legacies in conjunction with a reinstallation of the SMA's permanent collection. The artists will also explore their former relationship as student and teacher (Hamilton studied with Schira), incorporating images of pieces and actual objects from the collection along with their own works.



Artists **ANN HAMILTON** (left) and **CYNTHIA SCHIRA** (right) work with objects from the Spencer Museum of Art's permanent collection in preparation for the 2013 exhibition *An Errant Line*. Photo courtesy of the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, Lawrence.

The fibers field has an extremely rich and varied tradition that is well-represented in American art and history museums across the country. For artists, collections can be a treasure trove of inspiration and research for the production of new bodies of work. For the public, artists' responses to museum collections expand an audience's level of understanding.

The museum mines are deep and rich with creative ore. In the right artist's hands, the products these collections help to produce can truly be golden.

Textile artist and educator Michael James will teach a pre-conference workshop and be a featured speaker at *inter•face*, the 17th International Surface Design Association conference in San Antonio, TX (June 6–9, 2013). To read the brochure and register online, visit [www.surfacedesign.org/2013conference](http://www surfacedesign.org/2013conference). James's quilt *Home Economics* is included in *High Fiber: Recent Large-Scale Acquisitions in Fiber* at the Racine Art Museum, Racine, WI (thru January 20, 2013), [www.ramart.org](http://www.ramart.org).

To learn about the other museums mentioned in this article, visit Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, [www.cooperhewitt.org](http://www.cooperhewitt.org); Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, [www.spencerart.ku.edu](http://www.spencerart.ku.edu); and The Textile Museum, [www.textilemuseum.org](http://www.textilemuseum.org).

—Bruce W. Pepich is the Executive Director and Curator of Collections at the Racine Art Museum in Racine, WI. In addition, he regularly writes and speaks about contemporary crafts and works on paper. In 2012, he was inducted as an Honorary Fellow into the American Craft Council's College of Fellows.