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History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep
Foundation Gift

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Thornton Dial (American, 1928–2016). History Refused to Die (detail), 2004. Okra stalks and roots, clothing, collaged drawings, tin, wire, steel, Masonite, steel chain, enamel, spray paint, 8 ft. 6 in

(New York, November 24, 2014)—Thomas P. Campbell, Director and CEO of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, announced today that 57 works by contemporary African American artists from the Southern United States have been donated to the Museum by the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from its William S. Arnett Collection. In addition to paintings, drawings, and mixed media works by acclaimed artists such as Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, and Nellie Mae Rowe, the major gift includes 20 important quilts dating from the 1930s to 2003 that were created by women artists based in the area around Gee's

Bend, Alabama.

“We are an institution dedicated to telling the story of art across all times and cultures, and this extraordinary gift is critical to that commitment,” said Mr. Campbell in making the announcement. “It embodies the profoundly deep and textured expression of the African American experience during a complex time in this country’s history and a landmark moment in the evolution of the Met.”

William S. Arnett, Founder and Chairman Emeritus of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, noted, “This collection documents a little-known tradition that began in the Deep South, likely during the earliest days of slavery. It evolved and appeared in the open when the Civil Rights Movement empowered these African American artists to let their previously hidden visual arts come out of the woods and cemeteries and be seen in the front yards and along the roads. Art lovers and cultural historians everywhere owe a great debt to the Metropolitan, where this historic work will now be seen alongside the current and past art of the world’s great civilizations.”

The artists in the Souls Grown Deep collection represent a unique tradition native to the deep American South that has made a transformative contribution to the history of contemporary art. Often without formal training, and facing economic insecurity and racial discrimination, these artists created profound works from both conventional art media and cast-off materials, giving visual power to a highly developed vernacular tradition that enriches an alternative to conventional narratives of modern art. The Souls Grown Deep Foundation is dedicated to documenting, researching, preserving, interpreting, publishing, and exhibiting this tradition.

Sheena Wagstaff, Leonard A. Lauder Chairman of the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Metropolitan Museum, said, “From Thornton Dial’s magisterial constructions to the emblematic compositions by the Gee’s Bend quilters from the 1930s onwards, this extraordinary group of works contributes immeasurably to the Museum’s representation of works by contemporary American artists and augments on a historic scale its holdings of contemporary art.”