

# Indelible Impressions From 3 Shows in Washington

There is plenty of art to see now in the nation's capital, but three exhibitions stand out: Bill Traylor's iconic drawings, Dawoud Bey's haunting portraits and the savoir faire of Senegalese women.

By **Holland Cotter**

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SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

## 'Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor'

The self-taught artist Bill Traylor was born into slavery in rural Alabama in the early 1850s, lived through the Civil War and Reconstruction, and on into Jim Crow. In his 70s, with much of his family gone north, he moved to the city of Montgomery, where he lived on the streets and slept in a local funeral home. After a decade there, in his 80s, he suddenly — or so it seems, because we know so little about his earlier life — started making paintings and drawings of the kind seen in the astonishing exhibition “Between Worlds” at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.



“Untitled (Man Carrying Dog on Object),” circa 1939-42.  
High Museum of Art, Atlanta

His materials were rock-bottom basic: pencils, poster paint and scraps of cardboard. The studio was the sidewalk. Before his death in 1949 he produced hundreds of works. Most were silhouette-style images of people, animals and buildings that referred to the world around him but had a dreamlike psychological charge. In them, hulking dogs are both guardians and predators. Human figures have a goofy, spindly comedic lilt but are often attacking each other. This is a world of instability, mistrust and aggression, an imaginative version, one guesses, of the history Traylor lived through.

With 155 such images, this show, which won't travel to other museums, is the largest Traylor survey to date. So buoyant and fresh is the look of the work that you could almost miss its dark undertow. Yet the reality that self-taught art can be an expression of radical self-knowing has rarely been more movingly demonstrated.

Through March 17. Eighth and F Streets NW, Washington, D.C.; [americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu).

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART

## 'Good as Gold: Fashioning Senegalese Women'



Necklace, gold-plated silver alloy, mid-20th century, in “Good as Gold: Fashioning Senegalese Women.” Franko Khoury/National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

A few years ago, I paid a visit to the Senegalese fashion designer Oumou Sy in her Dakar studio and got a lesson in a concept of chic that goes beyond mere lookism to encompass an ethic of self-presentation: high style as a civic virtue. The Wolof word for this ideal is “sañse” (pronounced sahn-say), and it's the operative aesthetic in this exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

The show is based on a collection of spectacular Senegalese gold jewelry given to the museum by the art historian Marian Ashby Johnson in 2012. Most of the elaborately filigreed necklaces, bracelets and earrings date from the 20th century. And although produced by male goldsmiths, they were often commissioned by women who had a hand in dictating designs. These discerning patrons certainly had in mind a conspicuous display of wealth and prestige. But they

were also conscious of preserving the past — some jewelry themes and techniques can be traced back to archaeological samples — and of keeping up with the global present. Visual motifs from Europe and South Asia, and from the Jewish and Islamic Middle East show up in various combinations.

It says something about the values such jewelry represented that gold itself was not always the crucial ingredient. For economically less fortunate wearers, superb designs made in cheaper materials — woven fiber, say — were acceptable substitutes. It was the spirit the design embodied that mattered most and entire couturial ensembles could be built around it. On commission from the museum, Ms. Sy has created such an ensemble — an extravagant gown and headwrap accented with gold galore — for the show. It's sensational. Fashion as public sculpture, I'd call it.

Through Sept. 29. 950 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C.; [si.edu/exhibitions](http://si.edu/exhibitions).

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NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

## 'Dawoud Bey: The Birmingham Project'



Michael-Anthony Allen, left, and George Washington in "Dawoud Bey: The Birmingham Project" (2012). National Gallery of Art, Washington

Over a 40-year career, the Chicago photographer Dawoud Bey has specialized in African-American portraiture and introduced his sitters into contexts that have not readily welcomed them before, namely traditional-minded museums like the National Gallery of Art in Washington, where this show is installed.

In the 1970s, Mr. Bey documented the citizenry of Harlem; in the 1980s, he took his camera to the streets of Brooklyn; in a 2005 color series called "Class Pictures," he made portraits of high school students and shook up the ethnic mix. In each case, he was recording a slice of social history as it was happening. Then in "Birmingham Project," in 2012, he turned to the past and brought it forward into the present.



Betty Selvage, left, and Faith Speights, from 2012. National Gallery of Art, Washington

The subject was a single traumatic event: the bombing, of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., on Sept. 15, 1963. Four black girls were killed; two boys died in the aftermath. White supremacists were responsible for the crime. But although Mr. Bey made the series on-site in Birmingham itself, he turned to the past. His sitters, all African-Americans, fell into two groups: young people who were the same age as the children killed in the bombing, and adults who had reached the age the victims would have been had they lived. For the series, he paired the life-size portraits, one young person with one adult, as diptychs.

Four such pairings make up the show, along with a split-screen video, titled “9.15.63.” On the video’s left-hand side, the camera pans in slow close-up over everyday interiors: a lunch counter, a barbershop. On the right-hand side, we see a continuous moving shot, taken from a car window, of treetops and buildings on a sunny day — sights that any one of the murdered children might have seen on their way to church on that September morning.

Unusually small, the show feels a bit like a teaser for the superb book-form survey of the artist’s career, “Dawoud Bey: Seeing Deeply,” published in September by the University of Texas Press. And there’s nothing wrong with that. Exhibition and book together make a powerfully tender package.

Through March 24. Constitution Avenue, NW, between Third and Ninth Streets, Washington, D.C.; [nga.gov](http://nga.gov).

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**Gentlewomen of the Forbidden City: The Power, the Intrigue, the Clothes** Sept. 20, 2018



**Ghosts of the Past, Embalmed in White Plaster** Oct. 4, 2018



**Stripes and Tangles of Neon, Under the Hamptons Sun** Aug. 1, 2018

