

Frida Baranek (b. 1961)

“I live with these things around me. There are a lot of industrial leftovers, and I thought I could do something with them.” – FRIDA BARANEK, 1993

Brazilian-born Frida Baranek uses heavy tools, mechanical equipment, and discarded industrial materials to create large sculptures. She transforms leftover steel sheets and tubes, iron wire, and even airplane parts into abstract sculptures that seem to resemble forms found in the natural world. These sculptures are often about contrasts. They look lightweight, like birds' nests for example, but are actually quite heavy. At a distance they appear to be made of sticks or other natural materials, but they are made from manufactured materials. Some works look unstable, like they might tip over easily, but they are actually quite solid and sturdy.

Baranek also explores certain social issues in her sculptures. By demonstrating that even industrial debris and other discarded materials can have meaning if reused and remade, Baranek's sculptures lie at the crossroads of two important issues in our world today: environmentalism and recycling. These ideas are particularly important in her home country of Brazil. In the past forty years, this largest of South American countries has experienced immense changes related to rapid urbanization and industrialization. Baranek is one of a generation of artists who are using industrial materials and commenting on the health of Brazil's environment and industrialization more generally.

Like many contemporary artists, Baranek is something of a “global citizen.” Since the 1980s, she has lived and worked in São Paulo, Paris, Berlin, and New York City.

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Jennifer Bartlett (b. 1941)

Jennifer Bartlett became one of the most well-known artists in the 1970s and 80s when her enormous painting, *Rhapsody* (1975–76), was shown in a gallery in New York. The painting was made from 987 twelve-inch-square enamel plates that had been prepared to look like graph paper, and installed like a grid that covered more than 150 feet of the gallery walls. In addition to its size, the painting was surprising because rather than representing a particular artistic style, it seemed to be an overview of many diverse historical styles, including Impressionism, Expressionism, Abstraction, Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptualism.

Bartlett studied art at Mills College in Oakland, California, and at the Yale School of Art and Architecture, where she met other artists who, like her, developed styles that were independent of Minimalism, which was predominant at the time.

Early in her career, in the late 1960s, Bartlett made the decision to limit her materials and process for the next few years by painting only on steel plates and the graph paper grid. She also followed strict rules for each work, using only dots of paint within the squares. The resulting work was unpredictable and sometimes playful. After several years of painting in this style she created *Rhapsody*, which broke many of her own rules—it was lushly painted and included recognizable objects—and set a direction for her new work.

In years following *Rhapsody*, Bartlett continued to paint using the grid on steel plates for which she had become known. She also worked with oil on canvas, printmaking, and sculpture. In her subject matter, she explored both abstraction and representation; some of her work shows houses, gardens, and water, while others are created solely of colorful dots painted on top of a grid.

In her most recent work, Bartlett incorporates text to create “word paintings,” in which words and phrases are painted on her signature steel plates. The words are built up with multi-colored dots, making them hard to read. But once deciphered, they are personal, poetic, and witty.

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Carol Barton (b. 1954)

“I try to find ways to push a book’s pages beyond their flat surfaces and to integrate a message into the book’s form, weaving visual and verbal narrative into the magic of a third dimension.” –CAROL BARTON, 2006

Carol Barton studied painting at Washington University School of Fine Arts in St. Louis, Missouri, and later moved to Washington, DC to work at Glen Echo Park Arts Center. There, after learning pre-press skills to start printing her own work, she received a small grant to create her first edition of artists’ books. She later became interested in adding pop-ups to her books and spent two years studying early sculptural and movable books in area library collections, such as the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution.

For Barton, artists’ books provide a flexible structure in which to combine various media, such as sculpture, painting, and printmaking, with her interests in text, imagery, and sequencing. The exploration of visual narratives and expression of time across the page of the book are key elements of her work.

Most of Barton’s work, one-of-a-kind books and small editions, incorporates movable elements. She says that her father’s career as a diesel mechanic probably inspired her interest in the mechanical and structural qualities intrinsic to movable books and pop-ups. Her introduction to an antique Italian carousel book, a layered book form that can be pulled into a circle for display or can be read like a traditional codex book, was another influence. She works with a variety of book structures, including tunnel books and accordion books, often incorporating pop-ups within the structures. Her book *Five Luminous Towers: A Book to be Read in the Dark* (2001), contains pop-up towers that glow when the pages open, lit from within by a battery-powered bulb hidden in the book’s spine.

Barton currently runs Popular Kinetics Press, serves on the faculty at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, and teaches bookbinding workshops at art centers across the United States. She received the Bogliasco Fellowship for a residency in Italy in 2000, and in 2001 was awarded a residency by the Sacatar Foundation in Brazil.

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Jennie Augusta Brownscombe (1850–1936)

Jennie Augusta Brownscombe's childhood sounds like a story illustrated in one of her detailed narrative paintings. She was born in a log cabin in the Pennsylvania countryside to a farming family. Brownscombe could trace her ancestors on her mother's side of the family back to a colonist who had arrived on the Mayflower and a great-grandfather who had been a soldier during the Revolutionary War. Brownscombe was proud of this heritage, and it may have influenced her later interest in painting scenes from America's early history.

Brownscombe showed artistic talent even as a young child, and her mother encouraged her to write poetry and to draw. She practiced her drawing talent by sketching classmates and flowers. Her father died when she was just eighteen, but Brownscombe was able to support herself and save money to attend art classes by teaching school for three years. Eventually she had saved enough to travel to New York City to pursue formal artistic training. She became a founding member of the progressive new arts organization, the Art Students League, in 1875 and later taught there. In the early 1880s she traveled to Paris to continue her studies and made regular trips to Rome thereafter.

Brownscombe's sentimental oil paintings celebrating rural family life and portraying events from American history were popular in the United States and England. Viewers loved her highly naturalistic style, which included picturesque details that helped them recognize the stories and emotions portrayed. Her paintings were often used to illustrate books and magazines and were regularly reproduced as affordable prints, Christmas cards, and calendars. Such wide reproduction of her art ensured that it was familiar in homes across the United States.

Throughout her lifetime, Brownscombe was able to support herself through her art and teaching. She never married, and she continued working until the end of her long life, completing her final large oil painting at age eighty-one after recovering from a stroke.

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Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614)

Lavinia Fontana is considered the first European woman to succeed as a professional artist. She had art training similar to that enjoyed by men, sought commissions, earned payments for her art, and even supported herself and her large family with income from her art. In sixteenth-century Italy, women were not allowed to apprentice themselves to master artists to study art seriously as their male peers could. Women who did become artists usually had a father or other male relative who was an artist. Fortunately for Fontana, her father Prospero was a successful painter who decided to teach her his craft. He had no son so it may be that he trained his daughter so that she could help support him when he could no longer paint.

Fontana's family life was unusual in many ways compared to other women in her time. Most young women who married had to provide their husband with a dowry. A dowry was a payment of money, property, jewelry, and other goods that would help the husband support his wife. Fontana was such a good painter, she did not have to pay a dowry because it was known that she would earn money through her art. Her husband was also an artist, but not as talented as his wife. He gave up his career to help Fontana in the studio and manage the family's accounts and household. As busy as she was painting, Fontana also gave birth to eleven children.

Fontana painted many portraits of the wealthy women of Bologna, where she lived. She also painted religious and mythological paintings. These subjects were considered unusual for women artists because they required knowledge of the human body and literature that few women had the opportunity to study.

Not only was Fontana a skilled artist, she was also a smart businesswoman. She chose her patrons, the people who purchased her art, as godparents for her many children. By doing so, she built a network of people who would purchase her paintings and could recommend her skills to others.

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Georgia Mills Jessup (b. 1926)

“Prolific, gifted, inspirational...Georgia Jessup has created a body of work so diverse, so ambitious, it seems impossible that one woman could be responsible for it all.”

–SUSAN CONNELL, 1989.

Georgia Mills Jessup was born in Washington D.C., to an artistically talented family. She was the thirteenth of eighteen children. Both of her parents were artists, and by the mid-1980s, twenty-nine of her family members supported themselves through the arts, including her brothers and two of her children.

Jessup had an early interest in art and was an apprentice to the W.P.A. artist Herman L. Walker while she was a teenager. She studied painting at Howard University, receiving her B.F.A. in 1959, and ten years later earned her M.F.A. in ceramics and sculpture from The Catholic University of America. She then continued her studies at The American University and the District of Columbia Teachers College.

Jessup works in a variety of media, including painting, collage, ceramics, wood, and stone, and textiles. She has also been active as a muralist. She credits her interest in working with clay to her ancestors, the Pamunkey Indians of Virginia, whose pottery tradition predates the settling of Virginia by many centuries. In subject and technique, the work Jessup does in different media is diverse, encompassing decorative and functional stoneware, sculpture, and abstract and representational paintings.

For many years Jessup taught art in the Washington D.C., public school system, later became its Art Supervisor, and founded the program “The World Is Your Museum,” which was the forerunner of the Capitol Children’s Museum. She received numerous awards and grants, including a two-year artist-in-residence from the Smithsonian Institution’s Anacostia Neighborhood Museum and a later residency at the Smithsonian Conference Center.

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Frida Kahlo (1907–1954)

Frida Kahlo is perhaps best known for her bold, unflinchingly honest self-portraits. Though often small, these images are visually powerful and create immediate emotional impact on viewers. For Kahlo, art, politics, life, and the self were interconnected, and she portrayed herself accordingly. In her paintings, she openly explored her physical and emotional suffering, as well as her family heritage, radical politics, devotion to Mexico, and fascination with natural processes. As a result, her art serves as a visual document of both her personal life and her public persona.

Kahlo was one of four daughters born to a German-Hungarian father and a mother of Spanish-Indian descent in the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacán. This dual heritage, with links to both Mexico and Europe, became a source of pride for Kahlo and an inspiration for her art. She originally planned a career in medicine, but her dream changed dramatically in 1925. She was seriously injured in a violent bus accident, which damaged her spine, pelvis, collarbone, and right leg so badly that she lived with chronic pain and endured numerous operations for the rest of her life. While bedridden for three months following the accident, Kahlo began painting to pass the time and escape the pain. Unable to sit up, she had an easel and mirror affixed above her bed so she could be her own model; self-portraits would dominate Kahlo's work throughout her career.

Even after she could leave her bed, Kahlo continued painting and settled on a career as an artist. She had little formal training, but found inspiration in the Mexican folk art she loved, incorporating its vivid colors and two-dimensional forms into her own painting. Kahlo drew on pre-Columbian art and Mexican folk art as sources for forms and symbols in her painting. In her daily life, she expressed her devotion to her Mexican identity through her clothing. She favored the distinctive dress of the Tehuantepec women of southwest Mexico and often wore and represented herself in the long, full skirt, embroidered blouse (*huipil*), and woven shawl (*rebozo*) of the region.

Kahlo married the famed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera in 1929. They shared much in the way of art, politics, and nationalistic loyalty; however their marriage was difficult and tumultuous. The couple traveled to the United States and France, where Kahlo met luminaries from the worlds of art and politics; she had her first solo exhibition in New York City in 1938. Kahlo enjoyed considerable success during the 1940s, and in 1953, a year before her death, Kahlo was finally honored by the country she loved so much when she received her first solo exhibition in Mexico.

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Lucy Martin Lewis (c. 1902–1992)

Lucy Martin Lewis lived her life as a resident of the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico. Acoma is located on a high plateau near Albuquerque. From the time Lewis was very young, pottery was a part of her everyday life. Historically among the Pueblo people, women have made and decorated pottery. Like many Pueblo women, Lewis learned her craft by watching and helping her female relatives (her mother and aunt) make and decorate pottery. She never took formal art classes.

Every step of making pottery requires dedication and hard work. Lewis gathered and prepared the clay for her pots. She made each pot by building up the form with coils of clay and then scraping and smoothing it. She covered the pot with slip (liquid clay) and polished it using water and a smooth stone. Lewis also gathered and ground pigment to decorate the pots, painted the complex designs free hand, and fired her pots outdoors. The high heat of firing hardens the clay and sets the decoration. Lewis became known for pots that feature fine, linear geometric patterns that she carefully fit to the shape of the vessel.

Originally, Pueblo pottery was used for ritual purposes or for practical needs, such as holding food or water. It was only within Lewis's lifetime that pottery came to be appreciated as art, and potters began to sign their pots to identify themselves as artists. Lewis began to sign her work in 1950, when she won her first award at the annual Gallup Intertribal Ceremonial. Because Acoma Pueblo potters traditionally did not sign their names, hers was an act of independence, and it generated controversy within the community.

Lewis's life was long and fruitful. Her remarkable energy enabled her to do household chores, help her husband with the farming, and raise nine children, in addition to creating art. In 1960, the artist was struck by lightning. Many thought that she would not be able to continue to work. Lewis gradually regained use of her muscles and limbs, however. She continued to pot well into her 80s. Some of her daughters and grandchildren also create pottery.

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Gabriele Münter (1877–1962)

Berlin-born Gabriele Münter began to draw as a child, but did not get much encouragement from her parents. Even her country seemed against her becoming an artist. Women in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century were still not allowed to enroll in official art academies, which trained men. Münter took private lessons and attended an art school for girls. She also spent time traveling in Europe and the United States.

An artistic turning point came for Münter when she began studying at the progressive Phalanx School in Munich. She met other artists, including the famous Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, and learned about all the newest ideas in painting. She and Kandinsky were impressed by each other's art. For almost twelve years, they were companions, traveling and working together.

Other influences on Münter's developing style came from the French painters called "the Fauves." She saw their works on a visit to Paris. These artists painted traditional landscapes, still-lives, and nudes, but they used bright, vibrant colors that expressed their emotions rather than reality. This expressive handling of color appealed to Münter. Back in Germany, she joined a group of artists called the Blue Rider. This group of artists also experimented with expressive color, as well as bold designs and heavy outlines (contour lines).

She settled in Switzerland during World War I, where painting proved difficult because she moved around so much. She did draw a great deal during that period and finally resumed painting in the 1920s when she had returned to Germany. Though the Nazi government frowned upon modern styles of painting like hers, Münter continued to work in the colorful, expressive style she had helped pioneer. Throughout her life she continued to be inspired by the beautiful countryside of southern Germany where she lived. She also painted portraits, still lifes, and interior scenes.

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Clara Peeters (1594–ca. 1657)

Clara Peeters was one of several women who pioneered in the field of still-life painting in the early seventeenth century. Her earliest dated works, small oil paintings from 1607 and 1608, were made when she was fourteen years old. The skill evident in these meticulously painted images suggests that she had trained with a master painter. By the time she was eighteen years old, she was producing highly detailed compositions that are among the best examples of European still-life painting of the period.

Little detail is known about her life except for records of her baptism in Antwerp in 1594 and her marriage in 1639. She is best known for her images of food and for her role in developing specialized categories of still-lives, such as breakfast pieces and banquet pieces, which were arrangements of exotic foods and valuable objects. Her complex compositions of objects with various textures, such as metal, clay, wood, fish, shells, and animal fur, showed her ability to represent multiple contrasting textures and highlighted her technical skill in rendering form and perspective. By 1620 Peeters was painting arrangements of simpler foods, such as bread, cheese, and olives.

Peeters frequently included symbols in her still lifes, representing the passage of time and the temporary nature of life on earth. These symbols, such as peeled fruit, overturned glasses, and flower petals eaten by worms, were clearly understood at the time and added meaning to the work that was appreciated by seventeenth-century viewers.

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Hollis Sigler (1948–2001)

“I decided that now I had to incorporate the cause, because as an artist I have an obligation to say something, to be responsible to my community.” –HOLLIS SIGLER, 1994

Hollis Sigler created paintings, prints, and drawings based on elements of her life and personal experience, often exploring the nature of human relationships. Early in her career she chose to work in a naïve, childlike style. She kept this drawing style and rich, bright colors in her later work as well, which helped make her difficult subject matter more accessible to viewers. Her imagery included written banners and colorful borders, and she often created decorative, painted frames with the title of the work handwritten around the edge.

The subject of much of her work focused on women's experiences of love, family, home, and illness. She often portrayed empty rooms and dream-like landscapes scattered with objects in the moments just following a dramatic event. Her scenes suggest the repercussions of the event, rather than the cause.

In 1985, Sigler was diagnosed with breast cancer; she had lost both her mother and great-grandmother to the disease. She underwent treatment, but the disease returned; from that point forward living with cancer became the primary subject of her work. In 1992, she began the series, *The Breast Cancer Journal*, which expressed her own journey as a breast cancer patient. The works incorporate personal diary entries and medical research written on the frames and borders of each piece, expressing her struggle, acceptance, and hope.

Sigler received numerous grants and awards during her life, including a National Endowment for the Arts grant for painting in 1987 and an Honorary Doctorate from Moore College of Art in 1994. She was a Professor of Art at Columbia College in Chicago for twenty years.

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Lilly Martin Spencer (1822–1902)

“I work at my painting from morning 'til night. [Cincinnati is] literally full of portrait painters...but I shall beat them all, I hope one day.” –LILLY MARTIN SPENCER

At the age of seventeen, Lilly Martin Spencer covered the inside walls of her Marietta, Ohio, home with charcoal murals: full-sized portraits of her family, a landscape, a woman baking bread, a child taking his first steps, and more. The local newspaper reported on the display, and the house became something of a tourist attraction. Spencer's supportive parents encouraged her interest in art and such displays of talent. A few years later, the young artist left her home to study with several professional painters in nearby Cincinnati. Spencer set up a studio there, showed and sold her works, and soon painted better than her teachers.

After she married in 1844, Spencer continued to work as an artist while her husband prepared canvases and frames for her paintings and handled business matters. He also helped run the household. The money Spencer made selling her artwork supported their ever-growing family. Spencer gave birth to thirteen children, though only seven lived to adulthood. In 1848, the family moved to New York City to be closer to the heart of the American art world. Over the years, they relocated to New Jersey and later to the Hudson River Valley outside New York City.

During Spencer's lifetime, there was a growing market for art to decorate homes. For many decades, her sentimental images of happy families, angelic children, and good-natured housewives were in great demand. Prints made from Spencer's oil paintings of family life sold widely. Her still life and portrait paintings also were popular with patrons. Sadly, toward the end of Spencer's life, the public's tastes had changed and her style was no longer appreciated. The artist lived out her final years in relative poverty, but continued to paint until her death.

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Alma Woodsey Thomas (1891–1978)

“You never know what you’re going to do unless you keep working. People come to me and say, ‘Tell me how to paint.’ I say, ‘I can’t. It comes from inside you. You have to expose yourself. Nobody taught me how to paint. I had to do it myself.” –ALMA THOMAS

Alma Thomas proved that a person is never too old to develop a new way of looking at the world or to become a famous artist. Thomas was in her 70s before she began painting in the colorful, abstract style for which she is best known. She was eighty when she had her first solo show at a major American museum.

Thomas was born in Columbus, Georgia, the oldest of four girls. She was a teenager when her family moved to Washington, D.C., seeking relief from the racial violence in the South. Though segregated, the nation’s capital still offered more opportunities for African Americans than most cities in those years. As a girl, Thomas dreamed of being an architect and building bridges, but there were few women architects a century ago. Instead, she studied art and spent the next thirty-five years of her life teaching art at a junior high school in the city. She was devoted to her students and organized art clubs, lectures, and student exhibitions for them.

Even while teaching, Thomas regularly exhibited her art, but critics paid little attention to these realistic compositions. Soon after she retired, while preparing for a new exhibition, Thomas developed her signature style of painting. While looking at a holly tree outside her front window, she noticed the shifting patterns of color and light through the leaves. Using small dabs of brightly colored paints, she made an image that called to mind the flickering light and rustling leaves she observed. She continued to paint large canvases filled with dense, irregular, abstract patterns. The colorful paintings were inspired by the landscape and even the American space program, which fascinated Thomas. For Thomas, the pursuit of beauty was a lifelong quest. “[M]y real belief is in art, in beauty. I say everyone on earth should take note of the spring...coming back each year, blooming and gorgeous.”

Thomas became an important role model for women, African Americans, and older artists. She was the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art. A lifelong political activist, Thomas offered weekly art classes to children from Washington’s poorest neighborhoods. In her 80s, neither a broken hip nor a heart condition kept her from painting.

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Claire Van Vliet (b. 1933)

“When you work by hand you have the luxury of time that allows the materials to tell you what they want to be...I search for the right action, for the yes.” –CLAIRE VAN VLIET, 2006

Born in Ottawa, Canada, Claire Van Vliet spent her early childhood in England, where her father served in the Air Force. While living in England she had a nanny who took her long walks every day “even if the weather was bad...so I was in the landscape a lot. I suspect that those walks were very formative experiences that left me with a life long love of nature.”

She lost both parents before she reached the age fourteen and lived with an aunt in San Diego, California. She graduated from high school at fifteen, attended San Diego State College, and received an M.F.A. from Claremont Graduate University in 1954.

In 1955 Van Vliet began Janus Press, where her work straddled traditional book making and the production of innovative book formats and structures. She has worked as artist, typographer, printer, binder, and publisher. To date, she has published more than one hundred limited-edition artists' books.

Van Vliet says three interconnecting elements drive her work—text, imagery, and materials. Her work is often inspired by music and the written word; she enjoys “orchestrating all the parts of the book—type, imagery, materials, format, and structure—in the service of the text.” She often works with other writers, artists, printers, and binders, finding that the collaborative nature of bookmaking pushes her work and expands her ideas. The bindings she creates for her books are varied, including traditional codex, accordion fold, stitched, woven, and other inventive forms that spring from and enhance the meaning of the book.

While perhaps best known for her books, she is recognized for her work in a wide variety of media, including drawing, watercolor, pulp painting, woodcuts, etchings, and other printing methods, techniques she incorporates into her book works as well.

In 1989, after thirty-five years of work, she was awarded a fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation.

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