



SStoried Strings

The Guitar in American Art

May 26–August 13, 2023

Combining a wide range of artworks and historically significant guitars, this exhibition enhances our understanding of how the instruments can reflect cultural attitudes and narratives shaping American identity. Organized by Dr. Leo G. Mazow, Louise B. and J. Harwood Cochrane Curator of American Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the exhibition offers a deep journey into the symbolism of the guitar, which Mazow considers to be a singularly democratic instrument: "Affordable, portable, and at home in all kinds of artistic and musical genres, the guitar can be likened to a microphone that gets passed around—across boundaries of race, gender, class, and geography—making sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and be heard."

Storied Strings is divided into thematic sections, some chronological and others focusing on motif, musical style, or aesthetic qualities. It starts with early depictions of people playing guitars at home, showing the cultivated tastes of middle- and upper-class families in the nineteenth century. When seen in these domestic settings, the instruments are often played by women, showing how the amateur pursuit of fine arts such as parlor music, needlework, and poetry was at the time associated with femininity. Charles Willson Peale's 1771 painting *The Edward Lloyd Family* shows a seated woman strumming the *cittern*—a European cousin of the guitar—while her husband leans forward, protectively hovering over his wife and child.

Throughout nineteenth-century art, amateurs playing for family and friends are shown alongside professional musicians who teach guitar or perform for pay in private recitals,

concerts, and community gatherings. A highlight is Thomas Hicks's painting *The Musicale, Barber Shop, Trenton Falls, New York*, a depiction of a racially nonsegregated musical group—a rare subject for an artwork made in the period just after the Civil War. Nearby is a selection of classic Martin guitars, showing the importation of guitar-making techniques from Europe to the United States by Christian Frederick Martin Sr., a German immigrant who established the first American guitar company in 1833.

The guitar's role in giving voice to working- and middle-class people across America is acknowledged in artworks and recordings relating to blues and folk music, which speak to the injustices, hopes, sorrows, and joys of everyday life. In *Jessie with Guitar*, Thomas Hart Benton—known for his portrayals of people and stories of the American heartland—depicts his daughter on her eighteenth birthday. Having already achieved some success as a professional folk musician, Jessie Benton was part of the Folk Music Revival in the 1950s (fig. 1).

Over a third of the works in the exhibition are by Black artists or depict Black musicians. An extraordinary example is Romare Bearden's luminous collage *Three Folk Musicians* (cover), which links the European guitar and the African banjo, a synthesis that is still at the core of much American roots music. The social message in this section is clear—guitars and voices combined can speak truth to power. Elizabeth Catlett's *I Have Given the World My Songs* is a searing depiction of a Black woman playing guitar in front of a scene of racial violence. A photograph by Danny Lyons shows Bob Dylan playing guitar alongside civil rights activists at the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee office in Greenwood, Mississippi. In these



Figure 1

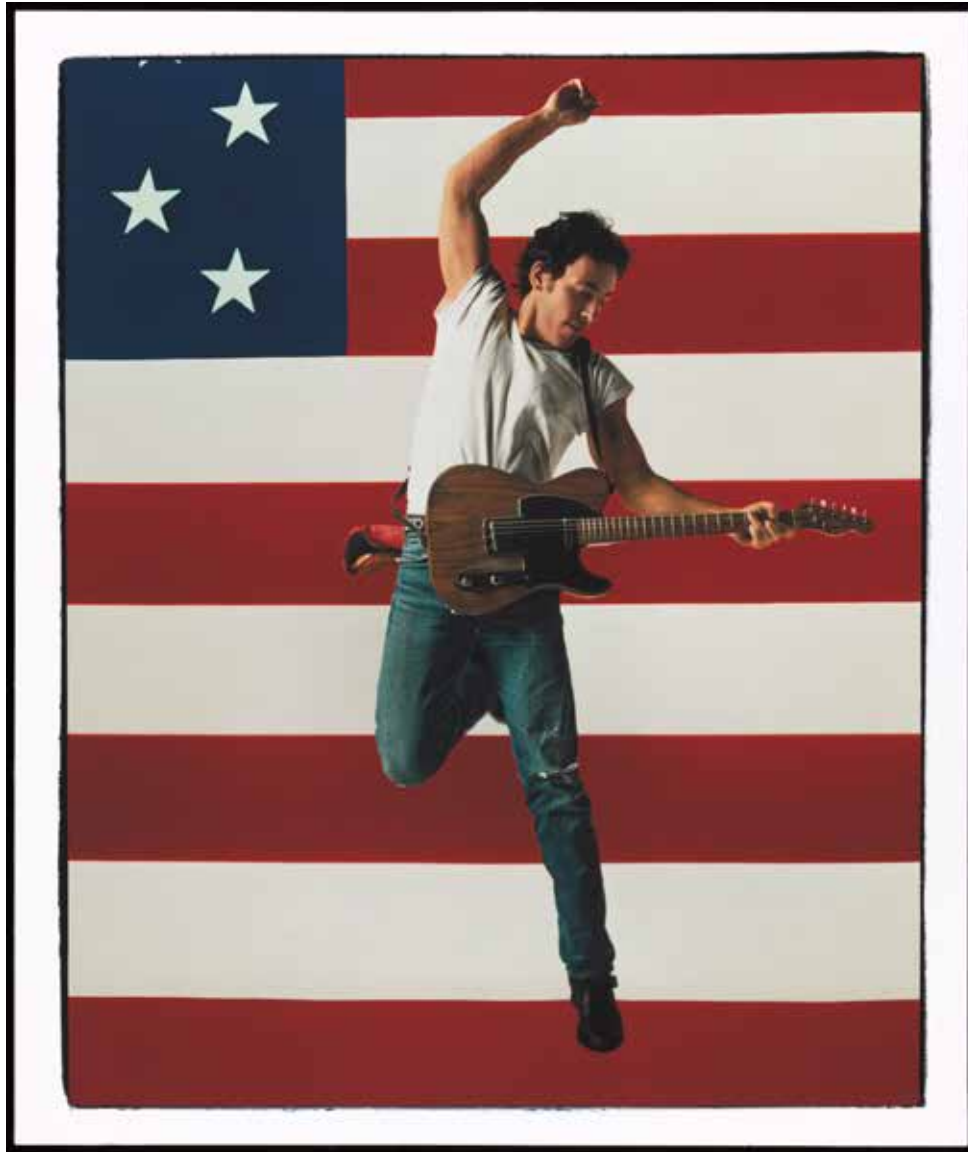


Figure 2

works, and in Annie Leibovitz's classic photograph of Bruce Springsteen taken during a photo shoot to promote his *Born in the U.S.A.* tour, the guitar is a symbol of resistance to an unjust world (fig. 2).

Throughout the exhibition, smaller groupings add texture to our story. The Hispanicization and Hawaiiiana sections reveal how guitars have been used to portray certain musical

styles and the people that play them as "exotic" for mainland audiences. Elsewhere, a selection of photographs and ephemera is dedicated to the iconic women of early country music such as Maybelle Carter, Loretta Lynn, and Kitty Wells, while another section showcases cowboy motifs, with video clips of Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, and Hank Williams playing western-tinged country music in the mid-twentieth century. The Frist's presentation of *Storied Strings* includes a performance photograph of queer musician Orville Peck, showing how the cowboy motif does not exclusively signify heteronormative masculinity (fig. 3).

Linked to the perception of the guitar as an instrument of the people, works in *Making a Living* show how guitars' affordability and portability have rendered them ready devices



Figure 3

for musicians at all levels of society looking to earn money. Early works portray blind guitarists playing for small change, often on the streets or sidewalks. On the other side of financial success, images of Dolly Parton on a tour bus, Webb Pierce and his guitar-shaped swimming pool, and William Eggleston's photograph of the guitar motif on Elvis's Graceland gates illustrate the gap between struggling street buskers and commercially successful artists. Between these two extremes is a photograph taken on Lower Broadway by Michael Ray Mott, which perfectly captures the flow of money in what may be the most guitar-centered street in the universe.

Commerce aside, there is something very personal about the guitar. In the Personification section, musicians are shown hugging or cradling their instruments like babies or lovers, the guitars' curvature echoing their own body shapes. The guitar as a human surrogate is evident in a photograph by Nashville-based photographer Steven Cross, which shows blues master B. B. King holding his guitar Lucille close, a joyful expression on his face as if the instrument is giving him the emotional sustenance normally provided by a loved one. Several works in this section challenge the correlations between guitars and passive femininity. Portraying guitar-wielding women as bold and self-confident, Sue Hudelson's *Julie* and Gregory Orloff's *Guitar Player* are a long way from early depictions of demure ladies playing guitars in their parlors. While the guitar may be seen as an anatomical extension of the player's expressive self, in Lonnie Holley's *The Music Lives After the Instruments Is Destroyed*, dismembered instruments suggest that even the destruction of the physical body cannot kill the human spirit.



Figure 4

With their dramatic angles, swooping curves, and shining surfaces, the bodies of electric guitars denote speed, power, and showmanship—traits often associated with “guitar gods” of rock and roll. In a selection of electric guitars dating to the genre’s early years, we see Telecasters and Stratocasters, a Gretsch Silver Jet, and other streamlined instruments, some of which were played by legendary stars such as Eric Clapton and Keith Richards. Turning more deeply to the origins of rock, on view in this section is Michael C. Thorpe’s quilt showing pioneering guitarist Sister Rosetta Tharpe, known to many as the Godmother of Rock and Roll for her fusion of blues, jazz, and gospel into what can only be described as a rollicking proto-rock idiom that influenced Elvis Presley and other musicians in the 1950s. Visitors will be able to hear some of Tharpe’s astonishing music in a video installed near the quilt.

A concluding section, *Aestheticizing the Motif*, explores the inherent beauty of guitars, as well as their place in abstract images where symbolic content is transformed into compositional elements. This section features hand-painted print collages by John Baldessari showing people holding electric guitars flatly rendered in pure hues, reminders of the photo-based imagery of much pop art (fig. 4). Elsewhere in the gallery, a video of Kaki King’s performance of her song “Surface Changes” shows an innovative combination of musicianship and projected imagery that conveys the dynamic interface of music and visual art in the twenty-first century.

Mark Scala
Chief Curator

ILLUSTRATIONS

Cover: Romare Bearden. *Three Folk Musicians*, 1967. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2016.336. © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. © 2023 Romare Bearden Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Travis Fullerton

Figure 1: Thomas Hart Benton. *Jessie with Guitar*, 1957. Jessie Benton Collection. © 2023 T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Figure 2: Annie Leibovitz. *Bruce Springsteen, New York*, 1984. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of John Stewart Bryan, by exchange, 2022.12

Figure 3: Lance Conzett. *Orville Peck at the Ryman Auditorium*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist. © Lance Conzett

Figure 4: John Baldessari. *Person with Guitar (Red)*, 2005 (edition 25/45). Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer. Photo: Aaron Wessling Photography. © John Baldessari 2005. Courtesy Estate of John Baldessari © 2023. Courtesy Sprüth Magers

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