

Let's Get It On: The Wearable Art of Betye Saar

Jan. 30 – April 27, 2025

Gallery exhibition casts new light on the way Betye Saar's early career in costume design informed her pioneering work as an artist.



CHICAGO—The Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society is pleased to present *Let's Get It On: The Wearable Art of Betye Saar*, on view January 30 through April 27, 2025. The exhibition offers the first sustained look at a pivotal moment in Saar's career, when a visit to Chicago's Field Museum in 1974 transformed the way she conceived of herself as an artist. A display of more than 60 objects – including a ceremonial robe from Cameroon, costumes and jewelry designed by Saar, drawings, photos, archival materials, and more – casts new light on the way Saar's early career in costume design informed her pioneering work in assemblage and installation.

Let's Get It On is presented as part of a series of exhibitions and events linked to [Panafrica: Histories, Aesthetics, Politics](#), a multi-year research project at the Neubauer Collegium that is exploring the connections between Pan-African politics and culture. The series includes *Project a Black Planet: The Art and Culture of Panafrica* (Dec. 15, 2024 – March 30, 2025), a major exhibition at

the Art Institute of Chicago that was informed by the research project and curated by members of the research team. Saar's work is featured in that exhibition, and she will participate in Panafrica Days (March 5–8), a constellation of discussions and performances across the city of Chicago jointly organized by the Art Institute, the Black Arts Consortium at Northwestern University, Chicago Humanities, and the Neubauer Collegium.

Born in Los Angeles in 1926, Saar originally trained as a printmaker and interior designer. She took an early interest in experimenting with the incorporation of prints on everyday objects and began exploring the sculptural possibilities of found materials after visiting a Joseph Cornell retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1967. "I immediately started collecting stuff after I saw that show,"



Saar told the *Los Angeles Times* in 2016. A breakthrough came with the box-size assemblage *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), which reclaims a racist mammy figurine as a heroic symbol of Black empowerment and feminist resistance.

Saar's 1974 visit to the Field Museum strengthened her interest in weaving together strands from her personal life, American history, and Afro-Atlantic symbolism. At the time she was a single mother raising three daughters in Los Angeles. She was earning a living as a costume designer and teacher at the Otis College of Art and Design (the celebrated painter Kerry James Marshall was a student), and she was also an active participant and organizer in the city's vibrant Black Arts Movement. In the spring of 1974, she helped a group of local artists affiliated with the movement raise funds for a trip to Chicago to attend that year's National Conference of Artists. Saar traveled with the artist David Hammons, and the two visited the Field together during that formative trip.



"The Field Museum was an important step in my development as an artist because I saw lots and lots of African art, Oceanic art, and Egyptian art... I had never seen that much," Saar recalled in 1990. A Bamum chieftain's robe with tightly rolled balls of human hair sewn into it — a centerpiece of the Neubauer Collegium exhibition — made a particularly strong impression on her. "It was so powerful, because not only was it a rough fabric and beautiful to look at, but it had a little bit of everybody on it," Saar remembered. "For me, even in a glass display case, it was almost like an electrical shock that came through that display."

Upon her return, inspired by the spiritually charged power of the African collection at the Field, Saar deepened her resolve to mine African symbols and rituals as part of her artistic practice. Her interest in costume design began to recede as she became increasingly devoted to developing new sculptural forms and visual language. In the ensuing decades, Saar became internationally renowned for the way her assemblages channel myth, magic, and memory to address the entangled legacies of racial and feminist struggles in America.

“With its strong connections to our Panafrica research project, *Let’s Get It On* exemplifies the Neubauer Collegium’s approach to integrating the arts and research inquiry,” said Tara Zahra, Roman Family Director at the Neubauer Collegium. “We are deeply honored by the opportunity to showcase these early pieces by Betye Saar in partnership with the Art Institute and the Field Museum, and thrilled to share new insights about how her work in fashion design helped to launch her extraordinary career as an artist.”

Let’s Get It On: The Wearable Art of Betye Saar is curated by Dieter Roelstraete and made possible by the Neubauer Family Foundation and the Brenda Mulmed Shapiro Fund. Additional support and partnership provided by Roberts Projects, the Field Museum, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

IMAGES

Betye Saar, *Saar Hand Banner*, 1968. Silk, fabric tape, ink, thread. 43.5 in x 31.5 in (110.49 x 80 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, CA. Photo: Paul Salveson.

Betye Saar, *Antigone (Blue Dress)*, 1969–1970. Mixed media collage on museum board. 18 x 12 in (45.72 x 30.48 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, CA. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

Betye Saar, *Cheetah Dress*, 1968. Silk, rayon, thread, zipper. 33.5 x 22 in (85.09 x 55.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, CA. Photo: Paul Salveson.

MEDIA INQUIRIES

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GENERAL INFORMATION

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Gallery hours: M–F, 9am – 4pm