



Hung Liu (American, born China, 1948–2021), *Black Madonna*, 2016, lithograph on paper, 33.75 x 26.5 in., Museum Purchase, The Trout Gallery, 2017.20. © 2024 Hung Liu Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Sojourner Truth, Ida Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Ella Baker. The work commemorates the contributions of these women to abolition, civil rights, and women's rights, while also holding up quilting, an art form traditionally defined as a woman's craft, as the collective bond uniting their endeavors.

Like Ringgold, contemporary artist **HUNG LIU** (American, born China, 1948–2021) champions strong, determined women in her work who have

overcome adversity and represents them, in Liu's words, "with reverence, sympathy, and awe." Liu's *Black Madonna* may not relate directly to her own experiences living under the rigid ideology of the Cultural Revolution in China, but she frequently was drawn to subjects that echoed her own challenges. In 1948, when Liu was a baby, her mother fled Communist forces on foot during a harrowing journey, determined to keep Liu alive, as her father was captured by Red Guards and imprisoned. Like most of Liu's work, *Black Madonna* was inspired by a photograph and conveys the monumental intensity of a mother's love for her baby as well as the quiet sacrifices endured for her child's protection and care.

From powerful meditations on past tragedies and complicated histories in the work of **SHAN GOSHORN** (American, Eastern Band Cherokee, 1957–2018) and **KÄTHE KOLLWITZ** (German, 1867–1945) to radical experiments in abstraction seen in prints by **LOUISE NEVELSON** (American, born Ukraine, 1899–1988) and **MINNA CITRON** (American, 1896–1991), this exhibition offers a diverse selection of works by over 20 women artists from the collections of The Trout Gallery and the Reading Public Museum.. Each artist presents her unique identity and historical perspective through very different styles and subjects. Collectively, the exhibition champions achievements and challenges injustices, inviting viewers to reassess social convention and redefine their perceptions of a "girl in slacks".

# GIRL IN SLACKS

WOMEN ARTISTS *from the*  
READING PUBLIC MUSEUM

NOVEMBER 1, 2024–JANUARY 25, 2025

This publication was produced in part through the generous support of the Helen Trout Memorial Fund and the Ruth Trout Endowment at Dickinson College.

Graphic design by Krista Hanley, Dickinson College Print Center

Cover Image: Barbara Morgan (American, 1900–1992), *Martha Graham - Lamentation (Oblique)*, taken 1935, printed c. 1980, gelatin silver print, 13 1/16 x 10 7/16 inches, Museum Purchase, 2012.20.5. Reading Public Museum, Reading, Pennsylvania. © Barbara Morgan Estate

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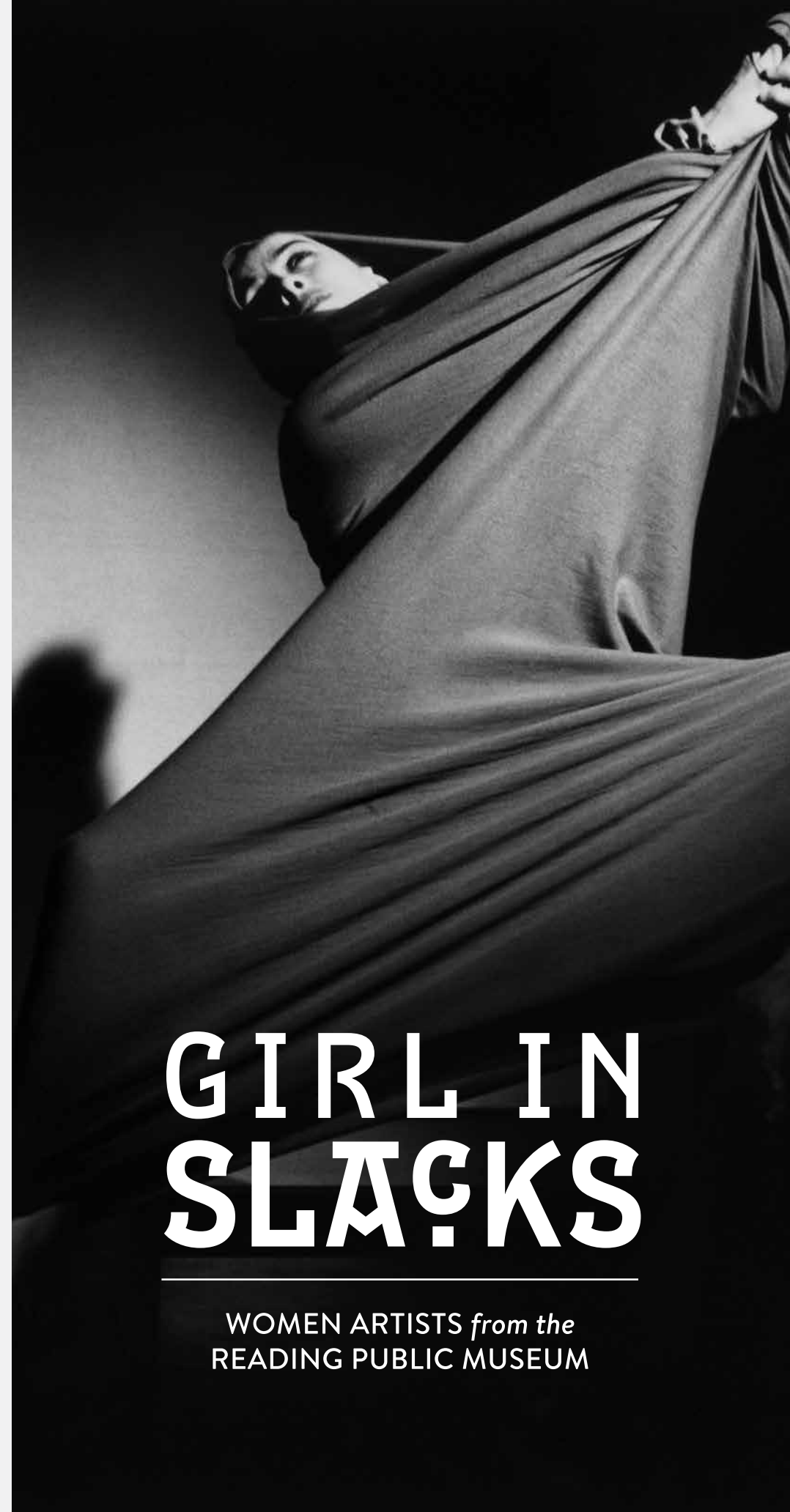
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## WOMEN ARTISTS *from the* READING PUBLIC MUSEUM

The title of this exhibition is borrowed from a small drawing by **ISABEL BISHOP** (American, 1902–1988), who is best known for depicting working women in the 1920s and 1930s. Following Bishop’s interest in progressive representations of gender and sexuality, this exhibition considers how western women artists over the last three centuries challenged conventions and faced issues of sexism, racism, and identity in their work. Until the twentieth century, women were frequently denied formal artistic training and often had difficulty showing and selling their work. Artwork created by women was automatically deemed inferior, and stereotypes traditionally associated women with crafts like textiles and decorative arts rather than what was deemed to be “fine art.” Even when women who possessed undeniable talents found success, they still confronted gender-based discrimination. It was not until the equal rights and feminist movements of the 1960s that women were finally free to study, teach, and explore art throughout the United States and Europe.



Isabel Bishop (American, 1902–1988), *Girl in Slacks*, ink wash drawing, n.d., 18 1/8 x 13 in., Gift of the Artist, Reading Public Museum, 1962.430.1

Under Renaissance Humanism a small number of women attained recognition as artists, though those who prospered were usually the wives or children of painters and were able to train in the family workshop. For example, the



Elisabetta Sirani (Italian, 1638–1665), *Holy Family with St. Elizabeth and St. John the Baptist*, c. 1650–1660, etching, 19 7/8 x 15 3/8 in., Museum Purchase, Reading Public Museum, Reading, Pennsylvania, 1970.69.1



Marie Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun (French, 1755–1842), engraving by Francesco Bartolozzi (Italian, 1725 – 1815), *L’innocence se réfugiant dans Les Bras de la Justice (Innocence taking refuge in the arms of Justice)*, 1783, 28 1/8 x 29 1/8 in., Museum Purchase, Reading Public Museum, 1968.219.1C



Rosa Bonheur, c. 1895–99, photograph in the public domain.

Italian artist **ELISABETTA SIRANI** (1638–1665), whose etching *Holy Family with St. Elizabeth and St. John the Baptist* is shown here, was the daughter of painter Giovanni Andrea Sirani of the School of Bologna. She apprenticed to her father at a young age, taking over the family workshop at 19 when her father became debilitated by gout. In doing so, she supported her entire family through her art alone. Later, Sirani opened a studio for women artists, a novel concept in the seventeenth century, even in progressive Bologna.

In the eighteenth century, artistic education began to shift from workshops to formal academies. Few women were allowed to attend these schools, and those who were admitted were still barred from studying the human body. Still, many female artists found success in their portraits, landscapes, and still lifes. The engraving made after a pastel drawing,

titled *Innocence Taking Refuge in the Arms of Justice*, demonstrates the success of **MARIE LOUISE ÉLISABETH VIGÉE LE BRUN** (1755–1842), who served as the portrait painter to Marie Antoinette. In 1783 Marie Antoinette aided in Vigée Le Brun’s acceptance into the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture.

During the nineteenth century, access to academies and formal art training continued to expand for women. French artist **ROSA BONHEUR** (1882–1899)

received much acclaim as a painter of animals, and she regularly visited farms, slaughterhouses, and horse fairs to study her subjects from life. In order to move more freely through stables and fields, Bonheur sought a police permit to wear men’s pants and cut her hair short. In addition to supporting herself financially and defying social conventions for women artists, she maintained long-term, quasi-matrimonial relationships successively with two women.



Violet Oakley (American, 1874–1961), *For the Preservation of Italy, Guardian of the World’s Most Precious Heritage of Beauty*, 1918, ink on paper, 21 1/8 x 17 1/4 in., Gift, Captain Roswell C. Williams Jr., Reading Public Museum, 1934.61.35.15.

Early in the twentieth century, women’s rights and opportunities could be seen as expanding, particularly with the women’s suffrage movement. Artist **VIOLET OAKLEY** (American, 1874–1961) who completed a major public mural commission for the Pennsylvania State Capitol, championed women’s suffrage and also was the second woman hired as a faculty member at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Despite these social and political gains for women, as well as the fact that Black women were active participants in the women’s suffrage movement, the nineteenth amendment did not guarantee universal suffrage. It was not until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that racial discrimination in voting practices was banned.

These realities of intersectionality, namely overlapping social identities such as gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, and other markers of identity impacted by systems of discrimination and oppression, were addressed directly by many women artists in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. **FAITH RINGGOLD** (American,

1930–2024), for instance, highlighted the lives of eight prominent Black women in *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*. Included in this imagined scene of celebration and community are Madam C.J. Walker,



Faith Ringgold (American, 1930–2024), *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*, 1996, nine-color lithograph on paper, 22.75 x 30.5 in., Gift of The Dickinson Club of Washington, The Trout Gallery, 1996.3. © 2024 Faith Ringgold/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York