



OCTOBER 2019

# STARRY SKIES

*Plantation*, 1980 | Elizabeth Talford Scott



Elizabeth Talford Scott. *Plantation*. 1980. Cotton ground; cotton, wool, and synthetic blend appliqué, cotton and silk embroidery threads, metal needle, cotton lining. 68 1/2 x 74 1/2 in. (174 x 189.2 cm). The Baltimore Museum of Art: Collectors Circle Fund for Art by African Americans, Baltimore Appliqué Society Fund, and purchased as the gift of the Joshua Johnson Council, and Mr. and Mrs. Irvin Greif, Jr., Lutherville, Maryland, BMA 2012.226. © Estate of Elizabeth Talford Scott

A square white quilt virtually explodes with numerous colorful stars. Each star is unique, varying in the fabrics used, the color and character of the stitching around them, the knotting and other embellishments, and the number of points. Some are crisply geometric and some are softly organic. At the center is what appears to be a red and purple star bursting with energy as new stars perhaps emerge from its interior. This is "the mother of the stars," considered by the artist to represent life force and freedom.

Elizabeth Talford Scott (1916–2011) was born and raised in Chester, South Carolina, where she lived on a former plantation on which her grandparents had been enslaved and her parents later worked as sharecroppers. She moved to Baltimore in 1940. In Chester, she learned the art of quilting from family members, but it was after she retired that she began to invent most fully as she did in unique and powerful quilts such as *Plantation*. In this work, Scott references the constellations that guided enslaved African Americans on their quests for freedom, and also the Great Migration of African Americans across the 20th century from the South to northern American cities as they set out to create a more just future.

*Plantation* captures two distinct viewpoints. One viewpoint looks down, imagining the fields of the former plantation where Scott grew up. Stitching maps the features of the plantation, with rows evoking the planted fields. The other perspective looks up at the stars from the land below. The artist observed, "These stars back home were very precious to me. They gave us so much light. They lit our way home at night. They lighted up the porch. They even seemed to give off heat and warm us."

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Ask students to look closely at the image of *Plantation*. Have them research the historical significance of natural features (stars, rivers) in the efforts of enslaved African Americans to navigate to the north. Which other artists have referenced the same history through their own work? How have they approached the topic? What medium did they use?

After looking closely and discussing *Plantation*, ask students to observe natural phenomena during the week and record some of their observations. (These may include the changing colors of leaves, the colors of a sunset, or clouds before a storm.) Using colored paper, have students create a paper "quilt" collage that reflects on the natural phenomenon of their choice. How did they choose to depict this phenomenon? What is its meaning to them?

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*Plantation, 1980*

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