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Baltimore

THE TRAILBLAZERS

From Politics to Public Health, Sports, Art, Film, and the Humanities:
Six Baltimoreans Who Changed Everything



Clockwise from top left: Kurt Schmoke, Brooks Robinson, Carla Hayden, John Waters, Barbara Mikulski, and Joyce Scott.

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JOYCE SCOTT

By Leslie King Hammond

JOYCE J. SCOTT IS A WEST BALTIMORE-BORN and -educated sculptor, jewelry maker, quilter, lecturer, accomplished singer, and performance artist whose creative journey has been nothing short of astounding. As I began my scholarly art history career, Joyce and her mother, Elizabeth Talford Scott, a legendary quilt and fiber artist, provided me with master classes on the transmission of African Diasporic aesthetic traditions and how the retention of those traditions is essential to the expansive legacy of American art and culture. A natural teacher and mentor to younger and emerging artists, Joyce intentionally chose the path of a self-employed artist to safeguard the integrity of her mission and the meaning behind her distinctive aesthetic.

Her multimedia artistry celebrates iconic s/heroes as it fearlessly confronts injustice, racism, and homophobia, and contests the histories and mis/representations of marginalized people. An empath, Joyce is committed to agitating sensibilities in hopes her communities and audiences will become more consciously “woke” and responsive and responsible to the well-being of all humankind. She began to address the enormity of these issues with the most humble of materials—a bead and button; needle and thread—and evolved into an incredible change agent, as acknowledged by a MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant in 2016 and a Johns Hopkins University honorary doctorate in 2022.

Also gifted with an outrageous, raucous, bewitching, hilarious, and nutty charm, Joyce loves to lasso unsuspecting individuals into spontaneous jokes, songs, and riotous impromptu performances at any time of the day—or wee hours of the morning. Once while presenting a paper at a University of Paris conference, as I described Joyce’s colorful personality, several hands from the audience flagged my attention. Thinking there were questions, I inquired about their concerns. Instead, someone in shouted in agreement, “I have been abused, too!” The French audience howled with laughter. Her persona is akin to the revered, and sometimes feared, trickster deities who play critical roles in global cultures, especially in African-Diasporic and Indigenous-American belief systems. In this way, in her work and her being, Joyce functions as a powerful disruptor, a brilliant situation-inverter, hyper-sensitive to everything in view as she critiques questionable moralities through her artistry.

My first encounter with Joyce occurred in the mid-1970s, when I was completing my art history doctorate at Johns Hopkins University. Walking across campus to a local art fair, I saw a woman who had wedged herself between two “legitimate” vendors with a huge display case on her lap. My curiosity led me to her jewelry of beads and repurposed buttons, beautiful work which immediately fascinated me, and before I knew it, I’d fallen into her witty trap. She waxed on about being a single parent with five children, needing money for support, food, clothing, supplies—everything, in other words. Instantly, I realized I was in the company of an original artist in theatrical presentation. Several weeks later, sitting on our marble steps as my husband, O’Neill Hammond, washed his antique car, she unexpectedly came

walking down the street. O’Neill and Joyce, it turned out, were classmates at Maryland Institute College of Art. We quickly became fast friends and, as our relationship grew, Joyce pulled together an entire sisterhood of women in the arts known as The Girls of Baltimore—a posse that includes Linda DePalma, Oletha DeVane, Ellen Burchenal, Patti Tronolone, Linda Day Clark, Amy Raehse, and Lowery Sims—all of whom have continued to work together on significant local and national projects for more than 30 years.

When she received her MacArthur Fellow recognition, Joyce called it “truly a Baltimore award.” “It shows that someone can have a profound voice in the arts and still live in her community,” she said, and that, “great things can happen to you right where you are.”

Yet, be cautioned. Should you ever meet Joyce, be on guard. You, too, might just become the next target of one of her wild performative interventions!

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Leslie King Hammond is the founding director of the Center for Race and Culture at the Maryland Institute College of Art, where she is also graduate dean emerita.

