

# FORT GANSEVOORT

artnet

## Aminah Robinson Left Her Art to an Ohio Museum. Now It's Going on a Grand Tour

Two major shows could vault the influential Columbus sculptor to a new level of recognition.

By Eileen Kinsella - January 10, 2025



Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson. Photo courtesy of the Columbus Museum of Art.

If you are not already familiar with the work of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson—a prolific, influential, and largely self-taught artist from Ohio who died in 2015 at the age of 75—you may be in for a revelation this year.

An eye-opening show, “Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson: Character Studies,” is on view now at the Fort Gansevoort gallery in New York’s Meatpacking District. The gallery, run by dealer Adam Shopkorn, represents Robinson in the U.S., and is working to draw attention

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to her, along with the Columbus Museum of Art, to which the artist bequeathed all of her work and personal effects, including her home-studio in that Ohio city. The CMA will also be sending a touring exhibition, “Aminah Robinson: Journeys Home, a Visual Memoir,” to three U.S. museums this year, with more stops to follow. Both shows present deep dives into various aspects of her multi-faceted seven-decade career.



Installation view of “Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson: Character Studies” at Fort Gansevoort, New York.  
© Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson Trust. Courtesy of the Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson Trust, Columbus Museum of Art, and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

“Character Studies” includes drawings, paintings, sculpture, puppetry, music boxes, handmade books, textile-based pieces, and poetry, in which Robinson reflects on themes of family and ancestry, often through the lens of ordinary, found objects and everyday tasks. The art blends her personal experiences—including characters from her childhood home in Poindexter Village in Columbus, one of the country’s first federally funded public housing developments—with broader narratives of the African American experience throughout history, including her great-aunt Cornelia Johnson’s tales of slavery.

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Shopkorn said that he first came across her work—two monumental quilted pieces that she worked on for long stretches—on the website of the Underground Railroad Museum in Cincinnati, several years ago. “The work never really ended,” he said. “She worked on them for decades at a time and they were still never really complete and could always be added to. I was enamored with what I saw... I just kind of got the Aminah bug.”

He was referring to *RagGonNon* (completed in 2004), which is comprised of two tapestries, *Journey I* and *Journey II*, that tell the story of the artist’s ancestors and their forced relocation from West Africa across the Atlantic Ocean to the U.S. “Once freedom came to enslaved people, Aminah’s journey takes you to her birthplace—Columbus, Ohio,” according to the museum website. The *RagGonNon* shows images of Robinson’s childhood and the games she played, following her all the way into her adulthood. The title refers to the artist’s philosophy, to “rag on and on and on,” no matter what, and also alludes to her view that complex artworks continue to evolve by way of viewers’ contemplation.

The figurative sculptures at Fort Gansevoort feature heads fashioned from “hogmawg,” a term (picked up from her father) that she used to describe the clay-like material she wielded in her sculptures, made primarily from a mix of mud, sticks, pig grease, lime, and glue. The figures are decorated with human hair, button eyes, and outfits that consist of repurposed clothing and other handcrafted decorations. One tabletop sculpture, *Brownskin Man* (1997), was based on a local street vendor who was a fixture in the artist’s childhood. The Columbus Museum loaned it to the show.

*Brownskin Man* sports a checkered-print cap and matching coat, sewn to fit his small frame. Multicolored cloth sacks hangs from his figure, representing the vessels in which the vendor carried his pork rinds for sale, also known as brown skins.



Installation view of “Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson: Character Studies” at Fort Gansevoort in New York. © Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson Trust. Courtesy of the Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson Trust, Columbus Museum of Art, and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

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Though Robinson may not be a household name, she never labored in obscurity. A traveling retrospective of her work made stops at the Brooklyn Museum, the CMA, and other institutions between 2002 and 2007, and she won a MacArthur “genius” grant in 2004.

“It’s a wonderful history that has sort of evolved over the years,” Deirdre Hamler, the director of the Aminah Robinson Legacy Project at the CMA, said of the artist’s career. “It started with her being enamored with the museum as a child. She was a visionary early on, and always aspired to be at the museum. As a young Black girl from the 1940s who lived in the neighborhood, she was able to go into the museum to see art and also took classes.”

By the time Robinson was in her teens, one of her art pieces was featured in *Seventeen* magazine, Hamler said. She also exhibited her works at the Ohio State Fair.

Hamler said that the last few years have involved “a long process of determining how to manage this trove,” and that the museum’s working relationship with Fort Gansevoort has helped.

Shopkorn painted his gallery’s walls a brilliant deep shade of red, Robinson’s favorite color, for the exhibition and said that museums have been expressing interest in acquiring works from the show.

Prices have been set somewhat conservatively. Shopkorn said that drawings from the 1960s and ’70s start at \$4,500 and run up to \$11,000, while some paintings on paper (some of which are eight feet tall), run up to \$35,000. The most important sculptures in the show run up to about \$50,000. (There are no records of her work selling at auction in the Artnet Price Database.)

Proceeds from the exhibition will support the Legacy Project, as well as a residency program for African American artists and writers that she developed at her former home and studio in Columbus, conservation of her work and workplace, and related museum exhibitions and educational programming.

“Having this opportunity to steward her legacy is really special,” the CMA’s director, Brooke Minto, said in a phone interview. “Her legacy is really special. It also allowed us to delve deeply into the history of Columbus and the region, and the way in which the city has evolved.” Minto noted that many artists in the area counted Robinson as a teacher and a mentor.

“In some ways the museum had its marching orders,” Minto said. “Robinson was really clear about the work continuing to be available in the market for the purpose of supporting younger artists. It was the museum’s charge to figure out how to make that happen.”

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*“Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson: Character Studies” is on view at Fort Gansevoort in New York, through January 25. “Aminah Robinson: Journeys Home, a Visual Memoir” will be on view at the Springfield Museum of Art in Ohio from February 1 to July 13, before traveling to the Newark Museum of Art in New Jersey from October 16 to March 1, 2026, and the Mobile Museum of Art in Alabama from March 26, 2026 to January 9, 2027. Two remaining venues will be announced later in the year; the full tour will run through 2028.*



Installation view of “Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson: Character Studies,” at Fort Gansevoort, New York. © Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson Trust. Courtesy of the Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson Trust, Columbus Museum of Art, and Fort Gansevoort, New York.