

Exhibition Teacher Resources for Middle and High School

Penny Sisto at 80

February 3 - April 9, 2022



About the Artist and Exhibition

Penny Sisto is an internationally recognized artist who has exhibited throughout the United States and abroad. International presentations of her work include the exhibition of a grouping of Holocaust quilts at the Gatehouse of Auschwitz and a selection of her *Slavery* series quilts that were displayed at the Royal Armories Museum in Leeds, England in 2008. She has won numerous awards and honors for her artwork and has been the subject of two public television programs. She is known for the difficult subjects, such as AIDS, poverty, and racism that she addresses in her works, as she advocated for social justice and peace.

Born in the Orkney Islands off the northern tip of Scotland, Sisto began learning how to sew at age three. As an adult she worked for the British Ministry of Overseas Development, utilizing her skills as a midwife to aid in health clinics for the Maasai, LuBukusu, and Kikuyu tribes of East Africa. Her time in Africa inspired her to combine the quilting, embroidery, and applique techniques she learned from her grandmother with the beading and collage methods of her African friends, resulting in the distinctive style seen in her work today.

Penny Sisto has received many commissions for quilts, including four works at the Abbey of Gethsemane, of which a 28 x 9 foot quilt entitled *Risen Christ* hangs at each Easter season and for funeral services. Some of the other collections containing Sisto's works are: Sisters of Charity, Sisters of Loretto, Thomas Merton International Studies Center, Spalding University, Kennedy Family, and the Peabody Essex Museum in Massachusetts. Selected grants the Penny Sisto has received include: Kentucky Foundation for Women, Indiana Arts Commission, Mater Fellowship, New Directions, and Southern Arts. In 1993 she was awarded a Baha'i Peace Award for Arts Promoting World Peace because of her promotion of peace and justice through her work.

Penny Sisto at 80 is an exhibition of recent works by the venerated New Albany fiber artist. The works seen here reveal a return of the artist's focus to well-loved subjects from her decades-long career as an artist and midwife: powerful women, mothers with children, goddesses and other spiritual figures—all assembled from scraps of fabric and adorned with her signature diamond-like sewn details.

In addition to thirty of her newest works, the exhibition will include film footage of Sisto's personal morning routine, as well as the artist's first quilt, stitched when she was a child in 1948 with household materials. In *Penny Sisto at 80*, the circles that form the number 8 remind us that aging, and the passage of time, is not a straight line from beginning to end. A deeply spiritual number in many of the world's religions, the number 8 looks like an hourglass upright, but viewed sideways, it is a symbol of perpetuity and opportunity for rebirth. Looking at the whole of the exhibition Sisto notes, "Now, when I look at this series I feel only gratitude. Gratitude and a faith in putting one foot in front of the other, one stitch in front of another even into Infinity."



Questions for Viewing and Discussion

The following questions can be used to guide viewing and discussion of any of the paintings or drawings in the exhibition.

- What is the first thing that you notice about the quilt? Why do you think the artist chose to include this in the quilt?
- What feelings does this piece of art bring out for you?
- What can you learn about the artist from viewing this exhibition?
- How does the imagery used in these works relate to the idea of aging?
- What is your favorite work in the exhibition and why?
- What questions would you like to be able to ask the artist to know more about a specific quilt or the exhibition as a whole?



Crow's Nest, 2021 - 52" x 40"

Activities

Soliloquy Writing (English/Language Arts)

Penny Sisto's work has a narrative quality to it. After students have toured the exhibition they will choose one of the pieces that has a human figure and will compose a soliloquy that figure would recite. A soliloquy is defined as "the act of talking to oneself" or "a poem, discourse, or utterance of a character in a drama that has the form of a monologue or gives the illusion of being a series of unspoken reflections." With this activity they will express their thoughts and feelings of that person or figure and give them a story. Students will need to take time to observe the colors and the scene present in the work and try to take on the role of the figure to create their soliloquy. This will give students a chance to connect with the artwork on a deeper level.

Influential Person Spotlight and Collage (English/Language Arts and Art-Making)

Many of the subjects of the quilts that Sisto makes are influential people either in her life or in society at large made to look almost as a spiritual being. Have students choose someone of power or importance in their own lives and write a spotlight or short biography of them. Students will create a collage of that person that shows them in a spiritual light. Students can create a physical collage or use digital software to create their collage. See the link below for a video guide made by a technology teacher on creating a digital collage using [Google Drawings](#) but other software could be used as well.

Spirituality and the Number 8 (Social Studies)

Spirituality and the number 8 play significant roles in this exhibition. It is Sisto's 8th show at the Carnegie and the symbolism of the infinity sign in the title of the show. It also holds a place of import in many different spiritual and religious groups around the world. In conjunction with a World Religions unit, have students view the quilts in the exhibition and the conduct research on the number 8 and its significance within different groups such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, etc. Once they have done their research, have students write a 1-2 page report on this significance and its connection to the exhibition, either a specific work or the exhibition as a whole.

Henges and Standing Circles (Social Studies)

Standing circles dot the landscape of Penny Sisto's native Scotland. These mysterious "henges," believed to hold spiritual significance, have intrigued people for millennia. Have students research a standing circle such as Stonehenge, the Stones of Stenness, the Ring of Brodgar, or other henges in the British Isles. Create a poster or presentation about the history of the henge and its significance to the people who live by it today and those of the past. Have students present to the class or display their poster so that others can learn about these neolithic structures.



Additional Resources and Related Artists

Penny Sisto at 80 Webpage

<http://www.carnegiecenter.org/exhibitions/penny-sisto-at-80/>

Information from the Carnegie Center about Penny Sisto at 80 as well as other events at the museum

Penny Sisto

<http://pennysisto.com/>

Website of the artist with information about her and houses some of her completed works

"In the Fullness of Time" Louisville Magazine Article

<https://archive.louisville.com/content/penny-sisto-louisville-fabric-artist>

CONTENT WARNING: Sexual abuse, language

Bisa Butler

<https://www.bisabutler.com/>

Tabitha Arnold

tabithaarnold.com

About Us

The Carnegie Center for Art & History is one of Southern Indiana's cultural cornerstones. Housed in New Albany's original library building, the Carnegie Center has ongoing exhibits about the history of the Underground Railroad in the region and the remarkable life story of celebrated Civil War nurse Lucy Higgs Nichols. The Carnegie also features rotating exhibitions of contemporary local, national, and international art in a wide range of visual mediums, as well as many opportunities for hands-on learning.

As a branch of the Floyd County Library, the Carnegie Center supports the growth and creativity of an engaged, informed, and connected community. Those tenets form the basis of the Carnegie Center's creation of quality programming for both youth and adults. Admission is always free as part of our dedication to community accessibility and inclusivity. Visit or schedule a tour on Mondays through Saturdays, and join us for special programs on Thursday evenings.

201 E. Spring Street, New Albany, IN 47150

812-944-7336 -- www.carnegiecenter.org

Monday-Saturday: 10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Thursday 10:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m.

