

Funk Center's digital tours give you a sense of being there

By Maria Sonnenberg | For FLORIDA TODAY
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While Florida Tech's Ruth Funk Center for Textile Arts enjoyed good crowds for the first part of its latest exhibition, COVID-19 put the kibosh on the last half of the show's three-month run. That was a shame, because "Ubhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence," provided a powerful overview of a new form of bead art developed by women living and working together in rural South Africa.

Museums schedule traveling exhibitions months in advance, and when a show closes in one location, it usually heads to another. Extending dates for the Funk Center show, which closed April 25, was impossible.

To save the day and allow more people a peek at the unique show, Florida Tech techie extraordinaire Martin Gallagher stepped in to create an immersive online experience of the show.

While he was at it, he added another virtual tour, this one for "Designed to Mobilize: Propaganda Kimono 1920-1945," an exhibition showcasing the complex visual motifs of Japanese wartime kimonos and curated almost exclusively from the Center's permanent collection.



Virtual tours of Florida Tech's Funk Center for Textile Arts give viewers the opportunity to experience exhibits like these Japanese propaganda kimonos.

Provided; Florida Tech

"If people can't get to the exhibits, the exhibits can come to them," said Gallagher, manager of Florida Tech's Digital Scholarship Lab at Evans Library.

Gallagher tapped into his experience creating virtual tours for travel and real estate for these "Funk from Afar" tours.

"It is an opportunity for people who could not visit or who want to revisit the show," he said.

"It gives you a sense of being there."

Links for the shows can be found at textiles.fit.edu. The virtual tours took on additional significance after the university announced the closing of the Funk Center at year's end as a cost-cutting measure spurred by the economic uncertainty of the pandemic.

"Ubhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence" showcases art that involves stretching a black fabric tight like a canvas and then attaching colored glass beads to transform the cloth into a contemporary art form of remarkable visual depth. Ubhle—pronounced o-buk-lay—means "beauty" in the Xhosa and Zulu languages, an apt description for the shimmering quality of light on glass that the beadwork can generate.

From a distance, each panel presents a continuous surface, but as the viewer moves closer and each tiny individual bead catches the light, the meticulous skill and labor that went into each work becomes apparent. A single panel can take more than 10 months to complete.

The show was developed by the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum in Washington, D.C. It is organized for tour by International Arts & Artists.

The kimono tour presents kimonos and associated textiles from one of the most distinctive periods of textile production in Japanese history.



This Japanese textile fragment is part of the exhibit opening at the Ruth Funk Center for Textile Arts on the Florida Tech Campus.

Provided: Dominic Agostini

Propaganda textiles, produced within a nation primed to advance its cultural identity on the world stage, were created by and for Japanese citizens. These textiles provide an important lens for understanding the role of consumerism, coercion and fashion during a remarkable and controversial period of transition. The 75 historic textiles in the show include the iconography, motifs and metaphors displayed on objects manufactured as propaganda between 1931 and 1945, a turbulent period that included the Second Sino-Japanese War and World War II.

According to Funk Center assistant director and curator Keidra Navaroli, the pandemic may well have changed the way museums connect with their communities.

"My colleagues in the industry are being so creative, because it is important for museums to do all they

can to reach people," said Navaroli.

Virtual tours such as the Funk Center's allow museums the opportunity to present experiences that transcend time and place, and allow everyone, not just the select few who make it to the bricks-and-mortar buildings, the joy of a unique experience.

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