

“It has just begun”: Strawcraft in Bahamian Visual Culture

Simone Cambridge

Dans le contexte de la production culturelle de la diaspora noire, l'artisanat continue d'être une source souvent négligée qui peut offrir une compréhension plus holistique des histoires nationales et individuelles. Cet article traite de la thèse « Growing functional arts in the Bahamas » de Thelma Eula Cambridge et plus précisément de sa présentation du travail de la paille aux Bahamas. C'est en tant que petit-enfant de Thelma Eula Cambridge que l'auteur de ces pages appréhende son œuvre. En examinant d'abord l'art contemporain qui considère le travail de la paille comme fondement esthétique, cet article traite également des techniques utilisées par Cambridge pour décrire cet artisanat, en analysant les exemples matériels dont elle se sert, mais aussi son design, les images incluses dans la thèse et l'attention qu'elle porte au travail et à l'industrie qui entourent cette pratique. Cet article aborde la culture visuelle et la littérature entourant le travail de la paille aux Bahamas, ainsi que la relation qu'il entretient avec le tourisme, les archives et les récits nationaux.

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In December 2019, I encountered my grandmother's handwritten thesis by accident, in a glass showcase in the lobby of the National Archives of The Bahamas. After coming into the archives to look at material for an unrelated project, I studied the lobby display cases after a research session. In one of the cases, I found my grandmother's name, “Thelma Eula Cambridge,” labelled in bold letters above yellowing pages bound in burlap.

The text, “Growing functional arts in the Bahamas,” is a hand-bound volume written in calligraphy, which academically investigates the “The Steel-Pan” and “Strawcraft.”¹ Thelma Eula Cambridge, my grandmother, wrote the text in 1968 as a final project necessary for the completion of her program at Bahamas Teachers' Training College. She explores the techniques and origins of each practice, while creating her own archive through defining, cataloguing, and documenting. Throughout the text are hand-drawn illustrations, samples, and straw work examples reproduced by my grandmother herself.² The book also, therefore, functions as an artwork.

The majority of the text, titled “Strawcraft in the Bahamas,” focuses on the weaving of palm fronds to create “straw,” a material used to make a variety of items including bags, mats, hats, and shoes.³ This process is commonly referred to as “straw,” “straw work,” and “strawcraft” interchangeably. My grandmother writes about her subjects from a historical and scholarly standpoint, documenting the gathering of raw materials and their processing, design, use, and origin. She praises strawcraft as an industry, citing the labour of vendors, and the complexity of the practice.

This article is an attempt to situate my grandmother's text within a larger body of discourse within Black diasporic folk art and craft. “Growing functional arts in the Bahamas” has been lost to contemporary discourse surrounding strawcraft and Black diasporic art practices, despite straw work continuing to be a prominent part of Bahamian visual culture. I therefore ground this discussion in contemporary artwork that uses strawcraft as its aesthetic foundation and starting point of discussion. I discuss the content of my grandmother's text and briefly explore historical strawcraft iconography. I seek to raise my grandmother's text as an important archival landmark which documents the state of strawcraft in the 1960s and the history that precedes it. “Growing functional arts in the Bahamas” is the first text focused solely on Bahamian craft of its kind. A subsequent treatise on straw

1. Thelma Eula Cambridge, "Growing Functional Arts in the Bahamas," Thesis, Bahamas Teachers' Training College, 1968, The National Archives of The Bahamas.

2. In 1968, at the time the text was written, my grandmother had given birth to two of her three children. My aunt, Sythela Cambridge, was six years old, while my father, Sidney Cambridge Jr., was four years old. Both as children contributed to my grandmother's work by assisting with illustrations. My grandmother goes so far as to include a primary school project inspired by strawcraft, completed by my aunt and her classmates, in the text as an example.

3. The first quarter of the text discusses "The Steel-Pan," a popular instrument used in West Indian music, originating in post-WWII Trinidad. Oil drums from American military bases were cut, heated, and shaped into the base of the steel-pan drum. Like strawcraft, the history of the steel pan is rooted in Indigenous and African creative expression as the instrument emerged after multiple colonial laws restricted the use of traditional instruments after the emancipation of slavery in 1834. See also Percival Borde, "The Sounds of Trinidad; The Development of the Steel-Drum Bands," in *The Black Perspective in Music* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 45–49; Peter Seeger, "The Steel Drum: A New Folk Instrument," in *The Journal of American Folklore* 71, no. 279 (January–March 1958): 52–57. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on the "Strawcraft" section of the text because it not only includes hand-drawn illustrations but also samples of strawcraft woven by her hands, situating my grandmother as one of the strawcraft artisans she describes. I consider myself, as an art history scholar working in the fields of transatlantic slavery studies and Black diasporic art, to also be implicated in this process of archival production that contributes to a wider literature about Caribbean art, Black diasporic folk art, and related fields. I am further connected to this portion of the text through past work as a mixed media textile artist.

4. Karen Knowles, *Straw! A Short Account of the Straw Industry in The Bahamas* (Nassau: Media Publishing, 1998); Cambridge, "Growing Functional Arts in the Bahamas."

5. This article and reflection on my personal family history is also influenced by bell hooks's discussion of her grandmother's artwork in *Aesthetic Inheritances* and Sherry

work, *Straw! A Short Account of the Straw Industry of The Bahamas*, was written in 1998 by Karen Knowles.⁴ My personal experiences working in post-colonial archives as an art history scholar interested in transatlantic slavery studies, colonialism, and Caribbean art also influence this article, as well as my experiences as witness growing up in a post-colonial, independent Bahamas.⁵ I note my position as a non-participant in the industry of strawcraft and the tension that occurs between engaging with strawcraft as an art practice that simultaneously exists within vernacular craft and formal "high art" spaces such as museums and galleries. As a "craft" and a "folk art," strawcraft has received little attention within scholarly discourse because of the practice's perceived inferiority. This article pushes against this polarizing categorization, highlighting the use of strawcraft by artists and Thelma Eula Cambridge to present complex narratives that are relevant to the past and present.

Today, strawcraft remains a popular industry in The Bahamas. Although consumed by locals and visitors alike, much of the hats, bags, mats, and baskets sold are exported as tourist objects. It has continued to support a notable livelihood for many, as my grandmother suggested in 1968. Bahamian fashion houses, such as Harl Taylor BAG, David Rolle, and Haus of Assembly have branded straw items to elevate their products from their market-vendor sold counterparts, with designs by the late Harl Taylor entering luxury retailers such as Bergdorf Goodman.⁶

A surge in exhibitions and artwork using straw work as their foundation for aesthetic and intersectional analysis was my own cue to examine themes in "Growing Functional Arts in the Bahamas." *Inherited Values* (2020), curated by Jodi Minnis in Nassau, conceptualized strawcraft as a vehicle for memory and therefore necessary to understand the contemporary realities of micro-economy and to imagine Caribbean futures.⁷ Minnis sought to highlight the "sustainability and longevity of our ancestral micro-economies," shedding light on local business and industry.⁸ The featured artists Kendra Frorup and Anina Major used strawcraft weaving patterns in non-traditional mediums of wood and clay.⁹ As descendants of straw vendors, both artists abstract and reconstruct the nostalgia, while suggesting the repercussions of industry within contemporary memory and the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰

Frorup uses found materials and recreates local objects to collage patterns and textures that reflect Bahamian visual culture, referencing architecture and domestic life. In *Addition of It* (2020), Frorup layers sculpted resin, rough brushstrokes, and screen-printed textures, creating the effect of a layered blueprint construction plan. The centre collage is framed by angled wooden boards that reference traditional "clapboard" Bahamian homes and the straw work that fills the Bahamian domestic interior. This strawcraft pattern is echoed in other works by Frorup featured in the exhibition including *Another Direction* (2020), *So Much Meaning* (2020), *Obscured by the Veil of Security* (2020), and *Across the Pond* (2020). In *Endanger of Becoming Useless* (2020) Frorup again uses the patterns of strawcraft, further referencing strawcraft's materiality through the image of an unfinished woven straw item printed

Farrell Racette's *I Want to Call Their Names in Resistance*, in which she honours the Indigenous craftswomen excluded from larger artistic narratives. bell hooks, "Aesthetic Inheritances," in *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 9; Sherry Farrell Racette, "I Want to Call Their Names in Resistance": Writing Aboriginal Women into Canadian Art History, 1880–1970," in *Rethinking Professionalism: Women and Art in Canada, 1850–1970*, ed. Kristina Huneault and Janice Anderson (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), 285–326.

6. "Welcome to Haus of Assembly!" Haus of Assembly, <https://hausofassembly.com/blogs/haus-of-assembly/shopping-in-nassau-bahamas>.

7. Jodi Minnis, *Inherited Values*, TERN Gallery, Nassau, Bahamas, December 7, 2020 – February 8, 2021, <https://www.terngallery.com/exhibitions/inherited-values>.

8. Minnis, "Inherited Values Statement."

9. Minnis, "Inherited Values Statement."

10. Personal interview with Anina Major, Zoom Meeting, November 8, 2021; Minnis, "Inherited Values Statement"; Personal correspondence with Averia Wright.

11. Cambridge, "Growing Functional Arts in the Bahamas."

12. Personal interview with Anina Major.

13. Personal interview with Anina Major.

14. Natalie Willis, *Floating Rib – Audio Guide*, mp3 (The National Art Gallery of The Bahamas, Nassau, Bahamas, 2021), <https://nagb.org.bs/floatingrib?rq=floating%20rib>.

15. Natalie Willis, *Floating Rib*, The National Art Gallery of The Bahamas, Nassau, Bahamas, April 15 – August 15, 2021.

16. Krista A. Thompson, *Developing the Tropics, The Politics of the Picturesque in the Bahamas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Personal correspondence with Anina Major.

17. Susannah Elisabeth Fulcher, "Anina Major Finds 'No Vacancy in Paradise,'" *The Provincetown Independent*, February 6, 2020, <https://provincetownindependent.org/arts-minds/2020/02/06/anina-major-finds-no-vacancy-in-paradise/>; Patricia Ginton-Meicholas, *No Vacancy in Paradise: A Collection of Poems* (Nassau: Guanima Press, 2001).

18. Thompson, *Developing the Tropics*.

19. *Your Country Your Name II* (2020) is a follow-up performance to *Your Country Name Here* (2016),

in layered primary colours. The straw work item unravels through the composition, contrasting an enlarged image of wooden boards. This work continues themes of home and domesticity while questioning strawcraft's future.

Anina Major's work recreates patterns of strawcraft in clay, giving new expression to the motif of interlapping and interwoven palm fronds, or "strings."¹¹ In works such as *Seasoned Rice Pot* (2020) and *Celadon Rice Pot* (2020), the vessels formed from "plaited" clay forms are organic, misshapen, and imperfect.¹² Major suggests through shaping the body and the sculpture's holes that the uneven textures and irregularities in glazed colour become metaphors for Bahamian tourism, domestic life, and women's labour as understood in contemporary society. The surfaces of Major's sculptures become marked through the inclusion of sea glass, shells, and other items associated with the Bahamas in the porcelain's atmospheric firing process. In *Ponder* (2015) | **fig. 1** | and *Daughter Series* (2015), Major disrupts the functionality of the traditional Bahamian straw doll. By rendering straw dolls in scorched clay to recreate a strawcraft plait, the toy designed as a tourist object no longer functions as a lightweight, children's souvenir that is convenient for travel. Major, inspired by a seemingly out-of-place straw doll found in Brooklyn, New York, sought to create a straw doll that could not as easily be discarded.¹³ Instead, the weighted objects suggest permanence, displacement, immobility, tension within the strawcraft industry, and act as points for mediation and reflection.

Floating Rib, a 2021 exhibition curated by Natalie Willis, sought to highlight Black Bahamian women who have lived in the diaspora in relation to issues of sexuality, nationalism, and historical visual cultures.¹⁴ Several of the artworks in the exhibition also reference straw work. Anina Major in *(No) Vacancy* (2020) references the visual culture of strawcraft by invoking its materiality and connections to tourism through a wall installation of palm fronds behind a blinking fluorescent neon sign reading "No Vacancy in Paradise."¹⁵ Major situates the viewer in a modern recreation of the background used by photographer Jacob Frank Coonley to frame vendor Lizzie Anderson.¹⁶ Replacing the Black Market Woman trope in the centre of the work is the neon sign, referencing the hotel and resort industry in Bahamian tourism. The phrase "No Vacancy in Paradise" refers to the title of a poem written by Bahamian cultural critic Patricia Ginton-Meicholas which reads: "No there's no vacancy in paradise/ we are claiming all the rooms/ willing only to lend space/ to those who take with due respect/ the role of the gracious guest."¹⁷ Major is therefore rejecting the invitation extended by the appropriated straw background which was used to tropicalize and exotify the Bahamian landscape and its residents and instead (re)claims territorial occupancy.¹⁸

Artist Averia Wright in her video performance *Your Country Your Name II* (2020) "cocooned [her] body" in straw armour as she walked through tourist sites in downtown Nassau that have been made desolate by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁹ Wright sports a plaited straw helmet with a woven raffia train,



Figure 1. Anina Major, *Ponder*, 2015. Porcelain, 12.7 × 30.5 × 22.9 cm. Personal Collection of Anina Major. Photo: TERN Gallery, Nassau, Bahamas.

Figure 2. Averia Wright, detail from *Your Country Your Name II*, 2020, in *Floating Rib*, The National Art Gallery of The Bahamas. Photo: Simone Cambridge.



which was performed by the artist during the 2016 Caribbean Linked Artist Residency Program. Personal correspondence with Averia Wright; "Katherine Kennedy," *Caribbean Linked*, September 12, 2018, <https://caribbeanlinked.com/editions/caribbean-linked-v/critical-writing/katherine-kennedy/>.

20. Personal correspondence with Averia Wright.

21. Personal interview with Averia Wright, Google Meetings, July 12, 2021.

22. Suffragette House was the family home of Mary Ingraham, the leader of the Women's Suffrage movement. After multiple protests, Bahamian women were allowed the right to vote in 1962. Pompey Square is a public space commemorating a former site of the auction and sale of enslaved people and an 1830 plantation revolt led by an enslaved man named Pompey.

23. "Nassau | Creative Cities Network," <https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/nassau>.

24. Personal interview with Averia Wright.

25. Royston Jr. Jones, "Straw Vendors Struggling to Make Ends Meet amid Market Closure for More than a Year," *Eye Witness News*, June 10, 2021, <https://ewnews.com/straw-vendors-struggling-to-make-ends-meet-amid-market-closure-for-more-than-a-year>; Sloan Smith, "PLAYING POLITICS: Straw Market Vendors Demand More Social Assistance until Market Reopens," *Eye Witness News*, July 15, 2021, <https://ewnews.com/playing-politics-straw-market-vendors-demand-more-social-assistance-until-market-reopens>; Sloan Smith, "SAFETY FIRST: Govt Wants to Open Straw Market but Concerned about Outbreak, Says DPM," *Eye Witness News*, July 22, 2021, <https://ewnews.com/safety-first-govt-wants-to-open-straw-market-but-concerned-about-outbreak-says-dpm>; Natario McKenzie, "RECALIBRATING: Govt to Undertake 6-Year Review of Straw Market Operations before Allowing It to Reopen," *Eye Witness News*, November 4, 2021, sec. Business, <https://ewnews.com/recalibrating-bahamas-government-to-undertake-six-year-review-of-straw-market-operations-before-allowing-it-to-reopen-after-covid>.

26. Personal interview with Averia Wright.

27. Several of the fabrics used in the work are exclusively locally produced by Bahama Hand Prints, see <https://bahamahandprints.com>.

straw torso plate, straw shoes, and a bright blue bodysuit spray-painted to mimic traditional Bahamian Androsia print batik fabric | fig. 2 |.²⁰ Her helmet doubles as a mask that anonymizes and costumes the artist as a hero-like, life-size straw figure. As she walks paths usually occupied by tourists, Wright is physically reclaiming territory and challenging the tourist search for authenticity by proclaiming herself as a tourist-object.²¹ Sites passed during Wright's journey include Suffrage House and Pompey Square, referencing political protest and historic injustice.²² Wright also leads the viewer past a sign that marks Nassau as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Creative City, raising the question of the title to the viewer, prompting thoughts about what makes a city creative.²³ Wright ends her journey at the Straw Market, a building created for straw vendors to sell and store their goods, but the doors are closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁴ She beats on the front doors of the building, before crumpling to the ground. Beyond performing the hardship experienced by straw vendors caused by the March 2020 closure of the Market and the decrease in visitors due to the spread of COVID-19, Wright expresses her own disappointment and frustration as she returns to the place where she worked with her mother as a child.²⁵ Wright also pays tribute to her aunt, a straw vendor, as her descendant in *The Patron Saint* (2020) by casting her face in gold-toned bronze, surrounded by a halo of layered straw plait, metal, gold leaf, and raffia.²⁶ Strawcraft is the foundation of this work, grounding other aspects used to decorate straw commercial goods such as raffia pompoms, raffia braided tassels, tropical patterns, and locally produced fabrics.²⁷ She uses these materials to give her aunt the status of a deity, extending the tradition of honouring individual straw vendors even further. Wright's aunt becomes a venerated saint in the eyes of the museum visitor, immortalizing her labour and skill.

The artists and exhibitions that are discussed are a limited sample of the contemporary interpretations of strawcraft in Bahamian visual culture. Artists continue to make work that centres strawcraft, using its connections to labour, industry, gender, the land, class, and tourism to present complex narratives about Bahamian society. While the welcoming of strawcraft into "high art" spaces is relatively new, these themes are also present in "Growing functional arts in The Bahamas" as my grandmother considers strawcraft's history, industry, labour, and design. "Growing functional arts in the Bahamas," consists of written text, material examples of strawcraft, and hand-drawn illustrations throughout her artbook-thesis | figs. 3–5 |. My grandmother's approach is modern and experimental. Aside from the text being handbound and handwritten, she adheres examples of raw materials, embroidered designs, embellishments, deconstructed straw goods, and small-scale straw-object construction patterns. The book also includes craft supplies such as needles and lists detailed instructions for straw work designs, functioning as a catalogue, manual, and exhibition. This multifunctional focus on materiality differs from other strawcraft literature that relies singularly on images, singles out individual practitioners from Bahamian

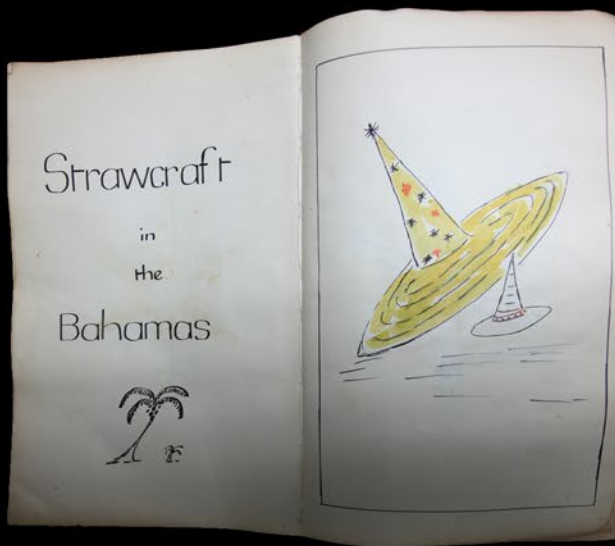


Figure 3. Thelma Eula Cambridge, "Strawcraft in the Bahamas," in "Growing functional arts in the Bahamas," 1968. Mixed Media on paper, 53.34 x 38.1 cm. Photo: The National Archives of The Bahamas.

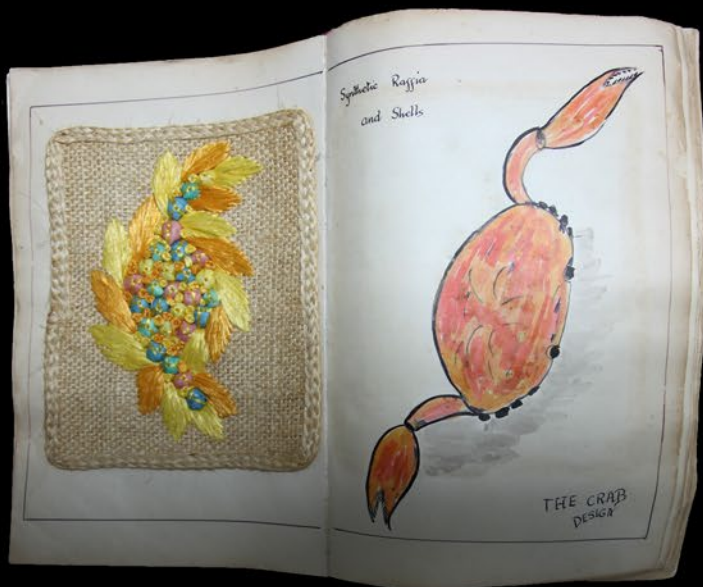


Figure 4. Thelma Eula Cambridge, "The Crab Design," in "Growing functional arts in the Bahamas," 1968. Mixed Media on paper, 53.34 x 38.1 cm. Photo: The National Archives of The Bahamas.

Figure 5. Thelma Eula Cambridge, "Notes on Pattern and Design," in "Growing functional arts in the Bahamas," 1968. Mixed Media on paper, 53.34 x 38.1 cm. Photo: The National Archives of The Bahamas.

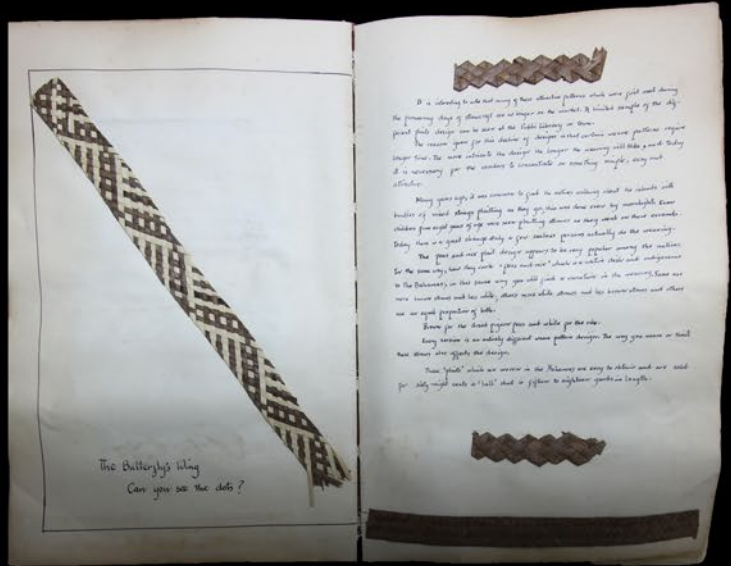
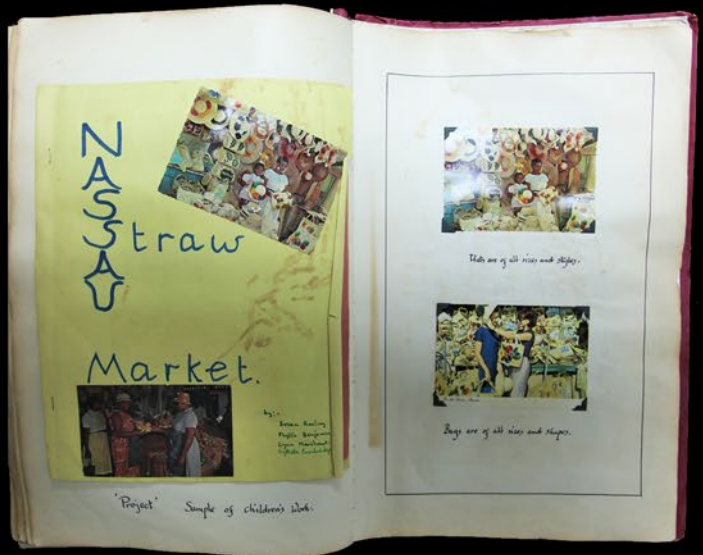


Figure 6. Thelma Eula Cambridge, "Examples of Strawcraft in Media," in "Growing functional arts in the Bahamas," 1968. Mixed Media on paper, 53.34 x 38.1 cm. Photo: The National Archives of The Bahamas.



islands, and lacks detail concerning pattern, design, and cross-cultural influences.²⁸ It draws attention to the ingenuity and endless creativity of artisans. By representing examples of strawcraft in the format of a book, the text is a break from exhibitions about straw work because, while it displays a variety of artworks, it is inherently archivable and created with the intention of preservation. “Growing functional arts in the Bahamas” was compiled to be shared as a source of information. This is particularly relevant considering the unnamed and undated display at Nassau’s Public Library cited in her bibliography, of which there is no archival record, and other media about strawcraft that precede the text, such as guidebooks, photographs, and magazines, which were created primarily for circulation outside of The Bahamas.²⁹

My grandmother’s illustrations are juxtaposed with material examples which give life to the concepts while grounding the viewer and suggesting complexity in design. Fig. 4 shows my grandmother’s interpretation of “The Crab Design.”³⁰ On undyed sisal, orange and yellow embroidered raffia highlight the shape of a crab consisting of dyed green and red shells. Her accompanying crab illustration uses shadows and highlights which are mirrored and abstracted using contrasting colours in the embroidered and embellished crab. The work suggests that vendors engaged in strawcraft possess a complex understanding of form, shape, texture, and colour. She marvels at and celebrates this creativity in a section titled “Native Response: ‘It comes from the head,’” which also discusses her experience interviewing local vendors in downtown Nassau.

Photography is also used in “Growing functional arts in the Bahamas” to highlight my grandmother’s artwork and research. Images sourced from magazines, postcards, tourist brochures, and local publications are placed throughout the text which link to the visual culture of strawcraft, including themes of the Black market woman and touristic consumption.³¹ In fig. 6 (shown in detail in fig. 7), the top right image is a postcard of a straw vendor and a young girl posed amid dozens of decorated straw goods.³² Hats and bags crowd the image, framing and surrounding the vendor and girl. The straw goods attract the prospective tourist through the large quantity and variety of handmade objects. My grandmother’s use of the image in this text, however, gives the photograph new context, becoming a tribute to woman-led industry and labour. After detailed explanations of the construction of strawcraft, the image becomes symbolic of the continuous and arduous labour done by the vendor that will eventually be continued by the girl pictured. The methodology described in her text is repeated in the image and defines the livelihood of multiple generations. Fig. 7 additionally suggests pride in the abundance of items which fill the frame. My grandmother captions the image: “Hats are available in all sizes and styles,” suggesting the considerable skill required to create a large body of straw work that appeals to the competing desires of tourists.³³

The bottom right image in fig. 7 (shown in detail in fig. 8) depicts two female tourists admiring straw goods before a vendor’s stall. Surrounded

28. Knowles, *Straw!: A Short Account of the Straw Industry in The Bahamas*; The Department of Archives, Ministry of Education, “Aspects of Bahamian History: ‘A Brief Historical Review of Straw Work in The Bahamas.’”; The Department of Archives, Ministry of Education, “Straw Market.”

29. Cambridge, “Growing Functional Arts in the Bahamas”; Mary Moseley, *The Bahamas Handbook* (Nassau: The Nassau Guardian, 1926); Mary Moseley, “Nassau - and the ‘Out Islands’ of the Bahamas,” *Magazine of Life and Times in the Enchanted Bahamas* 4, no. 2 (1951); Stark, *Stark’s History and Guide to the Bahama Islands* (Norwood, MA: Plimpton Press, H. M. Plimpton & Co., Printers & Binders, 1891).

30. Cambridge, “Growing Functional Arts in the Bahamas.”

31. Personal correspondence with Sidney Cambridge Jr. and Sythela Cambridge, March 2021.

32. Personal interview with Anina Major, November 8, 2021.

33. Cambridge, “Growing Functional Arts in the Bahamas.”



Hats are of all sizes and styles.

Figure 7. Thelma Eula Cambridge, postcard detail in "Growing functional arts in the Bahamas," 1968. Mixed Media on paper, 53.34 × 38.1 cm. Photo: The National Archives of The Bahamas.



Bags are of all sizes and shapes.

Figure 8. Thelma Eula Cambridge, postcard detail in "Growing functional arts in the Bahamas," 1968. Mixed Media on paper, 53.34 × 38.1 cm. Photo: The National Archives of The Bahamas.

by hats, bags, and baskets, the two women hold embroidered and embellished bags and hats. One woman fits a hat decorated with large pompoms on to the other woman. The vendor is again absent from this image which is a postcard captioned “In the Straw Market.” The two women shopping and engaging with strawcraft objects replace the vendor, as the straw goods visually signify the exotic and tropical. My grandmother wrote during a period where strawcraft production greatly increased. Legacies of WWII momentum placed more importance on local industries, while more accessible air travel, newly built resorts, private sector development, and expanded advertising and public relations led to a substantial increase in visitors to The Bahamas during the 1960s.³⁴ The quantity of straw vendors increased as tourism continued to expand. Writing during the final years of The Bahamas as a British colony, my grandmother situates her account of strawcraft within the boundaries of production and education, to further encourage straw work as an industry. She praises the many vendors that have created livelihoods and sustained generations of families. Throughout the text, she cites the monetary benefit of straw work, framing the tradition as a useful skill to benefit young people entering an economy increasingly dependent on tourism. While advocating for the integration of straw work into education, she also argues for the tradition’s preservation. She writes:

It is agreeable that the strawcraft is worth preserving. How this can be done is another problem. Many people think, that the craft should be taught in the schools as a means of preserving it, and because of its educational value. I feel too, that because there is so much one can learn from Strawcraft, I think, it is worth preservation and should have its place in the schools.³⁵

This conjoining of education and preservation aligns with the nationalist ideals being circulated at the time, where more emphasis was placed on aspirational values like education.³⁶ This resonated with Black middle class Bahamian women like my grandmother during a decade of fast-paced political change.³⁷ Her writing precedes the establishment of the National Archives of The Bahamas and is written in the absence of a general value being placed on non-European art in the colonial archive as well as “prejudices against most things African.”³⁸ The production of a national Bahamian history that included Black colonial subjects was only then being conceptualized during the 1960s, influenced by the Civil Rights Movement in the nearby United States.³⁹ Colonial politics of looking in The Bahamas were dictated by the tropicalized fantasy created by tourism investors and foreign developers.⁴⁰

My grandmother acknowledges the change in “people’s views and attitudes towards the Bahamian Crafts through the recent years” and embodies this change in her writing.⁴¹ She desires strawcraft’s aesthetic value to be made visible, outside of its status as a tourist-object, and for the labour and industry of straw vendors to be celebrated. She uses her text to demonstrate that the practice requires advanced technique, ingenuity, and creativity—all of which has spanned centuries:

34. Angela B. Cleare, “Pioneering Spirit, Promotion and Year-Round Tourism - 1950’s,” in *History of Tourism in The Bahamas: A Global Perspective* (Xlibris Corporation, 2007), 111–50.

35. Cambridge, “Growing Functional Arts in the Bahamas.”

36. Gail Saunders, “The Changing Face of Nassau: The Impact of Tourism on Bahamian Society in the 1920s and 1930s,” *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 71, no. 1/2 (1997): 21–42.

37. Women were allowed the right to suffrage in 1962; the first elected Black majority Parliament was held in 1967; Independence from Britain would follow in 1973.

38. Gail Saunders, “Nassau, Heritage and the Impact of Tourism,” *Journal of the Bahamas Historical Society* (October 2006): 14–23.

39. Cleare, “Pioneering Spirit, Promotion and Year-Round Tourism - 1950’s.” The physical site of the National Archives of The Bahamas would officially open in the late 1980s, being granted a departmental organization by the Ministry of Education in 1981 after The Bahamas became an independent state in 1973. The Archives’ forerunner, the Public Records Office, was established in 1971. Johansson Cooper, personal interview at Department of The National Archives of The Bahamas, Ministry of Education, August 20, 2021; Leshelle Delaney, Personal interview at Department of The National Archives of The Bahamas, Ministry of Education, August 20, 2021.

40. Krista A. Thompson, “Tropicalization, The Aesthetics and Politics of Jamaica and the Bahamas,” in *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 1–26.

41. Cambridge, “Growing Functional Arts in the Bahamas.”

42. Cambridge.
43. Cambridge.
44. Minnis, "Inherited Values Statement."

45. Cambridge, "Growing Functional Arts in the Bahamas"; Personal correspondence with Averia Wright, Google Meetings, July 12, 2021; Personal correspondence with Jodi Minnis, December 2020; Knowles, *Straw!: A Short Account of the Straw Industry in The Bahamas*; Minnis, "Inherited Values Statement"; Personal correspondence with Anina Major.

46. hooks, "History Worked by Hand"; Racette, "I Want to Call Their Names in Resistance."

47. Thelma Eula Cambridge, "Growing Functional Arts in the Bahamas"; Karen Knowles, *Straw!: A Short Account of the Straw Industry in The Bahamas*; The Department of Archives, Ministry of Education, "Aspects of Bahamian History: A Brief Historical Review of Straw Work in The Bahamas," *Nassau Guardian*, March 23, 1989, sec. C; Rosalyn Howard, "The 'Wild Indians' of Andros Island: Black Seminole Legacy in the Bahamas," *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 2 (2006): 275–98; Keith F. Otterbein, *The Andros Islanders: A Study of Family Organisation in the Bahamas* (Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press, 1966); The Department of Archives, Ministry of Education, *Andros Island Bahamas* (Nassau: The National Archives of The Bahamas, n.d.); Jodi Minnis, "Inherited Values Statement" (Exhibition Statement, TERN Gallery, Nassau, Bahamas, March 2021). While many islands in The Bahamas are known for particular styles of straw work, the settlement of Red Bays, Andros, is known especially for a distinctive style of basket weaving that is still practiced today. This settlement is known locally for its history of Seminole migration, however, a deeper inquiry into ethnographic influences, migration patterns, local domestic practices and weaving is much needed.

48. Knowles, *Straw!: A Short Account of the Straw Industry in The Bahamas*; Krista A. Thompson, "Life as the Natives Live It': The Tourist Quest for Authenticity and the Selling of Mr. Amos Ferguson," Master's thesis, Emory University, 1999, <http://www.proquest.com/docview/304564789/abstract/5552861CE0F94E6DPQ1>; The Department of Archives, Ministry of Education, "Aspects of Bahamian History: A Brief Historical Review of Straw Work in The Bahamas."

Strawcraft is a great heritage and long before emphasis was placed on books, people were expressing their abilities and various skills...Personally, my attitude towards the industry is more positive. I appreciate the work now, more than I did a year ago. After trying to produce some of the products I have seen on the stalls. I discovered that the work, entailed is much more difficult than it appears.⁴²

She lists in detail the intricacies of straw work, noting decline in the variety of styles within the practice and the production of strawcraft for primarily tourist consumption. By titling her text as "growing," she anticipates the expansion of strawcraft as an industry, while participating in its expansion through the text's function as an educational resource.⁴³

Strawcraft is not only a tradition that is usually passed down orally but is also often practiced at a physical geographic distance.⁴⁴ Historically, certain styles of straw design are attributed to specific islands in The Bahamas or specific persons. Once woven or constructed by various artisans, the majority of items are shipped to Nassau, the capital, where they are dispersed and sold. My grandmother collects a variety of weaves and designs in one text, noting the difference in technique between islands and alluding to the presence of strawcraft in the wider-Caribbean region.

There is a collective fear within straw work discourse that certain techniques and patterns are "dying out" as knowledge held by elders is not passed down to descendants.⁴⁵ This is coupled with the dismay and mourning of what has been lost that cannot be named due the dismissal of strawcraft as enslaved, domestic, and woman's work.⁴⁶ In my grandmother's determination to preserve strawcraft, she also possessed this fear of further loss and her text occupies a unique place by memorializing strawcraft as an aesthetic practice.

Similar to other former British colonies in the region, much of The Bahamas' history, and therefore the history of strawcraft, is marked by colonial occupation and violence. Straw work is one remnant of The Bahamas' African-Indigenous heritage that has continued to occupy a space in local popular culture. Large numbers of enslaved Africans were brought to the islands for plantation labour and the practice of strawcraft has remained relevant. Rooted in African basket weaving, the practice is also influenced by Seminole weaving practices due to displaced populations settling in the northern Bahamas.⁴⁷

The methodology and history of straw work are typically passed down by families through oral tradition, which the literature reflects.⁴⁸ While unrecorded in slave ledgers or other official colonial documents, tourist guides suggest that strawcraft was necessary to Black domestic life. Sleeping mats, hats, bags, baskets, and shoes made of plaited straw filled the gaps created by the ruling white elite during slavery and after emancipation. Slowly, these items entered the market for tourist consumption, while strawcraft and the straw vendor became a figure in popular media.

As early as the late nineteenth century, Black female vendors, who lived in Over-the-Hill communities of the formerly enslaved, travelled to downtown Nassau to sell plaited straw hats and baskets.⁴⁹ "Palmetto thatch" was



Figure 9. Jacob Frank Coonley, *On the way to Market*, 1888–1904. Albumen print. Photo: The National Art Gallery of The Bahamas.

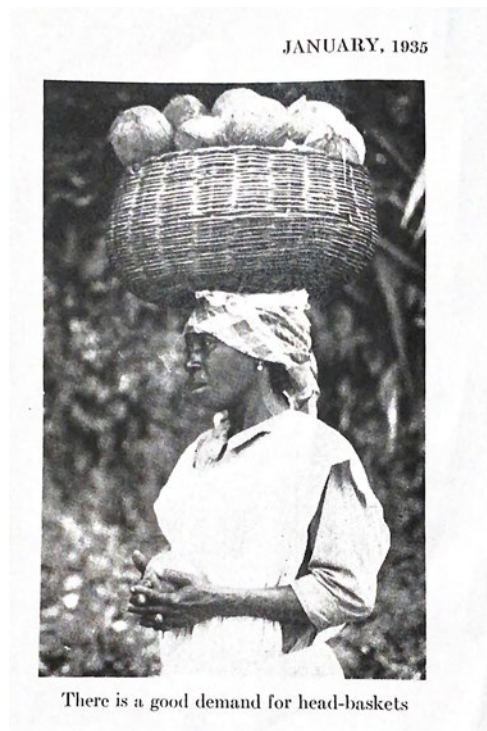


Figure 10. Unknown, "There is a good demand for head-baskets," in *Nassau Magazine*, 1935. Photo: reproduced from *Nassau Magazine of The Bahamas* 2, no. 1 (1935), 16.

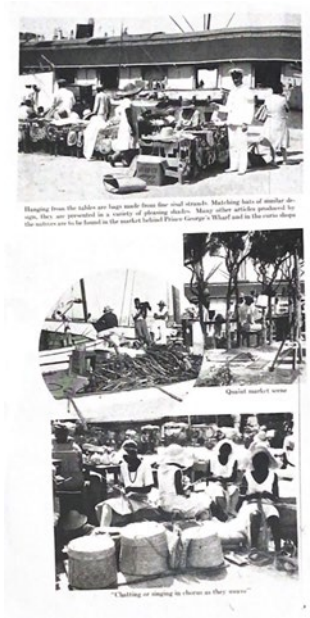


Figure 11. Unknown, image spread in Nassau Magazine, 1935.
 Photo: reproduced from Nassau Magazine of The Bahamas 2, no. 1 (1935), 17.



Figure 12. Unknown, "Dr. and Mrs. C. W. Tegge," in Nassau Magazine, 1951. Photo: reproduced from Nassau - and the "Out Islands" of the Bahamas - Magazine of Life and Times in the Enchanted Bahamas 4, no. 2 (Winter 1951-52), 8.

noted as a material sold at downtown markets.⁵⁰ Even earlier accounts state that white elites sold goods made by Black craftspeople.⁵¹ The Black female vendor interested early visitors and tourism promoters as the local Black population in The Bahamas were framed as part of the tropical scenery.⁵² Surrounded by palm fronds and staged in vacant landscapes, the Black market woman became an icon for image makers, representing feminized and sexualized interpretations of the tropics | **fig. 9** |.⁵³

Once enticed to visit by this imagery, the modern tourist held a discriminating eye with a nostalgia for the handmade in search of “the ultimate authentic memento” to commemorate their journey to the islands.⁵⁴ Enter Bahamian strawcraft. By 1926, Mary Moseley, editor and founder of *Nassau Magazine*, describes “straw-plaiting” in *The Bahamas Handbook*: “One of the most important cottage industries is straw-plaiting, nearly all of the working hats worn by natives being made by hand from locally grown palm top. Native mats and baskets, which are well made, are in great demand.”⁵⁵

Straw work becomes a recurring feature in Moseley’s *Nassau Magazine*, a tourist publication marketed to local and international audiences, paying tribute to tourist themes popularized half a century earlier.⁵⁶ Some images featured, as seen in figs. 10 and 11, show tropicalized images of Bahamian market vendors and straw plaiters, aligning with earlier circulated images and tropes as seen in *On the way to Market* | **fig. 9** |. Photographs are captioned and labelled with phrases such as “quaint market scene” and “chatting or singing in chorus as they weave” which solidify the local scenes pictured as tropical and naturalize the unnamed “natives” pictured | **fig. 3** |.⁵⁷

Later photographs featuring strawcraft show smiling, wealthy visitors surrounded by would-be souvenirs. In fig. 12, white elites are pictured buying straw bags at a local vendor’s table outside of the Royal Victoria Hotel, a popular tourist resort. This iconography of strawcraft is mirrored in the images selected for “Growing functional arts in the Bahamas.” The text, however, also adds to the imagery depicted by offering itself as an alternative to tourist-centered imagery, capturing straw work as a practice in its use of illustration, material, and collected photographs.

Contemporary art that uses strawcraft as its starting point of discussion and “*Growing functional arts in the Bahamas*” have potential to be in dialogue, as both mirror issues of preservation, memory, heritage, labour, and tourism and acknowledge the creativity and complexity within strawcraft, while celebrating the women-led industry created and sustained by straw vendors. My grandmother’s text through its commemoration of strawcraft as an aesthetic foundation to present complex ideas, a Black diasporic aesthetic, rejects institutional failures of memorialization while still seeking a place within the archive, education, and tourism. Calling for the expansion, preservation, and continued investigation of strawcraft, the intentions of “*Growing functional arts in the Bahamas*,” I echo my grandmother’s conclusion, “This work is not actually finished. It has just begun.”⁵⁸ ¶

49. “Over-the-Hill” is a catch-all term used to describe the several communities of free, formerly enslaved Blacks who lived south and southwest in Nassau, The Bahamas’ capital. These communities were geographically and socially segregated from the white businesses and residences located in Nassau’s downtown core and to the east of the island. The name references a long stretch of hilly terrain that marked the line of segregation. See Michael Craton and Gail Saunders, “Over the Hill and Far Away: The Life and Culture of Bahamian Blacks After Slavery,” in *Islanders in the Stream: A History of the Bahamian People: Volume Two: From the Ending of Slavery to the Twenty-First Century*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 101–30.

50. The Department of Archives, Ministry of Education, “Straw Market” (Archival Summary, Nassau, Bahamas, n.d.), The National Archives of The Bahamas.

51. Knowles writes that during the 1720s the wife of Governor Phenny sold straw hats, but that little detail remains about the venture. Karen Knowles, “From the Street to the Market Plaza,” in *Straw! A Short Account of the Straw Industry in The Bahamas*, 9–24.

52. Thompson, “Developing the Tropics, The Politics of the Picturesque in the Bahamas,” in *An Eye for the Tropics*, 92–155.

53. Thompson, “Developing the Tropics,” 92–155.

54. Krista A. Thompson, “‘Life as the Natives Live It’: The Tourist Quest for Authenticity and the Selling of Mr. Amos Ferguson.”

55. Mary Moseley, *The Bahamas Handbook*.

56. Mary Moseley, ed., Nassau and the “Out Islands” of the Bahamas, *Magazine of Life and Times in the Enchanted Bahamas* 4, no. 2 (1951); Nassau Magazine of the Bahamas 2, no. 1 (1935); “Mary Moseley Collection” (The National Archives of The Bahamas, 2021).

57. *Nassau Magazine of the Bahamas* 2, no. 1 (1935).

58. Cambridge, “Growing Functional Arts in the Bahamas.”