Ray Materson
Born 1954 in Milford, CT.

Materson, who was born in Connecticut and grew up in the Midwest, now lives and works in Michigan. As a young man, Materson was interested in and studied the dramatic arts and philosophy, but after falling into trouble with drugs and committing several robberies to support his habit, he was arrested and sent to prison in Connecticut to serve a 15-year sentence. He was released early, on parole.

Materson was 33 years old when he went to prison. Today, he recalls, "I had been incarcerated about one year when I began stitching my way to freedom. I knew how to sew a button onto a shirt and do minor mending." In jail, Materson, who, as a child, had enjoyed watching his grandmother spend hours at her needlework, managed to obtain a sewing needle of his own from a security guard. Using fabric swatches taken from bedsheets or plain, white boxer shorts, and laboriously extracting the colored threads from knit socks, Materson gathered the materials he needed to begin making embroidered portraits of baseball players and scenes plucked from memory or inspired by pictures in magazines.

In prison, the security guards told Materson, "Matty, you're just one less knucklehead we have to worry about." They allowed him to pursue his art-making, for which, from other inmates, he earned the nickname "Betsy Ross." Materson's fellow prisoners paid him with coffee and cigarettes in exchange for his personalized, handmade artworks.

To date, the artist has produced several hundred remarkably colorful and detailed thread-and-fabric images, each of which tends to be about the size of a standard, small index card. In addition to pictures of baseball players, he has crafted individual or groups of related works inspired by the plays of Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Chekhov, not to mention portraits of such royal figures from the past as Queen Victoria, Catherine the Great, and members of the Russian Imperial Romanov family.

In his art, Materson has also addressed the subject of drug addiction. In 2003, that aspect of his work caught the attention of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which honored him with a grant in support of this artistic activity; that award also allowed him to develop an arts program for young people wrestling with drug and alcohol addiction. An autobiography, Sins and Needles: A Story of Spiritual Mending, was published by Algonquin Books in 2002.

Materson is the first to acknowledge that his chosen materials and art-making technique have traditionally been associated, often dismissively, as "women's work" (a notion that feminist artists of the 1970s imaginatively subverted as they reclaimed the expressive power of needlework, weaving, quilt-making, and other so-called craft-based or handiwork genres and techniques).

Materson's work may be appreciated in the broader context of numerous art brut creators who have used embroidery, fabric, or the embellishing of textiles or garments as the main materials and methods of their art. In Materson's case, the skill and straightforwardness with which he portrays his subjects also invites the association of his painstakingly executed images with the efforts of American folk artists to document both their immediate surroundings and imaginary worlds.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the New Museum of Contemporary Art (New York); the American Folk Art Museum (New York); the American Visionary Art Museum (Baltimore); Halle Saint Pierre (Paris); Compton Verney Art Gallery (United Kingdom); and other museums in the United States and overseas have featured Materson's work in various thematic, group exhibitions. His embroideries have also been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions at American Primitive Gallery (New York), and have been included in various projects at Henry Boxer Gallery (London). His works are in the collections of the American Folk Art Museum, the American Visionary Art Museum, the Louis-Dreyfus Family Collection, and other notable institutional and private hands.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2026
Ray Materson: Metamorphosis, Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids, MI

2025
So Long, Bowery!, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York
In a dark time, the eye begins to see, curated by Robert Cozzolino, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York
Ray Materson: Common Threads, Brattleboro Museum & Arts Center, Brattleboro, VT

2024
The Fiber Art Show, BravinLee Programs, New York, NY
Between the Lines: Prison Art & Advocacy, Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, NM
Criss Cross: A Fiber Exhibition, Portrait Society Gallery of Contemporary Art, Milwaukee, MI

2023
Ray Materson: Embroideries, 1990-2023, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, NY

2021
Figure Out: Abstraction in Self-Taught Art, Outsider Art Fair New York, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, NY

2020
Hand & I: Mending the World One Stitch at a Time, curated by Yulia Tikhonova, Schmidt Center Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL

2016
Mending the Soul with Miniature Stitches: The Needlework of Ray Materson, The Mini Time Machine Museum of Miniatures, Tucson, AZ

2014
Raw Vision: 25 Ans D'Art Brut, curated by John Maizels and Martine Lusardy, Halle Saint-Pierre, Paris, FR

2003
High on Life, American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, MD

2000
Treasures of the Soul: Who is Rich?, American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, MD

1994
Raymond Materson: Pictures from Unraveled Socks, American Primitive Gallery, New York, NY

1991
Peace, Albany Institute of History and Art, Albany, NY

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, MD
American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY
The Louis-Dreyfus Family Collection

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2005
Glueck, Grace, "ART REVIEW: Portraits of Life and Fantasy That Embody the Artists," The *New York Times*, May 6, 2005.
Kimmelman, Michael, *The Accidental Masterpiece: On the Art and Life and Vice Versa*, Penguin Press, New York, 2005.

2004
Rogers, Anne, "Outside Prison, 'Sock Thread' Artist Finds Success," *Fiber Arts* 30, no. 4, 2004.

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Karlins, N.F., "Outsider Extravaganza," *Artnet* Magazine, January 30, 2003.
Kimmelman, Michael, "You've Been to the Game, Now Take a Look at the Artwork," The *New York Times*, August 29, 2003.

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Materson, Ray, *Sins and Needles: A Story of Spiritual Mending*, autobiography, Algonquin Books, Chapel Hill, 2002.

1996
Fusselman, Amy, "Through the Needle: The Art of Ray Materson," Raw Vision, #17, Winter 1996-97.

1994
Reif, Rita, "From Scraps of Prison Cloth a Miniature World Grows," The *New York Times,* December 11, 1994.