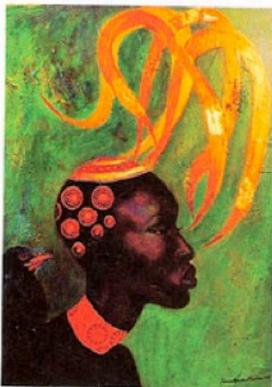




Right: *Majestic*; below: *Dignified*
 Next page, top: *Sankofa Queen*;
 bottom: *Hope*



THE DREAMER

TAMARA NATALIE MADDEN ADDS A ROYAL TOUCH TO ORDINARY PEOPLE

Many people describe their work as a passion, but for Tamara Natalie Madden, art is her life. She has always focused on photography and drawing, but it took a diagnosis with a life-threatening illness to make her seriously pursue her craft.

"I had a pretty rare kidney disease called IgA nephropathy. I got officially diagnosed when I was about 21. This disease progresses

very quickly, and eventually, I ended up on dialysis," she says. "It was during that time...that I started really drawing again and painting. I decided that I really needed to focus on my gift and nurture it."

It was at that time that the artist, who was based in Milwaukee, Wisc., from the age of 13, returned to her native Jamaica with her mother to find a half-brother she had never met. Not only did she find

him, but her brother Leroy offered her a much-needed kidney—and testing proved that he was a perfect match.

"I felt like my life was blessed, and I needed to show that through my work," Madden says of her return to painting. "I felt like that was what God was telling me to do. 'You need to create. Whatever else is going to happen in your life, I'll guide you, but you need to create.'"

Since that 2001 transplant, Madden has created a body of work that is known for its bold use of color and texture and realistic depictions of people.

"I'm inspired by real people, by everyday people. I'm inspired by people who are living in poverty," Madden says. "My grandmother...was the epitome of a Caribbean woman. I just feel like people like that are overlooked. People who get up every day and they work hard and they struggle—regular people aren't really seen."

In 2004, Madden moved to Atlanta and her works found a home at Avisca Fine Art Gallery in Marietta, Ga.

"Her work had a very honest quality about it," recalls gallery owner Byrma Braham. "I think it very faithfully evoked the culture and the people and the characters that I recall myself, coming from Jamaica."

Madden, who is self-taught, says that some people found her honest portraits too hard to look at, so she created what she calls her *Kings and Queen* series.

"I had an epiphany one day. All it takes for you to do is take a person who is struggling and put them in some nice clothes, and [people are] going to notice them," she says. "I decided to take the same people that I might have painted before, and I started putting them in clothes that were seemingly royal. I would make sure their heads were up high and that they looked proud and stoic."

Madden tries to make her paintings three-dimensional.

"I paint with acrylic and mixed media. I use fabric, and I use gold leaf for my crowns," she says. "I use mediums to make [my paintings] have a lot of texture so the pieces can be more interesting when you see them up close."

Her African-inspired touches have attracted collectors like writer Denene Millner to Madden's work.

"Her work just speaks to her dedication to her people. I am a lover of art, but I am especially in love with the art done by people who are dedicated to our culture," says Millner. "She's passionate about that and that's what makes me passionate about her."

Like the West African symbol that Madden's painting *Sankofa Queen* takes its name from, the artist feels it is very important to remember the past and to learn from it. She places a bird in each of her paintings as personal reminder.

"It's a way of putting my experience in every piece. The birds represent freedom—freedom from illness, from the dialysis machine..." she says. "[They] represent a freedom to pursue my dreams, to live, to soar. I infuse them in every piece so I never forget where I've been."

"One of the things I respect the most is that the artists that I am around and was mentored by are constantly learning," she says. "This doesn't happen overnight, [but] if you're working toward your dream, anything can be accomplished."

—Tiesha Henderson

