IT IS NOT SURPRISING that contemporary artists have chosen textiles to tell important stories. For more than 1,000 years, textiles have been used in the West to recount tales of triumph and struggle. Works such as The Lady and The Unicorn tapestries and the Bayeux Tapestry illustrate tales from The Bible, the heroic deeds of kings, the adventures of mythological figures, as well as morality lessons. Textiles such as these were teaching tools, conveying significant information about religion and historical events for both the literate and illiterate public. The artworks in ‘Stories of Migration: Contemporary Artists Interpret Diaspora’ continue this role as visual testimonies to the human experience of migration. The exhibition presents the artwork of 44 makers from three continents, whose work provides commentary on diaspora, the overarching narrative of our time, through the skillful use of fabric, needle and thread. A diaspora is defined by the Merriam Webster Dictionary as the ‘movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland’. The term was first coined in the third century to refer to the Jewish diaspora but today is used to describe any group of people living outside their traditional homeland, according to George Washington University Diaspora Programme professors Jennifer M Brinkerhoff and Leisl Riddle. It’s a timely subject. The media is awash with stories of today’s immigrants as they flee persecution, war and economic hardship, and the heart-wrenching images of families fleeing their homes clutching their meager belongings. The story of migration is therefore not one story but millions of stories. The artists in this exhibition tell some of these – the Jewish diaspora; the African diaspora that resulted from the slave trade; the Japanese internment in relocation camps during the Second World War; and the myriad displacements of other peoples that have occurred from ancient to modern times. The artworks are as diverse as the stories themselves and include West African fabric pictographs, a stitched map of the world, a repurposed quilt, and a quilted coat depicting the migration history of North America.

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Stories of Migration: Contemporary Artists Interpret Diaspora is on show at the George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum, Washington DC until 4 September, and accompanied by a catalogue.