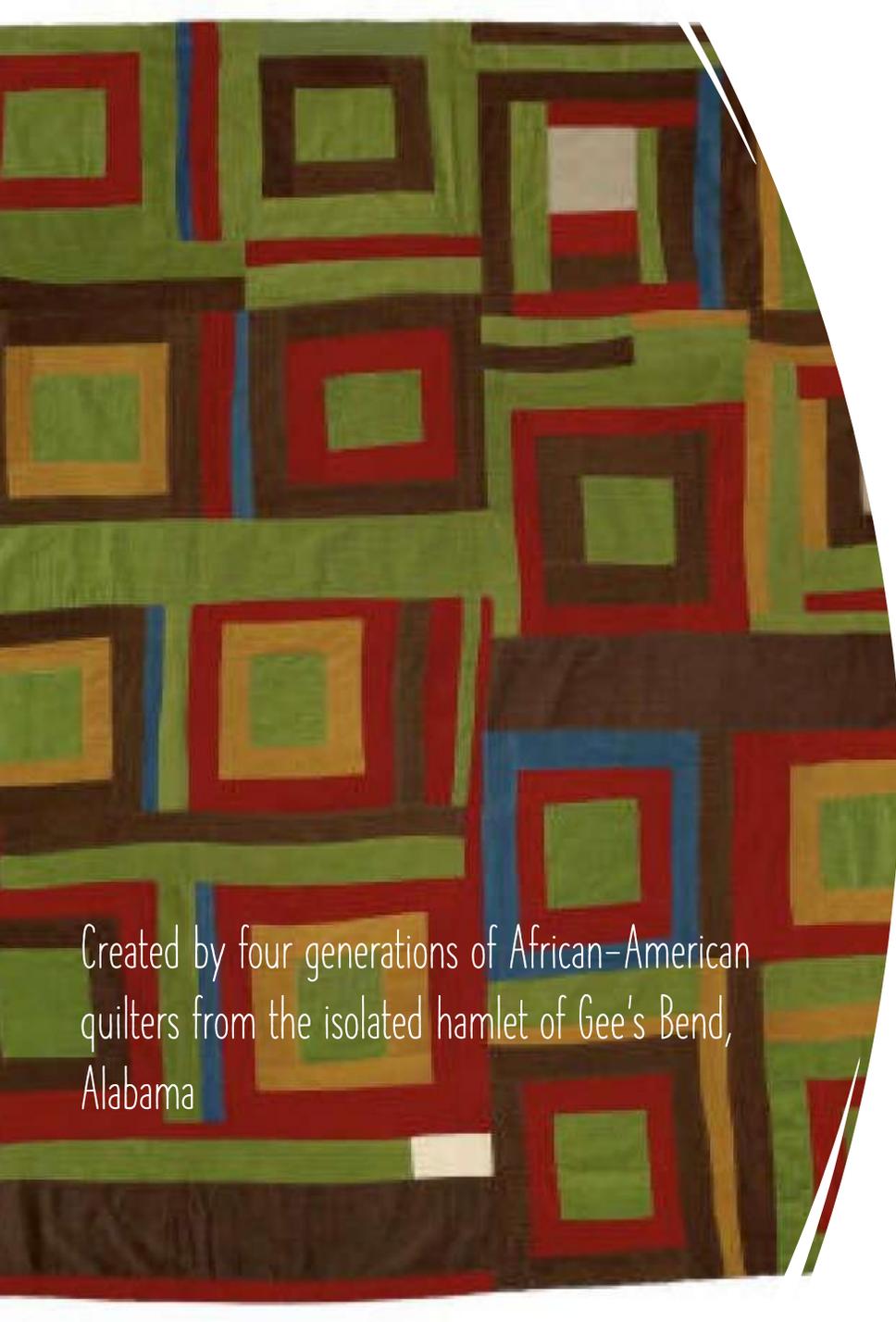




THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF QUILT MAKING IN AMERICA

In his seminal book, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (1962), George Kubler expressed the view that the concept of art should be expanded to include all man-made objects. His approach eliminates the distinction between artifacts and "major" art - architecture, painting, sculpture. Drawing on the fields of anthropology and linguistics, Kubler replaced the notion of style as the basis for histories of art with the concept of historical sequence and continuous change across time.

"Artistic production, whilst distinct, belongs to the 'whole range of man-made things, including all tools and written' and 'such things mark the passage of time with greater accuracy than we know, and they fill with shapes of a limited variety'... 'Everything made now is either a replica or a variant of some thing made a little time ago and so on back without break to the first morning of human time'".
(Kubler, 2007: 1) The demarcation between art and craft, an invention of the Renaissance mind, therefore, becomes unimportant when considering objects of utilitarian nature. This suggests that quilts, and specifically American quilts, rightfully deserve the distinction of art, without qualification.



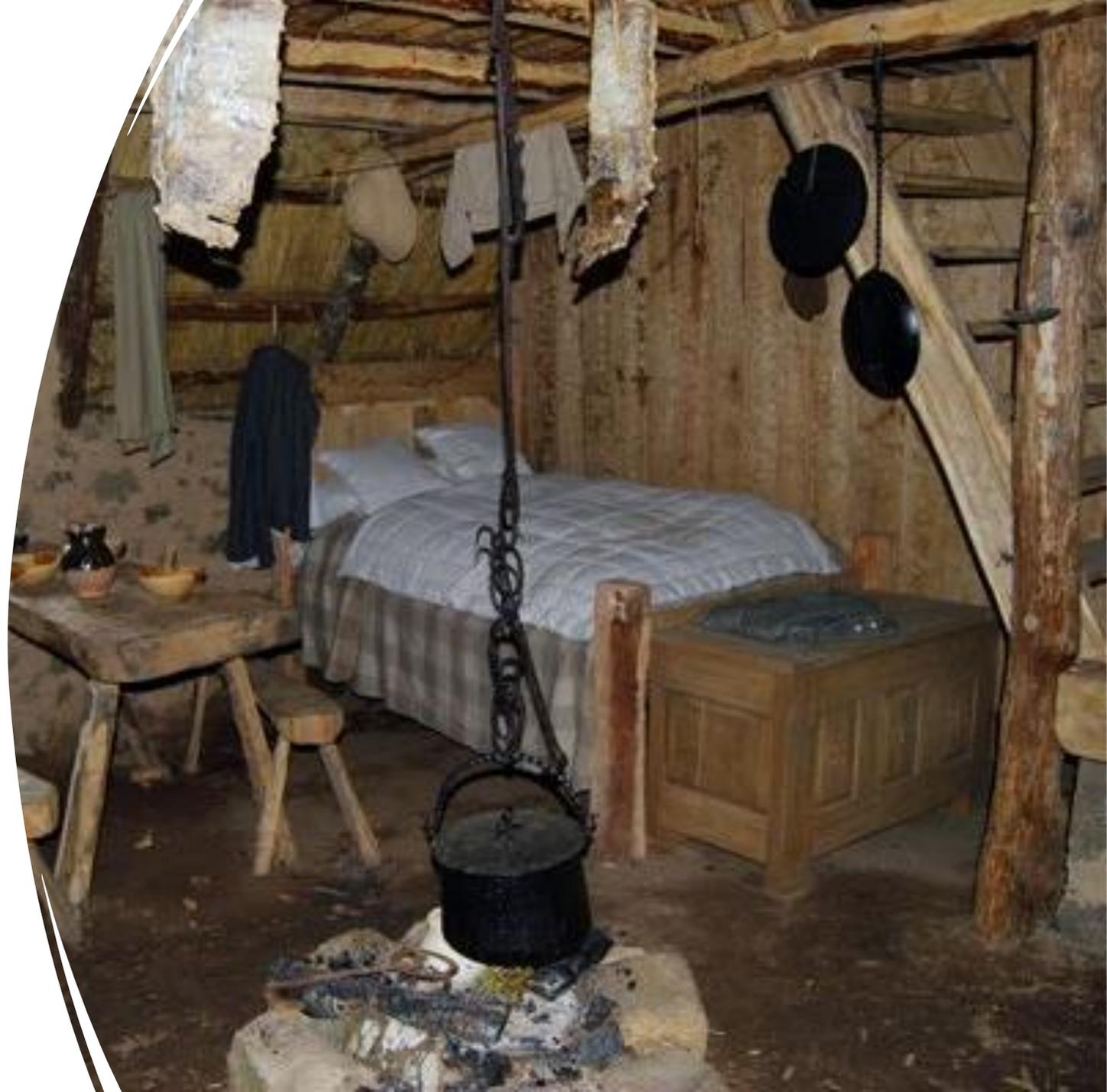
QUILTS OF GEE'S BEND

Created by four generations of African-American quilters from the isolated hamlet of Gee's Bend, Alabama

When the exhibition of the quilts of Gee's Bend * first opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2003, an article in the Wall Street Journal began, in part: "Museum curators have a lot to worry about in these tough times: attendance, security, damaged art. And now...bedbugs. Some of the biggest blockbuster exhibits of recent years have nothing to do with Van Gogh and Vermeer - they are all about quilts. But here's the question: is it art? Curators are quick to point out that this is legitimate stuff, with its own masterworks and history."

COMING TO AMERICA

Padded textiles used as bedcoverings were found throughout the world long before the first English and Dutch settlers arrived in the New World. By necessity in the early years of colonies, the quilting of bedcovering soon flourished.



A WOMAN'S PLACE



Quilts are a functional and decorative art – a reminder of the human impulse to endow even the most utilitarian objects with beauty and creativity. The character of art created by American women beginning with the earliest Colonial settlements were largely determined by the prevailing attitudes, shaped by ideas defining the nature and place of women in society. "...it is the province of women to make a home... the abode of order and purity."

NEEDLE ARTS



Perhaps the most persuasive deterrent to women who were - or might be tempted to overstep established bonds of the domestic sphere was the fear of ridicule and loss of respect. Although there were exceptions, the majority of women were not in the forefront of progressive artistic movements. The needle arts - sewing, embroidery, lace making, knitting, crewel work, quilting - were the most socially acceptable and therefore the most popular arts for women.



AN INTELLIGENT BEING

But not all women accepted domesticity. As one woman questioned in 1790, "I would calmly ask, is it reasonable, that a candidate for immortality, for the joys of heaven, an intelligent being, who is to spend an eternity in contemplating the works of Deity, should at present be so degraded, as to be allowed no other ideas, than those which are suggested by the mechanics of a pudding, or the sewing of the seams of a garment?"

NEEDLE AND THREAD

The sewing box was a woman's constant companion. They were at the core of her domestic chores, providing the opportunity for socialization and an outlet for creativity. Substituting needle and thread for brush and paint, and pieces of cloth for canvas, women used traditional tools and techniques to fashion what one author called "mistress-pieces" of art.



COLOR AND DESIGN

These women wrought a body of work in the textile arts, done within the limitations dictated by their social role, but with a vigor and ingenuity that resulted in strong visual statements characterized by a superb sense of color and design. In fact, quilts are considered one of America's great indigenous art forms.





TEXTILES EXTANT

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, one of the few pieces of furniture mentioned in early household inventories was the bed. Of all textiles extant from colonial times, those related to the bed are the largest category.



QUILTS FOR WARMTH

To provide protection and warmth - part of a woman's work - many bed coverings were needed. Bed coverings in total might be worth more than the bed itself, as textiles were expensive and time-consuming to make. The first quilts made in America were utilitarian pieced quilts, as there was little time for creating more decorative quilts, even among the wealthy. As one writer observed, "a woman made utility quilts as fast as she could so her family wouldn't freeze, and she made them as beautiful as she could so her heart wouldn't break."

Pieced Quilt: the most commonly seen quilt type, made up of small pieces of fabric sewn together. Block quilts are pieced squares of fabric sewn together.

COVER UP FOR LOVE



The remnants used to make pieced quilts often tell their own story. For some quilters, remnants were salvaged from the clothing of a deceased loved one. As one young woman reminisced, "It was when Daddy died...Mama say, 'I'm going to take his work clothes, shape them into a quilt to remember his, and cover up under it for love.'"

CHILDREN'S LESSONS

Clothing, linens, bedcovers, towels, bags, and the myriad textile-based items so crucial to daily life required vigilant and frequent attention through needlework. Throughout the colonial period, young girls were required to learn the basic needlework skills that would enable her to create and care for nearly all the textiles in daily use. Plain sewing, knitting, spinning, weaving, and embroidery were expected lessons in the proper education of any young woman, rich or poor.





LEARNING TO QUILT

Girls were also taught the art of quilting at an early age. As soon as they were old enough to cut cloth into squares and sew them together, they began to make quilts, simple at first but progressively more complex.

TWO BLOCKS A DAY

"Before I was three years old, I was started at piecing a quilt. Patchwork, you know. My stint was at first only two blocks a day, but these were sewn together with the greatest care or they were unraveled and done over. Two blocks was called a single, but when I got a little bigger I had to make two pairs of singles and sew the four blocks together, and I was pretty proud when I had finished them."





APPLIQUÉ QUILTS

- Appliqué quilts came into common use in the later 18th century, when factory-made fabrics were imported to America. Appliqué quilts were made with cut-out shapes stitched to a ground fabric. They were more expensive than pieced quilts but provided an ideal place to showcase elaborate quilting. Despite the cost, many women preferred the greater freedom of design, whether realistic, narrative, or abstract.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Regional differences in quilts began to appear quite early in the colonial period. Those made in New England were needed for warmth and were more likely made of homespun, constructed of strips of whole cloth or simple geometric forms. In the South, with its warmer climate and agrarian economy, enslaved women handled much of the basic textile work, while the woman of the house created fancier work.



Painting by Mary Lyde Hicks Williams (1866-1959)

BALTIMORE QUILTS

The South had a particularly strong applique tradition. Some of the finest examples originated in an around Baltimore, Maryland. They are distinguished by elaborate and identifiable stitching - always considered one of the most important elements of a quilt.

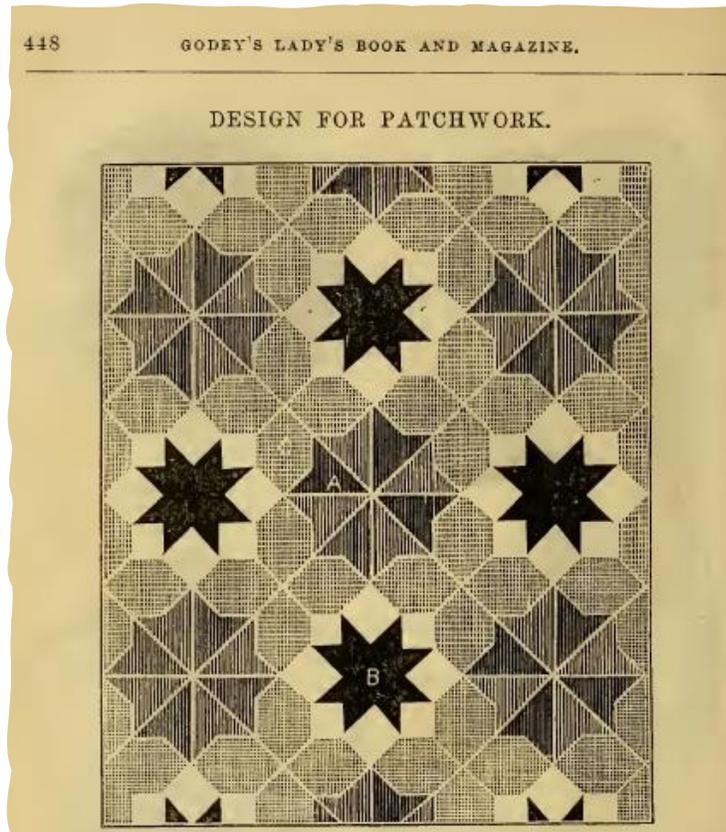


BRODERIE PERSE

Broderie Perse, or Persian embroidery, was also popular in the South. It is an intricate technique in which the shapes of flowers, birds, animals, and foliage were cut from pieces of printed cotton and chintz, then sewn together on a plain ground fabric.



PAPER PATTERNS



- By the middle of the 19th century, standardized quilt patterns appeared in women's periodicals such as Godey's Lady's Book, Miss Leslie's Magazine, and Peterson's Magazine. These pre-drawn patterns were called Berlin work, as so many of the first commercial designs came from Germany. Berlin work required skill but little creativity. By the end of the century, creativity was equated more with stitching itself than with design.

CREATIVE STITCHES

By the end of the century, creativity was equated more with stitching itself than with design.



THE QUILTING BEE

The making of textiles provided some of the sanctioned social events of a woman's life in the 19th century, and quilting bees were time for shared work and companionship, combining the social with the functional. The quilting bee is a uniquely American institution. Ostensibly, the bee served to assist each woman in the completion of a quilt, but its greater value lay in the opportunity it afforded for women to exchange news, recipes, home remedies, fabric scraps, and personal problems, and to learn new skills and teach their daughters, all in a mutually supportive way.



COMMUNITY EVENTS

- Quilting bees took many forms, from an impromptu gathering of close relatives or neighbors to large-scale affairs that involved much of the community, accompanied by refreshments and entertainment. Even the unskilled needlewoman was invited, as her cooking talents might be used to prepare an end-of-day feast.





THE GOSSIPS

A great deal of folklore and tradition is related to the making of quilts. Legend has it that sharp tongues were plied along with sharp needles at a quilting be, but it primarily offered a much-needed opportunity to socialize and relax, while at the same time accomplishing a necessary chore. This quilt detail shows a confidential exchange of opinion between two women.

(Original quilt by Eunice W. Cook in Vermont, 19th century, now lost)



SUFFRAGE

Social issues of great significance and controversy were frequently the subject of conversation at quilting bees. It was at a quilting bee that Susan B. Anthony made her first suffrage speech advocating the right to vote for women.



HUMILITY BLOCK

To many, to stitch a perfect quilt top is an affront to God, and so intentionally worked a "mistake" into the quilt.

QUILTING AND COURTING

Men were often included in the merrymaking that followed the completion of a quilting bee. Much courting took place on these occasions, as seen in the discreet handholding under the quilting frame - although it has not escaped granny's sharp eye. That the quilting bee was a popular social event in the 19th century is confirmed by countless references, diaries, paintings, verse, and song.



THE LAST STITCH

Quilting bees became quite competitive, with all the young girls trying to produce their very best stitches. When only the last row of quilting remained, the married women stepped aside, leaving the girls to vie for the distinction of setting the last stitch, for it was believed that the winner would be the next to marry.





BRIDE'S QUILTS

Bride's quilts were often made at quilting bees. These quilts featured symbolic images representing love, fidelity, and fertility. Steeped in sentimentality, they were often lovingly stored in chests as an heirloom to be handed down from mother to daughter. More than personal treasures, they are documents that provide information such as marriage names and dates, emigration, population, and cultural heritage.

A BAKER'S DOZEN

Tradition dictated that every young girl aspired to have 13 quilts - a "baker's dozen" - for her dowry, stored in her dower chest by the time she married. In some places, she pieced and quilted the quilts herself. A special quilting bee would be held to finish either all of the quilts or just the special 13th and more elaborate bride's quilt.





ALBUM QUILTS

Album or friendship quilts on which names were stitched or written were popular products of quilting bees, made by women of a community or church parish as a gift for a friend moving to a new home, often on the western frontier. Patches of specified sizes were made individually then stitched together by the group.

*May good mercy preserve the
His power protect
His goodness uphold the
His wisdom direct
Fanny Richard
March the 6 1857
Domestic happiness & the pen*

LIFE'S UNDERTAINTY

Album quilts also documented the life passages of a family. Elizabeth Roseberry Mitchell of Kentucky made a touching personal statement about life's uncertainty with her coffin quilt, dating from 1839. When a member of the quiltmaker's family died, she removed a labeled coffin from the border and placed it within the graveyard in the center of the quilt.





THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

Quilt making, along with other needle and textile arts, was often an outlet not only for creative energy but also for the release of a woman's pent-up frustrations. Women's thoughts, feelings, their very lives were inextricably bound in the designs just as surely as the cloth layers were bound with thread.



BITTERSWEET RECOLLECTIONS

As one quiltmaker reminisced: "It took me more than twenty years, nearly twenty-five, I reckon, in the evening after supper when the children were put to bed. My whole life is in that quilt. It scares me sometimes when I look at it... So they are all in that quilt, my hopes and fears, my joys and sorrows, my loves and hates. I tremble sometimes when I remember what that quilt knows about me."

A QUILTER'S VIEW

Throughout the 19th century, self-taught women artists looked around themselves, then created scenes they saw - hills and fields, lakes and streams, buildings and roads - and the log cabin motif (right).



DUTCH TULIP MOTIF

American folk artists were heavily influenced by the art of the Old World, as many Americans were either born in or had ancestral roots in Europe. Motifs can be traced to sources of inspiration such as flowers that were important elements of European still life paintings.





IRISH CHAIN

The wave of immigration brought many ethnic patterns, designs, and techniques that were adapted for quilts. Irish Chain is evidence of the influx of Irish immigrants to America beginning with the great Irish potato famine in the 1840s.

PRINCESS FEATHER

Pennsylvania Dutch quilt patterns were more whimsical, such as Bachelor's Thumb, Lover's Knot, Shoo Fly, and Princess Feather, a whirling swastika, an ancient symbol of life.





AMISH QUILTS

Amish women have long created quilts that reflect their religious and social values. By spurning popular printed and synthetic fibers, they still cling to a preference for fabrics of solid and deeply saturated colors. Probing the possibilities of color interaction within a standard geometric format, Amish quilters have explored design potentials that reveal an intuitive reflection of the modern dictum of Mies van der Rohe, "Less is more."



AFRICAN STRING TECHNIQUE

Many of the quilt designs made by African-American quilters (for example, the quilters of Gee's Bend) differ from those found in the Euro-American quilt tradition. They are considered to represent a unique continuation of the textile traditions of West Africa, with strip or string techniques, strong color contrasts, asymmetry, large designs, and multiple patterning found in kente cloth from Ghana (bottom).

STAR OF BETHLEHEM



The inspiration for quilt patterns are innumerable and reflect not only personal history but also regional folklore and religious belief. Quilt patterns and names had religious origins with patterns based on traditional symbols. The Bible served as a source for names, such as Rose of Sharon, Jacob's Ladder, and Star of Bethlehem, one of the most popular of all quilt patterns.



MARTHA WASHINGTON STAR

There were many other astronomical motifs, many with religious overtones, such as Rising Sun, Blazing Star, and Martha Washington Star, named for a pattern rendered by Mrs. Washington, who was known to be a skilled seamstress.

BURNING KANSAS

Quilts also served as political expression, such as Burning Kansas (or Kansas Troubles), based on the activities of abolitionist John Brown in the border state, where in the 1850s the issue of slavery resulted in widespread bloodshed. Events such as this gave quiltmakers an opportunity to express views on patriotism, wars, and slavery.



QUILTS ALONG THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

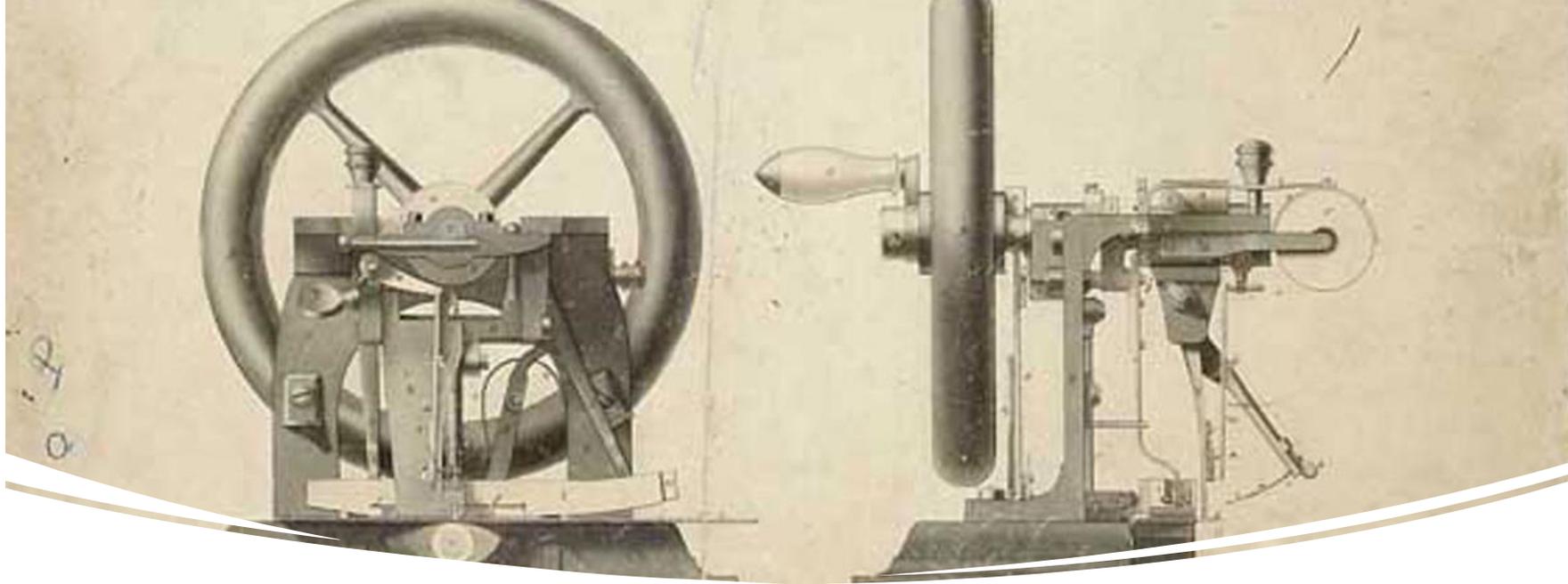


Were quilts bearing visible codes intended to help enslaved persons along the Underground Railroad (ca. 1850–60)? Recent speculation considers that shapes and motifs embedded in quilts, but there is no evidence, authenticity, or documentation to support this contention. Nevertheless, the legend persists that a quilt hanging from a clothesline or windowsill of a safe house could signal immediate danger or provide directions along the route. Some of the coded motifs are thought to be a bear paw (left) = follow an animal trail through the mountains to find food and water, log cabin - seek safe shelter here, or drunkard's path - zigzag in case you are being tracked by hounds. This controversial theory of communication continues to be both disputed and believed.

"T" FOR TEMPERANCE?



Numerous quilts contained visible or veiled references to political and social events through both the design and the names assigned to them. Almost every significant event of the day showed up in quilts - wars, elections, temperance, suffrage, emancipation, centennial, civil rights, and so on.



INVENTION OF THE SEWING MACHINE

By the mid-19th century, many necessities could be purchased at a store rather than produced at home and technology gave rise to increased leisure time. The sewing machine, first patented in 1846 by Elias Howe, brought with it efficiency and speed. It was embraced by American women as a way to apply greater decorative aspects to their handiwork, thus making quilts increasingly elaborate and complex.

CRAZY QUILTS

The decorative aspect of bedcovers reached its zenith with crazy quilts, popular during the last decades of the 19th and early decades of the 20th centuries. There are several theories about the origin of the term crazy quilt, the most compelling of which is as a purely decorative description of the random combination of irregularly shaped pieces of fabric - including men's neckties, bits of a wedding veil, hair ribbons, and luxurious fabrics such as silk, satin, and velvet, - and excessive embroidery that made up these eccentric quilts.





ANYTHING "ORIENTAL"

Another theory is that the term comes from the randomly shaped pieces that resemble "crazed" porcelain. Yet another is that the style was inspired by an exhibition at the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876, where a Japanese screen made of patches of various materials and textured gilt paper ornamentation sparked a taste for anything "oriental."

FORMAL ELEMENTS

It is interesting to note that during the years when American and European painting consisted of representational styles, women quilt artists were already exploring the purely formal elements of line, texture, shape, color relationships, value contrasts, and inventive variations of original patterns.



THE ORIGINAL CUBIST

Crazy quilts are at once charming, humorous, sentimental, decorative. It is also an art form that effortlessly masters the qualities inherent in modern art. When the Armory Show opened in New York City in 1913, introducing modern art to an unsuspecting public, there was, curiously, a piece of crazy quilt on display in the exhibition. The New York Evening Sun ran a cartoon entitled "The Original Cubist." Although obviously intended to mock the Cubist movement, it also unconsciously acknowledged the long-established use of abstract design in quilt making and the involvement of American women with abstract reasoning in resolving design problems.



BUILDING AWARENESS

The making of quilts as a means by which to build awareness of and actively express their convictions on issues of the day - political, religious, social - began in the 19th century. One of the earliest was the missionary movement, in which women traveled to distant lands to preach, while those at home supported missionary work by organizing into charitable organizations.





BICENTENNIAL QUILTS

Interest in making quilts waned during the mid-20th century, as they were seen as old-fashioned and "making-do." A sense of nostalgia brought about by the Bicentennial of the U.S. in 1976 also brought about a renewed interest in quilts as symbols of national pride.

QUILTS AS SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

While most Bicentennial quilts were celebratory of America's freedoms, other quilts, then and now, address historic social issues such as lynching, child labor, and women's suffrage, and issues of contemporary relevance such as civil rights, equality and inclusion, and racial injustice.



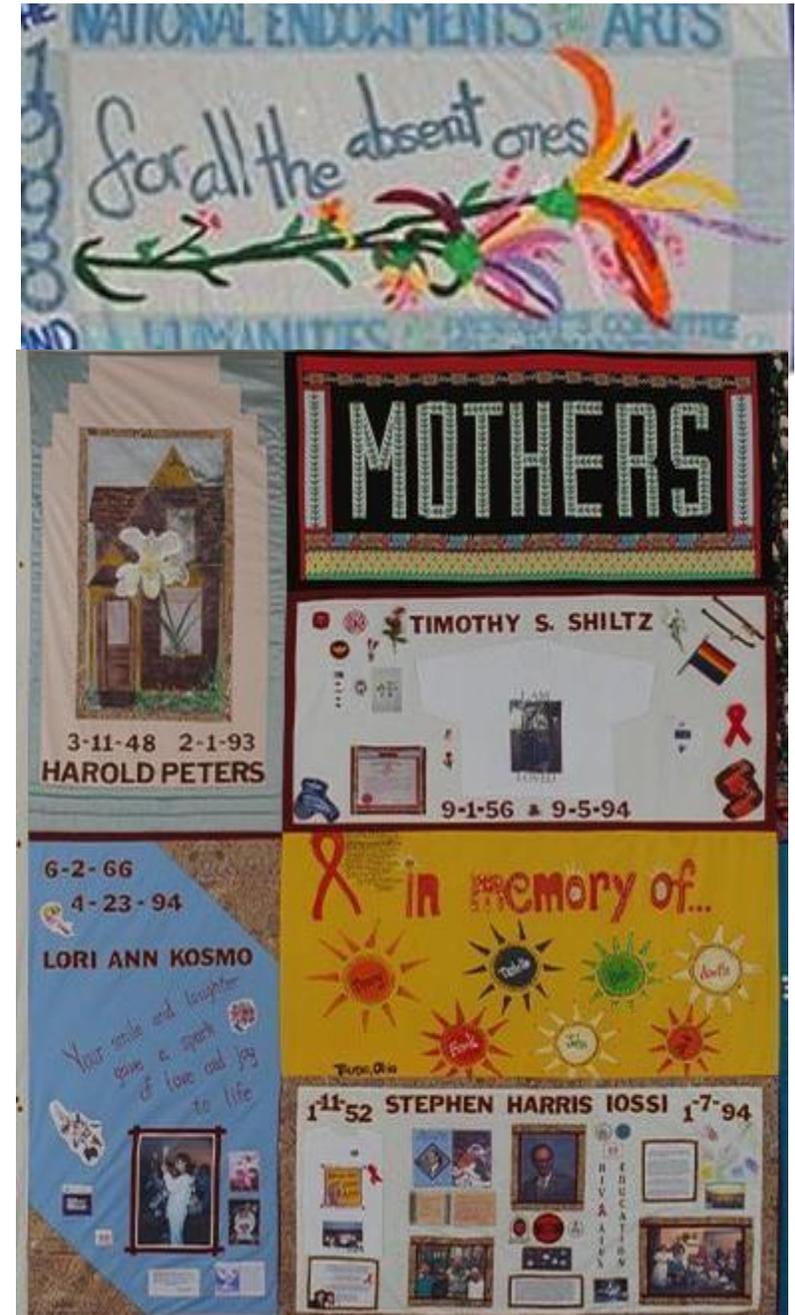
AIDS MEMORIAL QUILT

Quilts as social conscience, social justice, and social advocacy have since become part of public discourse, beginning with the AIDS Memorial Quilt. The AIDS Memorial Quilt was conceived in San Francisco in 1985 and created as a memorial for those who had died of AIDS and to help people understand the devastating impact of the disease. The quilt was unveiled on October 11, 1987, on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., during the National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights. It consisted of 1,920 panels covering a space larger than a football field. It featured a sunrise ceremony of the reading of the names of those represented on the quilt.



THE NAMES PROJECT

After the inaugural display in 1987, the AIDS memorial quilt toured 20 cities over a four-month period. Panels were added in each city, with a total of 8,288 panels returning to Washington in October 1988. *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* received an Academy Award for Best Documentary in 1989. By 1992, the quilt included panels from every state and 28 countries. In 1993, panels were carried in President Clinton's inaugural parade. The last display of the entire AIDS Memorial Quilt was in October 1996, when it covered the entire National Mall in Washington, where it was viewed by an estimated 1.2 million people. Today, with more than 48,000 panels dedicated to more than 100,000 individuals, it is too large to fit in the Mall.





9/11 QUILT PROJECT

In the days following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., the 9/11 Memorial Quilt Project was envisioned. Inspired by the AIDS Memorial Quilt, it was an open-call for quilters, fabric artists, and all interested parties to create quilts in remembrance of September 11, 2001. Within the first year, 94 quilt panels were submitted to the project (the panel at the left was made by Lynchburg College faculty, staff, and students). Over the next two years, the quilt was displayed throughout the United States (including at the Daura Gallery). The quilt is now in the collection of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum in New York City.

QUILTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Quilts also serve as a platform to create dialogue about social justice issues and experience the power of activism. The education programs of the Social Justice Sewing Academy, founded in 2017, seek to bridge communities through participation in quilting bees that explore issues such as gender discrimination, gun violence, and mass incarceration. The premise is that quilters of all ages, races, ethnicities, religions, political leanings, or socioeconomic status can speak their truth, build knowledge, learn from one another, and become agents of social change.





ARE QUILTS ART?

In the 1970s, pioneering Feminist artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro blurred the lines between fine art and craft. Chicago is best known for *Dinner Party*, a monumental collaborative multimedia project that celebrates women's history through 39 place settings incorporating traditional women's fabric crafts such as embroidery and needlepoint. Schapiro, a founder of the Pattern and Decoration Movement, created "femmages" – collages using lace, sequins, handkerchiefs, needlepoint text, and bits of diversely patterned fabrics – a powerful feminist statement that reclaimed "women's work." Together, they gained recognition and acceptance for different modes of artistic production.

FAITH RINGGOLD

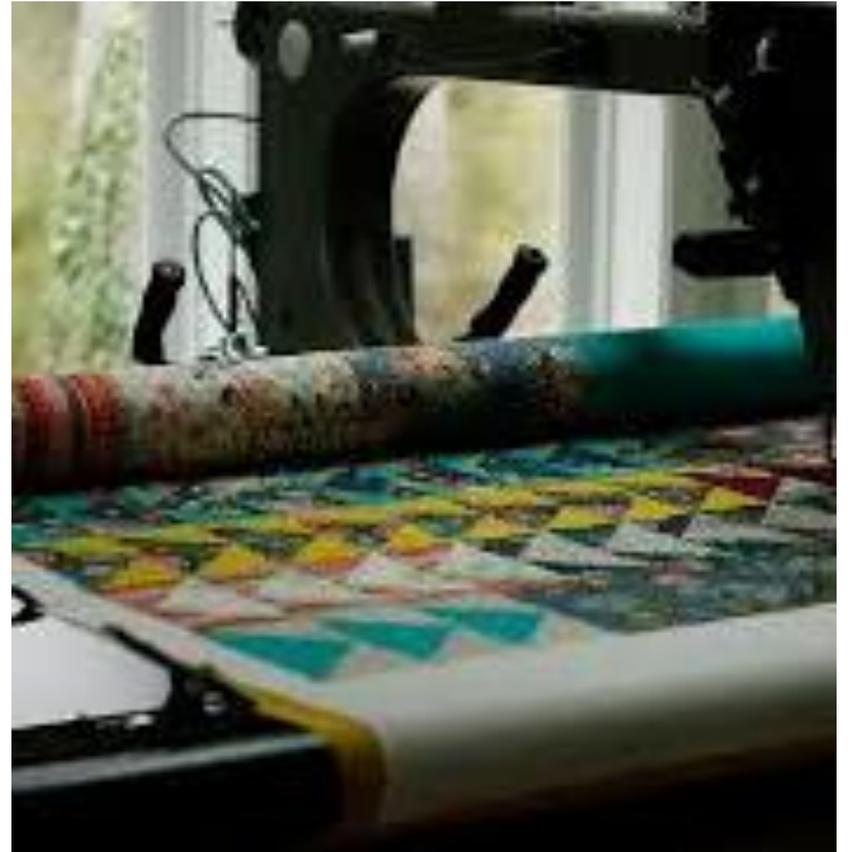
Faith Ringgold has, perhaps more than anyone else, established quilts as a fine art. A painter, mixed media sculptor, performance artist, writer, and teacher, she created a unique way of painting using the quilt medium. Her first quilt, *Echos of Harlem*, was made in collaboration with her mother in 1980. Her first story quilt, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima*, was written in 1983. Her style and use of quilts continue to "wow" audiences around the world.

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BIG BUSINESS

Quilt making is big business in 21st century America, for both professional quilters and hobbyists. Quilt and fabric stores, long-arm sewing machines, publications, and juried exhibitions are flourishing. According to a 2014 survey, "Quilting in America," there are more than 16.4 quilters and a quilt industry valued at \$3.76 billion.





A NEW ERA

Quilts are a paradox. Art, yet craft. Old fashioned, yet modern. Domestically produced, yet dependent on industrialization. Avant-garde yet conventional. Community oriented, yet individually creative. As in previous generations, quilt making pushes the boundaries and blurs the lines of needlework as artistic expression. Art critic Robert Hughes, reflecting on Amish quilts, stated, "seen out of their original context of use, hanging on a wall, they make it very plain how absurd the once jealously guarded hierarchical distinctions between 'folk' and 'high' art can be."

QUILTS =
MODERN ART



FORCED TO FLEE



Jo Thomas, Child Behind Barbed Wire, 2018

Throughout history people have been forced to flee from their homes for their own safety and survival due to war, oppression, natural disasters, and atrocious human rights violations. The refugee crisis has imposed severe impacts on the social, economic, and political structures of host countries, especially poor and developing countries. This powerful and timely exhibition, coordinated by Studio Art Quilt Associates (SAQA) illustrates the global challenges arising from the current refugee crisis impacting countries across the globe.

On exhibit at the Daura Museum of Art, University of Lynchburg, through October 9, 2020.

SELECTED RESOURCES

Gee's Bend Quiltmakers
(Soulsgrowndeep.org/gees-bend-quiltmakers)

International Quilt Museum, University of
Nebraska-Lincoln
(www.internationalquiltmuseum.org)

Social Justice Sewing Academy
(www.sjsacdemy.org)

Studio Art Quilt Associates
(www.saqa.coj)

Amish: The Art of the Quilt (Robert Hughes, author)

Artists in Aprons: Folk Art by American Women (C. Kurt Dewhurst, Betty McDowell, Marsha McDowell, authors)

Faith Ringgold (www.faithringgold.com)

Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad (Jacqueline Tobin & Raymond Dobard, authors)

Quilting in America
(quilting-in-America.com/history-of-quilts.html)

The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort 1750-1950 (Roderick Kiracofe and Mary Elizabeth Johnson, authors)

Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies (Julia Spruill, author)