

African-American Quilts: Two Perspectives

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Recently there has been an explosion of interest in American quilting. Scholars have explored quilts by chronology, region, construction, and materials. They have looked at the overall history, they have focused on singular traditions. One important and complex area of inquiry that has emerged over the last decade is the study of quilts and other textiles made by African Americans. From May 12 to 16, 1993, as part of "The Great American Quilt Festival 4" at Pier 92 on the Hudson River, the Museum of American Folk Art will present two important exhibitions devoted to quilts made by African-American quiltmakers. Both exhibitions represent many years of research on the part of their respective curators—Dr. Maude Southwell Wahlman and Cuesta Benberry—and offer different aspects of the history of African-American quilting in the United States. While one exhibition explores the African antecedents of some African-American quilting traditions, the other presents the broad spectrum of quilting by African-American quiltmakers from the nineteenth century through the present day.

It is not the purpose of this article to paraphrase the thoughts and writings of two scholars eminently qualified to represent their own findings. Nor is it my aim to endorse one perspective over another. It is my hope that this brief discussion will encourage people to take advantage of this unprecedented opportunity to experience for themselves the dialogue that continues to evolve in this field.

As an observer with an interest in American quilt history, I am left, after reviewing the thoughtful material of both historians, with a strong conviction that neither line of inquiry ultimately negates the other. The fine focus applied by one is part of the story told by the other. However, the attention paid to the African design qualities of some quilts has captured the imagination of the quilt world almost to the exclusion of all other aspects of African-American quilting. But there remain questions and inconsistencies that suggest there is more than one way to view a quilt and a great deal of work still to be done. The more

information we bring to this material, the deeper is our understanding and appreciation of the incredible complexity of historical, cultural, and emotional forces that shape every aspect of the creation of these quilts and our response to them.

In 1976, Gladys-Marie Fry wrote a monograph on the life of Harriet Powers, whose two Bible quilts must be included among the United States' greatest cultural treasures. She discovered a corollary between the

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technique and imagery of these two quilts and the appliqué tradition of the Fon people of Dahomey, West Africa, now the Republic of Benin. During the following two years John Michael Vlach and Mary Twining noted the seeming retention of two African textile techniques in work by African Americans, namely strip piecing and appliqué.¹ By 1980, the first exhibition of African-American quilts had been organized by Maude Wahlman and John Scully for the Yale School of Art Gallery. The purpose of the exhibition was to pinpoint specific characteristics of quilts made by African-American quiltmakers that were similar to African-made textiles. In the enthusiasm that followed, the visual characteristics quickly came to be generally viewed as the criteria for defining an African-American quilt. African designs, techniques, and symbolism as antecedents for the quilting aesthetic of African-American quilters became the primary focus for ensuing articles, exhibitions, catalogs, and symposia.

Dr. Wahlman, who has been one of the most eloquent proponents of the study of African design derivations in this body of work, writes in the introduction to her forthcoming book, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*:

Similar designs in African quilted textiles and African-

BIBLE SCENES QUILT
Made by a member of the
Drake family
Thomaston, Georgia
1900-1910
Appliquéd cotton
76½ x 71"
Collection of Shelly Zegart





FREEDOM QUILT
 Jessie Telfair
 Parrot, Georgia;
 1980
 Pieced and appliquéd
 cotton and synthetic fabrics
 73 x 85"
 Collection of Shelly Zegart

American quilts are coincidental, due to the technical process of piecing which reduces cloth to geometric shapes—squares and triangles. All these techniques—piecing, appliqué, and quilting—were known in Africa, Europe, and the United States, yet these African-American quilts are often profoundly different from European or Anglo-American quilts. The difference lies in historically different aesthetic principles, with both technical and religious dimensions.²

Dr. Wahlman's research began in 1977 when she was a graduate student at Yale. She had already published one book on contemporary African art that included an examination of African textiles. With the support of Robert Farris Thompson, her advisor at Yale, Wahlman began an exploration of possible connections between those textile traditions and quilts made by

African Americans. In the course of her continuing investigations she has interviewed at least 500 quilters and seen thousands of quilts. The results have formed the basis for her many contributions to the study of the African roots of quilts made by African Americans.

In 1989, Dr. Wahlman published two articles in *The Clarion* that detailed some of the results of her research.³ At that time, Dr. Robert Bishop approached her with the idea of organizing an exhibition for the Museum of American Folk Art using quilts by living African-American quiltmakers that she would identify for the Museum's collection. The purchase of the quilts would be supported by a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

This past year I had the opportunity to view Cuesta Benberry's exhibition "Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts," which was organized under the auspices of The Kentucky Quilt Proj-

ect, Inc. Louisville, Kentucky. In the exhibition and accompanying catalog, Benberry was the first to publicly question the existence of the "African-American" quilt as the only or even the major quilt expression of African Americans. She proposed that there was no "typical" African-American quilt, but a diverse body of work influenced by factors that included region, education, training, socioeconomic group, and period. She further advocated that the work of African Americans was not separate from the mainstream of American quilting and that African Americans, present in America since the first slaves arrived in the seventeenth century, had in fact participated in the formation of that mainstream. As a result of the exhibition organized by Cuesta Benberry, the Museum recognized a unique opportunity to bring together these two different areas of focus for the first time in one space.

Quilt history has been Cuesta Benberry's "absorbing interest" for

PIG PEN
 Log Cabin variation
 Pecolia Warner
 Yazoo City, Mississippi
 c. 1982
 Cotton, linen, and
 synthetic fabrics
 81 x 81"
 Museum of American Folk Art
 Gift of Maude Wahlman
 1991.32.3



over thirty years. During that time she has collected an astounding archive of material relating to quilting and has generously shared her knowledge with curators, quilt historians, quilters, and the public. She writes that her interest became a "passion" when she began her investigations into African-American quilt history many years ago. In the introduction to the catalog that accompanied her exhibition, Benberry indicts the single-mindedness of the direction of earlier research:

Scholars located a small group of quilts profoundly different visually from the accepted aesthetic of traditional American patchwork quilts. These idiosyncratic quilts from black women of rural southern and similar backgrounds were examined closely for stylistic variances, construction techniques, fabric color choices and symbolic design references. Most exciting of all was a linkage between the black American quilts and African design traditions, believed to indicate an unconscious cultural memory in the quiltmakers of their far-away motherland. African-American quilts became one of America's newest forms of exotica. Continued scrutinization of the quilts resulted in the promulgation of a number of theories which were immediately accepted as fact. Visual criteria for recognizing African-American quilts (stitch length, asymmetrical organization of quilt patches, size of the patches, frequent use of bright colors) were devised. Long-established canons of quilt history research, such as determining the quiltmaker's identity, the quilt's provenance, date of making and fabric content, were no longer deemed essential. One needed only apply the recently-created visual criteria to identify with certainty quilts of African-American origin.⁴

This criticism of the methodology behind some of the early research highlights a few of the problems associated with this topic and rightfully

condemns the application of these criteria as the sole determining factors of African-American quilts. But it does not, nor is it meant to, invalidate the existence of this "profoundly different" group of quilts. The large numbers of quilts that share this aesthetic, including nineteenth-century examples, and the insight that Dr. Wahlman has shown regarding the making of these quilts lend credence to the argument for a specific cultural tradition at play in certain quilts. Furthermore, Dr. Wahlman writes in the introduction to her own forthcoming book about African-American quilts:

These aesthetic criteria were a starting point and in no way was I trying to pigeonhole this innovative art. Yet others picked up on these criteria and used them to determine which quilts were 'real' African-American quilts... My thesis is that most African-American quilting derives its aesthetic from various African traditions, both technological and ideological ones. Thus I deliberately study African-American quilts which exhibit similar aesthetic tendencies with African textiles. Cuesta Benberry has recently clarified this situation by correctly pointing out the great diversity of quilting made over the last two centuries by African Americans.⁵

Dr. Wahlman describes seven traits that appear consistently in the African-American quilts she has studied: vertical stripes, bright colors, large designs, asymmetry, improvisation, multiple patterning, and symbolic forms. She has also noted deeper affinities between these quilts and African textiles, primarily in the use of symbolic patterns.

Long narrow strips are the primary construction technique in West African and Caribbean textiles, and most cloth found in West Africa was made by joining these strips to form cloth. Loose, or "flying," strips were also used as part of ceremonial costumes in societies such as the Yoruba *Egungun* in Nigeria, which were organized to honor ancestors. The piecing of strips to form a textile is related to patchwork and in the hands of African

craftsmen, this piecing often intentionally results in asymmetrical and unpredictable patterns that stop the eye as it travels across the cloth. Weavings by women on wide stationary looms utilized vertical designs that simulated the fabrics made from pieced strips that were woven by men on narrow, portable looms.

Color has traditionally played an important role in African textiles. The earliest cloth was blue and white, providing a strong contrast that could

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be seen from a distance. Later, colorful cloths were produced using European cloth that had been unraveled and rewoven. Multiple patterning, improvisation, asymmetry, and color all contribute to the important function of African textiles in communicating the social status of the wearer in terms of wealth, prestige, and education. Robert Farris Thompson has also suggested that they serve the further function of protection, confusing evil spirits that travel in straight lines.⁶ Dr. Wahlman traces these characteristics to four African civilizations: the Mandespeaking people of West Africa, the Yoruba and Fon people, the Ejagham people, and the Kongo and Kongo-influenced people. As slaves were brought to the New World, this mixture was further blended with Latin-American, Native-American, and European influences.

Although men were the primary textile artists in Africa, in the United States slave women became the principle weavers, seamstresses, and quilters, conforming to an established gender division of labor. Yet these same women were also expected to perform many of the same hard physical tasks for which the men were responsible.

These additional skills were desirable and increased the female slave's worth to her owners. However, they also increased the burden that slave women bore. Long after men

STARS
Nora Ezell
Green City, Alabama
1977
Cotton and synthetic fabrics
94 x 74"
Museum of American Folk Art
This purchase was made
possible in part by a grant
from the National Endowment
for the Arts.
1991.13.1



were able to rest at night, women would still be required to produce a certain stint of weaving as well as the textile needs of their families.⁷

Cuesta Benberry states, "Africans brought to America were unfamiliar with the bed quilt but had knowledge both of the techniques used in making a quilt (piecing, appliqué, embroidery) and in weaving cloth."⁸ The transition to quilting was thus facilitated. However, the fact that Africans already possessed these skills would suggest that, as in other immigrant cultures, they also possessed an aesthetic concomitant with these skills that could be newly interpreted and adapted to the new forms. Whether that aesthetic was applied by the same quiltmakers who created the pieced, appliquéd, embroidered, whole cloth, broderie perse, and reverse appliquéd quilts that conformed to the dominant aesthetic is not yet conclusively known.

Benberry repeatedly cautions against drawing general conclusions on the basis of scant visual evidence. This is important to keep in mind as one reads earlier writings on this topic. In his important and acclaimed work *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife*, for instance, John Michael Vlach briefly discusses African-American textiles. He makes several interesting points in his description of a blanket woven by Luiza Combs, an African woman who was brought to the United States near the beginning of the Civil War. Her weaving, a wool blanket with a stripe pattern, was probably made during the era of Reconstruction. Vlach emphasizes that all the steps of production, including color and design, were entirely within her command. Based on this one example he states that, although more comparative study is needed, the color choices conform to an African aesthetic. He points out that the stripe design, though familiar in "Anglo-American" weaving, was also a common African design. But then he concludes that the one blanket gives a "hint of the kinds of textiles that might have been made by slaves under the supervision of white owners. Those coverlets, blankets, and fabrics may have been African and American simultaneously."⁹

Even postulated as tentatively as Vlach has done, can the inference be

made that a blanket woven during Reconstruction for family use might be indicative of a textile produced under the supervision of a white owner? Benberry points out that to use the term "Anglo-American" suggests that no other groups participated in the formation of "American" textile traditions. Yet Africans, to name just one group, were vital contributors to the weaving and textile community that was forming these traditions. The limitations of the form make stripes a natural design choice from a technical standpoint and striped weavings are found in many cultures. Until more evidence is found, is the argument for an Anglo derivation more compelling than that for an African influence imported with slaves since the seventeenth century? It is, after all, the aesthetic and technical manipulation of the form, as well as its use, that indicates cultural preference.

One of Cuesta Benberry's aims in both her exhibition and publication was to establish the presence of African Americans throughout the annals of quilt history in the United States. She hoped to achieve this through the analysis of historical fact and visual evidence. Where there did not seem to be ample material to draw conclusions, she chose not to speculate, but simply to state what was historically known. That quiltmaking among African Americans was widespread is supported by surviving examples from all former slave-holding states. Most of these quilts have descended in the families of the slave owners and are considered by some to be representative of the work produced by slaves for their white owners. The number of extant quilts made by slaves for their own use is small, yet statements have been published assigning general design characteristics to this category of quilts. The quilts that are documented were made mostly in traditional patterns such as "Nine-Patch," "Log Cabin," and "Rob Peter to Pay Paul."¹⁰ Benberry asks rhetorically whether she can then conclude that these examples did not differ from those made for the slave owners.

Interestingly, these are the very types of patterns that Wahlman cites in her discussion of African antecedents in African-American quilts. Log Cabin is essentially a strip-pieced pattern and a design that continues to be popular with contemporary African-American

quilters. Both Log Cabin and the Nine-Patch pattern incorporate small squares that share affinities with the cloth charm known as a "Mojo" or a "Hand." These charms, derived from West and Central African charm concepts, embody a healing medicine with the power to protect. In addition to their decorative qualities, they symbolize safety for the person using them.¹¹

In the paragraph that follows, Benberry raises another interesting question, one that highlights the com-

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plexity of tracing the origins of quilt styles and techniques. The American patchwork quilt is usually associated with the geometric block configuration. In recent years this has increasingly been referred to as an Anglo-American style. According to quilt historians, among them Barbara Brackman, this configuration did not become standard in American quilting until the middle of the nineteenth century.¹² Previously, there had been more flexibility in the patterns that quiltmakers chose, the most popular being the medallion style; both block and strip construction appear as minor techniques. As the block construction did not arrive in the New World intact from a European source, but seems to have developed in the United States, it cannot be accurately labeled "Anglo-American." Such a term precludes the possibility of contributions to the evolution of the form by people of a non-European background.

Cuesta Benberry's text positions the creation of quilts within the social and historical context of African-American life and quilt history. From this chronological presentation there emerges a picture of African-American life from the Antebellum South to the Freedom Marches of the Civil Rights era to today. She writes of slave women who purchased their free-

dom and the freedom of their families through their needlework skills and of free black women in the anti-slavery movement who supported their endeavors partially through the sale of their quilts. She writes of the Freedom Rides and Freedom Marches of the 1960s and early 1970s; of Jessie Telfair's quilt that reads simply, "Freedom," over and over across its surface; and of the Freedom Quilting Bee, a quilting cooperative that remains in existence today as the Martin Luther King, Jr., Freedom Quilting Bee.

African Americans made auto-graph quilts, commemorative quilts, crazy quilts, fancy quilts, and scrap quilts. In the twentieth century they have continued to quilt individually, for their own use, and as a group, to support community values. Many trained artists have turned to the medium as a flexible alternative to more orthodox materials. Some of these artists have utilized African visual traditions to express their sense of continuity. Carole Harris of Detroit felt that traditional African designs offered her "the answer to questions I didn't know I had."¹³ After making a quilt that featured colorful hanging strips, Harris discovered pictures of dance costumes from Western Yoruba to which her quilt bore a striking resemblance. Quilting has been so much a part of the African-American tradition that creative African Americans working in all the arts have incorporated quilt imagery into their written and visual expressions.

One of the most important groups of quilts included in Benberry's exhibition are those made by several generations of the Perkins family. These quilts represent a rare chance to document the quilting practices of a single family over a period of time and in both rural and urban settings. They range from decorative quilts on which a great deal of care and technical expertise were lavished to quickly made utility quilts. The technical skill, composition, and construction appear to be directly related to the quilt's intended function. The quilts demonstrate a participation in the prevalent trends of quilting of the period and illustrate the adaptation of skills to both use and socioeconomic factors.

At the risk of being criticized by both curators, however, I would not be

entirely fair to this discussion if I didn't point out a few motifs that seemed ambiguous, especially in the crazy quilt. One block, strikingly different from the rest, bears a design that looks like a strip-pieced quilt. This is explained only as having particular significance for the family. Crazy quilts are usually embellished with embroidered and appliquéd motifs, and this example is no exception. The crossed croquet mallets express the family's enjoyment of this activity, and the wheeled star is an effective decorative device. But these designs also bear strong similarities to symbols in the ideographic writing system of the Ejagham peoples of Nigeria known as Nsibidi, which Wahlman feels has played a significant role in the language of African-American quilts. Could the embroidered hands be the record of a child, as Benberry states, and also have protective connotations? The very nature of the crazy quilt—complex, asymmetrical, multi-patterned—invites the quiltmaker to encode layers of meaning, whether that meaning is personal to the maker and her family or signifies wider cultural messages.

Among the most interesting American quilts, both for their powerful imagery and rich historical and cultural references, are Bible quilts, made predominantly by Southern African-American women. Through their visual appliquéd narrative imagery these quilts parallel a strong African oral tradition that transmits values and religious beliefs, as well as educational and cultural teachings.

The appliquéd images found on the late-nineteenth-century quilts made by Harriet Powers have inspired research for some time, and their debt to the appliquéd banners of the Fon people of Dahomey is not in question. Wahlman has taken a new look at Harriet Powers' quilts and believes that they might have strong fraternal associations. Benberry, too, notes the importance of fraternal organizations to African-American families from the postbellum era into the twentieth century. She suggests fraternal associations as another possible source for the enigmatic imagery sometimes found on Bible and other quilts. These organizations offered one of the avenues available to African Americans for health insurance and other benefits

that were otherwise frequently denied them. They also afforded opportunities for social activities and achievements of office within the society.

In the literature on African-American quilting there has developed an exciting and thought-provoking discussion that has widened the scope of scholarly investigations. Hopefully, the result will be the continued discovery of material and information that sheds light on all aspects of the African-American contribution to the history of American quilting. ★

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NOTES

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1 Dr. Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (New York: E.P. Dutton in Cooperation with the Museum of American Folk Art, 1993).

2 Ibid.

3 Dr. Maude Southwell Wahlman, "African-American Quilts: Tracing the Aesthetic Principles," *The Clarion* 14, no. 2 (Spring 1989), pp. 44–54; Wahlman, "Religious Symbolism in African-American Quilts," *The Clarion* 14, no. 3 (Summer 1989), pp. 36–44.

4 Cuesta Benberry, *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts* (Louisville, Ky.: The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., 1990), p. 15.

5 Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*.

6 Ibid.

7 Deborah Gray White, "Female Slaves in the Plantation South," in *Before Freedom Came: African-American Life in the Antebellum South*, eds. Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr., and Kym S. Rice (Richmond, Va.: The Museum of the Confederacy and University Press of Virginia, 1991), p. 109.

8 Benberry, *Always There*, p. 23.

9 John Michael Vlach, *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1991), p. 36.

10 Benberry, *Always There*, p. 28.

11 Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, p. 81.

12 Barbara Brackman, "The Strip Tradition in European-American Quilts," *The Clarion* 14, no. 4. (Fall 1989), p. 45.

13 Benberry, *Always There*, p. 62.