Bird of Paradise Quilt Top is replete with appliquéd birds, familiar and exotic animals, and people in a colorful floral setting. The intriguing image of an elephant, with gold embroidered lettering forming the name “HANNIBAL” on his red blanket, and the elephant’s apparent keeper, invited a closer look. New findings provide an additional context that confirms the dating of the quilt top and the attribution of the quilt’s geographical origins. This new information once again proves that folk art is often a significant document of American social history.

The fanciful beast, named after the famed Carthaginian general, was more than just an embellishment in the quiltmaker’s colorful composition; research reveals that this pachyderm had a significant history. For more than 30 years, Hannibal performed with an animal menagerie and later was a circus entertainer.


**Inscription (Back):** Imported in 1831 and advertised as the “Great Hunting Elephant, Timour the Tartar,” he was renamed in 1833 by Raymond, Weeks & Co. and billed as “War Elephant Hannibal.” In the mid-1850s he was part of the Great Broadway Menagerie, Signor Chiarini’s Italian Circus, Raymond & Co.’s Menagerie, Herr Dreisbach & Co.’s Menagerie, and Stickney & Co.’s Circus. For many years, through 1863, he traveled with Van Amburgh & Co., which advertised in local newspapers. Hannibal performed mostly in the Midwest, but from 1860 to 1862 local ads advertised Hannibal as appearing in the Van Amburgh traveling circuses in...
New York City and throughout the Hudson Valley, including Kingston, Poughkeepsie, Newburgh, Hudson, Red Hook, Rhinebeck, Beekmanville, Troy, Albany, and Kinderhook. These locations place the animal in the exact area in which the quilt is thought to have been created. A paper template for one of the related images on the quilt was cut from the Poughkeepsie Weekly Eagle, suggesting that the creator was from that area.

There was a report that, during his lifetime, Hannibal killed several people, but there is little information to corroborate the assertion. Hannibal died in 1865, and was so popular that, years later, in 1871, his bones were exhumed with the purpose of placing the skeleton in a museum at the Chicago Medical School. At this time, the whereabouts of Hannibal's skeleton are unknown, but there is evidence in the archives at Northwestern Medical School (formerly Chicago Medical School) that a Dr. Boyd, who led the Hannibal project, was a professor of anatomy at the hospital. Further research revealed that Hannibal's keeper for 12 years, between 1851 and 1863, was an I. or B. Frank Thomas (1819–1898), during the very years that Hannibal performed in New York. It is likely Thomas who is depicted in the quilt as the figure feeding Hannibal.

Traveling menageries were popular in the middle of the 19th century in the Hudson River Valley. Text of the newspaper used as a template for the quilt is concerned with northern and southern economic interests in cotton, consistent with problems facing the nation in the years just prior to the Civil War, further verifying the present dating of the quilt.

*Much of this biographical and historical information came from studies of late-18th- and early-19th-century show elephants, animal menagerie and circus history, contemporaneous newspaper ads, and from the research of and interviews with circus historian Stuart Thayer. Special thanks also go to Terry Ariano, curator, Somers Historical Society, Somers, N.Y. and Richard W. Flint, Baltimore.*

**Quilt and Textile Events and Exhibitions**

**Compiled by Eleanor Berman**

**Auburn, Ala.**
**Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art**
**Quilts of Gee’s Bend**
Sept. 11–Dec. 4
334/844-1484;
www.julecollinssmithmuseum.com

**New Albany, Ind.**
**Carnegie Center for Art and History**
**Rhapsody in Rugs: Rags to Rugs**
Sept. 7–Nov. 12
812/944-7336;
www.carnegiecenter.org

**San Jose, Calif.**
**San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles**
**Uncommon Threads: Traditions in Transition**
Through Jan. 1, 2006
408/971-0323;
www.sjquilt.org

**San Francisco, Calif.**
**Golden Gate Historical Park and Library**
**Hannibal, the Elephant**
415/357-8200;
www.gatepark.org

**Spencer, Iowa**
**Arts on Grand**
**Mystery Quilts**
Sept. 9–Dec. 22
712/262-4307;
www.spenceria.org/aog

**Paducah, Ky.**
**American Quilter's Society**
**Trampunto/Stuffed Work, Antique and Contemporary**
270/442-8856;
www.quiltmuseum.org

**Lowell, Mass.**
**New England Quilt Museum**
**World War II Era Quilts**
Through Oct. 30
978/452-4207;
www.nequiltmuseum.org

**St. Charles, Mo.**
**Foundry Art Centre**
**Quilt National 2005 Winners**
Through Nov. 6
636/255-0270;
www.donaldralston.com

**St. Louis, Mo.**
**St. Louis Art Museum**
**Sleep in Beauty: Bed Coverings from Around the World**
Through Oct. 23
314/721-0072;
www.slam.org

**Lincoln, Neb.**
**Museum of Nebraska History**
**Great Plains Women: Patchwork Lives**
Through April 2, 2006
402/472-4754;
www.nebraskahistory.org

**Boone, N.C.**
**Turchin Center for the Visual Arts**
**Quilt National 2005 Winners**
828/262-3017;
www.turchincenter.org

**Tillamook, Ore.**
**Latimer Quilt and Textile Center**
**Valerie Webb: Wheat Weavings**
Sept. 28–Nov. 20
503/842-8622;
www.oregoncoast.com/latimer
david@goldenrods.com

**Intercourse, Pa.**
**People's Place Quilt Museum**
**A Showplace of Quilts: Dazzling Contemporary Creations**
Ongoing
800/828-8218;
www.ppquilts.com

**Lancaster, Pa.**
**Lancaster Quilt and Textile Museum**
**Textiles Are My Paint: Portrait Hooked Rugs by Linda Friedman Schmidt**
Through Dec. 31
717/299-6440;
www.quiltandtextilemuseum.com

**Harrisonburg, Va.**
**Virginia Quilt Museum**
**Feedsack Quilts from the VQM Collection and Paper Doll Quilts by Rebekka Seigal**
Through Oct. 3
540/433-3818;
www.vqumuseum.org

**Shelburne, Vt.**
**Shelburne Museum**
**25 American Quilts and the Women Who Made Them**
Through Oct. 31
802/985-3346;
www.shelburnemuseum.org

**La Conner, Wash.**
**La Conner Quilt Museum**
**“Dear Jane”**
Sept. 21–Dec. 31
360/466-4288;
www.laconnerquilts.com

Eleanor Berman is a volunteer at the American Folk Art Museum.