

BY LEE KOGAN

BIRD OF PARADISE QUILT TOP / artist unidentified / vicinity of Albany, New York / 1858-1863 / cotton, wool, silk, and ink with silk embroidery / 84½ × 69½" / American Folk Art Museum, gift of the trustees, 1979.71

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 “HAN/I/BLE” 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.



COURTESY RICHARD W. FLINT



“Hannibal,” photographed in Newport, Vermont, in August 1860 / collection of Richard W. Flint

Inscription (front): *Van Amburg [sic] & Co.’s Mammoth Elephant, HANNIBAL. Largest in the world. August 1860; (back): Imported by George Vaughn NY 1833. Became the property James Raymond. Died 1865 with Van Amburgh Menagerie & Thayer & Noyes Circus at Center-ville, Pa. Height 9½ ft. Skeleton mounted in [illegible] Veterinary College in Chicago. Henry Barnum with stove pipe hat. Jack Parks lying down. Frank Thomas keeper all that I recognize. Taken August 18th 1860 Newport Vermont. To Frank Hyatt from Frank Townsend, Brewster, NY.*



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

Quilt and Textile Events and Exhibitions

COMPILED BY ELEANOR BERMAN

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 goes to Terry Ariano, curator, Somers Historical Society, Somers, N.Y. and Richard W. Flint, Baltimore.

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

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

Golden, Colo.
Rocky Mountain Quilt
Museum
**Historic Beauties in
Red and Green**
and
**Hopi Quilting
Traditions**
Through Oct. 29
**Men of the Cloth:
Quilts by Men**
Oct. 31, 2005–
Jan. 7, 2006
303/277-0377;
www.rmqqm.org

Lakewood, Colo.
**American Quilt Study
Group Seminar**
Oct. 7–9, 2005
402/472-5361;
www.h-net.org/~aqsg

Washington, D.C.
The Textile Museum
**Huari Ceremonial
Textiles**
Through Jan. 8, 2006
202/667-0441;
www.textilemuseum.org

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

Spencer, Iowa
Arts on Grand
Mystery Quilts
Sept. 22–Oct. 22
712/262-4307;
www.spencer-
ia.com/aog

Paducah, Ky.
Museum of the
American Quilter's
Society
**Trapunto/Stuffed
Work, Antique and
Contemporary**
Nov. 5, 2005–
Jan. 8, 2006
270/442-8856;
www.quiltmuseum.org

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

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

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
402/471-4754;
www.nebraska
history.org

Boone, N.C.
Turchin Center for the
Visual Arts
**Quilt National 2005
Winners**
Dec. 2, 2005–
Jan. 15, 2006
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
/latimertextile

Intercourse, Pa.
People's Place Quilt
Museum
**A Showplace of
Quilts: Dazzling
Contemporary
Creations**
Ongoing
800/828-8218;
www.ppquilt
museum.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.quiltandtextile
museum.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.vaquilt
museum.org

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

La Conner, Wash.
La Conner Quilt
Museum
"Dear Jane"
Sept. 21–Dec. 31
360/466-4288;
www.laconner
quilts.com

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