

Figure 1. Photograph by Arthur Rothstein, “Girl at Gees Bend Alabama”. Subject is Artelia Bendolph 1937, funded by the Office of War Information/Farm Security Administration--from the Library of Congress, National Archives.

Memory and Spirit: African American Quilting

Museum Connections: Art and Enlightenment/Family and Community

Purpose: Students will learn about how quilts are a part of American folk art. Prior to the 1960's the making of beautiful quilts by Black women was not considered an "art" but just a craft or a "homey" practical activity. This lesson will provide an in-depth education and insight into the rich history and quilting customs of our African American population. Students will be taught how to make a fabric quilted postcard that may be mailed to our soldiers overseas, or some other Afro-centric themed quilting activity as determined by the teacher. Since this lesson delves greatly into the history of African American quilts, it can be adaptable to a large range of quilting lessons.

Course: High School Visual Arts

Time Frame: 5-6 class periods

Correlation to State Standards for Visual Arts:

2.0 Content Standard: Historical, Cultural and Social Context:
Students will demonstrate an understanding of visual art as a basic aspect of history and human experience.

A. The student will propose ways that the visual arts reflect significant historical, cultural, and social issues.

1. *Critical Response:* The student will determine ways that works of art provide social commentary, document historical events, and reflect the values and beliefs of the society in which they are created.

- Understand how values, beliefs, and customs can be expressed through crafts.
- Create works of art that reflect particular cultures, times, and places.

Objective(s):

Students will demonstrate the ability to perceive and interpret ideas about African American cultural experiences through the study of African American quilts in order to complete a small quilt-making project (i.e., the making of handmade postcards for American soldiers serving overseas), or some other Afro-centric themed quilting activity as determined by the teacher.

Learning Outcomes:

- 1) Students will demonstrate the ability to create, organize, and produce a quilted postcard with African American components to send to American soldiers abroad or some other quilting activity as determined by the teacher.
- 2) Students will demonstrate an understanding of African American quilts (textile art) as a clear aspect of American history and be able to describe the importance of preserving Afro-centric quilts as a part of our nation’s artistic and domestic heritage.
- 3) Students will use vocabulary unique to quilters in order to demonstrate the ability to identify, analyze and apply criteria for making aesthetic judgments as they create their project from this learning unit.
- 4) Students will be able to communicate how artworks crossed cultural boundaries and how African cultural ideas, values, and arts became blended with European settlers’ cultural ideas, values, and arts in the making of a quilt.
- 5) Students will learn about the various “eras” in African American quilt history and demonstrate an understanding of the nine basic characteristics that can make a quilt uniquely Afro-centric in composition.
- 6) Students will be able to describe the importance of building strengths through adversity.

Vocabulary and Concepts:

Quilt	a specific type of bedcovering made of two layers of fabric padded between with cotton, wool, or feathers and firmly stitched together in a pattern, or “tufted” with embroidery thread.
Quilting	the act of making specific bed coverings by piecing fabric together in attractive designs. For centuries African American quilters have created unique and colorful quilts for themselves, for families that either owned or employed them, and for their communities.
Tufting	is the act of pulling a short piece of yarn, or heavy thread, through three layers of fabric with regular spacing and tying it off on one side. Tufting is used to hold the layers of a quilt together in one place and helped to give the bedcovering a particular character.
Quilt patterns	the special way that quilters put together their projects

	<p>usually creates a recognizable quilt pattern. It is believed that the earliest quilts were simply large pieces of fabric sewn together with cotton batting in between them, and they were crude blankets or coverlets to be used against the cold. The “Crazy-Quilt” pattern is made by sewing together any size or shape of pieces of fabric. This is probably the oldest “pattern” for quilting. The “whole cloth,” or early raffia/reed quilts, used one type of fabric for both sides of the quilt. After the 1800s, literally thousands of patterns emerged, and they peaked in creativity and popularity in the early to middle part of the 20th century.</p> <p>Early African American quilts looked similar to the woven quilts that American slave ancestors made on the coasts of West Africa from plant fibers and reeds. Later, they borrowed elements from European quilts. Eventually, most quilts looked very similar to all other American quilts. Be that as it may, they usually held some defining characteristics ---like the use of bold color (especially black and red), asymmetric compositions, and the use of certain favored prints on the fabric. Some favorite African American patterns were named “The Spider Web,” “The Churn Dash,” “The Strippy/String,” variations of the “Nine Patch,” “The Log Cabin/Courthouse Steps,” “The House Top,” and “The Crazy Quilt.”</p>
Batting	<p>early quilts had raw combed cotton picked from the plants after harvest. The cotton was then worked into a rough “blanket” and then stuffed between the back and front of the quilt. Entire families participated in making the batting by combing out twigs and stems from the fluffy part of the cotton plant.</p>
Hand stitching	<p>before the invention of the treadle sewing machine which was non-electrical and operated by the foot (around 1830), all of mankind’s garments were hand sewn. Up until around the time of the American Civil War (1860) most clothing was hand sewn together with needle and thread. Most quilters could not afford a sewing machine, so thousands of tiny stitches were made to hold the fabric in quilts together. Until Isaac Singer invented a sewing machine that was inexpensive enough to manufacture, all</p>

	<p>sewing was “one-push-of-the-needle-through-the-fabric” at a time. Better quilts have more than seven stitches per inch. In fact, the “value” of the quilt is sometimes partially gauged by how many stitches there are in an inch of sewing (SPI means stitches per inch). More stitches were better as it meant the tailor/seamstress was skilled and the cloth held together for longer during washings and use.</p>
Underground Railway	<p>the Underground Railway consisted of a system of “safe houses” and people who helped slaves run away from their owners—usually from the South to areas well past the Mason-Dixon Line to the North. It is a controversial subject as to whether there was a “code” using quilts exposed at windows and hanging on fences for slaves to use in order to get messages about whether it was safe to move on, or to use a certain road/pathway to escape.</p>
Historic preservation	<p>quilts are made of textiles (cloth) and use a number of different substances (sheep wool and a number of plant products) to make the threads that are woven together as fabrics. All cloth before about 1930 was made from “organic” or living substances. As a result, they do not hold together forever like metals, stone, or even wood. Harsh washings, sunshine, and constant use cause the fabric to fall apart or to “rot” in many quilts. African American quilts, for the most part, were created to be used to keep families warm. Unlike the “fancier” quilts that were made for show, they were washed often and used daily. Many quilts have been stored improperly and the threads have been eaten by insects, or have had the material “shatter” from age. Therefore, because there are fewer and fewer historic quilts each year, it is important we rigorously find, catalogue, cherish, and care for these pieces of textile history.</p>

Materials:

For the Teacher:

- Extensive Historical Background is included in this lesson.
- Computer access for patchwork postcard project, or other Afro-centric themed quilting activity, as determined by the teacher.
- Publications and web sites listed in this lesson.
- Afro-centric themed quilting fabric.
- Heavy postcard paper (not corrugated), sharp scissors, rubber cement, cotton-covered polyester thread, medium sized needles, and straight pins to hold your quilt together before you sew or glue them.

For the Student:

- Student Resource Sheet 1: Outstanding Characteristics of the African American Quilt
- Student Resource Sheet 2: Group Report Topics
- Materials needed to complete postcards, such as sections and pieces of memorable family's textiles, i.e. shirts, dresses, skirts, etc., with Afro-centric characteristics (colors, prints, textures) as described in the section on "African American quilt characteristics." If this will not work, scraps of material from home or the purchase of fabric from a store.
- Book/Reading List for Young Adults about Quilts below:

Alycon, Clara. *Hearts and Gizzards; Motherhood in Motion*. Danbury, CT, Rutledge Press, 1998. (short stories about quilting and motherhood)

Atwood, Margaret E. *Alias Grace*. New York, Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1996. (Servant girl accused of murder based on true story—quilts woven into story)

Brown, Hallie Q. *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction*. Xenia, OH: Aldine Publishing Co., 1926.

Beecher Stowe, Harriet. *The Minister's Wooing*. New York" Derby and Jackson, 1859. (Chapter 30, "Quilting")

Chiaverini, Jennifer. *Round Robin: an Elm Creek quilts novel*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000. (romance around a quilting group).

- Dallas, Sandra. *Alice's Tulips*; a novel. New York, St. Martin's Press, 2000. (Civil War era America with quilting details).
- Hall, Eliza Calvert. *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*. Boston, Little, Brown, 1907. (Masterworks of Literature series)
- Hamilton, Betsy. "The Quiltin' at Old Mrs. Robertson's." *Harper's Weekly*, February 1894. Mitchell, Felicia, ed. *Words and Quilts: A Selection of Quilt Poems*. Quilt Digest Press, 11296.
- Hicks, Kyra E., *Martha Ann's Quilt for Queen Victoria*, Dallas, TX: Brown Books Publishing Group, 2006.
- House, Silas. *Clay's Quilt*. New York: Algonquin Books, 2001. (male quiltmaker)
- Hubalek, Linda K. *Aurora, CO.*, Butterfield Books, mid 1990s. (Trail of Thread series with many books about Kansas pioneer women).
- Irvine, Robert R. *Called home*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1991. (Mystery)
- Kaufman, Margaret. *Aunt Sallie's Lament*. West Burke, VT., Janus Press, 1988. (book accordion to make a quilt—about a quilter).
- Mitchell, Felicia, ed., *Words and Quilts: A Selection of Quilt Poems*. Quilt Digest Press, 1996. (poems and pictures of quilts).
- Macheski, Cecilia, *Quilt Stories*. Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1994. (25 stories, poems and plays featuring the making of quilts).
- McCrumb, Sharyn *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*. New York, Scribner, 1992. (Mystery in Tennessee where a quilt foretells deaths).
- Michaels, Barbara. New York, HarperCollins. (Trilogy begun by *Ammie, Come Home* (1968) about a vintage quilt with magic in it)
- Otto, Whitney. *How to Make an American Quilt*. New York: Villard Books, 1991. (about friendships in a quilting circle).
- Porter, Connie, *Addy's Wedding Quilt*. Middleton, WI: Pleasant Co. Publications, 2001. (Addy makes a quilt for her parent's church wedding even though they have "jumped the broom while slaves).

Ringgold, Faith. "The Street Story and Quilt." *Shooting Star Review* vol. 2, no. 2 Summer 1988. (short story).

Rosales, Meloye. "Twas the Night B'fore Christmas: An African-American Version. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1996. (retold classic with quilt illustrations).

Rutberg, Becky. *Mary Lincoln's Dressmaker: Elizabeth Keckley's Remarkable Rise from Slave to White House Confidante*. New York: Walker & Co., 1995.

Sinnott, Susan. *Welcome to Addy's World: 1864*. Middleton, WI: Pleasant Co. Publications, 1999. (condition of AA in US—North and South—right after Civil War).

Walker, Margaret. *Jubilee*. Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1966. (Slave narrative novel about Walker's own family history).

Resources

Publications:

Allen, Gloria S. "Bed Coverings in Kent County, Maryland: 1710-1820". *Quilting in America: Beyond the Myth*. Nashville: Rutledge Hill, 1994.

Bales, Judy. "Fractal Geometry in African American Quilt Traditions". 4th Biennial Symposium of the International Quilt Study Center & Museum, University of Nebraska: Lincoln, 2009.

Benberry, Cuestra, *Always There: the African-American Presence in American Quilts*. Louisville: Kentucky Quilt Project, 1992.

Benberry, Cuestra, *A Piece of My Soul: Quilts by Black Arkansans*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000.

Brackman, Barbara, *Facts and Fabrications: Unraveling the History of Quilts and Slavery*. Lafayette, CA: C&T Publishing, 2006.

Cook, Anna Lue, *Textile Bags (The feeding and Clothing of America)*. New York: Books Americana, Inc., 1990.

Ferrero, Pat, *Hearts and Hands : The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society*. San Francisco: Quilt Digest Press, 1987.

Freeman, Roland L., *A Communion of the Spirits: African-American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories*. Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1996.

Fry, Gladys-Marie, *Stitched From the Soul : Slave Quilts From the Ante-Bellum South*. New York : Dutton Studio Books in association with the Museum of American Folk Art, 1990.

Haders, Phyllis, *Sunshine and Shadow: the Amish and Their Quilts*. New York: Universe Books, 1976.

Hicks, Kyra E., *Black Threads: An African American Quilting Sourcebook*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2002.

Hicks, Kyra E., *Martha Ann's Quilt for Queen Victoria*, Dallas, TX: Brown Books Publishing Group, 2006.

Horton, Laurel, ed., *Quilting in America: Beyond the Myths*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1994.

Houck, Carter, *The Quilt Encyclopedia Illustrated*. New York: H.N. Abrams in association with the Museum of American Folk Art, 1991.

Krikstan, Catherine, "Quilt Stitches Together Story of Black Watermen", *The Star Democrat*, December 8, 2009.

Leon, Eli, *Accidentally on Purpose: The Aesthetic Management of Irregularities in African Textiles and African-American Quilts*. Davenport, Iowa: Figge Art Museum, 2006.

Lyons, Mary E., *Stitching Stars: The Story Quilts of Harriet Powers*. New York: Scribners, 1993.

Macheski, Cecilia, *Quilt Stories*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994.

MacNeal, Patricia Miner, *Quilts From Appalachia: An Exhibition Sponsored by the Palmer Museum of Art, Penn State, and Central Pennsylvania Village Crafts, Inc.* University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1988.

Saving America's Treasures. (Foreword by Hillary Rodham Clinton) National Geographic Society, 2001. Washington, D.C.

Sullivan, Patricia, "Cuesta Benberry, 83: Scholar of Quilts and Author". *The New York Times*, September 3, 2007.

Thompson, Robert Farris, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. New York: Random House, 1983.

Tobin, Jacqueline, *Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

Torsney, Cheryl B., and Judy Elsley, eds., *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994.

Wahlman, Maude, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*. New York: Studio Books in association with Museum of American Folk Art, 1993.

Wahlman, Maude S., (1999). *Hidden in Plain View*, "Secret African Signs Encoded in African American Quilts: A Foreword". New York: Random House.

Waldvogel, Merikay. *Soft Covers for Hard Times: Quilting in the Great Depression*. Nashville: Rutledge Hill, 1990.

Watts, Katherine and Elizabeth Walker, "Joyful Improvisations: The Quilting of Anna Williams." *American Quilter*, Winter 1997, 36-40.

Wright, Giles, "Black History by the Shovelful". Camden County Historical Society, July 4, 2001.

Web Sites:

Breneman, Judy A. "The Myth of Colonial Quilting (1620-1780)", 2002
<http://www.historyofquilts.com/colonial.html>

Cargo, Robert, African American Quilts of Alabama: Flowers without Roots?,
<http://www.quiltstudy.org/includes/downloads/cargopdfforweb.pdf>

"Civil War Quilts", *Quilting 101.com*,

<http://www.quilting101.com/styles/civil-war-quilts.html>

Foley, Deborah, "Young Readers at Risk: Quilt Patterns and the Underground Railway"
http://faculty.culver.org/~foleyd/Teacher_files/craftingfreedom/diatribe110304.pdf

Mazloomi, Carolyn L., “Quilting African American Women's History: Our Challenges, Creativity, and Champions”, introduction to exhibition at the Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center of the Ohio Historical Society, Wilberforce, Ohio, March 8-November 8, 2008.

<http://www.carolynmazloomi.com/publications.html>

Meeske, Susan, “Quilt Me a Story”, Rutgers University Professional Development Dept., 1996.

<http://comminfo.rutgers.edu/professional-evelopment/childlit/books/MEESKE.pdf>

Ringgold, Faith, “Painted Folk Art Quilts”

<http://www.artincontext.com/artist/ringgold>

Roach, Susan, “Traditional Quilting in Louisiana.”

http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/creole_art_quilting_tra.html

Historical Background:

Introduction

Interest in African American quilts and quilters goes back almost as far as the concept of “America.” When a Dutch ship exchanged Africans for food in 1619 at Jamestown, Virginia, the door was opened to a shameful institution, chattel slavery. It would survive for centuries and take a civil war to end it.

Change rarely brings only sorrow; suffering can manifest itself into tremendous drive to overcome obstacles and can birth new opportunities. As harsh and grievous as their new lives were, the first Africans who came to America gathered about them their native abilities and forged a new identity. Blending the spiritual beliefs and native traditions brought with them, they melded the resources and challenges of the New World and brought forth a unique culture: the African American identity. This chrysalis provided for artistic inspiration and produced the African American quilt as a renowned folk art form. Quilting was a tool and a social endeavor that produced bonding among African American women in families, church groups, social clubs and entire communities. Quilting is one of the oldest forms of visual artistic expression used by African Americans. What

began as a woman's utilitarian necessity and duty would eventually evolve into the personal, exquisite expression of a skilled artist.

What exactly is a quilt? What particularly makes a quilt "Afro-centric?" A quilt is a form of needlework with three layers of fabric stitched together usually to form a pattern—the actual "quilting" part of the process is usually designed to enhance its beauty. Quilts were (and still are) made from a wide variety of discarded scraps, old clothing, and worn-out bedding. Even men's suits with the seams opened and flattened served for batting! Many quilts were created from whatever the family could spare to make warm and comfortable bedding. Most Southern quilts were made of cotton and had cotton batting; Northern quilts were sometimes stuffed with flax and wool material called "linsey-woolsey."

African Americans and indentured servants of many nationalities (such as the Irish, German, English, Scot, etc.) performed long hours of labor at least six days a week and often ended the day with one or more family members working on making bedding. In the South, children and other family members literally "combed" cotton to get out dirt, twigs, and leaves from the raw plant. Afterwards, they would press the cotton into rough "sheets." They also roughly filled the quilt with whatever rags or stuffing they could find. Often times children would thread needles, hold the light to sew by, or run errands while their mother and older sisters stitched.

Quilts were also made for the families of their owners or people for whom they worked. From documents like diaries and journals, researchers have discovered there were some family quilts passed down as heirlooms that were actually made by their servants, sewing women, or slaves and not by the direct relatives. Sometimes quilts were made to provide extra income. Quilting "bees" were social gatherings to share in the work of sewing. When held by slaves, they were one of the few social events sanctioned by their owners.

Colonial Slaves and Early Bedding

The earliest bedding in America protected everyone from the cold and enfolded infants, the infirmed, and elderly in warmth and comfort. The early American forms of bedding not only warmed them, but also, covered the drafty windows and doors. Much of colonial bedding looked more like rugs than what modern people think of as bedcovers. It is a myth that early colonials (1620 - 1780) made "quilts" in the form contemporary people visualize. Until "ready-made" fabric was available to the masses (in about 1840), only those with slaves or servants could afford to have someone create anything other than what we would consider crude bedding. Fabric had to either be brought from other countries across the Atlantic

or hand-woven on local groups. For the most part, it was not quilts they were creating in colonial times, but blankets, shaggy “bed-ruggs” and coverlets.

Since bedding was such a utilitarian item, it was used until it was worn out and was very rarely mentioned in any colonial writing. George Washington had listed in his inheritance from his mother a blue and white quilt. However, owning or making a piece of bedding like a finely sewn, appliquéd fancy coverlet would have been the last thing on the mind of the average colonial woman and her hard-working family.

Historically, African Americans have been expressing their diligence and artistic abilities by creating colorful, rhythmically patterned bedding called “quilts” for about two centuries. When American manufactured textiles became widely available in around 1840-50, fabric was readily available to most Americans, even servants and slaves. Only then, as stated in *The Myth of Colonial Quilting* (1620-1780), “did quilting become an occupation of the everyday woman.” No record of these utilitarian covers for beds and hangings for doors exists in any document or journal from Colonial American times.

A History of African Influences in American Quilting

The forced migration of people from the West and Central coast of Africa to the major towns in America engendered the creation of a unique cultural heritage. These displaced Africans struggled to adapt to their new surroundings and to chattel slavery. Chattel slavery is the outright ownership of a human for the duration of their natural life.

To the credit of these displaced peoples, with the new materials and experiences in America, they reconstructed themselves within the confines of a repressed and restricted environment. They taught their young about their African heritage and linked the art of quilt making to their artistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. As slaves, they had been required to leave everything behind, yet their textile artwork preserved traditions and preferences from their Motherland. Many of the patterns, colors, and techniques used in Africa to create textiles have survived to have presence in modern quilts.

As to the early African history of this unique type of bedding, “quilt-like” assemblages in specific tribal textiles were formed from repairing and putting together old pieces of cloth the family had used. Later, the appearance created by piecing these together became a tradition in African American patterns.

Some cloth patterns particularly linked to American African textiles are the Kente, The Bogolanfini and the Kuba. The Kente textiles are basically from “Ivory Coast”

tribes where the patterns were derived from tribal “sayings,” famous royalty, and stories of their ancestors.

The Bogolanfini textiles are also well-known. Many designs find echoes of favored patterns such as the “Four Leaf,” “Flower,” “Panther Skin” and others. Many patterns in the famous “Dashiki” shirt popular in the 1960s came from the ancient Mali Bamana tribe who created Bogolanfini cloth.

Kuba textiles are famous because of their “appliquéd” and embroidered patterns generously decorated with cowrie shells. The Ngeende, Bushoong and Ngongo tribes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo developed patterns used in rhythmic geometrics of their heritage. This valued textile produced some of the patterns still found today in favored Afro-centric fabric.

Mid-1800s Up to The War Between the States

There was little to say about the quilts before about 1850. The Oblate Sisters of Providence (Black Catholic nuns still in service today) was founded in Baltimore, Maryland and opened an early school for African American girls. They taught sewing and embroidery. A star patchwork baby quilt was shown at a Boston Anti-Slavery Society Ladies Fair in 1836, attributed to a “negro-mother.” Harriet (Ross) Tubman sewed a patchwork quilt anticipating her marriage to John Tubman in 1843; and in 1850, Mary Jane Batson, a Virginia slave, stitched the “Couples Quilt” exhibited at the 1982 World’s Fair in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Before about 1800, cloth was made locally. Big cotton harvests, the steam engine, railways, inventions contributed to the burgeoning of American millhouses producing cloth which were staffed primarily by women. Cheap cloth had become available to everyone by the middle of the 1800s. Steeped in tradition, the African American quilt came solidly into being because material became more available to poor families. It is unfortunate that continuous use and frequent washing with harsh lye soaps weakened fibers and most bedding just plain “wore out.” When this happened, the old quilts were used as “batting” (stuffing) for the next generation of quilts.

The War Between the States

By the mid-1800s American quilts were distinctive and the African American quilt had melded into European and African traditions. There is no disputing that quilting offered women of all races the opportunity to develop a unique opportunity that did not compete with the fine arts of the predominate male population.



Figure 16. Barbara Pietila, "They Sold Nettie Down South", used with permission of the artist and the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of African American History and Culture.

Barbara Pietila is a Baltimore, Maryland, quilter whose work draws its themes from African American history and from her own family stories. The Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture has acquired "They Sold Nettie Down South," the above quilt art, for their permanent collection. When she sent the work of art to the museum she stated, "In this quilt, as loved ones leave, the slave prepares for her revenge using the knowledge learned from the ancestors and plants from the fields she has worked and hated." During a telephone interview with Ms. Pietila she stated "choice of color, pattern and construction techniques have often been unique, however, traditional styles have been used just as often in making African American quilts."

As The Civil War progressed there was a desperate need for clothing and bedding for both the Union and Confederate troops. Many soldiers were buried in their quilts that family had sent with them. It was said that these quilts gave comfort to soldiers in knowing that something of their family was with them and often times, was buried with them in the many unmarked graves of the fallen. Back in the 1850s, the government did not supply necessities like they do now (particularly the Confederacy as the conflict continued). It was often up to the women to provide their men folk with blankets and quilts. The soldier's quilts were sewn quickly and crudely of old clothing, feed and fertilizer sacks, and sometimes even the clothing of the men who had died in combat. Particularly in the South, money and material became very scarce. Basic and simple patterns and sometimes with inspiring words to encourage the soldiers, the quilts were cut to fit the small cot of the enlisted man or the hospital bed.

Elizabeth Hobbs Keckly, a dressmaker and confidante to Abraham Lincoln's wife Mary Todd, wrote, "I was born a slave—was the child of slave parents—therefore I came upon the earth free in God-like thought, but fettered in action." This quote is from her book, *Behind the Scenes: Thirty Years a Slave, Four Years in the White House*. Born in 1818, on a plantation in Virginia--with the "Master" as her

father--she learned to be a seamstress from her enslaved mother. Elizabeth's road to freedom came through her sewing abilities. As a result, she eventually bought her son and her own freedom. She became the "modiste" or dress designer and maker for Mary Todd Lincoln during her stay in the White House. She had also sewn for Mrs. Jefferson Davis and Mrs. Stephen A. Douglas. The quilt, pieced with various silks embroidered with raised eagles and floral motifs, shown below, was made by Elizabeth and resides in the Kent State Museum where it can be seen with one of the Mrs. Lincoln's inaugural ball dresses.



Figure 17. Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, "The Elizabeth H. Keckley/Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt" Pieced quilt of various silks embroidered with raised eagles and floral motifs. Photograph by David M. Thum, Courtesy/permission of the Kent State University Museum.

Another story taken from this period had to do with a presently controversial topic. *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* is based on the memories and testimony of Ozella McDaniel Williams. Ozella contended that there had been a "secret code" never revealed before that provided runaway slaves with directions and information. According to this secret code freedom could be found in the messages in quilts hung out of windows, fence posts and cloths lines. According to Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, in their late 1990s book, slaves that were on the "Freedom Trail" could memorize the blocks and understand the local layout for shelter, safety and assistance. Ozella gave detailed information about what each type of pattern or block conveyed.

This publication, *Hidden in Plain View*, has been a source of conflict in the quilting community. It has been alarming to academic and quilt historians that the story of this secret code was presented as "fact" without further research to support Ms. William's narrative. However, the fact that there is so little directly written by Black citizens contributes to the possibility of a code to assist slaves to freedom.

Stitched from the Soul Slave Quilts of the Antebellum South by Gladys-Marie Fry offers proof of a few slave-made quilts survival. The makers of many quilts made during this period did not get credit for their work. Sometimes the owners of slaves kept or made gifts of quilts without revealing their creators. Cuesta Ray

Benberry, the author of *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts*, suggested the work of many slaves was made “invisible” to the larger world and this included many pieces of folk art such as quilts.

In 1861, The Civil War began and advertisements for dresses, shirts and quilting began showing up in certain magazines placed by Black women. Thomas Elkins, an African American inventor, received a patent for a combination ironing and eating table which converted to a quilting frame. “Aunt Pattie Earthman,” age 103, of Nashville, Tennessee was still quilting without wearing glasses.

The Late 19th Century through the Beginning of the 20th Century

After the Civil War both formerly free and newly emancipated Black women moved from general all-inclusive labor into domestic or small farm work. Life, for women of color, had not changed much. They had few civil rights and worked from the “crack of dawn until late at night.” Although material/fabric was more readily available and was much cheaper with big cotton harvests and American textile mills, many African American quilters still used discarded clothing, ticking (mattress fabric), fertilizer and grain sacks, burlap, and scraps in the composition of their quilt creations. Necessity dictated the bedding of those days was plain, easily sewn, and stuffed with anything from corn husks to worn out quilts. There are even quilts that have men’s suits opened at the seams and used as the middle layer for warmth!

It was during this time that many women of all heritages started to “swap” general quilting patterns more than earlier times. The seamstresses of European background were starting to heavily influence the quilters of African descent and as a result, they shared commonly favored patterns.

At this time, “African American quilt makers' backgrounds, living conditions, needs, access to materials, aesthetic sensibilities, creative impulses and technical skills were vastly divergent,” Mrs. Questa Benberry wrote in a modern exhibit brochure, arguing that no single style represented them. “Thus it is a simplistic notion that legions of black quilt makers produced works displaying a single aesthetic orientation.” This quote is from the obituary dated September 3, 2007, in the *Washington Post* about Questa Benberry, a legendary quilt historian. She also was quoted in her eulogy as saying, “I soon realized that any investigation of quilt history, a female-dominated narrative, would also be closely allied to women's history.”

With freedom came the freedom of choice and the right to choose any pattern available on the market. Many more traditional symbols, structure, and textures changed with the availability of common fabrics. Barriers were breaking down as

slavery and all its inhibitors slowly moved toward the homogenizing of stylish clothing, house wares, and some social conditions.

Favored and uncomplicated patterns of this period were the block and/or strip, the patchwork, the ‘crazy quilt,’ the nine-patch (and variations of it), and the log cabin. The log cabin pattern is one of interest because it represents a philosophy about life. Usually there is a red or yellow center block that represents the hearth and fire. Around it is built narrow strips representing the logs of a cabin. One side traditionally has light colored fabric, and the other half has dark fabrics representing joyful and sorrowful aspect of living.

The Quilting Boom: Two World Wars

There were many influences upon Americans of African descent during this period. A broader and more opportunistic world was in place for women of color. In 1909, Nannie H. Burroughs opened the National Training School in Washington, D.C. for Women and Girls based on the “Three B’s”—the Bible, the Bathtub and the Broom. The curriculum included sewing and very probably quilting. The first exhibition (called “The Negro Historical and Industrial Exposition”) included “all kinds of sewing” and was held in Richmond, Virginia. The “Practical Patchwork Company,” founded by African American seamstress, Marie D. Webster, had patterns for quilts in such magazines as *Ladies Home Journal* just before WWI. In 1934, Ruth Clement Bond designed a set of quilts that are now called the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) quilts. TVA was one of the first agencies in the Federal Government to hire African American managers with the same pay as their white counterparts. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) started to gather American slave narratives in 1936.

During the Great Depression, the WPA was created to employ the unemployed, and hire down-and-out writers to record stories of American families. It was of interest to the writers to interview people who actually had been former slaves during the Great Depression. Talking of quilting came up for many women as it was a major source of socializing as well as comfort and income for their families. In *Voices from Slavery*, published in 1970, on page 60, Martha Colquitt was interviewed and remembered, “Our beds had big homemade posties and frames, and we used ropes for spring. Grandma...used to piece up a heap of quilts out of our old clothes and any kind of scraps she could get ahold (sic) of.”

The following quilts are dated from around 1920 to 1940 and are representative of many African American quilts from this period.



Figure 18. "Nosegay in Blocks", 1940s, Louisiana, maker unknown. Photograph by owner, Willow M. Pittman

Figure 19. Inset of quilt of figure 18



Figure 20. "The Montgomery, Alabama "Shore Fowl" Feedsack Abstract". Izzy Johnson, maker, 1920 and 1935.

Figure 21. An enhanced view of the ink stamping on the feedsack backing. Photography by Willow M. Pittman, author and owner

Several factors contributed to the large number of African American quilts created from about 1915 to about 1960. The first contributor had to do with barrels and sacks, the second was about sewing machines, and the last had to do with a pattern company and a newspaper.

Before 1900, all grains were transported in wooden barrels. Around 1910, consumers and farmers alike were getting their animal feed, sugar, and flour mostly in huge rough cotton sacks with the name of the company inked on it. Many Americans, especially minorities, were facing starvation. Free cloth was an important commodity. One sack equaled an apron; three sacks equaled a dress. The Great Depression of the 1930s produced a great deal of "chicken linen" quilts and as a result, feedsack became a major fabric source.

The sewing machine was actually invented early in the 19th century but was not "perfected" or widely available until the late 1880s. Most machines were out of the question for African American seamstresses and quilters. The sewing machine did become more available as the income of minorities improved. Hand stitched quilts are, however, of more "value" to many in the quilting world because they can represent hundreds of hours of work.

The last contribution made to the production of African American quilts had to do with two resources that quilters started to use. McCalls was one of the first companies to produce old and new patterns for quilts. African American quilters used patterns like the Dresden Plate, The Wedding Ring, and others to create their own versions of them. The second resource was patterns reproduced in newspapers like the *Kansas City Star*. Each week women would clip out and save quilt patterns. The first patterns came out in the 1920s and ended in 1961. Fanciful names and patterns were used by many African Americans to create quilts named “Pickle Dish,” “Black-Eyed Susan” and “Sunbonnet Sue.” These patterns are available today thanks to quilt historians.

In early twentieth Century America, many women had little or no opportunity to express their artistic abilities except through some domestic chores. Quiltmaking, because women in general were limited in their means to engage in the “outside world,” was a way to share personal, social, and even political expressions. Quilting provided a medium for many women who may not have had the chance to shine in their communities, churches, or society as a whole. “Women embraced quilts as not only a medium for expression, but also as a means to exhibit their power,” said Sara Pendergast in *Quilts: A Female Perspective on American Culture*. Also, she included, “Quilts were desired and marketable commodities which brought needed income to the household, revenue for their places of worship, and support for the military.”

The collecting and displaying of quilts as American folk art is important for it gives a “voice” to everyday women. African American women did not had many opportunities or choices in the past to give expression to innate talents. Quilting, over two centuries, gave them an outlet for their creativity. Elizabeth Scott has a quilt in the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture. Along with her quilt is this reflection in exhibit 25 of the **Things Holds, Line Connect: African American Families and Communities in Maryland Gallery**, “It’s important to me to use art in a manner that invites people to look and then carry something home—even if it is subliminal—that might make a change in them. Imagine a piece of art that will let you sleep under it! Art that comforts on so many different levels is exceptional.”

Contemporary Quilting: 1960 to the Present

"I think we get so emotional about quilts because they're such an integral part of many people's lives," Mrs. Benberry told the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* in 1998. "They're on the bed. They're there at birth. They're there at death. They're part of the marriage bed. They're part of our lives, and they give us so many memories..."

You'd call a quilt like you would a child. [Her mother-in-law would] lift up a trunk lid and say, 'Come see my Sugar Bowl;' she didn't say, 'Come see my blue-and-white quilt.'”

Quilting in 2010 America estimates there are over 21 million quilters in the U.S. and at least a million or more are Black. Sewing together has been an activity that has brought women of color together for centuries of family life and it has resurged over the last decades.

Traveling quilting shows such as Roland Freeman’s “A Communion of the Spirits” toured nine museums in 1997. Carolyn Mazloomi’s “Spirits of the Cloth,” in 1998, opened at the American Crafts Museums in New York. These were only the beginning of many national showings of African American quilts.

As tours, displays, fairs, and museum showings began to take place, a specific mention should be made of the Gee’s Bend quilting community. The isolated, rural area has produced eight generations of stellar quilters. The Quilts of Gee’s Bend: exhibition started in the early 2000s at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. In 2003, the Gee’s Bend Quilters Collective of about fifty women, was formed to continue to produce their quilts and exclusively sell them. The Internet site about the group states, “The town’s women developed a distinctive, bold, and sophisticated quilting style based on traditional American (and African American) quilts, but with a geometric simplicity reminiscent of Amish quilts and modern art.”

Their work, collectively and individually, is amazing, “jazzy” and free-style. Martin Luther King came to Gee’s Bend during the civil rights era and told them, “I came over here to Gee’s Bend to tell you, ‘You are somebody.’” This quote came from “Fabric of Their Lives” in the October, 2006, issue of the *Smithsonian Magazine*. These women rose from the backwater of Alabama to international fame with unique and dramatic creations using old shirts, polyester dresses, pants, strips, and blocks of used clothing. When collector William Arnett came to town looking for a quilt he had seen in a photograph in 1998, and purchased several from the quilt’s maker, word soon “spread through Gee’s Bend that there was a crazy white man in town paying good money for raggedy old quilts” (same issue of the *Smithsonian* as above).

By improvising their percussive colors and geometric but simple patterns, these women and their ancestors created startling works of art. They did not have simple comforts for much of their lives-- such as electricity, indoor plumbing, heat or running water—but they created beautiful art work from scraps and rags.

Overall, African American quilters have chosen to include varying levels of their African heritage into their contemporary work.

When reviewing the characteristics of Afro-centric quilts that are stated and shown earlier in this body of work, many of these qualities are found in the make-up of African American quilts. Of course, there are quilters of all colors following traditional European styles. African American quilt historians recognize Faith Ringgold, Cuesta R. Benberry, Gussie Wells, Carolyn Mazloom, LaQuita Tummings, Nora Ezell, Elizabeth T. Scott, Mary Albertha Green, and Hystercine Rankin as just a few of the nationally recognized artists using quilts as their medium.

Within Maryland there are many quilting societies, guilds and groups that support traditional and contemporary African American quilting. Groups such as the African American Quilters of Baltimore still bring women together to bond over their stitching.

By improvising their percussive colors and geometric but simple patterns, as mentioned earlier, these women and their ancestors created startling works of art. They did not have simple comforts for much of their lives-- such as electricity, indoor plumbing, heat or running water—but they created beautiful art work from old clothing.



Figure 22. “[Sewing a Quilt](#),” Jennie Pettway and another girl with the quilter Jorena Pettway, Gees Bend, Alabama, Arthur Rothstein, photographer, 1937. This image is from the National Archives, Library of Congress.

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgibin/query/i?ammem/fsaall:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(fsa+8b35946\)\)+@field\(COLLID+fsa\)\):displayType=1:m856sd=fsa:m856sf](http://memory.loc.gov/cgibin/query/i?ammem/fsaall:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(fsa+8b35946))+@field(COLLID+fsa)):displayType=1:m856sd=fsa:m856sf)

One in three of Gee’s Bend residents is named “Pettway,” the surname of one of the original owners of the Gee’s Bend antebellum plantation. The “eye-popping” quilts below are just a few created by the “Benders” community.



Figure 23, Mary L. Bennett, "Housetop," variation, 1965, with permission from Tinwood Media

Figure 24. Essie Bendolph Pettway, "Roman Stripes" variation, 1997, with permission from Tinwood Media for figures 23-25

(Please check on Figure 25 – this one could not be located under the artist’s name or by this name in the collection.)

Overall, African American quilters have chosen to include much of their heritage into their contemporary work. Many of these qualities that are traditional are still found, along with African influence cloth, in the make-up of African American quilts.

Within Maryland there are many renowned quilting artists. In a late spring, 2010, during a telephone conversation with Sandra Smith, it was discovered that several of her works of quilting art were inspired by the Gee’s Bend Exhibition in Baltimore some years ago. She worked on one quilt, “Gees Four” for over a year. Most of her work is two-sided (fairly unusual). The quilt pictured below is called “The Conversation.” Her work can be described as a blend of contemporary and traditional styles with a “jazzy, modern-art” outcome.

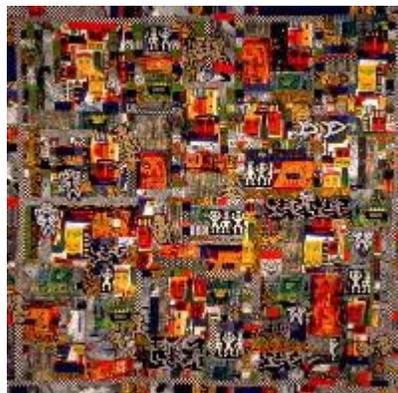


Figure 26. "A Conversation", 1994, by Sandra Smith is taken from her gallery of works and used with her kind permission. It can be found at <http://www.sandrasmithquilts.com/docs/gallery.html>.
Photographer: Jose Sanchez of Baltimore, MD.

In conclusion, studying the history of African American quilts has confirmed that quilts, as a folk art form, have been under-explored and appreciated. While a 19th century quilt recently sold at a Sotheby's auction for about \$13,000 (and there have been others that went for much more), many collectors are active today. It is believed that we must strive to find and preserve the history and actual quilts of the past and present.

One hundred years from now will our descendants visit the Reginald F. Lewis Museum in Baltimore and see the legacy our African American quilters left us? Will they go to exhibits like the Elizabeth Scott's display and leave with America's legacy of responsibility, vitality, generosity and tenacity firmly fixed in their hearts and minds? Will they understand the price our ancestor's paid for their freedom—for America's freedom? Hillary Rodham Clinton, in the foreword of *Saving America's Treasures* said, "...the greatest danger facing our historic legacy today comes from...indifference, neglect, the much needed resources and the ravages of time." Willow Pittman, the author of this lesson states, "That passing the knowledge of how deeply African American quilts have impacted many people, will help to educate our young and develop their appreciation of the quilt on many different levels." This lesson plan is derived from the many resources available to the questing public and represents many years of research and collecting by the author. Review the information, view the pictures, and feel the passion and vitality that comes from them.

African American quilts have been a source of family history, an expression of creativity and love and also a pervasive inspiration to all women. It connects African American women to others in their community and re-establishes our relatedness to our mothers, grandmothers and "foremothers" through quilting and its history. Through this lesson plan, the author hopes to have explored the diverse contributions African American quilts have made for over two centuries and to remind all women of the value in connecting to our roots and heritage. Historical material included in this lesson connects African Americans back to their roots in Africa—to tribal artwork, traditions and spiritual inheritances. Documented evidence of quilting traditions from Africa re-establish ties to the African continent and connects many to knowledge of their cultural ties in West and South Africa.

An understanding of the African American experience is gleaned by viewing examples of historical records about quilting. It is an integral part of Maryland and America's history--both domestically and artistically. Knowing the basic characteristics of traditional African American quilt composition is a window into having a background in ethnic arts. This knowledge would also include current compositions by contemporary artists who quilt.

“Memory and Spirit: A History of African American Quilting” by no means exhausts coverage of the amazing presence and history of quilts by Black women. Actually, it barely covers the “tip of the iceberg” in substantiating the rich and varied experience afforded by this topic. The most moving aspect of this research is the realization that quilts very probably have given “voice” to the artistic talent of more minority women than any other medium. It was not “romantic” to sit up late at night and stitch on bedding to keep your family warm; women did not tell their friends the next morning of their “artistic endeavors.” Most African American women did not even recognize their own talent in the creation of these wonderful pieces of textile folk art until someone else “in the art world” discovered them. The author hopes the students and teachers using this lesson plan as a tool will recognize that African American quilts are a part of our treasured national heritage.

Lesson Development:

Motivation:

1. Introduction

Teachers should share the following information with students:

It is good for students of all cultures to learn an appreciation for other social groups. We need not just “tolerate” but celebrate our differences. African American quilts are the expression of the rise of an integral part of American culture. Black Americans contributed to the American language, economy, art and literature. Quilting is a multi-layered topic vested deeply in family life and the arts. The appreciation and preservation of quilts can teach students many things about the African American experience in helping raise our nation. There is a kinship between all women who have sewn these articles of comfort, memory, and beauty that crosses cultural lines. Having said this, an appreciation for the quilt as an Afro-centric folk form generates recognition of artistic skill and creativity in all art forms.

African American quilts are improvisational, deeply spiritual and unique in their tradition.

Preserving the past and providing for the future, of this art form, is a worthy endeavor. As Hillary Rodham Clinton said, “Irreplaceable symbols of our history need to be recognized as a form of documentation of our nation’s struggle for freedom. For our female forebears, for ourselves and the women who come after

us, we need to make sure the art form of the common woman is saved and perpetuated.”

This project is to have each student make a fabric postcard. This lesson is about the African American quilt and has detailed descriptions of their characteristics. The typical cards are about 4”X 6” however it can be any size, shape, color or design.

Note: As previously mentioned, this lesson is adaptable to a large range of Afro-centric quilting lessons as determined by the teacher.

2. Lesson Plan Project

Before you begin:

- Teachers will make a visual that will demonstrate each step in the making of a quilted postcard, or any other type of quilting activity, that will include different types of quilting designs and stitches.
- Teachers are encouraged to include visual representations of various quilts used throughout this lesson.
- Teachers may decide to develop a resource sheet for students to use while the lesson is being modeled by the teacher.

Step One:

- Students will be given and instructed to read **Student Resource Sheet 1: Outstanding Characteristics of the African American Quilt**. They are to be instructed to take notes on the historical information and pay particular attention to the pictorial representations as they read the information.
- Students will sketch the design they wish to use in making their quilts. If teachers should decide that students will make a quilted postcard, a lot of detail in their designs will not work, because it is a small project. American flags are popular but any design, particularly associated with a holiday, will be fine.

Step Two

If you should decide that students will make a quilted post card, the following steps should be taken:

- Students will gather fabric from old clothing that have some type of special memory for them. For example, the shirt they wore for their 6th grade class

picture, the skirt Mom was wearing when she came home with their little brother or sister, or some article of clothing that was/is important to them. Using discarded material (big shirts, skirts and dresses) that are Afro-centric in pattern and texture, will help make their postcards very special. Also, their selection in fabric will help in demonstrating that they have absorbed what African American quilts might look like.

- Students will decide the pattern they want to use. Use their “math hat” to figure out how many pieces they need and what size to fit onto the postcard. Cut out blocks, triangles, rectangles OR the pattern they would like to reproduce. See the website for examples on more “artsy” or holiday themed cards. Remember to keep things colorful and be creative!
- Students will SKETCH their designs onto piece of paper the same size of your postcard. Remind students not to make their designs too LARGE as it must fit onto your postcard and scaling down is difficult.
- Students will transfer their designs onto a piece of cardboard the size of the postcard you plan to send.

Step Three:

- Students will need the following materials in order to make their quilted postcard: a pair of scissors, heavy paper for making a “pattern,” paper that is the size of a postcard , needle, thread and/or glue.

Step Four:

- Students will baste together the pieces (to sew fabric with long loose stitches in order to hold pieces of material together temporarily). Leave ¼ inch extra on each piece if you are going to sew them together, OR use appropriate craft glue/rubber cement to assemble the pieces of fabric onto the postcard. When you glue your pieces onto the card, make sure they are dry before handling. Cards look better if you baste stitch them together before gluing onto your card but either way is fine.

Step Five:

- Students will compose affirming, upbeat and encouraging notes to the soldiers. Be sure to follow all the instructions and suggestions on the website. Encourage students to be mindful of the content and grammar used.

Step Six:

- The teacher will mail postcards to Diane Malaznik at 14215 Westmore Street, Livonia, MI 48154 for her to forward to our U.S. soldiers overseas. Check for deadline dates for the next holiday!

If you have any questions, email Penny Halgren, Fabric Postcard Posse, at <http://fabric-postcards.com>. Your finished postcards are not sent to her; however, they should be sent directly to Diane Malaznik whose address is above.

Following are examples of postcards that have been sent to Penny's Postcard Posse:



Figure 27. Postcard by Feldman. <http://www.fabric-postcards.com/images/ChristmasPics/feldman10.jpg/> Used with the express permission of Penny Halgren, creator of Penny's Postcard Posse.

Figure 28. Postcards by Bonnie. <http://www.fabric-postcards.com/images/ChristmasPics/bonnie001-1.JPG> Used with the kind permission of Penny Halgren, creator of Penny's Postcard Posse.

These images were taken with permission from the website of Penny Halgren, well-known quilting "guru," from California. Penny wanted to do something to let our soldiers serving away from home know that there are people who think of them.

Penny Halgren
7925 Pasadena Ave
La Mesa, CA 91941

These are her websites for those interested:

<http://www.How-to-Quilt.com>

<http://www.TheQuiltingCoach.com>

<http://www.QuiltBlockLibrary.com>

<http://www.AskPennyHalgren.com>

Email address: halgren@cox.net

Since 2006, people from around the U. S. have been creating postcard size quilts to send to our troops.

Assessment:

1. Divide students into groups of three to six persons (the number of students in this cooperative learning strategy will depend on the size of your class).
2. Have students select a lead person, recorder, and spokesperson for the group.
3. Pass out **Student Resource Sheet 2: Group Report Topics**. Give each group a topic on which to work from the list in order for them to discuss and write a three to four page essay (computers will be needed for question #4 and books will be needed for question #5).
4. Provide time for each groups' spokesperson to give his/her group report.
5. Allow class to discuss each report giving constructive criticism based on the objective established for this project.
6. Grade student reports and quilts based on a teacher made rubric given and discussed prior and during the assessment.

Closure:

While hand making quilted postcards and sending them to American soldiers in service to our nation, there should be some reflection on what our foremothers created when they sat by candle, fire and electric lights until late at night, sacrificing a portion of their life for their family's comfort. Sending the quilted card to servicemen and women will remind them of their own womenfolk at home. Also, the brief messages should remind them that they are not forgotten as they serve us...we, the people.

Please note:

As long as teachers stick with the Afro-centric quilting theme, teachers may decide to substitute some materials for those that will work with different visual arts classes. For example: Art and Design students may use scraps of fabric and glue them to a piece of thick drawing paper. Students in a Drawing and Painting class

may paint their quilt designs in a 5”x7” grid drawn on watercolor paper. Students in Photography may cut out photographs to tell a story.

Since lesson plans may be changed, teachers may decide to use the information in this lesson for another purpose other than making postcards sent to soldiers. For example, teachers may decide to have each student create a hand sewn quilted square and then have students piece them together in order to create a large class quilt.

Thoughtful Application:

Our nation’s gender and racial issues are deeply rooted in the development and production of quilts. The history of the African American quilt is tied to our cultural heritage in all its glories and shames. It should be very obvious this lesson can closely tied into many subjects like social studies, women’s studies, United States History, and labor issues.

Math is an integral part of making a quilt. Cutting pieces to scale and size requires arithmetic.

Quilting is an art form. Some of the most amazing pieces of folk art are quilts. It is the “ordinary and extraordinary” expression by women of their talents.

Lesson Extensions:

The Reginald F. Lewis Museum offers the work and words of several African American quilters. Quilts offer a visual statement for many issues the Museum puts forth to its visitors about race, history and gender. Teachers who incorporate the lesson about African American quilts into other lessons, can strengthen and inform their students about how life was experienced for African American women in the United States. It also connects cultural ties to African heritage.

Teachers may decide to use this lesson before or after visiting the Reginald F. Lewis Museum. Either way, it will make your students’ experiences richer. It will be easier to make curricular connections to many exhibits and increase their capacity to understand Maryland African American history, culture, and especially the arts. By “humanizing” this ordinary, daily life “chore”, i.e. quilting, into a real and artistic expression by womenfolk, many of the exhibitions offered by the Reginald F. Lewis Museum make clear ties to the past and the future for people of African heritage.

Credit Line for Photographs

“The “Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley/Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt.” Photograph by David M. Thum, Courtesy of the Kent State University Museum, gift of The Ross Trump Collection, Medina, Ohio, 1994.79.1. With kind permission of the Kent State University Museum.

- Gees Bend quilts images used with permission from Tinwood Media, Inc., Matt Arnett, Director of Exhibitions. 512 Means Street NW, #305, Atlanta, Georgia, 30318.
- Library of Congress, National Archives—Print and Photograph Division. “Girl at Window Gees Bend, Alabama. Photographer, Arthur Rothstein of the Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collection. {The U.S. Copyright Office information says that "Works by the U.S. Government are not eligible for U.S. copyright protection." (Circular 1 [pdf], "Copyright Basics," page 5.)}

Sandra Smith granted written permission to use her quilt image.

Jose Sanchez was the photographer. His studio was in Baltimore, MD.

The quilt is called *A Conversation*, “You have my permission to use a picture of the quilt from my website.”

Willow M. Pittman, (author and writer of this lesson) gives permission to use images of African American quilts from her personal collection. Photographed by Willow M. Pittman.

Penny Halgren, gave permission to use anything needed from her websites to use in this “Memory and Spirit: African American Quilt History” project.

Jean Druesedow gave permission to use image of the Elizabeth Keckley/Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt.

“Pieced quilt of various silks embroidered with raised eagles and floral motifs.”

Credit line: gift of The Ross Trump Collection, Medina, Ohio, 1994.79.1

This quilt is known as the “Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley/Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt.” It is said to have been made by Mrs. Keckley, a former slave who worked in the White House for the Lincolns, and it is thought to contain scraps from Mrs. Lincoln’s dresses. Mrs. Keckley was a well known dressmaker in Washington D.C. and had sewn for Mrs. Jefferson Davis, Mrs. Stephen A. Douglas and Mrs. John McLean as well as Mrs. Lincoln. She bought herself and her son out of slavery with the extra money she made as a seamstress. She later established the Home Economics Department at Wilberforce College in Ohio.

Student Resource Sheet 1

Outstanding Characteristics of the African American Quilt

What makes a quilt particularly Afro-centric? *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* by Maude Southwell Wahlman gives examples of common themes and patterns found in historical and contemporary African American quilts.

1) The African Weave Pattern

The “African Weave” pattern was originally created by the male in Africa. Men usually wove the fabric and the women decorated. This changed in America, where the male (patriarchal society) did not do “household” chores. However, the use of strips of cloth and woven patterns echoed the original “weaved” look from Africa that was so desirable for royalty and higher caste members of the tribe (Wahlman, p. 26). The simplistic example of this type of characteristic can be seen in Florine Smith’s quilt composition created ca. 1975. She is a member of the Gee’s Bend consortium.



Figure 2. Florine Smith’s “Strips,” 1975, is used with permission from Tinwood Media

2) The Use of large shapes of whole cloth/ single colored fabric

Wahlman stated, “In Africa, the need to be able to recognize people from far distances was crucial for warring tribes and traveling hunting parties” (Wahlman, p. 33). The use of large shapes is still reflected in the Gee’s Bend, of Alabama contemporary quilters. This particular quilt below was made by Amelia Bennett around 1950 and is built of blocks and strips of a variety of fabrics. It is 80 X 74 inches, a typical size for quilts for most of the 20th century.



Figure 3. Amerlia Bennett's "Blocks and Strips," 1950's, is used with permission from Tinwood Media

3) Strong Visuals of "Percussive" Color

Color preferences were associated with religious and cultural beliefs. Many of the lively and almost "aggressive color patterns are used in traditional African American quilts. After being influenced by European patterns at the turn of the 20th century, sometimes this was the only expression of Afro-centrism appearing in their make-up. These color predilections primarily came from use in Kente textiles, however, they are widely accepted and represented in African American color palette.



Figure 4. Lucy T. Pettway, 1981, "Birds in the Air" used with permission of Tinwood Media

Figure 5. Maker Unknown, 1948, "Starfish Blocks" embroidered from author's collection

Figure 6. Close-up of Figure 2; single block from author's collection

There is a story to be told based on African traditional colors. Using Lucy T. Pettway's "Birds in the Air" quilt (figure 4) as an example, black is a very common color found in most Afro-American quilts. It represents maturity and the expression of intense spiritual energy. Pink and purple are feminine colors and are usually worn by women. (Is it possible this is where we got the use of pink for baby girls?) Red is associated with blood as in many cultures. It also is the color of death and sacrifice. Yellow can be associated with fecundities and high-value. The white border usually is a color of celebration, hence, the use of white clothing when attending a funeral—to celebrate and honor the person's life.



Figure 7. Helen McCloud, ca. 1965, "Blocks and Strips, Tied With Yarn" with permission of Tinwood Media.
Figure 8. Unknown maker, "Strips in Blue and Rose", Alabama, ca. 1930, photographed and owned by author

4) Asymmetry

The above quilt (figure 7) by Helen McCloud of the Gee's Bend group in Alabama represents the artful "balancing" of color and texture reflects the traditional African weave. Repeating patterns were not "normal" in some African cultures for reasons both religious and superstitious. Breaks in patterns were meant to protect the wearer from "evil spirits." The creator was free to shift the fabric into separate weaves at any time based on their artistic judgment. In fact, the number of patterns or changes in a cloth usually correlated to the owner's higher value in their society. Irregularity also gave the maker a "mark" of ownership that prohibited others from copying it.

5) Recordkeeping/storytelling

Keeping track of history on cloth is an age-old tradition in many cultures. It was a way to keep records of historical events, unusual natural occurrences (such as eclipses of the sun), important dates in the personal or tribal history and were a way to appeal to the deities (gods). It provided a medium that could be handed down for generations to interpret.

Susan Meeske in the article, "Quilt Me a Story" discusses in a conversational, yet knowledgeable manner, the use of quilts as a medium for storytelling. She also puts forth the studied opinion that women used their patterns as running commentaries on their "lifestyle, artistic talents, political views, and even ...her emotions" (Meeske).

Harriet Powers is perhaps the best known "story-quilter" in African American textile history. Born in Georgia, Harriet was a slave revealed in the 1870 U.S. Census as having no ability to read or write. Two of her appliquéd quilts are in nationally-recognized museums. Being deeply religious, her first quilt depicted scenes from the Bible. Squares like "The Last Supper," "Satan amidst the Seven

Stars” and “Paradise with Eve” were part of eleven panels that captured the imagination of participants in the Athens, Georgia “Cotton Fair” in 1886. Roots of Harriet’s impressionistic and primitive/naïve style have been traced by historians to West Africa. Out of necessity, she sold her famous quilt to an admirer for \$5.00 several years after its first showing at the Cotton Fair. Today it is considered a national treasure. African American quilts in the Smithsonian’s collection are: Frances Jolly’s quilt top, Ann’s Quilt (slave-made) and Betty West’s quilt.



Figures 9 and 10. Harriet Power’s “Bible Quilt” and the smaller insert are used with kind permission for educational uses by the National Museum of American History.

6) Religious Symbols

Many spiritual marks are used world-wide to provide the participant with spiritual expression, protection and sacred knowledge. The above quilt by Harriet Powers, the “Bible Quilt,” provides universal symbols for the viewer to interpret. In quilting, sometimes there was writing in native language on the quilts and almost always, some form of symbolic representation for major concerns in the life cycle such as birth, mating and death. Diamond, circles, totems, or tracks of animals were frequently represented. Many interpretations were not written down but transmitted verbally within the family or sometimes known by whole communities. Over time their meanings were lost. Some African Americans and most Americans in general, are unaware of much of the significance of African art and tradition. The true meanings of many of the symbols on quilts were lost to succeeding generations, yet they were carried on through a sense of tradition and an emotional appeal.

At this point, the readers/students can help the author with a mystery! In early 2006, a quilt top was purchased with what the quilt deal said was a “Flying F” symbol within each of the blocks on the colorful piece. An avid collector herself,

she had no information about what the symbol meant. Look at the picture of the “Flying F” below. The author of this lesson, Willow Pittman, collector and student of African American quilts has not been able to discover what this symbol represents. Does anyone think they can find the original meaning of this symbol? If you do, please contact Rose Wiggins, the Maryland State Department of Education’s Liaison to the Reginald F. Lewis Museum, and she will get in touch with the author. Her email address is rwiggins@msde.state.md.us.



Figure 11. Views of the “Flying F” quilt top, ca. 1930, owned and photographed by Willow M. Pittman
Figure 12. inset of larger quilt top
Figure 13. single “Flying F”

“The Flying F” top has an unknown maker and was purchased from the Piney Woods area of Texas. It is cotton and has 9 blocks. Two of the “Flying F’s are of different color and slightly different design in keeping with the “imperfection” belief in some African American quilting. This is a mystery! For the author, at least, the interpretation is unknown.

7) Protective “Charms” and Patterns

Specific threats to the users of quilts were addressed by sewing “charms” onto the quilt itself. Many African Americans had similar belief systems that “perfect” patterns invited the god’s anger. They believed that only the gods were able to create perfection, hence, they sewed uneven or irregular patterns until around 1930. At that time, many African American women sewed quilt patterns “of the day” from patterns in the newspaper such as *The Kansas Star*. This particular quilt by Nettie Young is an “H” variation and is titled “Milky Way.” It was made in about 1971, and it embodies many of the traditions of African American quilts, including the geometric “protective” shapes of circles, squares and diamonds.



Figure 14. Nettie Young's "Milky Way" image is used with permission of Tinwood Media. This quilt was created in 1971, pattern is the "H" variation and is part of the Gee's Bend collection. (Please check on this one – could not be located under the artist's name or by this name in the collection.)

8) Strip or "String"

This type of quilt has its roots in western Africa. The use of strips of cloth torn or cut to create warm bedding produced a durable and inexpensive quilt. "Strippy" quilts have patterns that have many rhythms and a certain "unpredictability" about them. Contrasting colors and textures, improvisational patterns, and large scale pieces of cloth produced a good solution for long-lasting everyday bed coverings.



Figure 15. Gee's Bend quilter Jessie T. Pettway, born 1929. Bars and string-pieced columns, ca. 1950, cotton fabric. Use with permission of Tinwood Media, Gee's Bend community representative

9) Improvisation

Creating and changing old patterns is a major factor in the development of the ethno-aesthetic of this type of bedding and folk art. Breaking a pattern was important to African belief systems as it averted "evil spirits" and the wrath of gods who wanted to keep "perfection" to themselves. Later on it simply became a general manner of expression. Many European-type quilts were copied with the inclusion of the tradition of improvising new patterns and colors of the African American heritage, when textiles and patterns from many sources became available.

Student Resource Sheet 2

Group Report Topics

1. Challenges that occur when a population is uprooted or displaced. What do the people lose when this happens? Are there any advantages?
2. Name traditional characteristics of the African American quilt. How do you see these aspects surviving in today's Black American art and/or culture?
3. Women have had the traditional task of homemaking and the role of domestic provider in American culture. How did this role differ between other women in American during our history? How was it similar? Compare and contrast African American women's roles to that of European women.
4. Sandra Smith at <http://tinyurl.com/mknhrt3> has had her quilts described as modern art. She has also been labeled "jazzy" in her expression. How do these two ideas, "modern art" and "jazz" relate to her quilt art?
5. Student Resources Section has a list of books to read that are in some way related to quilting. The teacher or students are to select from the list books for students to read. Read a selection and write 3-5 paragraphs on how the use of quilts and/or sewing them relate to the book's story line? Provide an opportunity for students discuss and answer the question given to their group.

Note: Teachers may add questions relating to the lesson to this list.