

Quilts: The Great American Art: Women have always created works of art. But because the painted ceiling barred most women from the arts that receive high value in a male society, women channeled their talents into feminine “accepted” artistic expressions such as needlework and quilts. Quilts exist in fantastic variety wherever there are women and are a universal female art, transcending race, class, and national borders. The art of quilting can be traced back to Syria, Egypt, India, and China, as well as to Europe dating back to the seventeenth century, and came to America with the first women settlers and slaves. The early American immigrant women from England, Ireland, Germany, and the Netherlands mingled needlework traditions of those countries with new design traditions from the various American Indian tribes. Slave women from Africa made many of the Southern quilts, particularly on the large plantations.

American patchwork quilts were first made out of necessity. There were no factory-made blankets in early colonial days, winters were cold, fabric was scarce as well as expensive, immigrant men’s earnings were meager, and immigrant-slave men’s earnings were naught. Industrious women salvaged reusable fabric from worn-out clothes and made blankets called quilts. Albeit a necessity, these pieced-together blankets displayed female artistic expressions through which women could achieve economic, social, and political involvement particularly in exhibitions at state and county fairs.

Since the work of women quilt makers was not considered “art,” women quilters in early colonial days did not encounter the male harassment experienced by most female fine artists. Left in peace, these women oversaw the education and development of their daughters, contributed to women’s cultural legacy, and succeeded in their own manner to influence. Quilting Bees became a place at which women collaborated on making the quilts and on making history. Though most records claim women at the quilting bees exchanged gossip and recipes, it was obvious to women that was not all that was going on. The fact that Susan B. Anthony made her first speech in Cleveland to women at a church quilting bee gives an indication that then, as always, women had important things to say to each other.

Many women named their quilts with names that bore political or social significance. There was the *Freedom Quilt* given to young men at their twenty-first birthday celebration, but no comparable quilt to celebrate freedom for young women who were owned by their fathers until marriage and then by their husbands.

Quilts allowed women political expression. At a time when men barred women from voting, women quilters expressed their convictions in a language each understood. In a sense, writes Patricia Mainardi, it was “secret language.” The story goes there was more than one man of Tory political persuasion who slept unknowingly under his wife’s *Whig Rose* quilt. On the *Radical Rose* design of the Civil War period, each rose had a black center to express empathy with the slaves. It has been suggested there were quilts that bore signals communicating with slaves who could not read, hung over fences or clotheslines by courageous women guiding the men and women on the Underground railroad to “safe” houses.

Historically, quilts have been excluded from art literature, art history, and art museums. But in 2002 the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, sponsored an exhibit of the “Quilts of Gee’s Bend.” A second “Gee’s Bend” quilt exhibit, organized in 2006 toured

seven other city museums including the Indianapolis Museum of Art and the Orlando Museum of Art (January 27-May 13, 2007).

Sources: "The Great American Art," Patricia Mainardi; www.twoelizabeths.com
Smithsonian, October 2006 p67, Amei Wallach