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# Quilting: An Examination of Harriet Powers and Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley

Jennifer Moreland

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**QUILTING: AN EXAMINATION OF HARRIET POWERS AND  
ELIZABETH HOBBS KECKLEY**

By

**Jennifer J. Moreland**

B.A.F.A., Art History, University of New Mexico, 2009  
M.A., Art History, University of New Mexico, 2012

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Arts  
Art History**

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Albuquerque, New Mexico

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## **Dedication**

In memory of my father, Lorenze R. Moreland.

For Alex

## **Acknowledgments**

I gratefully acknowledge Kirsten P. Buick, my advisor and thesis chair, for her guidance and support. I also thank my committee members, Justine Andrews and Catherine Harris, for their help and useful recommendations pertaining to this research. And lastly to my family—thank you for your constant love and inspiration. Your encouragement has made this journey possible.

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**ABSTRACT**

African American quilting exhibits a long and rich history in antebellum and post-bellum America. Although hindered by their social status as slaves, African Americans were adroit artisans adept at producing exceptional quilts for personal use as well as for the plantation household. In the few surviving examples, slave quilts demonstrate a range of geometric improvisation, decorative patterning, and asymmetrical ornamentation. African American quilts are unique in their ability to articulate personal histories and narratives, religious ideologies, and communicate messages through color, pattern, and emblematic imagery. A close investigation of African and Euro-American design aesthetics is crucial to understanding the hybrid quality of quilts produced by slave women. Within this research, I specifically explore the lives and quilts produced by ex-slaves Harriet Powers and Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley—notably, *Pictorial Quilt II* (1895–8) and the *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt* (1860–80).

In addition to the historical underpinnings of textile production in colonial America, my research also explores the iconographic complexities of African American quilting, and examines how these quilts functioned as a necessary resource for social, spiritual, and

political endeavors. Given that slaves were generally provided commercial blankets every third year, sufficient bed cover was essential and provided a means for slaves to engage in quilting bees—social events that offered communal kinship, slave courtship, and psychological respite from the hardships of daily life. Moreover, covert messages evident in slave quilt imagery, played a pivotal role for slaves escaping north through the Underground Railroad.

I conclude with the life and work of contemporary artist and quilter, Faith Ringgold. Her artistic quilts and creative storytelling about slavery and freedom, reiterate the lives of enslaved African American women—women like Powers and Keckley. In, *Quilting: An Examination of Harriet Powers and Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley*, I hope to thoroughly demonstrate how African American quilts functioned on several levels in nineteenth-century America; and in part, were used not only as tools to compensate for meager supplies, but as special objects that are spiritual, communicative, and artistically extraordinary. In short, I hope that my research expresses the fundamental value, dynamism, and exceptional skill embedded in nineteenth-century African American quilts.

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## **Introduction: The Art of Slave Quilting in the Colonial Period**

### **A Historical Examination of Quilt Aesthetics, African Influences, and Resistance**

The development of African American quilting exhibits a long and rich history in nineteenth-century America. A hybridity of cross-cultural influences and artistic designs and processes, African American quilts are exceptional in their ability to articulate personal histories and narratives, religious ideologies, and communicate messages through color, pattern, and emblematic imagery. Hindered by their social status as slaves, African American women nonetheless contributed their artistic talents to the decorative arts. African American quilts served myriad functions in America: as necessary objects for bed cover; as canvases for self-expression; as unnamed heirlooms passed down for generations in the plantation household; as political objects for abolitionism, women's suffrage, and the Civil War; and as items expressing kinship and community. Given that my research focuses primarily on African American quilting conventions in antebellum and post-bellum America, I will also provide a thorough analysis of textile development in order to better demonstrate the history of quilted textiles. Such proficiency in textile production fashioned African American quilters to become ample producers of an amalgamation of African and Euro-American design styles. As a result, this relationship propelled the development of the slave quilt code assisting escapees through the Underground Railroad; and in part, fundamentally altered the production of African American quiltmaking into a profound, diverse, and aesthetically complex work of art.

The word *quilt* came into English from the Old French *cuilte*, *coilte*, or *coute*, which in turn was derived from the Latin *culcita* or *culcitra*, describing a stuffed mattress or cushion.<sup>1</sup> Quilts are customarily designed as multilayered textiles consisting of a top layer, a layer of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Shaw, *American Quilts: The Democratic Art, 1780–2007* (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 2009), 19.

insulation called batting in between, and a back layer. Batting is customarily composed of loose, unwoven cotton; however, in the early days of American quilting, quilts were lined with a variety of found materials, most commonly wool or cotton waste left over after processing, but sometimes wadded rags, old clothes, blankets, and even older, worn-out quilts were used instead.<sup>2</sup> The quilt's layers are attached to each other by hand or machine stitching or held together with widely spaced ties. This process of combining all three layers together is the actual quilting, where the term takes its name. Although the top layer of quilts can take on a variety of forms, the most commonly practiced in the colonies consisted of three distinct forms—whole-cloth, pieced, or appliquéd. Whole-cloth quilts consist of a single piece of material, which functioned as the decorative top layer of the quilted textile. Pieced quilts—also called patchwork—are named for combining small scraps of cloth sewn together to create decorative designs and patterns. In contrast, the appliquéd technique requires the cutting out of previously-made designs or shapes from one pattern and sewing this shape onto another piece of cloth such as the quilt top.

Prior to the nineteenth-century, the development of quilting had already made its mark on the historical record. Archaeological evidence suggests that the earliest societies of the ancient Near and Middle East were creating quilted textiles for, not only clothing and armor, but as items carrying great social, political, and ceremonial significance. We can ascertain the importance of quilted materials by the discovery of a funerary quilt found in a Siberian cave between the first-century BCE and the second-century CE (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> Ancient quilted cloth was being produced in lands as far East as ancient China and it is presumed that a carved figurine of a pharaoh wearing a quilted cloak, similarly to the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>3</sup> Shaw, 19.

Abydos sculpture (Figure 2), traveled from North Africa to Europe during the time of the Crusades.<sup>4</sup> Frequently in the Middle Ages, ancient warriors wore quilted garments as reinforcing armor for its flexible, warm, and durable nature. In Africa, quilted armor developed in an area of the southern Saharan region that extends as far east as Ethiopia and as far west as the middle Niger plain. A contemporaneous ceremonial procession reveals that African warriors continue the tradition of adorning themselves and their horses in elaborate and colorful quilted designs and patterns (Figure 3). In Europe, heavily quilted bedcovers survive from fourteenth-century Italy, and both the Netherlands and the British Isles have quiltmaking traditions that can be traced back to the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth-centuries.

As European settlers voyaged to the New World, they carried with them both existing quilts and the knowledge of how to craft them across the Atlantic. In turn, the earliest quilts made by colonial Americans were direct imitations of European models.<sup>5</sup> According to Robert Shaw, “The early years of American quiltmaking saw Old World traditions transferred to a new setting, helping many American quiltmakers find their own voices. As Americans explored their newly separate identity and destiny in the years after the Revolution, the seeds of a distinctly American quiltmaking tradition were sown...Those seeds would grow in ways as diverse and unpredictable as the new country itself in the decades to come.”<sup>6</sup>

Quilted textiles were not a new phenomenon to European colonials, they were however, extremely rare in their manufacture and use in the New World. Early colonial quilts were relatively uncommon due to the fact that printed cotton remained imported

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Shaw, 35.

from England and synthetic dyes were not yet extant. As a result, the production of quilted materials were extremely expensive and colonial quilts were elegant decorative bedcovers that were crafted by upper-class women who could afford the materials and the leisure time to produce them.<sup>7</sup> Those who owned quilts typically regarded them as prized possessions for their high value and were seldom used except on special occasions. The most common early quilt form was the whole-cloth quilt, which was most often made from a richly colored worsted wool called calamanco that was heat pressed to create a smooth, shiny, glazed surface (Figure 4).<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, however, the most favorable bedcovers found in the homes of colonial Americans were not quilts, but woven wool coverlets—similar to whole-cloth quilts—that were commercially manufactured in England, France, and the Netherlands (Figure 5).<sup>9</sup> This begs the question: How then did quilting become one of the most dominant features of colonial decorative arts in American society?

Approximately all that was produced in the New World, including cloth manufacture (particularly woollen cloth), was under the political provisions of the British Crown. However, much to the dismay of the Crown, colonial Americans of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries, quickly became ample producers of textiles, and ultimately, self-sufficient. By 1760, Philadelphia held the greatest concentration of textile manufacture on the continent.<sup>10</sup> It was not until the Revolutionary period, however, that colonial patriotism increased and local cloth-making was seen as another means to independence.<sup>11</sup> Until 1775, and again after the Revolution, many patriotic, philanthropic, and philosophical societies

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Shaw, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Harris, ed., *5000 Years of Textiles* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2010), 253.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 254.



sponsored attempts to establish more efficient textile manufacture; including patents for inventions like multiple spindle and reeling machines.<sup>12</sup>

Despite these measures, textile manufacture was still not industrialized and many Euro-colonials continued to rely on the finer and fashionable cloths produced abroad—well into the decades leading up to the Civil War. By the end of the eighteenth-century, however, the underpinnings for an autonomous textile industry had been initiated: in Beverly, Massachusetts, an integrated mill (combining hand-carding, –spinning, and –weaving) was founded by George Cabot in 1787, and until the early 1800s, made a wide variety of cotton cloths including corduroy, jean, denim, marseilles (double cloth), quilting, muslin and dimity. Moreover, in 1790 Englishman Samuel Slater established the first water-powered cotton-spinning mill in Providence, Rhode Island; and in 1793, Eli Whitney manufactured the cotton gin.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the development of American textile production altered dramatically with Whitney's cotton gin (Figure 6). Operated to quickly and easily separate seeds from cotton fibers—originally a time consuming and tedious process dependent on slave labor—the gin became a revolutionary technology for the economic stability of the rural South. As a result, the growing demand for slave labor was necessary to adhere to the increasing demands of cotton production. According to an early traveler Joseph Ingraham, "To sell cotton in order to buy negroes, 'ad infinitum,' is the aim and direct tendency of all operations of the thorough-going cotton planter: his whole soul is wrapped up in the pursuit."<sup>14</sup> By 1836,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 254-5.

<sup>13</sup> Harris, 257.

<sup>14</sup> Shaw, 38.

cotton comprised two-thirds of all American exports, and by 1850, it was the dominant crop of the rural South.<sup>15</sup>

The growing production of cotton, propelled one of the first modern factories in the world—a cotton mill established in Waltham, Massachusetts in 1814. In the early decades of the nineteenth-century, young girls from ages 10 to 25, also known as the New England Mill Girls, were leaving home to work in distant cotton factories. The labor provided by the New England Mill Girls reveals one of the earliest examples of colonial females entering the workforce. Each female was required to work 14-hour days and was paid approximately \$2 a week. Young women were working to help the financial stability of their families, which in turn, provided them the opportunities to purchase leisure; including quiltmaking and other decorative arts. By 1840, there were approximately more than 700 cotton mills of varying sizes scattered throughout New England.<sup>16</sup> The newly developed cotton mill operated turning raw cotton into cloth and its success fueled the explosion of American textile manufacturing in the following decades of the nineteenth-century.<sup>17</sup> According to Robert Shaw, the American textile industry was producing \$100 million dollars worth of cotton cloth each year—the equivalent of nearly \$2 billion worth today.<sup>18</sup> With the growing success of American cotton mills, cotton cloth became readily available for many nineteenth-century Americans. It was not until after the Civil War that fabric and sewing implements became widely accessible and affordable, transforming quiltmaking into a democratic pastime performed by women from a range of economic backgrounds; including those quilts produced by slave women.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Shaw, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 42.

By 1840, pieced or appliquéd quilts from American-made fabric had begun to overtake all other kinds of bedcovers in popularity.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, pieced and appliquéd methods were the most commonly employed in African American quilts. One example demonstrates a pieced quilt, which is the oldest surviving quilt attributed to a slave from the late 1700s (Figure 7). This quilt shows meticulous attention to detail in the various shapes and patterns that are sewn together to create aesthetically pleasing geometric designs. An additional example displays a slave-made appliquéd quilt, exhibiting a Princess Feather pattern from 1820 (Figure 8). This quilt clearly shows the obvious dexterity of the quilter and further illustrates slaves' beautiful craftsmanship in textile manufacture and design aesthetics.

In the South, it was not uncommon for plantation quilters and seamstresses to also work as field slaves (Figure 9). Most slave women worked alongside men all day in the fields picking and tending cotton. According to Gladys-Marie Fry, “It has been commonly thought that slaves in the general plantation population did not quilt. After all, working in the fields all day would have left them too little time or too little energy at night for such activity.”<sup>20</sup> Quite the contrary, many female slaves, as well as men in a few instances, had to complete their quilting and sewing duties all through the night after their work in the fields was complete; and oftentimes, slaves had to complete their sewing and quilting duties for the plantation household before they could begin their personal sewing tasks. Such is true in the following account by a former slave:

My mammy she work in de fiel' all day and piece and quilt all night. Den she had to spin enough thread to make four cuts for de white fo'ks ebber night. Why sometime I nebber go to bed. Hab to hold de light for her to see by. She hab to piece quilts for

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<sup>19</sup> Shaw, 42.

<sup>20</sup> Gladys-Marie Fry, *Stitched From the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Dutton Studio Books, 1990), 37.

de white folks too. Why dey is a scar on my arn yet where my brother let de pine drip on me. Rich pine war all de light we ebber hab. My brother was a holdin' de pine so's I can help mammy tack de quilt and he go to sleep and let it drop.<sup>21</sup>

Consequently, organized events such as quilting bees, offered slaves the opportunity to complete several quilts in a single evening (Figure 10). Whether sanctioned by the plantation owner or not, quilting bees functioned as a means for communal bonding amongst slaves, where quilters shared stories, fabrics, quilting techniques, and patterns. Occasions such as quilting bees afforded slaves the opportunities to sew creative patchwork quilts for personal use. Because whole-cloth fabric was rarely, if ever available, slaves relied on scraps of cloth, which were either donated by the slave–mistress, shared amongst slaves, or were cut from clothing in disrepair. Consequently, meager materials permitted slaves to generate a multitude of unique and creative quilted designs. Typically, a slave family would host the event, which included food, music, and dance; and normally a quilting party would alternate from one slave cabin to another. As noted by Fry, “Normally four people worked on a quilt, one at each corner. The first team to finish a quilt received a prize. This kind of organization meant that three to twelve quilts could be completed during the course of an evening.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, many slave men also assisted in the quilting. Oftentimes, slave men who were widowed and had children to care for, made it their responsibility to quilt for the family.

Provided that quilting bees were community events they also functioned as opportunities for slave courtship. Oftentimes, neighboring slaves, both male and female, would arrive at the event dressed in their finest clothing. House slaves fortunate enough to be given a secondhand dress from their mistress would wear it on such an occasion;

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<sup>21</sup> Fry, 51.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 71.

whereas, field slaves, who normally possessed one satisfactory ensemble, did their best at improvisation:

One cannot say for sure what standards of femininity slave women observed but it is clear that they took pleasure in looking their best. The circumstances of the slave community, however, did not allow for many such opportunities. The dresses of field workers were tattered and dirty, and women did not change into their best clothes during the work week. Only on Sundays, religious holidays, and other festive occasions could they dress in their finest. Their finest usually consisted of just one dress that had been laid aside and worn sparingly. They used sweet-smelling flowers and herbs as perfume and often kept the good dress packed in the flowers and herbs so that the clothing would absorb the pleasant fragrance. Hoops were made out of grape vines and were worn to make the dress fall neatly away from the body. A bright-colored hat or headwrap made for the finishing touch. On the average, house servants dressed better than field hands since they had access to cast-offs from the master's family, but all slaves tried to dress up for religious services and parties.<sup>23</sup>

According to two former slaves and their memories of courtship at such parties:

De gals charmed us wid honeysuckle and rose petals hit in dere bosoms...Dey dried chennyberries and painted dem and wo'em on a string around dere necks...courting gals...tried to do just like the young white missus would do.<sup>24</sup>

I 'members dat when us courted us when to walk an' hunted chestnuts. Us would string dem an'put 'em 'round our necks an' smile at our fellers.<sup>25</sup>

Quilting bees not only offered opportunities for slave interaction and courtship, but also afforded the enslaved the ability to share and practice personal histories and customs from their African heritage. In exploring the historical development of slave influence in the New World, slave artisans produced an abundance of designed objects that contain an amalgamation of African and Euro-colonial influences; and the design aesthetics of slave quilts are no exception. When the first African slaves reached the shores of the New World, in the early decades of the seventeenth-century, they were prohibited to bring any personal

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<sup>23</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985), 143.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>25</sup> Home Box Office, a division of Time Warner Entertainment Company. *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2002), 82.

belongings; however, what did survive the Middle Passage are an array of "Africanisms" that are based on cultural memory and oral tradition; including practical skills such as: iron and wood carving, textile design, weaving, dyeing, quilting, basketry, carpentry, landscaping, and architecture. Significantly, textile production was, and remains, a fundamental element to the African way of life, and was even practiced centuries before European contact. As a result, it is not difficult to imagine that traditional African designs and practices were assimilated into a Euro-American quilting framework. Maude Southwell Wahlman states that:

While men performed most of the weaving in Africa, in all probability it was women who most often created textiles in the New World...They combined remembered traditions with Euro-American traditions for making textiles, to create unique creolized art forms: woven blankets, African American quilts, and appliquéd funerary umbrellas. Their combined ideas would have been passed down from one generation to the next, most probably without verbal explanation for the meanings behind the aesthetic preferences.<sup>26</sup>

Given that slaves were forbidden to speak their native language and practice their own religion, quilting became an outlet and an avenue for artistic, personal, and religious expression. The slave, Louiza Francis Combs (Figure 11), demonstrated the West African Mande belief that evil spirits travel in straight paths and could not access the living if the latter were protected by broken lines or fragmented shapes.<sup>27</sup> In her hand-woven wool blanket (Figure 12), Combs made a deliberate attempt to create asymmetrical lines (however, the uneven indigo stripes could be a result of the loom). Regardless, Combs further emphasized this religious ideology by attaching a piece of cloth, featured on the left-hand side of the blanket, to stress the broken path ideology. According to Lisa E.

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<sup>26</sup> Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts* (Atlanta, Georgia: Tinwood Books, 2001), 31.

<sup>27</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 29.

Farrington, "The discontinuity of the two sides, while appearing arbitrary, was likely not. Idiosyncratic design elements of this type were employed consciously and deliberately...and are rooted in African—specifically Mande—religious precepts."<sup>28</sup> To further paraphrase Judith Chase's analysis, "...there sometimes appeared to be no attempt to match pattern...Considering the obvious dexterity of the weaver, this may be an Africanism. Black slaves oftentimes refused to plow in a straight furrow or follow a straight line in a pattern without occasionally deviating to foil the malevolent spirits."<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, African American slaves often employed strips in their quilts, and because the majority of their quilts were made from scraps of cloth, these textiles also exhibit an asymmetrical quality. By using this technique, female slaves were free to explore with asymmetrical designs that oftentimes achieved spontaneity and unpredictability. In Nancy Vaughn Ford's quilt (Figure 13), attention is drawn to the characteristic long narrow strips (once used for currency in West Africa) and a hand-woven men's weave that carries the long African tradition of strip-woven textiles (Figure 14). Since the eleventh-century, most cloth in West Africa had been made into strips and woven on small portable looms. The technology of strip-weaving was probably invented by Mande peoples—who made up twenty-five percent of the slave population in the New World—and spread via Mande Dyula traders throughout West Africa.<sup>30</sup> To this day, the majority of African American quilters prefer the asymmetrical patterns in their quilts because it creates spontaneity and originality, demonstrated in the mid-twentieth-century Gee's Bend quilt, *Bars and String-Pieced Columns* (1950s) (Figure 15). The quilt historian and scholar Eli Leon writes that:

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<sup>28</sup> Farrington, 29.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Wahlman, 29.

Improvisation, pervasive in West and Central African art and familiar as a basic element of African-American musical forms, is the vital force in Afro-traditional quilting. The artists maintain a generous attitude toward the accidental, embracing innovations that originate beyond the conscious domain. They use approximate measurement, stepping up the order of variability by dealing creatively with the tricky “piecing” situations that ensue. They favor “flexible patterning,” in which the design is conceived as an invitation to variation; rather than repeat, the pattern may materialize in a sequence of visual elaborations. Other variable elements, such as pre-cut scraps, shifts in scale, and multiple patterns, distinguish their work.<sup>31</sup>

An additional African influence on African American quilts of the antebellum and post-bellum periods is the technique of appliqué. Research suggests that slave quilts bearing appliquéd emblems, particularly those demonstrated in the quilts by Harriet Powers (discussed in Chapter 1), closely correspond to the Fon appliquéd cloths of West Africa (Figure 16). Monni Adams relates that the Fon textiles are, “Usually in rectangular panels suitable as wall hangings or pillow covers...the solid, bright colors and direct, forceful character of the imagery project a bold and lively effect, and compositions often balance a variety of floating shapes with a skillful and subtle sense of design.”<sup>32</sup> African appliquéd emblems carry various meanings beyond their visual and creative qualities. Such motifs can serve as symbols of status and power, but most importantly, they can function as components that relate significant oral narratives and histories. They embody a secret visual language and are shrouded in mystery to some degree—if one did not know the oral narrative or particular historical account, such coded emblems would be read with little clarity and understanding of their meaning.

Similar constructions of coded imagery found in Fon appliquéd cloths, are also uncovered in several slave quilts, which functioned to assist slaves fleeing through the

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<sup>31</sup> Eli Leon, *Accidentally on Purpose: The Aesthetic Management of Irregularities in African Textiles and African-American Quilts* (Davenport: Figge Art Museum, 2006), 11.

<sup>32</sup> Monni Adams, “Fon Appliqued Cloths,” *African Arts* 13 no. 2 (1980): 28.



Underground Railroad. Thousands of slaves risked imprisonment, torture, and death when they ran away from their masters. Sympathetic whites and free blacks had organized the Underground Railroad, which were networks of safe houses where a slave might hide.<sup>33</sup> Coded quilts were commonly hung over fences, on porch walls, or on clotheslines in order to be easily visible to runaway slaves. The Underground Railroad quilt code primarily consisted of ten principal patterns, each of which represented a different phase in the escape process (Figure 17). According to Farrington, "Like ancient hieroglyphs, the code comprised of reductive forms that could be read as clearly as any written language, if one only knew the meaning of each symbol. For more than a century, the code was presumably passed down from one generation of African-Americans to another, and it represents an astounding example of the endurance of African oral culture in the United States."<sup>34</sup> The ten-part quilt code derived from an oral account by Ozella McDaniel Williams—an elderly Charleston quiltmaker—who learned the code from her grandmother. Williams described that the monkey wrench and the wagon wheel were used as codes to instruct runaways to pack their wagons with the tools and supplies necessary for their journey north. The bear's paw advised runaways to follow bear tracks through the mountains to Canada and, according to recent research conducted by the National Park Service, the sign of the crossroads directed slaves to travel to Cleveland, a major Underground Railroad depot. The log cabin motif often incorporated black or indigo fabric centers—a probable reference to the black slave. Some log cabin codes had yellow centers, indicating a light or beacon in the wilderness, signifying a safe-house.<sup>35</sup> The shoofly emblem functioned as a possible identifier

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<sup>33</sup> *Hearts and Hands: Nineteenth-Century Women and Their Quilts*, directed by Pat Ferrero, New Day Films, 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Farrington, 33.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

that a friendly guide was nearby and the drunkard's path was a reminder to walk in a zig-zag formation, to ward off pursuers in the area.<sup>36</sup>

In the slave-made *Album Quilt* (1895) by Josie Covington (Figure 18), reveals examples of possible slave codes that may have been used in assisting runaway slaves. The flying geese symbol was used as a direction to follow; in other words, to follow the direction geese would fly during spring migration. The star emblem was also used as a directing tool for slaves to follow the North star. Lastly, the bow tie motif meant to dress in a disguise or to put on a change of clothes.<sup>37</sup>

Amongst the vast and incredible history that quilting affords, few are scarcely more astonishing than the quilts produced by slave women of the antebellum and post-bellum periods. The slave quilter and skilled artisan have exhibited a long and rich history in American textile production; and their quilts, with their African and Euro-colonial influences, have lingered throughout generations as cherished objects of wonder and imagination. While slave-made quilts were primarily generated out of necessity, those that have survived, further serve as creative historical records—artistic icons bearing memories of celebration, community, family, empowerment, and suffering. Quilts made by slave women were used to articulate personal histories and narratives, religious ideologies, and communicate messages through color, pattern, and emblematic imagery. Such proficiency in sewing and quilting demonstrates how necessary these skills were to the livelihood and well-being of African American slaves. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate how Harriet Powers and Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley were two enslaved women who defied social norms in antebellum and post-bellum America. Despite the odds that nineteenth-century

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

society afforded—enslavement, racial oppression, female persecution, and civil injustice—  
they both managed to rise above the challenges and master the art of quilting—  
distinguished in *Pictorial Quilt II* and the *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt*. Certainly, Powers and  
Keckley reveal in their quilts an unrelenting perseverance and expressive power that set an  
example for all African American women artists in the generations to come.

## Chapter One: In Her Own Words: Harriet Powers and *Pictorial Quilt II* (1895-8)

### Narratives in Appliqué and Thread

Throughout the abundance of quilts produced by nineteenth-century American women, those formulated by ex-slave Harriet Powers (1837–1911) are among some of the most celebrated and most documented in the historical record of textile production. Merely two quilts, quilted in the latter-part of the nineteenth-century, are known to have been made by Powers. Her first completed quilt, referred to as *Bible Quilt* or *Pictorial Quilt I* (1885–6) (Figure 19), is currently owned by the Smithsonian Institution, and her second quilt, likewise titled *Bible Quilt* or *Pictorial Quilt II* (1895–8) (Figure 20), is preserved at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts—the former of which will not be discussed at length here. I have chosen to exclude *Pictorial Quilt I* from the larger discussion, because I found that it parallels *Pictorial Quilt II* in content, visual appeal, and design construction; however, it is worth mentioning that *Pictorial Quilt I* is unique in its own right and deserves further examination than I am able to offer here. Nonetheless, in each quilted assemblage, Powers strategically combines appliquéd emblems and biblical motifs in a harmonious collaboration of fabric and thread; each of which are uniquely discerned by shape, contrasting pattern, and texture. The quilts generated by Powers are distinguished for their exclusive nature in nineteenth-century America and recall the formal elements found in West African appliquéd tapestries. The 1976 touring exhibition entitled, "*Selections of Nineteenth Century Afro-American Arts*," is featured in the newspaper article, "*Two Centuries of Black Pioneers in American Art*," which distinguishes Powers's *Pictorial Quilt II* for its, "...appliquéd abstract designs [that]...bears a striking resemblance [to] neighboring tapestries from Dahomey in

[West] Africa."<sup>1</sup> In short, the quilts function as exceptional documents that creatively merge African design aesthetics into narratives of Powers's most beloved biblical stories and historical events. Powers's quilts are exceptional for they are what Mary Lyons refers to as, "...diaries of her spiritual life...[that are written] with needle, thread, and cloth."<sup>2</sup>

Harriet Powers (Figure 21) was born a slave in Clarke County, Georgia on October 29, 1837. At the time of her birth, Clarke County was located in a section of the state known as the Plantation Belt, and by the time she was three-years of age, there were seventy-one plantations in the County alone. It was the planters living in this area who held more than half of the County's five thousand African Americans in slavery. The rest of the slaves lived on small farms or in Athens, the only town in Clarke County.<sup>3</sup> While enslaved, she grew to adulthood before she was manumitted in 1865 at the age of twenty-eight.<sup>4</sup> Given that limited documentation exists on Powers and her family, those who study her history, can determine her existence from the following: her two extant quilts; one brief oral narrative related to Jennie Smith; census data; tax documents; and records of deeds for Clarke County. "It is only from official records that we can glimpse bits and pieces of Harriet Powers' family history. Unfortunately, information of births, marriages, deaths, and wills was not as completely recorded for the black community as for the white in nineteenth century."<sup>5</sup> Aside from the date and place of her birth, no early history of Powers's life is available, including those by possible descendants. According to Gladys-Marie Fry, "No

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Loercher, "Two Centuries of Black Pioneers in American Art: Touring Display Salutes their Heritage," *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 16, 1976.

<sup>2</sup> Mary E. Lyons, *Stitching Stars: The Story Quilts of Harriet Powers* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1993), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Yaalieth Adrienne Simpson, "*African American Female Identity in the 19th Century: The Individual and Cultural Empowerment of Harriet Powers' Bible Quilts*" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2003), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Gladys-Marie Fry, "Harriet Powers: Portrait of a Black Quilter," in *Missing Pieces: Georgia Folk Art 1770-1976* (Atlanta: Atlanta Historical Society, in association with the Georgia Council for the Arts and Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1976), 19.

information is available from orally-transmitted family histories or reminiscences, because there are no known living descendants of Harriet Powers, her husband, or her children. Nor could dozens of elderly residents interviewed in Clarke and the surrounding counties provide any clues about her life."<sup>6</sup>

Fortunately, the first known record of Powers is described in the 1870 census. During that time, Powers was thirty-four years and married to Armstead Powers age thirty-eight. He was listed as "farmhand" and she as "housekeeper."<sup>7</sup> Together they had approximately nine children—two of which were apparently born into slavery—a daughter, Armanda born in 1855, and a son LeonJoe, born in 1860. A third child named Nancy, born in 1866, is listed in the 1870 record, however, the names and vital statistics of the remaining six children are unknown.<sup>8</sup> Scholars suggest that Powers may have had as much as eleven children, most of which surely died in the aftermath of the Civil War from a smallpox epidemic in Athens. As one former slave recollected, "Them Yankees brought the smallpox here with them and give it to all the Athens folks...and that was something awful. Folks just died out with it so bad."<sup>9</sup> By 1870, all "three children" (Armanda, LeonJoe, and Nancy) were living at home in Clarke County.

The young couple owned no land aside from a personal estate that amounted to 3,000 dollars.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the 1870 census indicates that Powers and her family lived a modest life on a farm where she and her husband accrued property with a stock of farm animals—horses, cattle, oxen, and mules—along with farm tools and machinery. They

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<sup>6</sup> Fry, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Simpson, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Lyons, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Simpson, 20.

owned no land in the 1870s, but in the 1880s, the Powers managed to purchase four acres.<sup>11</sup> However, during the Reconstruction period, Powers and her family experienced challenging economic times with a general decline in personal and financial welfare. Unrelenting financial hardships, compelled the family to sell a majority of their land and possessions by the 1890s. At some point after 1894, historical records reveal that Armstead had seemingly left the family, since Powers appeared solely as the "Head of Household" on the annual tax records.<sup>12</sup> That same year, the Georgia Tax Digest states that the Powers' defaulted on their taxes. By 1901, they once again possessed no land with the final sale of their remaining two acres sold for 359 dollars.<sup>13</sup>

It would appear that Powers lived her remaining years independently from 1894 until her death in 1911. Her children were grown when their parents separated, and there is a strong possibility that they may have left Clarke County, provided that their names do not appear on any further tax documents after 1894. Given that Powers either owned or had access to a sewing machine, (implied by the machine stitching on her quilts), seems quite plausible that she sustained herself by sewing and quilting for members of her community. Sadly, in her advanced years, Powers was forced to sell half of her household articles and farm animals to meet expenses. Her total possessions—furnishings, farm tools, animals, and personal effects—amounted to 82 dollars in 1901 and only 70 dollars by 1911.<sup>14</sup> That year, she died in poverty at the age of seventy-four on a farm in Buck Branch, Georgia.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Simpson, 20.

Considerable theory surrounds the early slave life of Harriet Powers. Some historians assume that she was a seamstress for the plantation, whereas others make no mention of her adolescent history. There is no doubt that young slave girls were the primary producers of sewing necessities such as clothing and quilts in colonial America. According to Sterling Stuckey, "Her date of birth meant she was in her teens in the 1850s and in her twenties at Emancipation. Almost certainly she learned to do quilts before Emancipation, since it was not uncommon for adolescent slave girls, or their adolescent descendants in our time, to take to making quilts."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, given the considerable number of plantations in Clarke County, Powers likely spent her childhood as a field slave, who learned how to sew by watching the older women card cotton, spin thread, weave and dye cloth, and sew clothes and bedding.<sup>16</sup> If this was the case, it is possible that Powers also learned the technique of appliqué via her slave community. On the other hand, for postulation sake, suppose Powers worked as a plantation seamstress, or a general house servant. In this circumstance, it is highly plausible that she would have been taught to sew by her plantation mistress or have been aware of and had access to the sewing and quilting fashions that were popular during her enslavement. Although Powers was illiterate, perhaps she had knowledge of the images depicted in fashionable quilting and sewing magazines advertising quilting fads of the nineteenth-century. "Availability of sewing materials plus women's magazine's (consisting of quilting fads) and savvy business and periodicals perceived a market for quiltmaking aids and began offering instructions, patterns, templates, and eventually kits, contributed to the expansion of quiltmaking in the

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<sup>15</sup> Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 91.

<sup>16</sup> Lyons, 2.



late-nineteenth-century."<sup>17</sup> Given that Powers's quilts were fabricated in the fashionable appliqué method of the nineteenth-century is further given credence by Fry who relates that, "Her only known quilts were made during the flourishing of the appliqué technique; this period, particularly in evidence in the South, extended from 1775 to 1875."<sup>18</sup> As reasonable a suggestion this may be, it is unlikely. It is highly more plausible that Powers worked as a field slave, rather than a plantation seamstress, and developed the technique of appliqué as a young girl through oral tradition; as it was done generations before her, in the customary designs and practices of African textiles. According to Stuckey, "Slave trading to America from 1750–1807 greatly strengthened African values in the Americas. Still, the preservation of those values in various forms was not an automatic process. On the contrary, slave ingenuity was indispensable to the survival of African culture in America."<sup>19</sup> Given that Powers was illiterate her entire life, her communication with the world was obviously visual and oral<sup>20</sup> and it is likely that the oral histories taught to Powers during her adolescence were those that she kept with her for the remaining years of her life. While in adulthood, Powers's imagination, and her dexterity for appliqué, reveal her creative vision manifested in oral history and folklore. The harmony of pattern and design construction are evident in her two extant quilts.

The subject matter of *Pictorial Quilt II* (1895–8) (Figure 22) incorporates biblical tales coupled with localized legends and natural phenomena. In my analysis of Powers's quilts, I focus primarily on *Pictorial Quilt II* The quilt in its entirety consists of fifteen proportionate squares with a narrative sequence arranged in vertical columns—strips—a

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<sup>17</sup> Marin F. Hanson and Patricia Cox Crews, eds. *American Quilts in the Modern Age, 1870-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Fry, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Stuckey, 83.

<sup>20</sup> Fry, 17.

structure created in African-woven textiles.<sup>21</sup> Providing this sequence, Powers created five independent strips and stitched each one to the next according to her narrative and creative preference. Powers' quilt is a remarkable configuration of bright colored motifs that artistically contrast with various warm hues and patterns, stitched against neutral cloth. Each appliquéd emblem is carefully and creatively manufactured into modeled poses that demand constant motion across the surface of the quilt. This story quilt is beautifully contrived with punctuated patterns of polka dots, stripes of varying styles and sizes, and a delicate array of precious floral and Victorian cloth (Figure 23). Each squared panel contains its own individual story and is framed with details of people in motion, animals, biblical stories, starbursts, and astronomical events that make up the poetic rhythm of the quilt's narrative sequence. Powers is celebrated for her creativity in interweaving her personal interests of animals, which were a fundamental component to her personal preference. Her attraction to animals is evident in the following account:

Harriet Powers' fascination with Biblical animals and characters stemmed from her attendance at vivid church sermons, which she committed to memory, according to Jennie Smith, the white woman who bought her first quilt. She expressed to Miss Smith a desire to attend a Barnum and Bailey circus that came to Athens about 1890, because she wanted to see the "Bible animals." (One compelling consideration that kept her away was the fundamentalist belief that it was a sin to go into a circus arena. However, she may also have lacked the price of admission).<sup>22</sup>

In the following analysis of each panel, Powers related the various meanings of each pictorial representation to patron Smith, who contributed some elaborations, but the essential meaning and language are Powers' own:

Square 1  
Job praying for his enemies. Job's crosses. Job's coffin.<sup>23</sup> (Figure 24)

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<sup>21</sup> Elliot, Davis, Dennis Carr, Nonie Gadsen, and Cody Hartley, *A New World Imagined: Art of the Americas* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2010), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Fry, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Lyons, 12.

Square 2

The dark day of May 19, 1780. The seven stars were seen 12.N. in the day. The cattle all went to bed, chickens to roost and the trumpet was blown. The sun went off to a small spot and then to darkness.<sup>24</sup> (Figure 25)

The event of 1780 is one of eighteen dark days recorded from 1706–1910, and is the most infamous. As a result of distant forest fires in Canada, the smoke polluted the air with ash, and turned day into night.<sup>25</sup> One New England eyewitness wrote in his diary:

Friday, May the 19th 1780.— This day was the most Remarkable day that ever my eyes beheld...About ten o' clock it began to Rain and grew vere dark and at 12 it was almost as dark as Nite so that wee was obliged to lite our candels and Eate our dinner by candel lite at noon day. But between 1 and 2 o'clock it grew lite again but in the Evening the cloud caim over us again. The moon was about the full (but) it was the darkest nite that ever was seen by us in the world.<sup>26</sup>

Although scientists insisted that the 1780 Black Friday—as it became popularly known—was confined to New England, oral tradition nonetheless circulated throughout the country. "Though she only heard about it in Georgia, Powers was so deeply impressed by this spectacular occurrence, which had even convinced some observers that the end of the world was at hand, that she recorded it on her quilt."<sup>27</sup>

Square 3

The serpent lifted up by Moses and women bringing their children to look upon it to be healed.<sup>28</sup> (Figure 26)

Mary Lyons remarks that Moses was a popular hero in the slaves' religious songs, for he led his people out of captivity to freedom:

Go down, Moses,  
Way down in Egypt land.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Fry, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Lyons, 30.

Tell ol' Pharaoh,  
Let my people go.<sup>29</sup>

Square 4

Adam and Eve in the garden. Eve tempted by the serpent. Adam's rib by which eve was made. The sun and moon. God's all-seeing eye and God's merciful hand.<sup>30</sup>  
(Figure 27)

Square 5

John baptizing Christ and the spirit of God descending and rested upon his shoulder like a dove.<sup>31</sup> (Figure 28)

Square 6

Jonah casted over board of the ship and swallowed by a whale. Turtles.<sup>32</sup>  
(Figure 29)

Square 7

God's creation of two of every kind, male and female.<sup>33</sup> (Figure 30)

Square 8

The falling of the stars on November 13, 1833. 'The people were frighten and thought that the end of time had come. God's hand staid the stars. The varmint's rushed out of their beds.'<sup>34</sup> (Figure 31)

Eyewitnesses to this event believed that the sky "was snowing fire," "the end of the world had come," "the sky is on fire," and "Judgment Day is here." In actuality, what took place was the infamous Leonid meteor storm of 1833. A brilliant display of countless shooting stars falling from the sky produced a dramatic episode seen in all areas of the country. According to Fry,

The Leonid storm of 1833, was observed for eight hours—eight times longer than previously recorded. Scientific observers describe the meteors as varied in size from the smallest visible points to fireballs equaling the moon in diameter. Although it is

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>31</sup> Lyons, 30.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>33</sup> John Michael Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978),

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<sup>34</sup> Fry, 21.

impossible to calculate the number of shooting stars that took place, estimates vary from 8,660 to 10,000 an hour.<sup>35</sup>

An eyewitness near Augusta, Georgia gave the following account:

At about nine p.m. the shooting stars first arrested our attention, increasing in both number and brilliancy until 30 minutes past 2 a.m., when one of the most splendid sights perhaps that mortal eyes have ever beheld, was opened to our astonished gaze. From the last mentioned hour until daylight the appearance of the heavens was awfully sublime. It would seem as if worlds upon worlds from the infinity of space were rushing like a whirlwind to our globe...and the stars descended like a snow fall to the earth...Occasionally one would dart forward leaving a brilliant train which...would remain visible, some of them for nearly fifteen minutes.<sup>36</sup>

A diary entry by a white planter in South Carolina further describes his experience:

I was suddenly awakened by the most distressing cries that ever fell on my ears. Shrieks of horror and cries for mercy I could hear from most of the negroes of the three plantations, amounting in all to about 600 or 800. While earnestly listening for the cause I heard a faint voice near the door, calling my name. I arose, and taking my sword, stood at the door. At this moment I heard the same voice still beseeching me to arise, and saying, "o my God, the world is on fire!" I then opened the door, and it is difficult to say which excited me the most, ---the awfulness of the scene, or the distressed cries of the negroes. Upwards of a hundred lay prostrate on the ground,---some speechless, and some with the bitterest cries, but with their hands raised, imploring God to save the fall much thicker than the meteors fell toward the earth; east, west, north, and south, it was the same.<sup>37</sup>

Square 9

The story of Noah and the animals that survived the flood by going aboard the ark, two by two.<sup>38</sup> (Figure 32)

Square 10

The angels of wrath and seven vials.<sup>39</sup> (Figure 33)

Square 11

Cold Thursday, 10 of February, 1895. A woman frozen while at prayer. A woman frozen at a gateway. A man with a sack of meal frozen. Icicles formed from the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Fry, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>38</sup> Lyons, 35.

<sup>39</sup> Vlach, 47.

breath of a mule. All blue birds killed. A man frozen at his jug of liquor.<sup>40</sup> (Figure 34)

Climatological data from 1895–8 reveals that the state of Georgia experienced extreme and unusually cold weather during the month of February 1895. Along with incessant snowfall and sleet, a severe cold wave brought the temperature down to minus-one degree in the Athens area.<sup>41</sup> It was during this event that Powers noted the deaths of several townspeople and animals by way of freezing to death.

Square 12

The red light night of 1846. A man tolling the bell to notify the people of the wonder. Women, children, and fowls frightened but Gods merciful hand caused no harm to them.<sup>42</sup> (Figure 35)

A glowing meteor shower ensued on the evenings of August 10 and 11, 1846 and were most visible in the southeastern United States. Twenty-three shooting stars were documented and gave the impression of falling fireballs that lit up the night sky. This astronomical occurrence gave the appearance that the sky was on fire and "the earth even appearing ready to ignite."<sup>43</sup>

Square 13

Rich people who were taught nothing of God. Bob Johnson and Kate Bell of Virginia. They told their parents to stop the clock at one and tomorrow it would strike one and so it did. This was the signal that they had entered everlasting punishment. The independent hog which ran 500 miles from Georgia to Virginia her name was Betts.<sup>44</sup> (Figure 36)

Square 14

The creation of animals continues.<sup>45</sup> (Figure 37)

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<sup>40</sup> Lyons, 28.

<sup>41</sup> Fry, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Lyons, 28.

<sup>43</sup> Fry, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Lyons, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Vlach, 47.

Square 15

Depicts the crucifixion of Christ between the two thieves.<sup>46</sup> (Figure 38)

According to Fry:

Probably the real significance of Powers's explanations of her quilt blocks is that oral history turns out to be startlingly accurate. This former slave depicted stories that she had only heard, never read, and they ran parallel to scientific records. But times were changing in Mrs. Powers' day, and she knew intuitively that the quilts she had so carefully and lovingly created should be explained, in written form, for those who would examine them in later years. Thus she dictated to Jennie Smith those stories that had impressed her. In the quilts themselves, Harriet Powers expressed both her life experiences and her African heritage.<sup>47</sup>

It is difficult not to notice the similarities between Powers's appliquéd story quilt and appliquéd textiles by West Africans, particularly the Fon and the Akan people of Benin. Many cultures throughout history have adopted the appliquéd technique: Hand-appliquéd textiles were made by the Spanish in the twelfth-century and by the Italians in the fourteenth-century and American Indians, West Africans, and Tebetan lamas, or holy men, have used the same method.<sup>48</sup> Fry also notes that, "Although narrative quilts are a distinctly American art form, they utilize an appliqué technique traceable to historic Eastern and Middle Eastern civilizations, and with discernable roots in African culture"<sup>49</sup> Given that the slave population consisted of a mixture of diverse Africans, Powers likely learned the appliquéd-technique from African descendants with cherished memories of sewing practices in the ancient Dahomean style. Stuckey suggests that, "Powers may have been of Dahomean descent (a predominant ethnic group in the South) or of Bakongo heritage provided the similarities of religious symbols. Or, Powers could have been of both Dahomean and Bakongo descent, but given the prevalence of ethnic forms in slave

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Fry, 22.

<sup>48</sup> Lyons, 31.

<sup>49</sup> Fry, 18.

communities of the South, she perhaps absorbed the values of an ethnic group she was not born into..."<sup>50</sup> Equally, Powers's quilts and African appliquéd textiles share the fundamental custom of oral narrative. For instance, Dahomean tapestries contain animals such as, lions, birds, elephants, and fish, as symbols of kings or as the central figures of proverbs (Figure 39). Powers's quilts include some of the same animals (pigs, fish, roosters and birds) as proverbial characters, and are made in a similar style.<sup>51</sup>

Traditionally, Dahomean cloth figures are first basted onto the background cloth and sometimes a chain stitch is directed away from the body to insure smoothness. Until recent years, the figures were made of hand-woven cloth. Powers followed a similar construction technique, and used machine-made cloth.<sup>52</sup> Stuckey asserts that:

So faithful in her rendering of the core of Bakongo religious thought that, were it not for the Dahomean features of her work, one might conclude her quilt was done in Congo-Angola. And yet the squared patterns of the fabric and depictions of characters are so close to those of Dahomey that one might, expect for the four moments and other Bakongo symbols incorporated into the quilt, conclude it was fashioned there. Thus, her quilt is a symbol of the fusion of African ethnic traditions in slavery and later.<sup>53</sup>

The formal similarities of style, shape, and color of each appliquéd figure, to those found on Dahomean tapestries, is further observed by Fry who writes that, "These people brought to the South this knowledge of appliqué, which in Dahomey, was executed by men but in America was perpetuated by slave women."<sup>54</sup> For generations, West African clothworkers were experts in the appliqué method. Proficient males continue to pass the traditional aesthetics and processes of appliqué down to their sons, who in turn, pass the

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<sup>50</sup> Stuckey, 91.

<sup>51</sup> Lyons, 31.

<sup>52</sup> Fry, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Stuckey, 91-2.

<sup>54</sup> Fry, 18.



custom down to their own sons.<sup>55</sup> A centuries-old practice, cloth-workers constructed appliquéd costumes to wear in religious dances (Figure 40) and, because the appliquéd-technique is a sign of rank, they would decorate umbrellas, flags, caps, and bonnets to wear as status symbols.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, Powers' story quilts function similarly to African story banners, which communicate significant events from their history. Such events, including the death of an important figure, is honored with appliquéd funeral cloths that convey a picture-story about the deceased person<sup>57</sup> (Figure 41). According to Lyons, "In Ghana, near Benin, the Akan people have made appliquéd flags for hundreds of years. Entire families become members of military associations, or companies, each with its own flag. The flags feature colorful animal and human figures, as well as the ancient religious symbols of the moon and the stars. These symbols show the presence of the Islam religion in Africa."<sup>58</sup>

Such religious symbology is a key element in Powers' story quilts and other slave quilts as well. Powers' frequent use of crosses, stars, and sunbursts are likewise found as symbolic emblems in African tapestries. For instance, a strong African influence on African American quilts of the nineteenth-century is articulated in the appliquéd emblems shown on a crib quilt by an unknown quilter (Figure 42). According to Dr. Robert Farris Thompson, "...the three motifs on the quilt, coffins, crosses, and suns, suggest that the quilt was made as a memorial for a dead child or as an amulet to ensure renewed health for a sick child."<sup>59</sup> The emblems also suggest a reference to African cosmology and mythology. The sun, the Congo cross, and the frequent use of red and white derives from Shango, a religious

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<sup>55</sup> Lyons, 33.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 33-5.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Fry, 14.

cult that originated in Nigeria, and spread to the New World as well as to the Caribbean. The crosses and suns on this quilt are also symbols directly related to the Bakongo of Africa and can also be found in the upper-left block of Powers' *Pictorial Quilt II* (Figure 43); as well as vaguely discernible on an appliquéd apron she wears in the only known surviving photograph of the quilter (Figure 44).

The ingenuity and construction of Powers' story quilts were a personal and spiritual process for the ex-slave and functioned much like a religious sermon. Powers, despite her difficult past as an illiterate slave who never attained financial prosperity, found tranquility in the sewing and quilting process: "...sewing the story quilt was a religious act for Harriet, like singing a spiritual. African Americans could choose any story in the Bible and make up a song about it. In the same way, Harriet could pick a favorite story from the Old or New Testament and create a picture for it."<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the spiritual process that quilting afforded Powers, helped to relieve some of the personal suffering and financial adversity that she must have felt throughout her life. Accounts relayed and documented by Smith confirm the magnitude of Powers' admiration and reverence she upheld for her two story quilts.

Upon completing her first quilt, Powers proudly exhibited her creation at the Cotton Fair near her hometown—an experience that would reveal her quilting mastery to the world and change her life in ways she could hardly imagine:

Harriet must have felt a flush of satisfaction when she spread the quilt over her lap, traced the figures with her fingers, and studied the bright colors that bounced off each other. When she heard about the Cotton Fair, she made a decision. She would enter her quilt in the craft exhibit and introduce her new child to the rest of the world.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Lyons, 20.

<sup>61</sup> Lyons, 17.

She hung her quilt in a corner of the exhibit tent. The aisles were lined with tables of seed displays and racks of jars with pickles and preserves. Mounds of plump potatoes, towering cotton stalks, and swollen watermelons surrounded her creation. All were competing for Best in Show...Then a visitor strolled through the exhibit. She stopped in front of Harriet's quilt. Harriet had never seen the young woman before, but the meeting with Oneita Virginia (Jennie) Smith would change the fate of Harriet's story quilt forever.<sup>62</sup>

At the time of their encounter, Smith was a young art teacher at a local girls' school who immediately was entranced by the beauty and ingenuity of Powers' quilt. As she later confessed, "I regret exceedingly...that it is impossible to describe the gorgeous coloring of the work."<sup>63</sup> At their meeting, Smith offered to purchase the quilt; however, Powers was adamant that the quilt was not for sale at any price. Sadly, four years later, the Powers family was in dire financial straits, and Powers sent word to Smith that the quilt was now for sale. According to Lyons:

Typical wages for a black craftsperson in Georgia in 1890 were as low as \$1 a day. Black labor was so cheap that Harriet may not have thought her quilt was worth much. She probably asked little for it, but Jennie Smith later recalled, 'My financial affairs were at a low ebb and I could not purchase.'<sup>64</sup>

It was not for another year that Smith was able to purchase Powers' quilt for five dollars—in the following passages, Smith described her 1891 transaction with Powers:

Last year I sent her word that I would buy it if she still wanted to dispose of it. She arrived one afternoon in front of my door in an ox-cart with the precious burden in her lap encased in a clean flour sack, which was still enveloped in a crocus sack.

She offered it for ten dollars, but I told her I only had five to give. After going out consulting with her husband she returned and said, "Owin' to de hardness of de times, my ole man lows I'd better teck hit." Not being a new woman she obeyed.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

After giving me a full description of each scene with great earnestness, she departed but has been back several times to visit the darling offspring of her brain.

She was only in a measure consoled for its loss when I promised to save her all my scraps.<sup>65</sup>

Now in the possession of Smith, she had the quilt displayed in the Colored Building at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia in 1895. It was with this exposure that the faculty wives from Atlanta University commissioned Powers to make a second quilt, *Pictorial Quilt II*, for their honorable Reverend Charles Hall, chairman of the board of trustees of Atlanta University.<sup>66</sup> Eventually, this quilt became part of the folk art collection of Maxim Karolik, who gave it to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1964.<sup>67</sup>

Consequently, Powers' quilts are everlastingly preserved, given the fortunate circumstance of meeting Smith. As difficult it must have been for Powers to part with the products of her artistic and creative brilliance, *Pictorial Quilts I* and *II* are testimony to Powers' harmonious collaboration of fabric and thread; each of which are uniquely discerned by shape, contrasting pattern, and texture. The quilts generated by Powers are distinguished for their exclusive nature in nineteenth-century colonial America and recall the formal elements found in West African appliquéd tapestries. In each quilted assemblage, Powers strategically combines biblical motifs and memories of natural phenomenon into powerful and innovative appliquéd emblems. Certainly, if it had not been for the confidence and empowerment Powers must have felt for *Pictorial Quilt I*—enough to submit it to the Cotton Fair—the world would never know Harriet Powers; an incredible and illiterate ex-

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<sup>65</sup> Fry, 19.

<sup>66</sup> Lyons, 22.

<sup>67</sup> Marie Jeanne Adams, "The Harriet Powers Pictorial Quilts," in *Black Art: An International Quarterly*. Vol. 3 no. 4, edited by Val Spaulding, (New York: Black Art, Ltd., 1979), 14.

slave who revealed her dexterity for quilting and appliqué, and a love for oral tradition, in two extraordinary extant quilts.

**Chapter Two: Memoirs of a Dressmaker: Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley and the *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt* (1860-80)**

**An Account of *Liberty* in Embroidery and Silk**

The antebellum period of the nineteenth-century witnessed incredible change and development. Many Americans were chartering Western territory for greater opportunity, while northerners were experiencing prosperous development in industrialization, and southerners remained profiteers in the thriving textile crop—cotton. This affluent economic growth demanded extensive slave labor; which in turn, demanded slave craftsmen and artisans with skills that were deemed worthy to the slave-holding population. Slave men have long been acknowledged as skilled carpenters, brick masons, iron makers, furniture makers, wood-carvers, and potters; whereas, slave women have far too long been denied recognition or acknowledgment—or even a history.<sup>1</sup> Only recently, have historians and scholars recognized the immense contribution that slave women, especially dressmaker and quilter Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (1818–1907) (Figure 45), have had on textile production and other valuable duties on the plantation—cooking, sewing, weaving, dyeing, quilting, knitting, and gardening—that also made their roles something of worth to their masters. Despite all adversity in nineteenth-century America, Keckley developed into an incredible seamstress and quilter and proved her dexterity in the notable *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt* (1860–1880) (Figure 46); currently preserved at the Kent State University Museum. The quilt encompasses all that was antebellum America: liberty; national patriotism; civil justice; and fashion—exhibited in silk—and manufactured in the popular style of embroidery. Some cities, such as Charleston and Baltimore, opened special schools to teach

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<sup>1</sup> Gladys-Marie Fry, *Stitched From the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Dutton Studio Books, 1990), 1.

young African American girls to sew and to learn decorative crafts like embroidery.<sup>2</sup> The *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt* is a testament to nineteenth-century beauty and luxury—composed by an unlikely source—a female ex-slave whose hard work and determination took her places she could never dream of.

As a result of slave dexterity in sewing and other needlework tasks, most antebellum plantations valued skilled craftsmen and seamstresses. Robert Shaw notes that:

The duties of slave seamstresses varied widely from plantation to plantation, as did relationships between the seamstresses and their white mistresses. Some slave seamstresses made clothing for other slaves as well as for members of their owners' families, while others were reserved as exclusive dressmakers. Some mistresses worked closely with slaves, while others had little or no direct contact with their slaves. Many slave seamstresses were highly skilled with a needle, the equal or better of their white counterparts. Some slave seamstresses were trained by their owners, while others learned from elders or family members. Whatever its sources, their craft was highly valued; sewing skills were often mentioned in advertisements for slave sales and auctions, and seamstresses commanded a premium on the block.<sup>3</sup>

To further quote Gladys-Marie Fry, "...the demand for skilled seamstresses was so great that nineteenth-century Southern newspapers regularly advertised for skilled female slaves, primarily seamstresses. These ads requested either a "plain" or a "complete" seamstress, which suggested an artisan who was proficient not only in cutting and sewing but also in embroidery and other similar skills."<sup>4</sup> We can ascertain their importance from historical Southern documents advertising for skilled female slaves:

'To be hired immediately,' a typical advertisement stated, 'A very complete Seamstress; a complete worker of muslin, sober, and no runaway; she is a young colored Woman in her eighteenth year; she is very fond of children, can make their clothes [sic] and dress them with taste.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Fry, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Shaw, *American Quilts: The Democratic Art, 1780–2007* (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 2009), 104.

<sup>4</sup> Fry, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 27.

Household inventories of the nineteenth-century occasionally documented African American seamstresses, including former slaves who have earned their freedom. Such was the case for Keckley who was born a slave in Dinwiddie Court-House, Virginia in 1818 to slaves Agnes and George Pleasant Hobbs; however, supplemental documentation maintains that Keckley's father was also her master. At an early age, Keckley was taught to sew by her mother who worked as a slave seamstress in the Burwell household and helped the plantation mistress make quilts. This was quite common on several southern plantations; as noted by the following passage:

On many plantations full-time seamstresses made garments for male and female slaves (including children). As one ex-slave described these artisans, "Regular women done our quiltings and made our dresses. She made our dresses plain waist, full gathered skirt and buttons down the backs of our waist." In this instance, "regular" meant that these women were assigned to work as seamstresses. In addition to dresses, the seamstresses also made jackets, men's trousers (pantaloons), quilts, coverlets, and table linens. Quilting was not confined to bed covers. Slave seamstresses also quilted petticoats, outer skirts, and pants.<sup>6</sup>

During her formative years, Keckley became an expert seamstress and a nursemaid for her master's children (her half-siblings). In her autobiography, Keckley recalls one of her earliest memories as a nursemaid, one in which she learned the important lesson of self-reliance:

Mrs. Burwell gave birth to a daughter, a sweet, black-eyed baby, my earliest and fondest pet. To take care of this baby was my first duty. True, I was but a child myself—only four years old—but then I had been raised in a hardy school—had been taught to rely upon myself, and to prepare myself to render assistance to others...My simple attire was a short dress and a little white apron. My old mistress encouraged me in rocking the cradle, by telling me that if I would watch over the baby well, keep the flies out of its face, and not let it cry, I should be its little maid. This was a golden promise, and I required no better inducement for the faithful performance of my task. I began to rock the cradle most industriously, when lo! out pitched little pet on the floor. I instantly cried out, "Oh! the baby is on the floor;" and, not knowing what to do, I seized the fire-shovel in my perplexity, and was trying to shovel up my

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<sup>6</sup> Fry, 17.



tender charge, when my mistress called to me to let the child alone, and then ordered that I be taken out and lashed for my carelessness.<sup>7</sup>

As Keckley continued to work as a diligent house slave, she also adhered to around-the-clock sewing tasks. The scheduling of sewing duties for plantation seamstresses depended, for the most part, on the size of the plantation. On large plantations cutting and sewing continued year round. On smaller plantations, this activity was confined to the slow season.<sup>8</sup> When Keckley matured to fourteen years old, she went to live with her master's eldest son—a Presbyterian minister—named Robert Burwell. It was during these adolescent years that Keckley relocated with her new master and his wife to Hillsboro, South Carolina. She remained there for roughly five years, and the abusive experiences and events she faced, proved to be some of the worst in her life. "From the very first I did work of three servants, and yet I was scolded and regarded with distrust. The years passed slowly, and I continued to serve them, and at the same time grew into strong, healthy womanhood."<sup>9</sup> While in her teens, Keckley was violently pursued by a white man and raped—an offense that, when done to an African American woman, was not recognized as a crime. The only mention Keckley provided about this painful memory is as follows:

I was regarded as fair-looking for one of my race, and for four years a white man—I spare the world his name—had base designs upon me. I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I—I—became a mother. The child of which he was the father was the only child that I ever brought into the world. If my poor boy ever suffered any humiliating pangs on account of birth, he could not blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life; he must blame the edicts of that society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes. Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, 1868, Reprint (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 19-20.

<sup>8</sup> Fry, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Keckley, 32.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

By her early twenties, Keckley went to live with Mr. Garland and his wife Anne Burwell, one of the daughters of her old master. The family moved to St. Louis from Virginia (a period in which Keckley married, but divorced her husband James Keckley eight years later). It was in St. Louis that Mr. Garland had hoped to improve his fortune in the West; however, this hopefulness was short-lived when critical economic conditions persuaded the Garlands to consider hiring out Keckley's mother, the aged Agnes Hobbs. According to Keckley, she fervently protested:

The necessities of the family were so great, that it was proposed to place my mother out at service. The idea was shocking to me. Every gray hair in her old head was dear to me, and I could not bear the thought of her going to work for strangers. She had been raised in the family, had watched the growth of each child from infancy to maturity; they had been the objects of her kindest care, and she was wound round about them as the vine winds itself about the rugged oak...My mother, my poor aged mother, go among strangers to toil for a living! No, a thousand times no! I would rather work my fingers to the bone, bend over my sewing till the film of blindness gathered in my eyes; nay, even beg from street to street. I told Mr. Garland so, and he gave me permission to see what I could do. I was fortunate in obtaining work, and in a short time I had acquired something of a reputation as a seamstress and dress-maker.<sup>11</sup>

The obvious dexterity Keckley obtained with her sewing and dress-making abilities would prove to become her saving grace. She reported, "The best ladies in St. Louis were my patrons...With my needle, I kept bread in the mouths of seventeen persons [her owners, their family, and other slaves] for two years and five months."<sup>12</sup>

Keckley worked as a slave seamstress for the Garland/Burwell household for thirty-years, before she bought her and her son's freedom for \$1,200 with her dressmaking abilities. This money however, could not be earned solely by Keckley, provided that her

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<sup>11</sup> Keckley, 44-5.

<sup>12</sup> Cuesta Benberry, *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts* (Louisville, Kentucky: The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., 1992), 40.

earnings went to the livelihood of the Garland/Burwell family. Fortuitously, the full amount of the debt was generated by several wealthy St. Louis patrons on Keckley's behalf:

Mrs. Le Bourgois, one of my kind patrons...in her sweet way said:—"Lizzie, I hear that you are going to New York to beg for money to buy your freedom. I have been thinking over the matter, and told Ma it would be a shame to allow you to go North to *beg* for what we should *give* you. You have many friends in St. Louis, and I am going to raise the twelve hundred dollars required among them. I have two hundred dollars put away for a present; am indebted to you one hundred dollars; mother owes you fifty dollars, and will add another fifty to it; and as I do not want to present, I will make the money a present to you. Don't start for New York now until I see what I can do among your friends." Like a ray of sunshine she came, and like a ray of sunshine she went away. The flowers no longer were withered, drooping. Again they seemed to bud and grow in fragrance and beauty. Mrs. Le Bourgois, God bless her dear good heart, was more than successful. The twelve hundred dollars were raised, and at last my son and myself were free. Free, free! what a glorious ring in the word. Free! the bitter heart-struggle was over. Free! the soul could go out to heaven and to God with no chains to clog its flight or pull it down. Free! the earth wore a brighter look, and the very stars seemed to sing with joy. Yes, free! free by the laws of man and the smile of God—and Heaven bless them who made me so!<sup>13</sup>

After receiving her freedom, Keckley viewed the financial generosity of her patrons as a loan, and worked in earnest as a seamstress to pay every cent that was afforded to her. She left St. Louis in the spring of 1860 en route for Washington D.C. Upon her arrival, her financial means were scarce, but these concerns were quickly appeased when she soon became a dressmaker for the Jefferson Davis household. News concerning the outbreak of the Civil War discontinued the Davis/Keckley relationship when the Davis family was compelled to move South; given Davis's political obligations. Soon thereafter, Keckley opened a successful dressmaking business where she became acquainted with some of the most wealthiest and powerful families in the D.C. area. Similarly to her experiences in St. Louis, Keckley's sewing expertise encouraged her to develop and maintain personal and professional relationships with her female patrons. It was under these circumstances that Keckley was introduced to and quickly became the personal dressmaker and confidant of

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<sup>13</sup> Keckley, 54-5.

Mary Todd Lincoln (Figure 47). Noted in Keckley's personal memoir, "I made fifteen or sixteen dresses for her during the spring and early part of the summer..."<sup>14</sup>

It was during her employment with the Lincoln family that Keckley created a pieced and appliquéd quilt, referred to as *Liberty, Medallion*, or the *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt* (c. 1860–1880) (Figure 48). This masterpiece is elaborately composed of silks, embroidery, and stuff-work or trapunto—a process in which the quilter laboriously inserts bits of cotton or yarn into a stitched motif with a needle to raise it above the surface of the quilt.<sup>15</sup> The quilt was likely completed in Washington, D.C. and measures 81 X 86 inches. The numerous silk scraps are believed to have been remnants from the dresses of the First Lady—each material characteristic of antebellum fashion. Patterned motifs and emblems, with subtle and delicate variations, create a harmonious and creative composition of fabric and thread. A rich burgundy fringe borders the quilt and burgundy tassels, each one three-dimensionally extending at all four corners of the quilt top, further embellishes the perimeter. Along each side of the quilt, pink champagne-colored rectilinear segments, are composed of meticulous embroidery and stuffed work (Figure 49). At first glance, each segment appears entirely symmetrical to one another; however, further observation reveals that subtle variations make each segment unique in its own right. A stuffed golden eagle is central to the rectilinear compositions and carries an array of flowers in its beak. The eagles are flanked by a series of embroidered florals—some stuffed and more detailed than others—which provide an eloquent display of rich dimensional embroidery.<sup>16</sup> Right angles, in bright blue silk, join each frame of the eagle segments, creating and completing a border on the

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<sup>14</sup> Keckley, 90.

<sup>15</sup> Shaw, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Kent State University Museum, "Civil War Fashion: The Keckley Quilt," YouTube Video File, 1:23, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvaADt6HwxI.html> (accessed June 6, 2012).

outermost edge of the quilt top. Each corner bears a spray of flowers or a basket of fruit.<sup>17</sup>

The small hexagonal fabrics are displayed in repeated arrangements that include an array of colors and motifs, typical of dress fabric of the mid–nineteenth–century (Figure 50). Among the display of hexagons, a handful are centrally adorned with embroidered flowers. Many early pieced quilts were made up entirely of small hexagons and customarily arranged to form interlocking mosaic patterns that resembled beehive honeycombs (Figure 51).<sup>18</sup>

According to Shaw:

Hexagon mosaic quilts were popular in the colonial period as well as in Europe in the early nineteenth-century and may have been influenced by contemporary designs for mosaic floors and tabletops. Mosaic walls and floors, created from small pieces of colored pebbles, tile, glass, ceramics, or other materials, were made in North Africa as early as 2000 BCE. The concept was brought to Europe by the Moors. Since the mosaic concept was easily translated to fabric, it was one of the earliest piecework design methods used by European and American quiltmakers.<sup>19</sup> (Figure 52)

The principal material used in Keckley's quilt is silk, several pieces of the material are striped or plaid, in keeping with the popularity of such patterns and fashion.<sup>20</sup> As mentioned previously, it is probable that Keckley attained the silk scraps from the numerous dresses she manufactured for Mary Todd Lincoln. In discussing the success of silk manufacture in the colonial period, the southern colony of Georgia was the most active producer of sericulture, or silkworm farming, in the early decades of the eighteenth–century. The silkworm is the larva or caterpillar of the domesticated silkworm—the primary producer of silk. The diet of a silkworm is chiefly composed of the leaves of a mulberry

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<sup>17</sup> Kent State University Museum.

<sup>18</sup> Shaw, 90.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Kent State University Museum.

tree<sup>21</sup>—a variety of tree that was brought by early colonial settlers in the early seventeenth-century. The necessity and demand for silk manufacture was particularly valuable. So much so that in 1730, Carolina settlers were granted free land for planting 100 mulberry trees for every ten acres cleared.<sup>22</sup> Given colonial success in silk production, exportation of raw silk to England was maintained for optimum weaving (a specialized skill not yet mastered in the colonies). Following 1749, Britain removed the import duty on colonial silks and reeling mills—mechanisms used to draw silk from the cocoon—which were established in Philadelphia and Savannah. It is probable that Savannah was responsible for sending 4,536 kg (10,000 lb) of silk fiber to England in 1759. In the following year, Connecticut became a frontrunner in silk production—a lead that it held until the 1830s. By the second half of the eighteenth-century, the manufacture of cotton slowly replaced silk as the fiber crop in colonial America.<sup>23</sup>

Keckley's exceptional quilt, composed of variations of fine silks, is completed with a central square configuration that functions as the focal point of the quilt top (Figure 53). An elaborate display of rectilinear shapes, richly embroidered with delicate floral emblems, decorate each frame of the central square design. Forming a central motif was an admired and fashionable fixture to quilt design in the colonial period:

The majority of early European and American pieced and appliquéd quilts were built around a central medallion, which provided a strong focus to the quilt's design. Medallion quilts were constructed from the center out; the medallion was made first and then framed by a number of different decorative borders to complete the top. Medallion construction was common on both sides of the Atlantic as early as the 1780s, and it continued to be used well into the nineteenth-century, especially in Europe.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, "Bombyx Mori: Silkworm," Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silkworm.html> (accessed June 6, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Harris, ed., *5000 Years of Textiles* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2010), 252.

<sup>23</sup> Harris, 252.

<sup>24</sup> Shaw, 57.

At the heart of the medallion rests an ornate dark eagle (Figure 54). The eagle is richly embroidered creating a feather-like texture and carrying twigs of olive leaves in its beak. The olive leaves are reminiscent of those used to fashion Roman crowns and wreaths during the Roman Republic. Later referred to as the *Civic Crown*, this display of leaves was awarded to Roman emperors, originating with Augustus, who saved the lives of citizens by ending a series of civil wars.<sup>25</sup> This reference is a poignant symbol for Keckley, given that the word *Liberty* is embroidered twice, above and beneath the eagle. An additional symbolic reference to liberty is markedly apparent in an embroidered American flag also situated below the eagle.

Civil War quilts bearing patriotic references were prolific during the antebellum era. According to Shaw, "Quilts made before and during the war reflect many of the passions and tensions of the times, as well as the complexity of relationships and social conventions in both the North and South. They are prime documents of the deep commitment of women on both sides to their men, their cause, and their country."<sup>26</sup> Such patriotic quilts featured an abundance of stars, the national flag, and the American bald eagle—adopted by Congress as the emblem on the Great Seal in 1782—and were popular motifs from the time of the Civil War well into the twentieth-century (Figure 55).<sup>27</sup>

Coupled with the patriotic fervor of the period was the development of reform quilts. Such quilts were produced to raise money for the war as well as to provide the necessary aid required for soldier relief. According to Shaw:

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<sup>25</sup> Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, "Civic Crown," Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civic\\_Crown.html](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civic_Crown.html) (accessed June 6, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Shaw, 104.

<sup>27</sup> Roderick Kiracofe, *The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort, 1750–1950*, (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1993), 123.

Forces on both sides of the conflict were ill prepared for war, and women sprang into action to provide much-needed clothing and bedding for soldiers...Women on both sides organized groups to make and gather supplies, aid and comfort soldiers in the field, and raise funds to support the war effort. Their contributions saved lives, lifted spirits, and provided solidarity and compassion at home and in the field.<sup>28</sup> (Figure 56)

Between 1862-3, Keckley herself sought to provide relief for the war effort and its soldiers:

One fair summer evening I was walking the streets of Washington, accompanied by a friend, when a band of music was heard in the distance. We wondered what it could mean, and curiosity prompted us to find out its meaning. We quickened our steps, and discovered that it came from the house of Mrs. Farnham. The yard was brilliantly lighted, ladies and gentlemen were moving about, and the band was playing some of its sweetest airs. We approached the sentinel on duty at the gate, and asked what was going on. He told us that it was a festival given for the benefit of the sick and wounded soldiers in the city. This suggested an idea to me. If the white people can give festivals to raise funds for the relief of suffering soldiers, why should not the well-to-do colored people go to work to do something for the benefit of the suffering blacks? I could not rest. The thought was ever present with me, and the next Sunday I made a suggestion in the colored church, that a society of colored people be formed to labor for the benefit of the unfortunate freedmen. The idea proved popular, and in two weeks "the Contraband Relief Association" was organized, with forty working members.<sup>29</sup>

It was also during this period that Keckley was informed of the heart-wrenching news that her only son had been killed while fighting in battle:

Previous to this [sometime around 1860-1] I had lost my son. Leaving Wilberforce, he went to the battle-field with the three months troops, and was killed in Missouri—found his grave on the battle-field where the gallant General Lyon fell. It was a sad blow to me...<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, the condition of the Civil War had an insurmountable effect on Keckley's personal and political life—she was a woman with deep political convictions regarding the civil liberties of oppressed African American slaves and freedmen. In the following account she wrote:

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<sup>28</sup> Shaw, 108-9.

<sup>29</sup> Keckley, 112-14.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 105.



...the emancipated slaves, in coming North, left old associations behind them, and the love for the past was so strong that they could not find much beauty in the new life so suddenly opened to them. Thousands of the disappointed, huddled together in camps, fretted and pined like children for the "good old times." In visiting them in the interests of the Relief Society of which I was president, they would crowd around me with pitiful stories of distress. Often I heard them declare that they would rather go back to slavery in the South, and be with their old masters, than to enjoy the freedom of the North. I believe they were sincere in these declarations, because dependence had become a part of their second nature, and independence brought with it the cares and vexations of poverty.<sup>31</sup>

While the *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt* expresses patriotism and emancipation, nineteenth-century abolitionists also fashioned quilts to express their political sentiments. Quilts were sold to raise money for the anti-slavery cause and functioned as a form of non-violent protest. In the quilt produced by abolitionist Deborah Coates (Figure 57), an emblematic detail of a kneeling slave—based on the Wedgewood medallion created in 1797—is embedded with the inscription, *Deliver me from the oppression of man*<sup>32</sup> (Figure 58). The kneeling slave was an iconic symbol for the abolitionist effort to end slavery and restore the civil liberties of the oppressed.

Keckley's quilt, with its abundant display of embroidered motifs, was a common practice among many elite quilters of the nineteenth-century. Some women created spreads that were decorated completely with floral and pictorial embroidery designs, while others combined embroidery with piecework and appliqué.<sup>33</sup> Some of the earliest and rarest American bedcoverings reveal decorated embroidery on pieced wool quilts. Colorful and fanciful decorative arts were extremely popular in the early decades of the nineteenth-century, when the taste for highly decorated and imaginative "fancy" furnishings was at its

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<sup>31</sup> Keckley, 140.

<sup>32</sup> *Hearts and Hands: Nineteenth-Century Women and Their Quilts*, directed by Pat Ferrero, New Day Films, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Shaw, 34.

peak.<sup>34</sup> The earliest surviving examples of embroidery are found in the Egyptian tombs of Tuthmosis IV (c. 1412 - 1364 BC) and Tutankhamun (1334 - 1325 BC), whereas the practice endures a long and rich history in areas of China, dating as far back as the fourth-century BC, and examples have also been discovered in European and Islamic embroidery from the eighth to twelfth-centuries AD.<sup>35</sup>

Embroidery is a method of decorating on an existing structure, typically a woven foundation fabric, with a needle and yarn. Unlike needlework techniques such as knitting and crochet, embroidery excludes simple seaming and should not be confused with other weaving practices such as brocade and tapestry.<sup>36</sup> Normally, embroidery is achieved by hand; however, since the nineteenth-century, the activity could be completed by machine. Myriad colored yarns, as well as the technique of whitework embroidery, are used to achieve ornamental impressions in low and high relief. The various imprints achieved by embroidery are countless and range from methods that incorporate padded details, spiralled wires, beads, and other materials to produce three-dimensional effects.<sup>37</sup> The process of embroidery is performed with yarns that are worked into the fabric after they are removed from the loom. The main embroidery stitches, generally speaking, may be classified as one of three types: flat stitches, loop stitches, and knotted stitches. With flat stitches (Figure 59) the threads lie flat on the surface of the ground fabric, although stitches may be side by side, overlapping or crossed.<sup>38</sup> There are innumerable variations of flat stitches such as satin stitch, stem stitch, long-and-short stitch, cross stitch, tent stitch, and couching. To form a

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<sup>34</sup> Shaw.

<sup>35</sup> Harris, 31.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 31-2.

loop stitch (Figure 60) the thread is brought to the front of the fabric, loosely looped and returned to the back. As the needle comes to the front a second time, it catches the end of the loop and secures it in place. Loop stitches may be open, as in buttonhole stitch, or closed, an example of which is chain stitch.<sup>39</sup> In knotted stitches (Figure 61), such as the French or Pekin knot, when the needle is brought to the front of the fabric the thread is wrapped around it several times, then carried to the back again to secure the knot.<sup>40</sup>

In the early decades of the twentieth-century, Ruth E. Finley wrote *Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them*; concurrently with its publication, Robert Lincoln—the eldest son of the former President Abraham Lincoln—removed Keckley's *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt* from private storage and into the public's eye.<sup>41</sup> According to Susan

Wildemuth:

This quilt, complete with an affidavit verifying its provenance, next came to Ross Trump of Medina, Ohio, from Mrs. Finley, and today resides in the permanent collection of the Kent State University Museum, Kent, Ohio, a gift from Mr. Trump in memory of his mother, Helen Watts Trump.<sup>42</sup>

No one knows for certain the outcome of the *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt* if it was not for the research and publication of Finley's book. When Keckley completed her memoir in 1868, she did not imagine that its contents would sever the close and personal relationship she held with the Lincoln family. Recounted in her memoir, Keckley recalled the emotional and financial suffering that afforded the former First Lady—particularly after she was forced to move out of the White House following the assassination of President Lincoln. In such despair, Mary Todd Lincoln was compelled to sell an abundance of custom dresses—

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<sup>39</sup> Harris, 32.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Susan Wildemuth, "Elizabeth Keckley and the Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt," *Quilter's World Magazine* 31, no. 1 (2009): 4.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

all of which were manufactured by Keckley. Remembering this painful experience, Keckley noted:

I...remembered of Mrs. L. having said to me at different times, in the years of 1863 and '4, that her expensive dresses might prove of great assistance to her some day... 'If Congress does not do something for me, then my dresses some day may have to go to bring food into my mouth, and the mouths of my children.'<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately, this became a reality. As a result, Keckley's masterful gowns are spread throughout the country—few have been preserved and exhibited in museums (Figure 62). In spite of these circumstances, Keckley's remarkable needlework and dressmaking ingenuity is apparent in the few surviving dress examples and in the *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt*. In the incredible collaboration of silk and embroidery, Keckley achieved an exceptional composition that is reminiscent of the antebellum era—an era when liberty, patriotism, and civil justice were rampant in the minds of many Americans. The *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt* is a fascinating example of perseverance and diligence; it reveals what an ex-slave can accomplish given all the adversity and oppression presented her throughout her life.

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<sup>43</sup> Keckley, 270.

**Conclusion: Harriet Powers and Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley: An Examination of  
Accomplishment and Influence**

**Continuing the Tradition in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century: Faith  
Ringgold and *Coming to the Jones Road, Part I* (1999–2000)**

In the longstanding pursuit of quilting in antebellum and post-bellum America, African Americans, free and slave, have always made quilts that reflect their lives and personal histories. Quilts are symbolic objects of the lived experience. They function as a written record—inscribed with fabric and thread rather than paper and pen. Quilts are emblems of hope, infused with a host of meanings—some broad, national, and patriotic; others subtle, familial, and personal.<sup>1</sup> All quilts convey a story. Such stories are embedded in the materials used, the design aesthetics, and in the process of their manufacture. African American quilts are a hybridity of cross-cultural influences and artistic designs and processes. They are nonetheless, exceptional in their ability to articulate personal experiences and narratives, religious ideologies, and communicate messages through color, pattern, and emblematic imagery. Quilts were of particular value in colonial America and were frequently written in household inventories. Given their worth, quilts were among the items stolen—along with horses and gold—by northern soldiers raiding southern plantations during the Civil War.<sup>2</sup> Remarkably, quilts were of treasured status and monetary value; and many African American slaves contributed their artistic talents to the worthy decorative art of quilting. Providentially, such decorative arts, although few, are lastingly preserved for all future generations to enjoy and study. African American quilts served myriad functions in colonial America: as necessary objects for bed cover; as

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Shaw, *American Quilts: The Democratic Art, 1780–2007* (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 2009), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Mary E. Lyons, *Stitching Stars: The Story Quilts of Harriet Powers* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1993), 5.

canvases for self-expression; as unnamed heirlooms passed down for generations in the plantation household; as political objects for abolitionism, women's suffrage, and the Civil War; and as items expressing kinship and community. In short, they are objects of great beauty and expressive power.

Harriet Powers and Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley were two enslaved women who defied social norms in antebellum and post-bellum America. Despite the odds that nineteenth-century society afforded—enslavement, racial oppression, female persecution, and civil injustice—they both managed to rise above the challenges and master the art of quilting—distinguished in *Pictorial Quilt II* and the *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt*. Their proficiency with fabric and thread became a psychological outlet for the hardships of daily life as well as a spiritual process—a process of creation, innovation, and healing. As noted by Beverly Gordon and Laurel Horton, "In making quilts, women "give life to" something highly sensual and alive—they create "bodies" that not only delight the eye, but all of the senses. The quilts are in turn experienced through the body, which is touched by the fabric, often even wrapped or enveloped by it."<sup>3</sup> Quilting is an explorative process and a pleasurable and rewarding pursuit. They nonetheless offered Powers and Keckley the opportunity to artistically demonstrate the sacred and social themes that were most significant to their lives: For Powers, this spiritual outlet was found in recounting biblical and meteorological narratives in appliqué; and for Keckley, this process occurred in embroidered patriotism denoting liberty and emancipation. Moreover, the activity of quilting afforded Powers and Keckley an avenue for healing through the method of free imagination and artistic originality—essential qualities that were hindered by their social

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<sup>3</sup> Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin, eds., *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles, 1750-1950* (Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, Co., 2009), 93-4.

status as slaves. Both women had earned their freedom at the time when *Pictorial Quilt II* and the *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt* were produced; however, their courageous and persevering efforts reveal that both quilts were not, and remain to be, just historical objects, but distinct items that reveal a considerable amount about the women who produced them; including: their personal stories; their influences; their sewing preferences; their creative strengths; and ultimately, their artistic genius.

Without question, *Pictorial Quilt II* and the *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt*, set an immeasurable example for all women artists and quilters. Harriet Powers found influence in the appliqué textiles of Africa, whereas Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley drew upon a Euro-colonial artistic vision; nevertheless, both women accomplished beautiful quilts with considerable success. Their quilts fundamentally altered the production of African American quilting and are proclamations that anything is possible, even in the face of domination and adversity. In spite of this, their contributions to the decorative arts set the foundation for elevating quilting to a new standard of artistic ingenuity and possibility. Susan Wildemuth wrote, "This quilt, [the *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt*] so rich in verbal history, is a work of art and a tribute to an excellent needlewoman, who by race, humble beginnings and gender was not supposed to be a success story. Instead, Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley showed the world just what a woman can accomplish when she sets her mind to it."<sup>4</sup> Certainly, Powers and Keckley were unaware of the enormity and influence that they and their quilts maintain for women's rights and artists in the following decades of the twentieth and twenty-first-centuries. In the careful and precise application of fabric and thread, their voices, influences, and experiences remain a strong presence in the minds of women artists today; notably, the artist, quilter, feminist, and storyteller Faith Ringgold.

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Wildemuth, "Elizabeth Keckley & the Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt," *Quilter's World Magazine* 31 no. 1 (2009): 4.

Faith Ringgold (1930—) (Figure 63) is a contemporary African American artist and educator who began her artistic career as a painter during the 1960s in Harlem. Born in the Harlem neighborhood, which she continues to visit frequently, Ringgold came from a close family, whose love of storytelling was an important early influence.<sup>5</sup> By the time she was a senior in high school, she had decided she wanted to become an artist. Ringgold became academically trained at the City College of New York where she graduated with a B.S. in Art Education in 1955 and later attained a Master's of Fine Arts degree from the same college in 1959.<sup>6</sup> Having been married, divorced, and had two daughters within a year of each other, Ringgold's early adult life was incessantly demanding.

As the 1950s drew to a close, the women's movement and the Black Power movement, developed in earnest by the late 1960s; and consequently, had an equally momentous effect on the art produced by African American women.<sup>7</sup> According to Lisa E. Farrington, the women's movement was a product of two significant events that had a revolutionary effect on women artists:

The first was the publication in 1963 of *The Feminine Mystique*. This groundbreaking volume critiquing society's repression of and discrimination against women and charting their changing roles was written by NOW (National Organization for Women) founder Betty Friedan. The second was the passing in 1964 of the Civil Rights Act, which banned sex discrimination. By the early 1970s, when the Supreme Court legalized abortion, perceptions of women, their prerogatives, and their status in society had radically changed. In response to this new outlook, women artists began to transform conventional perceptions of themselves into ones that better reflected their newly configured identities. Coming together in a vast array of formal and informal coalitions, a new generation of women artists formed the core of the feminist art movement.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Melody Graulich and Mara Witzling, "The Freedom to Say What She Pleases: A Conversation with Faith Ringgold," *NWSA Journal* 6 no. 1 (1994): 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 146.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



In the context of a male-dominated and chauvinistic Western art society, the feminist art movement sought ways to respond and counteract longstanding prejudices, stereotypes, and impediments—lack of access to art schools, the demands of child rearing, social taboos and restrictions—that had prevented women (and specifically African American women) from becoming "great artists."<sup>9</sup>

Notably from the nineteenth-century, callous stereotypes and mythologies concerning the black woman's body and moral standing were perpetuated in two primary characters, Jezebel and Mammy. According to Deborah Gray White:

The uniqueness of the African-American female's situation is that she stands at the crossroads of two of the most well-developed ideologies in America, that regarding women and that regarding the Negro. Although much of the race and sex ideology that abounds in America has its roots in history that is older than the nation, it was during the slavery era that the ideas were molded into a peculiarly American mythology. As if by design, white males have been the primary beneficiaries of both sets of myths which, not surprisingly, contain common elements in that both blacks and women are characterized as infantile, irresponsible, submissive, and promiscuous. Both blacks and women have generally been dependent politically and economically upon white men. Both groups are consigned to roles that are subservient, both groups have shared a relationship of powerlessness *vis-à-vis* white males, and both groups, as a matter of automatic response, have been treated as outsiders and inferiors.<sup>10</sup>

The Jezebel figure is impious and irreverent, immoral, and promiscuous; she is, in every way, a counter image of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian lady.<sup>11</sup> Governed solely by her libido, the sensual Jezebel character spawned entirely from early European contact with Africans:

The idea that black women were exceptionally sensual first gained credence when Englishmen went to Africa to buy slaves. Unaccustomed to the requirements of a tropical climate, Europeans mistook semi-nudity for lewdness. Similarly, they misinterpreted African cultural traditions, so that polygamy was attributed to the

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<sup>9</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, 146-7.

<sup>10</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985), 27-8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

Africans' uncontrolled lust, tribal dances were reduced to the level of orgy, and African religions lost the sacredness that had sustained generations of ancestral worshippers.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, the black Mammy is the all-encompassing champion. She is reliable, honest, authoritative, and protector. She is the caretaker of white children who can do anything and do it better than anyone else.<sup>13</sup> She was a woman completely dedicated to the white family, especially to the children of that family. She was the house servant who was given complete charge of domestic management. She served also as friend and advisor. She was, in short, surrogate mistress and mother.<sup>14</sup> As noted by White, Mammy encompasses superwoman qualities who does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women. She is less of a woman in that she is less "feminine" and helpless, she is really more of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves.<sup>15</sup>

Mindful of such stereotypical inaccuracies, as well as a thorough understanding of enslaved women in history, Ringgold devoted herself and her art in becoming a prominent fixture for women's rights activism, social reform, and the women's artist movement. By the late 1960s, she was a member of the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC), a group dedicated to protesting class discrimination in museum policies and practices. However, the AWC was monopolized by a white male membership that did little to further the causes of minorities or women.<sup>16</sup> As a result, Ringgold opted to form the United Black Artists' Committee (UBAC); an organization, which expanded the AWC's class concerns to further include

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<sup>12</sup> Deborah Gray White.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Farrington, 147.

issues of racial discrimination.<sup>17</sup> In 1971, Ringgold and Kay Brown organized the "Where We At" Black Women Artists Group, which staged the first black women artists' show in known history at the 1199 exhibition held at the Martin Luther King Gallery in New York.

Writer Cindy Nemser wrote in 1975:

During the sixties, black women in the arts had been torn between their allegiance to the Black Art Movement, which meant black males only, and their own need to fight sexism as women. Now artist Kay Brown, leading spokeswoman for the "Where We At" group feels that "black women across the board are beginning to relate to each other and are beginning to explore the various roles they are expected to play as well as challenging the myths that have been spread about black women in general." Brown predicts more unity among black women themselves and "hopefully a coming together of all women in the arts."<sup>18</sup>

In the early 1970s, Ringgold's art was transformed following a trip to Europe with her mother and daughters. According to Melody Graulich and Mara Witzling:

When she returned, she claimed her former dining room as her studio, an important gesture establishing art making as a major priority in her life. She began to try to find a way to create images of black people, technically by finding a way to render black skin tones, and thematically by producing portraits of members of her community, of "real" black people, whose images had been absent in her formal art education. "Instead of looking to Greece, I looked to Africa," she said.<sup>19</sup>

Ringgold was inspired by African masks and Tibetan *thangkas*—a form of religious painting on silk set within a wide, hanging brocade frame.<sup>20</sup> Her earliest collaborations of paint and fabric were produced in two series, *The Feminist Series* (1972–3) (Figure 64) and *The Slave Rape Series* (1972–3) (Figure 65). In the former, painterly compositions are punctuated by vertical text—withdrawing from writing in traditional Chinese painting—that recall antiracist and feminist statements by nineteenth- and twentieth-century black women

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<sup>17</sup> Farrington, 141.

<sup>18</sup> Cindy Nemser, "The Women's Artists' Movement," *Art Education* 28 no. 7 (1975): 21.

<sup>19</sup> Graulich and Witzling, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 103.

activists.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, it was these early compositions that were set against fabric frames and were glued rather than sewn together. Ringgold's early story quilts had not come into fruition, however, without the help of her mother Willi Posey. Posey was an expert seamstress and dress designer who was extremely influential to Ringgold's artistic vision and creative process. Beginning with *The Slave Rape Series*, Ringgold enlisted the help of her mother to produce sewn fabric borders; the first of many collaborations between mother and daughter that would eventually lead to Ringgold's signature form, the painted quilt, in 1980.<sup>22</sup> Like many feminist artists of the 1970s, Ringgold embraced the gendered associations of fiber as an oppositional strategy within the male-dominated art world.<sup>23</sup> In a 1975 interview, Ringgold explained her preference for fiber material:

Who said that art is oil paint stretched on canvas with art frames? I didn't say that. Nobody who ever looked like me said that, so why the hell am I doing that? So I just stopped; and now I do sewing and all kinds of things. Sewing has been traditionally what all women in all cultures have done. What's wrong with that? Politically speaking, I think some women would probably say, "I don't want to be placed in the bag [of] women's art...sewing." Okay, that's your choice...I don't want to be placed in the bag where I think that all art is about making something that nobody can move. Making some big, monumental, monolithic thing which I can't even afford to do...Feminist art is soft art, lightweight art, sewing art. This is the contribution women have made that is uniquely theirs.<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, Ringgold said farewell to the traditional form of oil-on-canvas painting, and began incorporating acrylic paint to sewn textiles. Ringgold's modified canvases consist of a quilted textile bearing painted figures and text that are interspersed with colorful and vibrant patchwork and bordering; such as, *Echoes of Harlem* (1980) (Figure 66). Perpetually aware of her ancestral slave heritage, Ringgold's art has continuously pertained to the

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<sup>21</sup> Auther.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 103.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

major themes of: marriage, sexuality, family, mother-daughter relations, African-American social history, civil injustice, women's rights, political activism, and female self-expression.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Ringgold began a new project entitled *Coming to the Jones Road, Part I* (1999–2000). The decision to begin such a series developed from a saddening and traumatizing experience beginning in the early 1990s:

I moved to Jones Road in Englewood, New Jersey, on November 23, 1992, with the dream of constructing a studio and creating a garden. Soon after I came to live on Jones Road and began to pursue my dream, I discovered that I was surrounded by hostile neighbors, who saw my presence on Jones Road as a threat to the "quality" of their lives. My dream of a studio and garden was to them no more than a rooming house with transient occupants. For more than six years I struggled with the town board to obtain the permits necessary to override my neighbors' opposition and build my studio. Having traveled the world but never having lived anywhere but Harlem, this was an extremely traumatic experience for me. But art is a healer and the sheer beauty of living in a garden amidst trees, plants, and flowers has inspired me to look away from my neighbors' unfounded animosity toward me and focus my attention on the stalwart tradition of black people who had come to New Jersey centuries before me. In *Coming to the Jones Road*, I have tried to couple the beauty of the place and the harsh realities of its racist history to create a freedom series that turns all the ugliness of spirit, past and present, into something livable. I am also trying, which is the hardest part of all, to speak in the voice of my grandmothers and fathers who made it possible for me in the twenty-first century to walk free and tell their story.<sup>25</sup>

The series is composed of eight colorful quilts and a powerful narrative that is harmoniously woven throughout each quilted textile. Significantly, all the narrators of Ringgold's quilts are African American women who speak with authority in their own voices.<sup>26</sup> In discussing the narrative process for this series, Ringgold wrote that:

...all I had to work with was a trail of shadowy figures under a moonlit sky stealing through the landscape in pursuit of freedom at Aunt Emmy's little white house on Jones Road." (Ringgold 353) A prominent character in the narrative, Ringgold drew Aunt Emmy from her great grandmother, Betsy Bingham, who "...was a tower of strength and beauty in our family according to everyone who knew her."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Faith Ringgold, "Coming to Jones Road," *Feminist Studies* 33 no. 2 (2007): 351.

<sup>26</sup> Graulich and Witzling, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ringgold, 353.

The painted series begins with two story quilts that reveal Aunt Emmy's modest white house surrounded by a heavenly sky and a verdant forest landscape; and a closer examination of each scene will indicate a mass of shadowy figures amidst the trees (Figures 67-8).

According to Ringgold:

Somehow I needed to see the shadowy figures in a more positive view early on and to know that they would reach Jones Road and be all right. So I envisioned them coming from church on a Sunday afternoon. I needed to create a sense of community in their new home on Jones Road. Then I could go back and tell you the story of how they had come to Jones Road in the first place.<sup>28</sup>

The third quilt is composed of a life-size reproduction of great grandmother Betsy (Figure 69). The painting is taken from an original photograph showing Betsy adorned in a white cotton dress and a sizeable white sunhat. Scripted along the border of the quilted frame reads the following:

Ever since that night Aunt Emmy left the plantation me and Barn Door been achin to follow. You see, Aunt Emmy used to come to Barn Door in his dreams and she would say: "I'm coming back to get you boy." Same thing she said the night she left there. Then one day, Barn Door was already in the fields choppin cotton when he felt a shakin and heard a rumblin, and then Aunt Emmy's voice came from deep in the earth. The voice said, "Barn Door, the time has come to walk to freedom. Nobody gonna stop you now. Wait till nightfall then go, and don't leave nobody behind. Keep a comin till you reach the Palisades. Then turn onto Jones Road. Look for an old white farmhouse with your dead Mama's star quilt on the roof. We be waiting for you. God be on your side. You as good as free!"<sup>29</sup>

The following four painted compositions mark the precarious journey to freedom.

The first entitled *Under a Blood-Red Sky* (Figure 70):

There was 28 of us and one newborn baby girl on that long hard sojourn through the woods and swamps. We named the baby Freedom because she was born almost free. By day, we prayed for the black of night to come to cover us. By night, we crept

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<sup>28</sup> Ringgold, 354.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 355.

softly to muffle our steps. We moved along as if in one body hardly knowing where we was goin, our way lit only by a chalk-white moon in a blood-red sky.<sup>30</sup>

Subsequently, *A Long and Lonely Night* (Figure 71) reads:

Our worse night was when we followed the river deep into the swamps. We was all weary from runnin from dogs and fightin snakes, and we was so hungry and there was nothin to eat. Just before daybreak we reached a clearing in the woods and where some white folks had gone away and left a banquet of food untouched. Lord, did we had a party in them woods? We ate and drank real good for the first time since we could remember.<sup>31</sup>

The following quilt, *Baby Freedom Came One Night* (Figure 72):

They say Aunt Emmy had the power to be in two places at the same time. Well one day I felt her pressin on my belly and I stop walkin and look down and I see Aunt Emmy's hand and then I see her face right there in front of me. "Now Precious," that's what she called me, "You be strong now. Barn Door is a good man, and you is a good woman, and this here baby is a freedom chile," she went on pressing my belly even harder. "You don't fret none. This baby be here for day in the mornin, sure as there's a God in heaven." Now how she know I was that way? I ain even tell Barn Door. I ain't tell nobody. Nobody but Jesus. Well sure enough, Baby Freedom come that night, and we all jus cry and Barn Door hold Baby Freedom and pray she don't make a noise—and she don't. And then everybody say "she our baby too," cause we all know she was born to be free.<sup>32</sup>

In the fourth story quilt, *We Jus Keep a Comin* (Figure 73):

We arrived at the Palisades before daybreak, dog-tired, aching from head to toe. But the sky was as blue as ever a sky could be and the birds were singing a strong sweet song of freedom. Lord, let this don't be no dream and we wake up choppin cotton. Well we was here cuz we see Aunt Emmy standin proud and pretty in the risin sun, and the ole white farm house with Barn Door's dead Moma's quilt on the roof and now we can't walk no more. Just fall on our knees makin a river of tears right there on the ground...<sup>33</sup>

Lastly, the final quilt of the series entitled, *Only the Children* (Figure 74), is an expressive statement of willpower and self-determination:

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<sup>30</sup> Ringgold, 356.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 357.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 358.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 359.

Tired as can be, the children commenced to run and play, their sweet voices ringing through the trees like bells of joy:

'We free! We free! Aunt Emmy got us  
now! We free! We free now!  
Ain gonna be sold no more  
Ain gonna be whooped no more  
Ain gonna cry cry cry no more  
Ain gonna chop chop chop  
In the hot sun For no one!

We free! We free now!  
Go to school Act a fool  
Free to play. All day  
Run in the sun Have us some fun  
Like anyone

We free! We free!  
Aunt Emmy got us now.'

God by my witness that's how we come to Jones Road on November the twenty-third, in the year of our Lord, seventeen hundred and ninety-two.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, Ringgold, like Powers and Keckley before her, is an extraordinary storyteller, quilter, and artist. Through her distinguished style of artmaking on quilted textiles, coupled with her unique application of paint, Ringgold, in many ways, is an innovator and model for all women artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Ringgold is progressive and not afraid to artistically and imaginatively reflect passionate convictions of: marriage; sexuality; family; African American social history; civil injustice; women's rights; political activism; and female self-expression. Finding her artistic voice and vision during the tumultuous 1960s, Ringgold defied longstanding stereotypes and mythologies concerning African American women. Similarly to Powers and Keckley in the nineteenth-century, Ringgold is just as pioneering and artistically original. Her artistic and imaginative narratives of slavery and freedom communicate the lives and experiences of

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<sup>34</sup> Ringgold, 360.



enslaved women. In many ways, Ringgold's quilts are biographical—they detail the lived experiences of nineteenth-century African American women—women like Powers and Keckley. Her quilted messages are powerful, commanding, and influential—in short, they reflect the creative brilliance and artistic genius of yet another African American quilter.

## Illustrations



Figure 1. Funerary quilt fragment, Siberia, between the first-century BCE and the second-century CE.



Figure 2. Abydos ruler, wearing what appears to be a quilted cloak, 2900 BCE.



Figure 3. Quilted armor on men and horses, Ceremonial procession, Twentieth-Century, Niger.



Figure 4. Whole-Cloth Calamanco Quilt, Melinda Brown or her daughter Henrietta Scribner. Vermont, late-eighteenth or early-nineteenth-century. Hand-quilted English calamanco wool, 94 x 90 inches. Collection of the Shelburne Museum.



Figure 5. Whole-Cloth Quilt, Susan W. Bacon. Connecticut, c. 1800. Printed cotton, hand-pieced, and hand-appliquéd, 93 x 84 inches. Collection of Bryon and Sara Dillow.

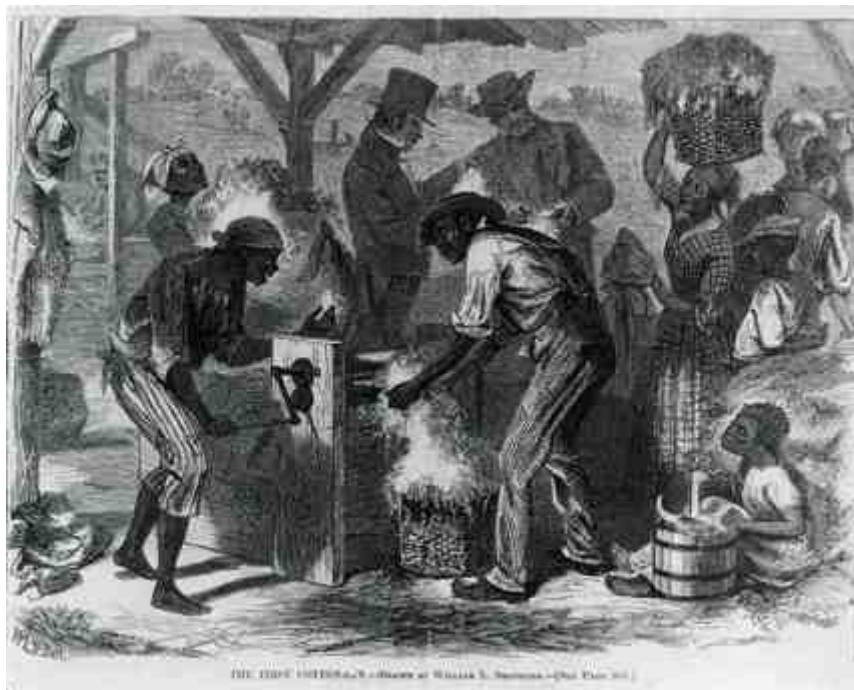


Figure 6. *The First Cotton Gin*. Wood engraving, drawn by William L. Sheppard. *Harper's Weekly*, December 18, 1869.





Figure 7. *Untitled*. Slave Quilt, c. late 1700s. Pieced quilt.  
The Valentine Museum, Richmond, Virginia.



Figure 8. *Untitled*, Slave quilter unknown, Mississippi, c. 1820,  
Princess Feather Pattern, Appliquéd quilt, dimensions unknown.





Figure 11. Louiza Frances Combs (1853 – 1943).



Figure 12. Woven wool blanket, Louiza Francis Combs, Kentucky, c. 1890. 79 ½ x 61 inches.





Figure 13. *Untitled*, Quilted by slave Nancy Vaughn Ford for personal use, c. mid-1800s. Courtesy of the McIntosh family.

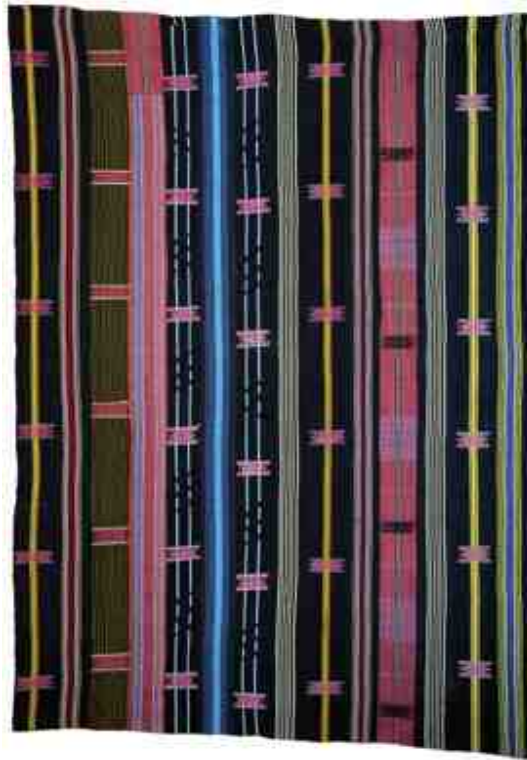


Figure 14. Men's Weave, Yoruba people, Nigeria, 1960s. 73 x 53 ½ inches. Private Collection.



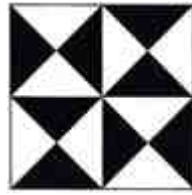
Figure 15. *Bars and String-Pieced Columns*, Jessie T. Pettway. Gee's Bend, Alabama, 1950s. Cotton, hand-pieced, and hand-quilted, 95 x 76 inches.



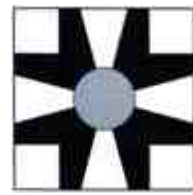
Figure 16. Fon Appliquéd Banner, Twentieth-Century.



Monkey Wrench



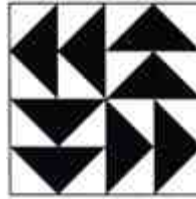
Bow Tie (also known as Hourglass)



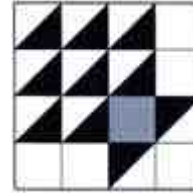
Britches



Wagon Wheel or  
Carpenter's Wheel



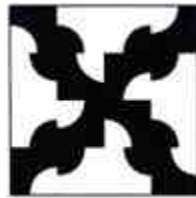
Flying Geese



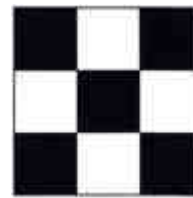
Basket



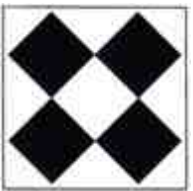
Bear's Paw



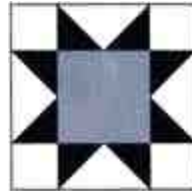
Drunkard's Path



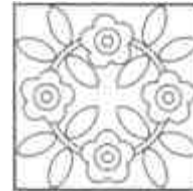
Nine Patch



Crossroads



Star or North Star



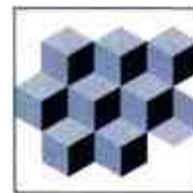
Rose Wreath



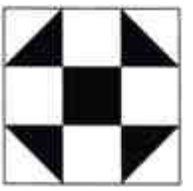
Log Cabin



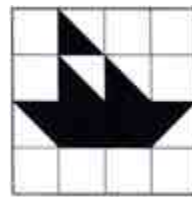
Wagon Wheel Variation



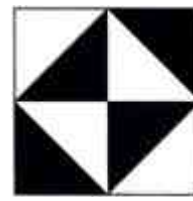
Tumbling Blocks



Shoofly



Sailboat



Broken Dishes

Figure 17. Underground Railroad Quilt Codes.





Figure 18. *Album Quilt*, Josie Covington, c. 1895. 81 x 80 inches, showing possible quilt codes.



Figure 19. *Pictorial Quilt I*, Harriet Powers. Georgia, c. 1885-1886. Appliquéd Technique, 73  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 88  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.



Figure 20. *Pictorial Quilt II*, Harriet Powers. Georgia, c. 1895-1898. Pieced, appliquéd, and printed cotton embroidered with plain and metallic yarns, 68 x 105 inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.





Figure 21. Harriet Powers (1837–1911), Photograph.





Figure 24. Square 1 Detail.



Figure 25. Square 2 Detail.





Figure 26. Square 3 Detail.



Figure 27. Square 4 Detail.



Figure 28. Square 5 Detail.



Figure 29. Square 6 Detail.



Figure 30. Square 7 Detail.



Figure 31. Square 8 Detail





Figure 32. Square 9 Detail.



Figure 33. Square 10 Detail.



Figure 34. Square 11 Detail.



Figure 35. Square 12 Detail.



Figure 36. Square 13 Detail.



Figure 37. Square 14 Detail.





Figure 38. Square 15 Detail.



Figure 39. Fon Appliquéd Cloth, Republic of Benin, Twentieth-Century.



Figure 40. *Egungun* Dance Costume, Yoruba people, Nigeria, Twentieth-Century. 61 x 70 inches. Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama.





Figure 41. Funerary Shrine Hanging, Annang-Ibibio people, Nigeria, 1950. Pieced and Appliquéd. Photograph by Keith Nicklin and Jill Salmons.

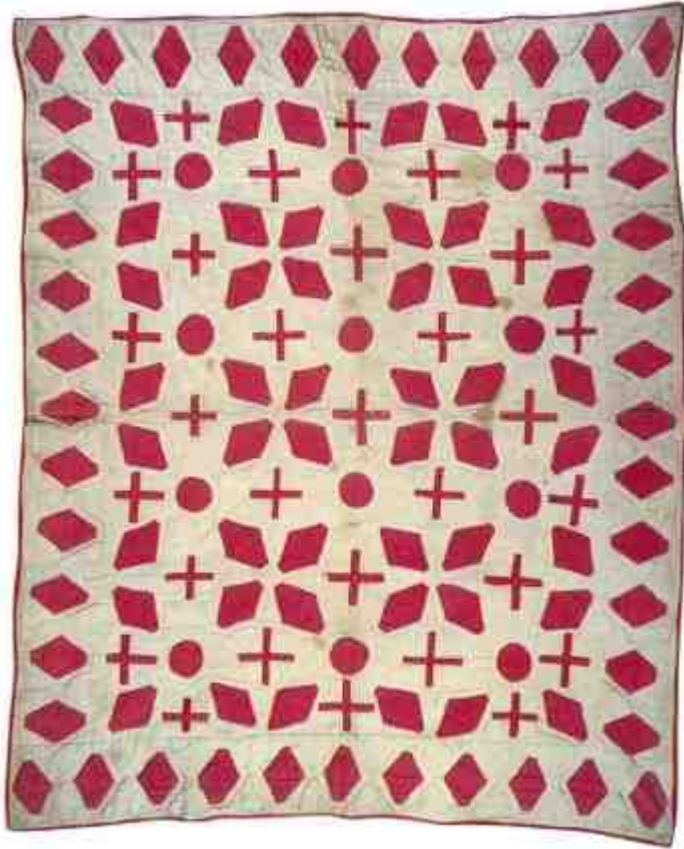


Figure 42. *Untitled*, Slave Crib Quilt featuring African influence, c. 1840-1860.



Figure 43. Square 1 Detail, showing cross and sun motifs.



Figure 44. Powers's Apron, showing similar cross and sunburst motifs, Photograph.



Figure 45. Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (1818-1907), Photograph.





Figure 46. *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt*, Elizabeth Keckley, c. 1860s.  
Silk embellished with tassels, hand-pieced, hand-appliquéd, and hand-quilted, 81 x 86 inches.  
Collection of the Kent State University Museum.



Figure 47. Mary Todd Lincoln.



Figure 48. *Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt.*



Figure 49. Eagle Segment Detail.



Figure 50. Hexagon Detail.





Figure 51. *Mosaic*, Hannah Wallis, Philadelphia, c. 1840. Cotton, hand-pieced, and hand-quilted, 98 x 98 inches. Collection of the DAR Museum.



Figure 52. *Mosaic*, Probably made by Catherine Brobst or Ranny S. B. Jungman. Pennsylvania, c. 1825-40. Hand-pieced cotton, 96 x 103 inches. Collection of the Winterthur Museum.





Figure 53. Central Medallion Detail.



Figure 54. Central Eagle Detail.



Figure 55. *Eagles*, Ohio, c. 1840-60. Cotton, hand-appliquéd, and hand-quilted. 90 x 90 inches. Private Collection.



Figure 56. *Civil War Soldier's Quilt*, Massachusetts, c. 1865. Cotton with ink inscriptions, hand-pieced, and hand-quilted, 85 x 53 inches. Collection of America Hurrah Archive.





Figure 57. Untitled, Deborah Coates, Pennsylvania, c. 1840 – 1850. Pieced silks with stamp work, 96 ½ x 89 inches.



Figure 58. Central stamped detail, *Deliver me from the oppression of man.*

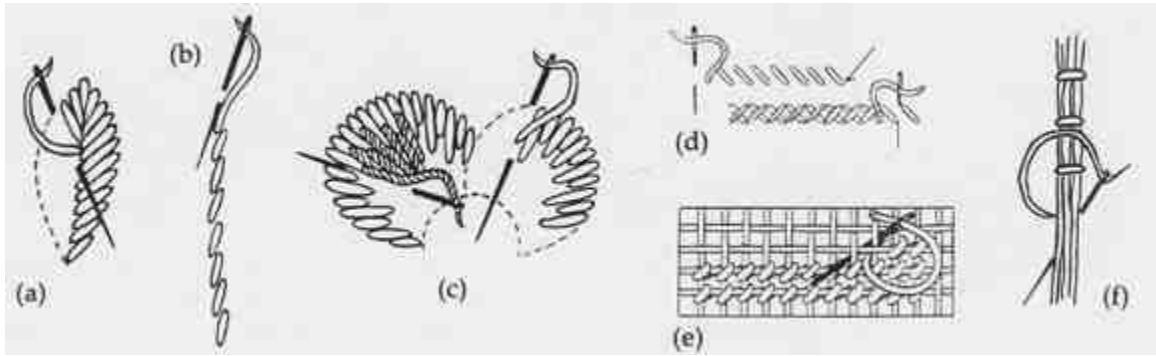


Figure 59. Flat Embroidery stitches.

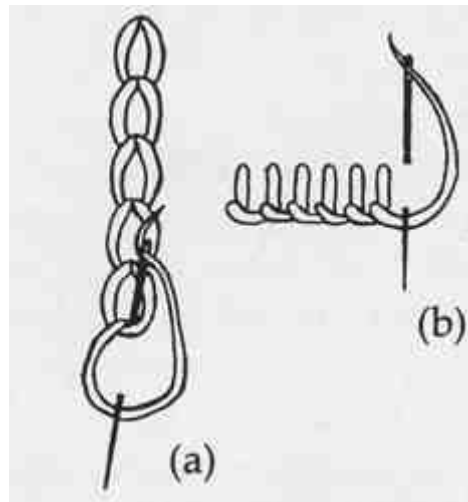


Figure 60. Loop Embroidery Stitches.

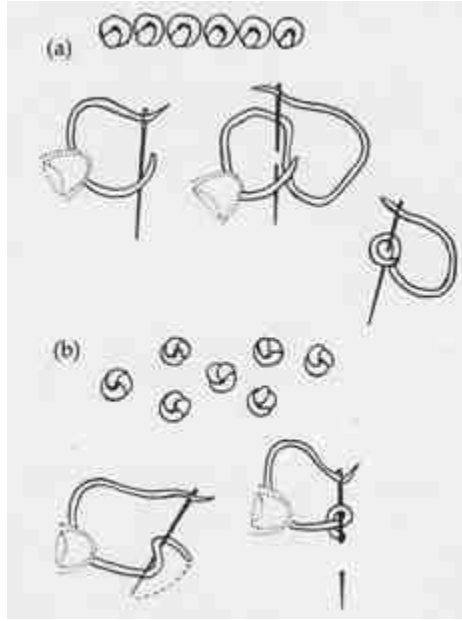


Figure 61. Knotted Embroidery Stitches.



Figure 62. Elizabeth Keckley Gown, c. 1863. Designed for Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln.



Figure 63. Faith Ringgold (1930—), Photograph.





Figure 64. Faith Ringgold, *Of My Two Handicaps, Feminist Series #10*, 1972.



Figure 65. Faith Ringgold, *Fight to Save Your Life: The Slave Rape Series #3*, 1972.  
Oil on canvas *thangka* with printed and pieced fabric, 86 x 48 inches.

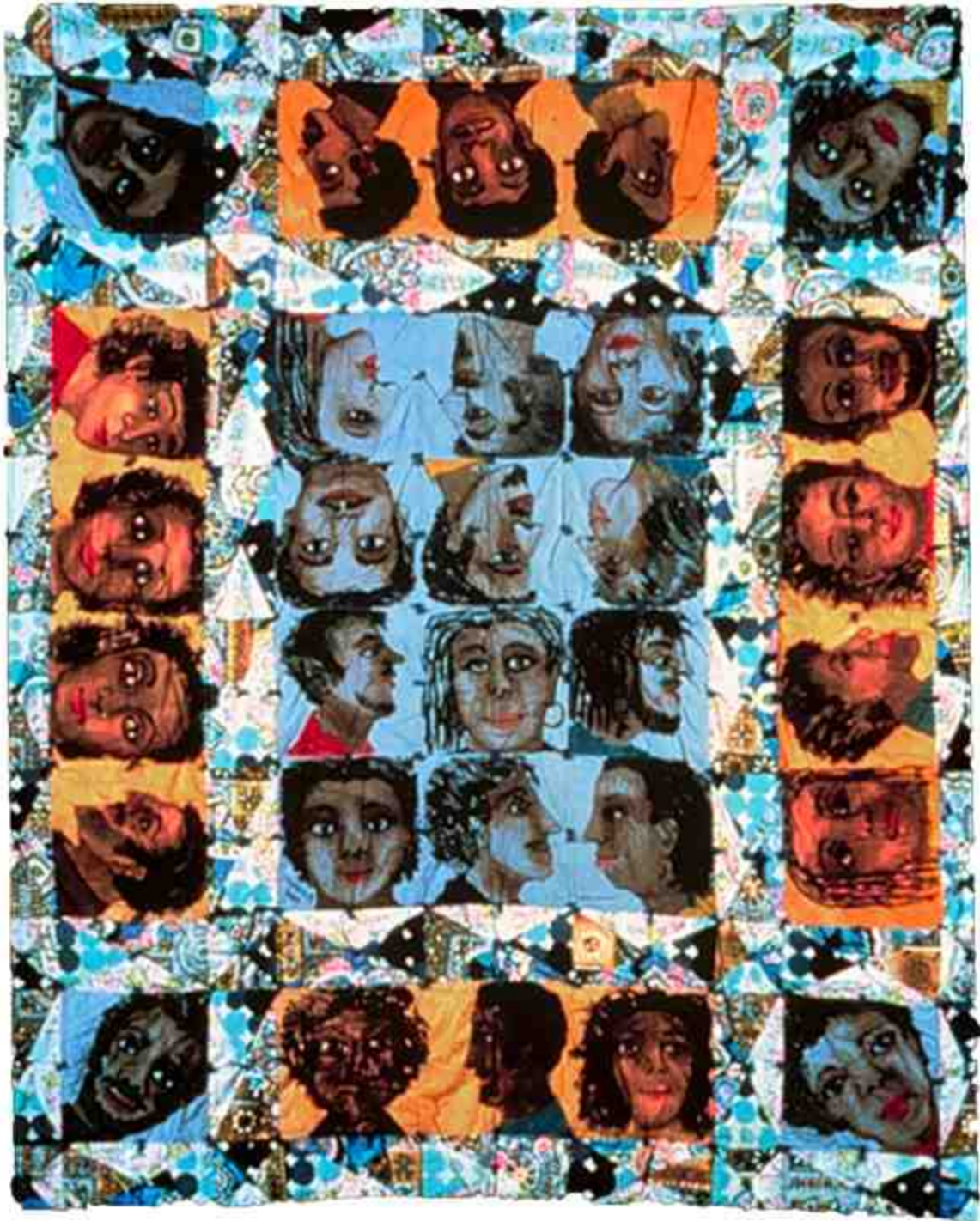


Figure 66. Faith Ringgold, *Echoes of Harlem*, 1980. Acrylic on canvas, dyed, painted, and pieced fabric, 96 x 84 inches. Created in collaboration with Willi Posey.





Figure 67. Faith Ringgold, *Coming to the Jones Road #1, Coming to Jones Road*, 1999.  
Acrylic on canvas, quilted, 57 x 87 inches.



Figure 68. Faith Ringgold, *Coming to the Jones Road #2, Sunday Evening*, 1999.  
Acrylic on canvas, quilted, 40 x 56 inches.



Figure 69. Faith Ringgold, *Coming to Jones Road #3, Aunt Emmy*, 1999.  
Acrylic on canvas, quilted, 67.5 x 38.5 inches.





Figure 70. Faith Ringgold, *Coming to Jones Road #4, Under a Blood-Red Sky*, 1999.  
Acrylic on canvas, quilted, 78.5 x 56 inches.



Figure 71. Faith Ringgold, *Coming to the Jones Road #5, A Long and Lonely Night*, 1999.  
Acrylic on canvas, quilted, 76 x 52.5 inches.



Figure 72. Faith Ringgold, *Coming to Jones Road, #6, Baby Freedom Came One Night*, 2000.  
Acrylic on canvas, quilted, 83 x 56 inches.



Figure 73. Faith Ringgold, *Coming to Jones Road #7, We Jus Keep a Comin*, 2000.  
Acrylic on canvas, quilted, 78 x 55.5 inches.





Figure 74. Faith Ringgold, *Coming to Jones Road #8, Only the Children*, 2000.  
Acrylic on canvas, quilted, 72 x 56.5 inches.

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