

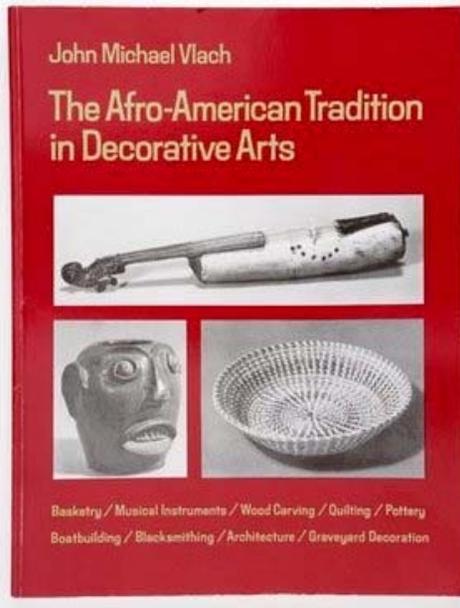
Quilt Scholarship

2. Myth and Methodology

Shelly Zegart Unpicks African-American Quilt Scholarship

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In 1989 at a symposium on African-American quilting connected to the exhibition *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South*, quilt scholar Cuesta Benberry gave a provocative lecture, calling for the definition of African-American quilts to be widened. She said “High drama was associated with the early research, with scholars only looking at a small number of African-American quilts proudly different visually from the accepted aesthetic of traditional American patchwork quilts. Scholars were looking for the linkage of these quilts to African design traditions, and unconscious cultural memory of the far away motherland. Thus a number of theories were quickly accepted as fact. This myopic view began to make researchers uneasy. How could such a small sample represent the entirety of African-American quilts made over two centuries? It is not useful to view them as isolated folk art objects, divorced from the lives of African Americans and the social, political, and economic conditions under which they have lived. A small percentage is visually exotic; the majority is not. Instead the quilts represent a diverse body of work by an ethnic group distinguished for its lengthy participation in American quilting. Isn’t it time we looked clearly at the mainstream?”



As recently as 1970 no one talked publicly about an African-American quilting tradition in the United States. The few quilt books that were published made almost no mention of it. But this was the decade when, as art critic Lucy Lippard put it, “After feminism opened the floodgates of women’s history... [the quilt became] the prime

visual metaphor for women’s lives, for women’s culture.” The 1970s also marked the emergence of “Black Studies.” These trends - one recognizing women and quiltmakers, the other African Americans - converged. The result has been a steady focus on quilts made by African Americans.

By the 1980s there was an explosion of interest in African-American quilts that Cuesta Benberry compared to the earlier 1970s craze for Amish quilts. She observed with dismay the rapid development of “pop-culture assumptions” about these quilts and their makers.

1978 - *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*, Cleveland Museum of Art, John Vlach

Folklorist John Vlach’s exhibit of African-American folk art and craft was the first to include quilts. By the mid-1980s Vlach’s early ideas about “Africanisms” had been expanded by art historian Maude Wahlman into a checklist and the theory that black quiltmakers were unconsciously reproducing African textile aesthetics.

Almost all of Vlach’s assumptions about African-American quilts have proved to be just that: assumptions made on little evidence. In her doctoral dissertation at The University of Texas, Margaret Roach notes that a decade later Vlach acknowledged his conclusions had been reached without a broad study of Southern quilts, and that these attributes or “Africanisms” were probably as much regional as racial.

1980 - *Black Quilters*, The Gallery, Yale University School of Art, Maude Wahlman and John Scully

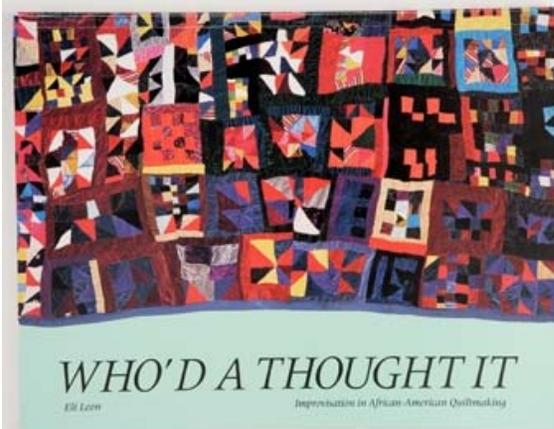
The purpose of this exhibition was to showcase specific characteristics shared by African-American quilts and African textiles. These quickly became the generally accepted criteria for defining an African-American quilt. In her article “African-American Quilts: Two Perspectives” in *Folk Art*, the magazine of the American Folk Art Museum, Spring 1993, Stacy Hollander pointed out “African designs, techniques, and symbolism as antecedents for the quilting aesthetic of African-American quilters became the primary focus for ensuing articles, exhibitions, catalogs and symposia.”

Maude Wahlman had published two articles in *The Clarion* (now *FolkArt*) in Spring and Summer 1989 that detailed some of the results of her research. They were not universally accepted. Quilt historian Ricky Clark’s vigorous response was published in a subsequent issue: “I find her [Wahlman’s] application of these principles to quilts and her selective interpretation more problematic than enlightening. In her eagerness to find African characteris-

tics in quilts made by black Americans she extrapolates boundlessly on the basis of very questionable evidence... Basic questions remain unanswered. Particularly alarming is Wahlman's use of two anonymous textiles as evidence of probable African-American traditions... Her imagination runs most rampant in her interpretation of Pecolia Warner's flag quilt. Apparently discounting the quiltmaker's own statement that her quilt was inspired by a dream she had after seeing an American flag, Wahlman informs us that the quilt is really 'an African-American version of the protective Haitian Mayo.' The evidence? It features strips, stars, and the colors red, white and blue - all significant symbols in Haitian culture. Wahlman should look at an American flag sometime." According to a 2001 article in the British newspaper *The Observer*, in 1960 the US disposed of several million yards of outdated US flag fabric by selling it to Haiti. Resourceful Haitians stitched it up into shirts, bed sheets, dresses, and tablecloths.

1987 - *Who'd a Thought It: Improvisation in African-American Quiltmaking*, publication and exhibition, San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, Eli Leon

Years later in her article "Surfacing: The Inevitable Rise of the Women of Color Quilters' Network" published in *Uncoverings 1993*, the American Quilt Study Group's periodical, Sandra German, an African-American quiltmaker, reflected on her visit to an early showing of Eli Leon's quilt collection that formed the basis of the *Who'd a Thought It* exhibition. "When we went to see the show at the [California Afro-American] Museum, one of the first things I noticed was that the quilts were very much unlike my own, or those of the other women of AAQLA [African-American Quilters of Los Angeles].

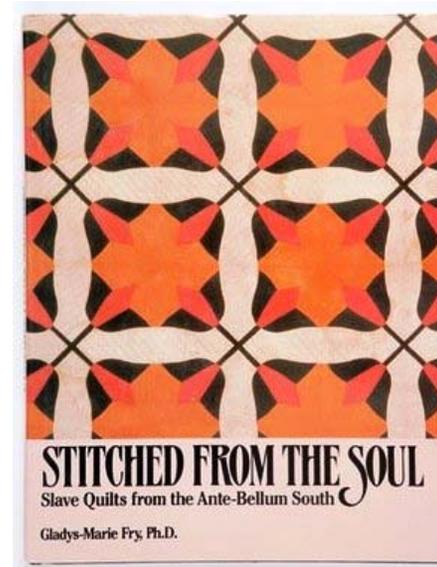


Everybody was abuzz!... Leon's exhibition represented neither their work, their style nor their input. The encounter left many unanswered questions and a lasting suspicion as to the validity of that show, its claims and its ramifications for the future of African-American quiltmaking. The Network founders wholly rejected the assertions of Leon and his contingent."

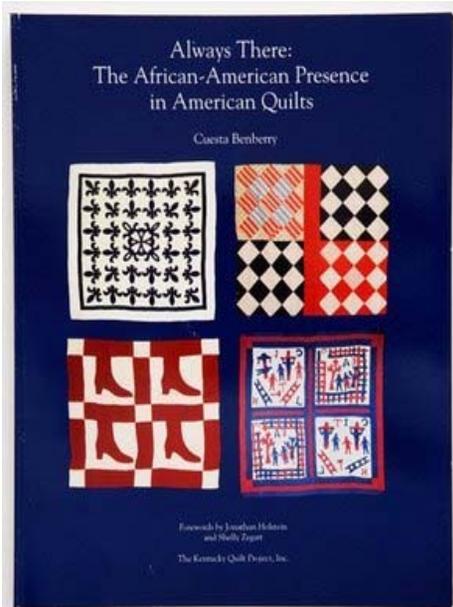
Jonathan Holstein voiced similar concerns in "Problems in Quilt Scholarship," an article written as part of *Expanding Quilt Scholarship - Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt*, 1992. "There were avoidable scholarly problems... I did read Eli's manuscript before it was published. It was inconsistent with the historical record as I understood it...notably and particularly his notion that African Americans might have been the inventors of the classic American quilt styles... I was amused by his idea that hair residue typing might give us clues to a quilt's origin... It was not until I actually saw his exhibition that I began to be disturbed... He had many tops quilted (16 of the 32 quilts illustrated in the exhibition catalogue were tops he hired craftsmen to quilt). Then I noted that two had been restructured...yet these tops were then used in the exhibition as examples illustrating aspects of his aesthetic analysis. Others have expressed their unease with Mr. Leon's methods... I was more concerned with attitude, preconceived notions, opinion stated as fact, history distorted to prove a theory..." Leon went on to win prestigious national awards, one a Guggenheim, and continues to publish as well as organize exhibitions.

1989 - *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South*, exhibition and publication, Museum of American Folk Art, Gladys Marie Fry

The New York show included a large number of pieces with weak documentation; more than half had virtually no provenance. When questioned about the problems, Dr. Robert Bishop, then Director of the Museum of American Folk Art, responded "In the end, we have an exhibition that will be examined critically and that in future years probably other scholars will attempt to develop other premises and do other research." Several weeks later the show was temporarily closed. When it re-opened the labels had been changed on many of the quilts. It is disappointing that an institution with such a reputation would put forward an exhibition that was flawed from the outset.



Holstein notes “To show quilts made by slaves in the antebellum south clearly requires tight dating...When the book came out I was appalled to see many of the quilts illustrated, supposedly made by slaves, were clearly, in my opinion, of the wrong period... A large art and history book, written by a well-known scholar and professor of folklore, and issued under the imprimatur of the Museum of American Folk Art would have an impact on those not well versed enough in quilt history to perceive the inaccuracies... The erroneous dating was not the only problem. Dr. Fry is a professor of folklore, a discipline whose methods of scholarship in principle differ little from those of classic historical research. Any number of colleagues in the field, had she consulted them, could have saved her the embarrassment of such incorrect dating and conclusions. The tragedy is that much of the book is sound and interesting, well written, and those parts are a valuable contribution to the field. Its lapses in good scholarship, misleading illustrations, and conclusions... make it particularly dangerous during a time when Dr. Fry and others are attempting to sort out the actual African-American contribution to American quilting methods and aesthetic styles. There is an obvious and simple solution to the problems. Simply to apply the rigorous methods of classical scholarship to the data and all will be resolved...” Over time when questioned by various people about these concerns, Fry has chosen not to respond.

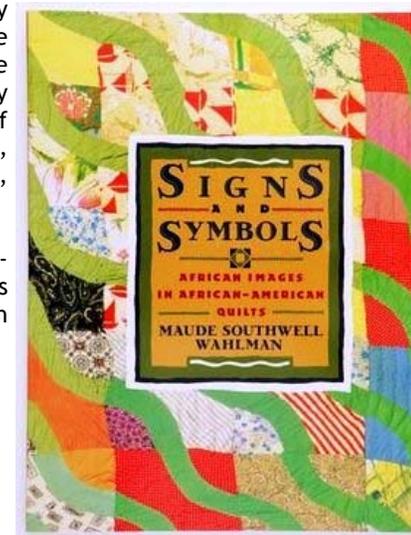


The preface of Fry’s book illustrates how much she engages in speculation when writing about slave quilts. “Denied the opportunity to record their thoughts on paper, slaves unconsciously left careful records of their emotional and psychological well-being on each surviving quilt. Clues are to be found, for example, in the consistency of the stitching pattern, the relative length and evenness reflects a certain amount of inner harmony. Deviations from this pattern might well indicate that the quiltmaker was nursing physical and emotional wounds... additional physical clues might be stains from tears or blood... All of these clues help us to trace the lifecycles of individual slave women, as well as chart the

knowledge and experiences they gained along the way... In a sense the stitches, the tears and the blood are ‘time markers’ of the everyday events in their lives... separations of family members by sale or death, whippings, punishment, deprivation, and so forth...”

The stereotyping continues. The University of North Carolina Press has recently reprinted Fry’s book with virtually no edits.

1991 - 1992, Cuesta Benberry, *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts*, exhibition, publication and conference, produced by The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., Louisville, Kentucky



At the time of the 1989 African-American quilt symposium in New York, Holstein, Eleanor Miller and I were planning a 20th-year retrospective of the landmark 1971 Whitney Museum of American Art quilt exhibition *Abstract Design in American Quilts*. We determined that Benberry’s perspective needed to be brought to a wider audience. It was long overdue. *Always There* was a major component of the exhibitions, publications and conferences that comprised *Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt*.

1993 - Maude Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*, exhibition and publication, organized by the Museum of American Folk Art

After publication in 1989 of Wahlman’s articles in *The Clarion*, Dr. Robert Bishop approached her with the idea of organizing an exhibition for the Museum of American Folk Art. In Hollander’s article “African-American Quilts: Two Perspectives,” she pointed out that these “quilts by living African-American quiltmakers” were to be purchased for the Museum’s collection.

In 1993, as part of *The Great American Quilt Festival 4*, Benberry’s *Always There* hung side by side with Maude Wahlman’s exhibition *Signs and Symbols*. The two curators simultaneously offered opposing perspectives of the history of African-American quilting. Hollander’s “Two Perspectives” article compared both theories, exhibitions and publications and sensitively trav-

ersed an emotion-filled debate.

In *Signs and Symbols*, Wahlman continued to assert the connections between African textile traditions and quilts made by African-Americans. According to Hollander, “Wahlman describes seven traits [also known as the Africanisms checklist] that appear consistently in the African-American quilts she has studied: vertical stripes, bright colors, large designs, asymmetry, improvisation, multiple patterning, and symbolic forms. She has also noted deeper affinities between these quilts and African textiles, primarily in the use of symbolic patterns.” Wahlman admits that she deliberately limited herself to studying quilts that exhibit those connections. She does note “Cuesta Benberry has recently clarified this situation by correctly pointing out the great diversity of quilting made over the last two centuries by African Americans.” Yet it is Wahlman’s stereotypical approach that continues to gain traction in the mainstream.

In the introduction to the *Always There* catalogue, Benberry said scrutiny of a small group of African-American quilts whose style was outside the traditional American quilt aesthetic “resulted in the promulgation of a number of theories that were immediately accepted as fact. Long established canons of quilt history research were no longer deemed essential.”

Hollander hailed Benberry as “the first to publicly question the existence of the ‘African-American’ quilt, saying there was no typical African-American quilt, but a diverse body of work influenced by factors that included region, education, training, socioeconomic group and period. She cautions repeatedly against drawing general conclusions on the basis of scant visual evidence.” But Benberry was swimming against the tide; premature assumptions have been made and gained wide credence. Many people are certain they can identify African-American quilts on sight.

1999 - Raymond Dobard and Jacqueline Tobin, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*

The claims made about African-American quilts in this popular book have created a nightmare for historians and quilt scholars. *Hidden in Plain View* is based on the ideas promoted by Wahlman and Fry and the claims of quiltmaker Ozella McDaniel Williams, a retired Los Angeles school administrator who returned to Charleston, South Carolina to sell her quilts to tourists. According to Williams, slaves used coded quilts based on African symbols to send messages to those fleeing captivity. “Ozella’s code,” the book claims, was handed down from slave times from mother to daughter.

Even before the book was published, the codes were featured in *USA Today*

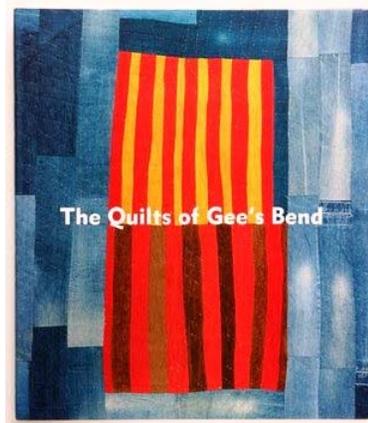
and boosted by “The Oprah Winfrey Show,” which invited Dobard, a quiltmaker himself, to appear in November 1998. There are currently more than 200,000 copies in print. The codes are taught in elementary schools (teachers have been eager to take up the theory because of its attractive elements - a secret code, artwork and a story of triumph), and the patterns represent a small industry within quilting.

Laurel Horton, a folklorist and quilt scholar, wrote to the Quilt History list serve (an online forum), Volume 99, Issue 302: “Personally, I found it one of the most bizarre books I’ve ever read. I found the authors’ concept of ‘scholarship’ to be shallow, incomplete, inconsistent, and poorly directed.”

As Marsha MacDowell, art history professor and Folklife Curator at Michigan State University, pointed out at the 1999 American Quilt Study Group annual meeting, “*Hidden in Plain View* has already done a lot of damage. It doesn’t matter that the authors tucked in a few obscure disclaimers along with their arguments. School children are now studying this stuff as the truth, they are making Dresden Plate quilts ‘just like the escaping slaves on the Underground Railroad...’ Those of us who talk about quilts to public audiences will be spending the rest of our careers arguing in vain that the information in this book not be swallowed whole. Since we didn’t write the book, we will not be believed.”

The most significant corrective to the ideas of the Quilt Code is Leigh Feller’s work. Her research, published at www.ugrrquilt.hartcottagequilts.com and in her article “The Quilt Code - The Other Side,” *Quilter’s World*, October 2007, serves as an example to us all.

In 2007, the quilt code was slated to be a part of a \$15.5 million Central Park monument honoring escaped slave and African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass. In his *New York Times* article “In Douglass Tribute, Slave Folklore and Fact Collide,” January 23, 2007, Noam Cohen described the project and its shortcomings. “... Beneath an eight-foot-tall sculpture of Douglass, the plans call for a huge quilt in granite, an array of squares, a symbol in each, supposedly part of a secret code sewn into family quilts and used along the Underground Railroad to aid slaves. Two plaques would explain this. The only problem: According to many prominent histori-



ans the secret code never existed. And now the city is reconsidering the inclusion of the plaques, so as not to ‘publicize spurious history...’

“It’s a myth, bordering on a hoax’ said David Blight, a Yale University historian who has written a book about Douglass and edited his autobiography... MacDowell observed ‘We are watching in real time an unfolding of belief in a story... It will take years to undo.’ New Jersey Historical Commission’s Afro-American History Program director Giles R. Wright noted “There is no surviving example of encoded quilts from the period. The code was never mentioned in any of the interviews of ex-slaves carried out in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration. There is no mention of quilting codes in any diaries or memoirs from the period...”

More compelling still is the presence of evidence that refutes the Code claims, including census records that indicate that the originator of the code was born in the late 1850s.

2002 - 2007 - Bill Arnett et al., exhibitions and publications, *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend* (later reprinted as *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend: Masterpieces from a Lost Place*), Tinwood Books, in association with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2002; *Gee’s Bend: The Women and Their Quilts*, Tinwood Books, in association with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2002; *Gee’s Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, Tinwood Books, 2006

The wildly popular Gee’s Bend exhibitions and accompanying publications have traveled to major museums across the United States. In the five years that have passed since the first exhibition opened, there are now prints and postage stamps, rugs, note cards, mugs, plates, newly made quilts, and a collective for selling them. The exhibitions have been immortalized by many and questioned by more than a few, but it cannot be denied that African-American quilts are now on the international radar.

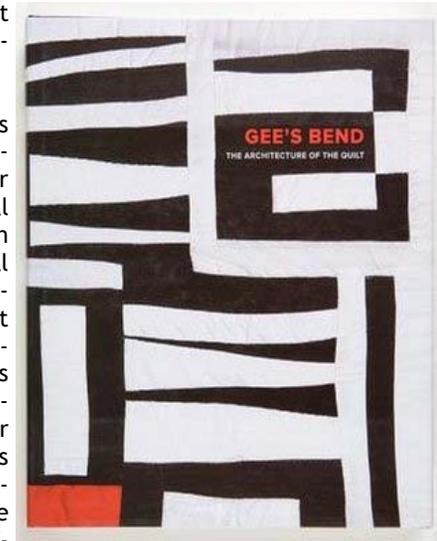
This massive undertaking was funded and organized by Bill Arnett’s Tinwood Alliance and Tinwood Books. The Arnetts developed the project and bought many of the quilts before and after the explosion of interest.

The problem with the Gee’s Bend exhibitions and publications is not the scholarship but responses to the exhibits, favorable and otherwise, are living proof of how far the issues of stereotyping of African-American quilts and their makers have been cemented into the public psyche. The past 30 years have taken their toll.

This project blurred the lines between the southern vernacular art world, the mainstream art world, the white quilt world, the African-American quilt

world and spawned fresh ideas about art and craft, black and white, isolated and urban groups.

Many people think that the Gee’s Bend quilts were recently discovered. In fact, in the 1960s Father Francis Walter, a young Episcopal priest working to combat racism in the area, was struck by several quilts he saw on a clothesline, instantly realizing they had a market in New York. He was right. Celebrities bought them and decorators sought them for their clients. Designers Diana Vreeland and Sister Parrish got involved, and the quilts were featured in national magazines. The Freedom Quilting Bee cooperative was a result of this effort.



Soon retailers demanded that the quilts be standardized and available to order from samples. The women produced them to feed their families, but made very different ones at home.

Every now and then Gee’s Bend is discovered. Then, when the trend is over, outsiders leave and life for the women goes back to what it was. Not this time. Since 2002, the quiltmakers’ lives and circumstances have radically changed and will probably never be the same again.

Michael Kimmelman, a well-known art critic, wrote the first major review of the quilts in the *New York Times* November 29, 2002. It set the stage for the art world to leap on the Gee’s Bend quilts and their makers as their own discovery. Kimmelman called them “some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced. Imagine Matisse and Klee (if you think I’m wildly exaggerating, see the show) arising not from rarefied Europe, but from the caramel soil of the rural South in the form of women, descendants of slaves when Gee’s Bend was a plantation...The best of these designs, unusually minimalist and spare, are so eye-poppingly gorgeous that it’s hard to know how to begin to account for them...”

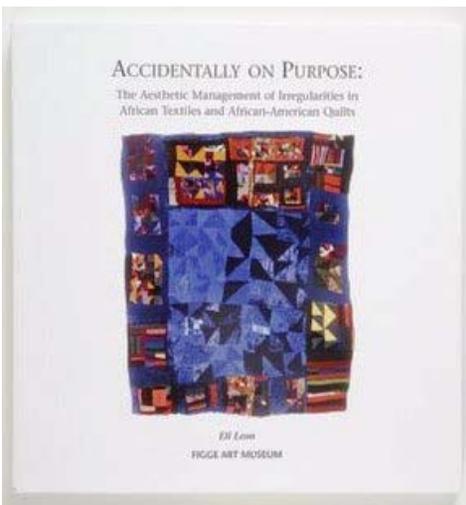
Fellner responded to this glowing review: “On the one hand, Gee’s Bend quilts fit right into the critics’ comfort zone: they look like modern art. On

the other, to the rarefied world where 'art' is something displayed and soberly pondered, they're disturbing: how to explain everyday, homemade objects whose unselfconscious abstract beauty outdoes Rothko and wows the most jaded cosmopolitan? Critics sidestep this challenge to their values by latching onto what they, at least, regard as rural black Southerners' exoticism, and safely distance themselves by discussing the quilters in terms of poverty, isolation and race."

2006 - Eli Leon, *Accidentally on Purpose: The Aesthetic Management of Irregularities in African Textiles and African-American Quilts*

Leon's latest book not only repeats the comfortable stereotypes that began 30 years ago with Vlach, but makes a number of questionable presumptions, including one about the origin of quilting itself.

In choosing to search for visual similarities between post-World War II African-American quilts and contemporary African textiles (in fact the African textiles are not dated), Leon limits his exploration to recently made examples; yet he generalizes from this limited selection about the full range of African-American quilts and African textiles and surmises about their earliest origins. Dozens of pre-1865 African-American quilts and many more 19th-century examples can be found in museums and private collections yet in Leon's book 72 of the 94 quilts were made after 1950, and the only 19th-century quilt is "anonymous," purchased at a flea market in the heart of Pennsylvania German country. As with his quilts, Leon mistakenly assumes contemporary African textiles are no different from those that would have been made and used by the Africans who were enslaved two centuries ago.



But ten years earlier in her 1997 publication and exhibition *African American Quilting in Michigan* MacDowell noted that "extensive fieldwork by a broad range of both academic and community-based participants did not reveal a typical African-American quilt type" but "a diversity of styles, patterns, names, techniques and uses found within the Michigan African-American experience." Mac-

Dowell warned against the futility of labeling a single quilt style "typically African-American."

Leon's underlying premise appears to be that, unlike any other people on earth, Africans and African-Americans were impervious to more than four centuries of trade, enslavement, and colonization. Indeed, he goes further, asserting that despite their enforced subordinate position in Britain and America, African slaves not only dominated those countries' quilting aesthetics but also were the origin of patchwork itself. "The English sewed patchwork very much like that which was sewn in America and many of the patterns that show up regularly in African-American quilts appear as well in the borders of the earliest surviving (18th-century) English and New English quilts. However, the appearance of these patterns in English patchwork and the popularity of patchwork quilts in England roughly coincide with the presence in England of Africans."

Leon takes for granted that the only influence on American quilting was English, claiming that the earliest reference to patchwork dates to 1771. In fact the earliest extant English patchwork (at Levens Hall) was made around 1708, and by the 16th century patchwork and appliqué were found throughout northern Europe, a region from which America received massive immigration during the years when American quilt style was forming. Regional differences and styles within the United States or the influence of French aesthetics on Louisi-

Lawsuits

In the spring of 2007 we were caught up in the drama surrounding lawsuits filed by three of the Gee's Bend quilters against the Arnetts and others for allegedly withholding money from the sales of their quilts. Tensions are high.

Dr. Bernard Herman, Professor of Art History at the University of Delaware has written an opinion piece addressing the emotions that have surfaced. Herman, a frequent visitor to Gee's Bend who has interviewed 40 of the quilters over a three-year period asks, "Why do these lawsuits generate such an unreflective response in the public readership? In art world conversations and blogs 'guilty' verdicts are routinely rendered in the conspicuous absence of facts. It does not take a historian to know how inflammatory words degrade the truth. The dualities of rich and poor, black and white, rural and urban, victim and villain are convenient and well-worn conventions... More worrisome is the hidden work these narratives perform. Victims remain victims; everyone plays their assigned role to perfection and we move on. Judgments rendered, the quilts are relegated the sidelines, a marginalized art in a society given to marginalizing practices... We should look for fuller accounts of how the contemporary art market operates and how it works for or against those artists categorized as self-taught, vernacular, and outsider... When the business of art trumps the beauty of art in the theater of public opinion, the art gets lost... We need to hear all the voices of Gee's Bend. The quilters have a lot to say and they say it eloquently."

Herman's piece is a clarion call for the Gee's Bend quilters' art to prevail over the manipulation and myopic views that are so prevalent. The same themes resonate throughout this article - the need to expose questionable evidence, a myopic view of African-American quilts, poor quilt history, stereotypes, clichés, lapses in scholarship and more.

ana Creoles are overlooked, nor does he address the similarities of his “Afro-Traditional” quilts to those made in regions without an African presence - Wales, Australia, New Mexico, Quebec.

However beautiful, Leon’s book must be read with great care, with particular attention paid to whether the authorities cited are appropriate and diverse. The dangers of self-referential citations are particularly acute.

Ideological concerns have hindered scholarly process for more than 30 years. We need unbiased and complex research such as Leigh Fellner’s examination of the quilt code and her current exploration of African textiles of the slave trade era. Examining African textiles alongside the prevailing theories about them and their links to quilts proves how many ideas about African-American quilting have relied on stereotypes that have little connection to historical fact.

Information on the textiles enslaved Africans would have used was not easy to find, Fellner says. “What little information there is on the subject is spread all over. So after digesting the textile books - Clarke, Adler, Picton, Lamb, Aronson, Krieger - I looked at other sources, such as studies of early African and European trade; notes by travelers and African elites on Africans’ cloth, clothing, and preferred imports; dye technology, botany, color symbolism and the history of textile consumption in Africa, Europe and the US; a mathematical analysis of the symmetries in one kind of African cloth; a study of what Africans say about their aesthetic preferences. Duncan Clarke provided an invaluable list of early African textiles in museum collections so I could compare Diaspora-era examples with their modern counterparts. But I also had to learn just who were brought here as slaves, and when. African-American culture is not a monolith; the mix of African ethnicities in Maryland, for example, is very different from Mississippi. And I had to find out how many African-born slaves were alive when quilting became commonplace here. Comparing a variety of sources helped verify their accuracy, and gave me a better sense of how textiles fit into West and Central African cultures before the 1830s. That would have been impossible had I looked at them out of context.”

If Fellner can conduct unbiased research, how, then, can the absence of historically accurate methodology continue to be accepted? Fellner thinks the explanation is “Indifference, timidity, or both - even in the face of careless scholarship and an unconscious (I hope) desire to validate preconceived notions. Writing on the subject has been dominated not by historians, textile or otherwise, but by art critics and folklorists, whose fields are ripe for speculation and projection. Rather than acknowledging the material and faith culture in which the quilter lives, and trusting what the quilter says about her

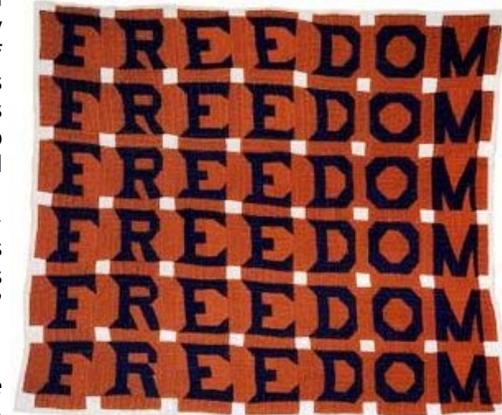
creation, they tear the quilt out of its context and use it as a Ouija board. Hence Wahlman’s claim that African-American quilters unwittingly put African (usually voodoo-related) ‘signs and symbols’ in their quilts even when the quilters themselves say otherwise.”

John Tierney, who writes for *The New York Times*, delves into the question of why groups fall prey to “informational cascades.” In his blog, he explained this aspect of herd behavior in laymen’s terms. “Large groups of people can reach a ‘consensus’ without most of them really understanding the issue. Once a critical mass of people starts a trend, the rest make the rational decision to go along because they figure trendsetters can’t all be wrong. This observed effect means groups are surprisingly prone to mistaken conclusions even when most of the people started knowing better.” Intellectually, at least, safety in numbers can be a dangerous illusion.

African-American culture and quilts are both complex; they deserve a complex level of research. We need scholars to re-examine past efforts critically, and then go on to publish fresh findings and perhaps new perspectives. We need mainstream magazines to examine these issues but to ask more questions before they publish a “good” but unverified story.

We need to be comfortable with commenting on and disagreeing with the major issues around African-American quilts. People should be able to write from unpopular perspectives. The refuting of long-held notions should be done using historically accurate methodology and in a broad, public arena. This is the challenge.

In *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, Greg Tate said, “Black isn’t... outside of art-historical space and time. Ferrying us off to our own realm of the aesthetic will not set us free.” Let’s honor African-American quiltmakers past and present by eliminating stereotyping, clichés, and opening our ears and minds to their unfiltered voices.



Freedom Quilt, 1980
Jessie Telfair, Terrell County, Georgia