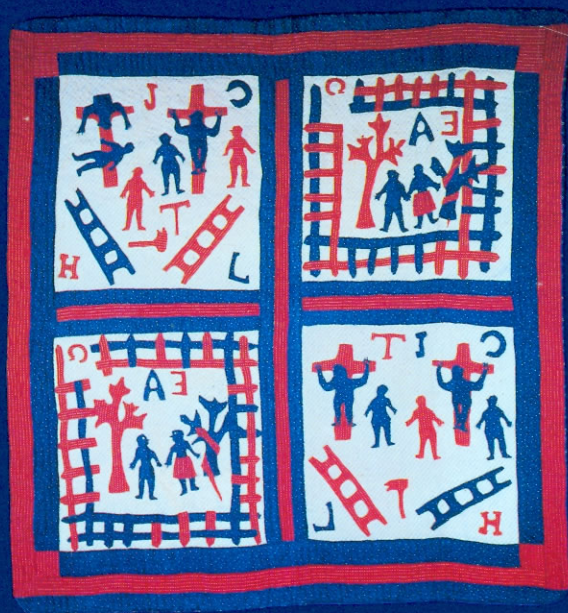
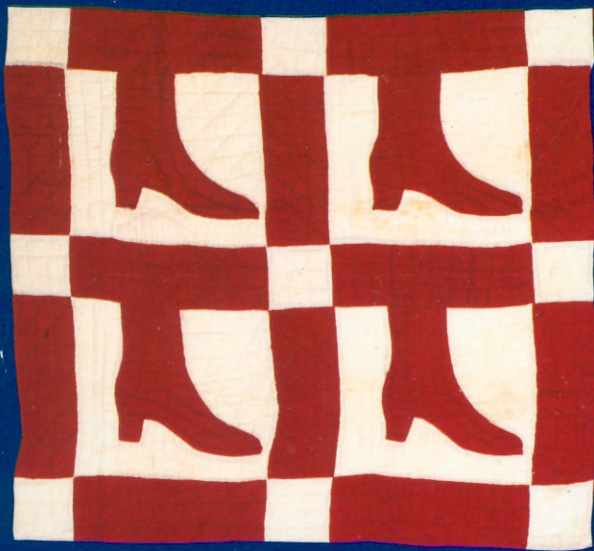
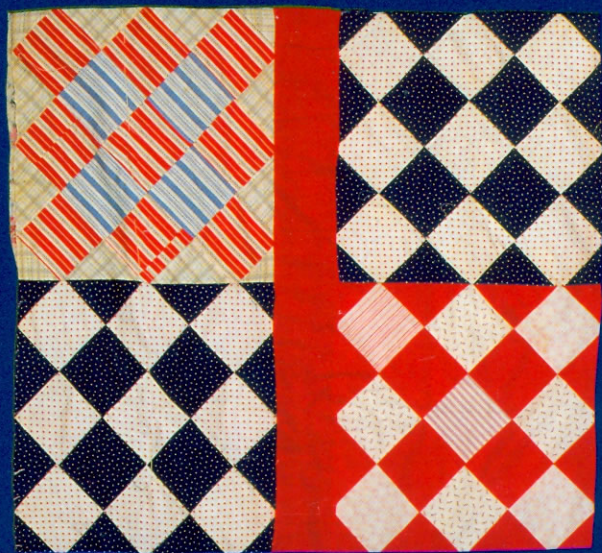
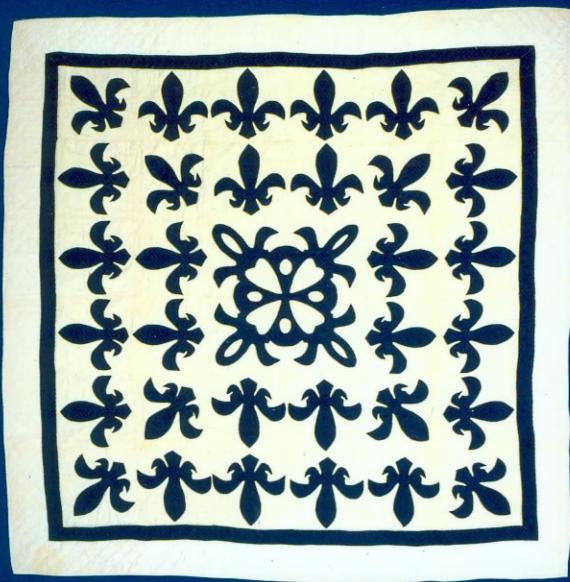


Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts

Cuesta Benberry



Forewords by Jonathan Holstein
and Shelly Zegart

The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc.

Directors' Statement

The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc.

The exhibition discussed in this catalogue is one of six produced by the Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc. as part of its 1991-1992 project, "Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt." The Celebration began in November, 1991, and continued through March, 1992.

The Kentucky Quilt Project was formed in 1981 to survey the state's quilts. Its original directors were Shelly Zegart, Eleanor Bingham Miller, and Eunice Sears. Katy Christopherson organized the volunteers who aided that survey. It collected data for permanent reference on more than 1,000 quilts and exhibited some of the most interesting found in *Kentucky Quilts 1800-1900*, which appeared first at the Louisville Museum of History and Science in 1983 and at 12 other museums thereafter under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. Since 1981 groups in 48 states have undertaken quilt surveys informed by the methods and directions of The Kentucky Quilt Project. Other project activities in the 1980s included securing a Virginia Ivey quilt for Kentucky, bringing *The Artist and the Quilt* exhibition to Louisville, curating an exhibition of Kentucky quilts in Australia, and giving financial assistance to Kentucky quilt groups for special projects. It also acted as consultant for other state quilt surveys.

In 1990 the current Directors of The Kentucky Quilt Project, Shelly Zegart, Eleanor Bingham Miller and Jonathan Holstein, began to discuss an appropriate way to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the historic exhibition, *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, which opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 1971. The exhibition, curated by Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof, created a worldwide awareness of American quilts as designed objects. We decided a group of events which might illustrate and further the extraordinary developments in the field over the past two decades would be most beneficial. A re-creation of the Whitney exhibition was a logical starting point, as many quilt researchers and scholars, quiltmakers, collectors, and museum personnel now actively involved with quilts, never saw that original show. We planned also five other exhibitions, four conferences and additional associated events. *Abstract Design in American Quilts* at the Louisville Museum of History and Science; *A Plain Aesthetic: Lancaster Amish Quilts*, at the J. B. Speed Art Museum; *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts* at the Louisville Museum of History and Science; *Quilts Now* at Zephyr Gallery; *Narrations: The Quilts of Yvonne Wells and Carolyn Mazloomi* at the Louisville Visual Art Association (Water Tower); and *Quilt Conceptions: Quilt Designs in Other Media*

at the Kentucky Art and Craft Gallery.

The four conferences were designed to further quilt scholarship in specific areas. "The African-American and the American Quilt" looked at African-American quilts both in relation to the African textile tradition and as part of the mainstream of American quilt making. "Directions in Quilt Scholarship" surveyed the field past and present, discussed quilts as art historical and social objects, and looked at problems in the field. "Quilts and Collections: Public, Private and Corporate" discussed the ways quilts are seen, collected and used by individual and corporate collectors, and museums. And "Toward an International Quilt Bibliography," through the individual efforts and interactions of 15 scholars, suggested the form and directions for a potential new quilt bibliography. Other events included lectures by scholars and quilt artists, and opportunities for participants to discuss issues in the field. In addition, data and dialogues developed at the conferences will be published, and audio and visual documentation of significant events were made for permanent record.

The Directors of the Kentucky Quilt Project hope the Celebration will bring, as did *Abstract Design in American Quilts* and the Kentucky Quilt Project's survey, new perspectives and directions to quilt scholarship, understanding and appreciation.

Jonathan Holstein
Eleanor Bingham Miller
Shelly Zegart

Foreword

In 1990 Jon Holstein and I were talking about the possibility of re-creating the 1971 exhibition, *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, which originated at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and was then seen in other museums here and abroad for the next three years. As we discussed its continuing ramifications in the quilt world, we realized we were interested in a larger endeavor, perhaps a group of events which would highlight the things which had flowed from that exhibition.

It was obvious we would need a good organization to create and manage such an extensive project. Fortunately, one existed — The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc. Eleanor Miller and I had, with others, organized The Kentucky Quilt Project in 1981 to survey Kentucky's quilts. Besides implementing the first state quilt survey, The Kentucky Quilt Project presented an exhibition drawn from the most interesting of the quilts found, *Kentucky Quilts: 1800-1900* which appeared first at the Louisville Museum of History and Science in 1983 and at twelve museums thereafter under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. A catalogue of the same title accompanied the exhibition. Jon's association with the project began when he was asked to write an introduction and quilt commentaries for the catalogue. In 1984 he joined Eleanor and myself as a director of The Kentucky Quilt Project.

After determining we would do a celebration with *Abstract Design in American Quilts* as our anchoring event, our next thought was Cuesta Benberry: an exhibition illustrating her thinking about African-American quilts must be part of it. I had heard Cuesta speak several times over the years on quilt subjects as diverse as W.P.A. Quilts and "Quilts of Struggle" from Soweto, South Africa. Yet her extensive work in the area of African-American quilts was not known to me until a conference in New York in 1989 on black quilting. I heard her speak there about the need to examine African-American quilts in the mainstream. What Cuesta said that day changed my perception of African-American quilts. I then began to read some articles Cuesta had written on the subject, including "The Story-Tellers: African-American Quilts Come to the Fore" in *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*. It seemed to me that Cuesta's perspective should be known to a larger audience and that a wider view of African-American quilting was long overdue.

Gaining a clear perspective of particular quilts is a familiar issue for The Kentucky Quilt Project. A main goal of the first project was to examine Kentucky's quilts in relation to the main body of American quilting. Until the survey, the accepted image of the Kentucky quilt was a thick country quilt in a mountain cabin. They never appeared.

Instead, the survey showed that Kentucky quilts had both some singular characteristics peculiar to them and traits they shared with the mainstream. Some of America's most elegant quilts were of Kentucky origin.

Similarly, the African-American quilts we expected to find in a state with a significant black population and a long-standing quilting tradition, did not appear. Where were they? We found several answers. First, many black families were reluctant to come forward with their quilts, feeling they weren't "good" enough. Also, when they did appear, their family histories were usually lacking. We felt the reason for this was the frequent dislocation of many African-American families and the difficulty of maintaining social continuity and history under those circumstances.

A number of recent exhibitions and seminars had focused on issues of black quilting, and serious issues of scholarship had been raised. An exhibition in Kentucky illustrating Cuesta's viewpoint would, we felt, both further knowledge of African-American quilts on a national level and bring to Kentucky's citizens an extraordinary chance to see the African-American quilt heritage in better perspective. Once we had made that decision, the second one was obvious: These goals could be furthered by a public discussion among scholars of the major issues in African-American quilt history. So a conference, "The African-American and the American Quilt," was planned and became a part of the Celebration.

Cuesta and others have worked valiantly for a more balanced view of African-American quilts. This exhibition, the first overall view of the subject, is a summation of years of research. The facts are not easy to find. When early quilt histories were written, African-Americans were seldom included, as black domestic life was of little interest to scholars and writers. This clearly is no longer true, and we hope *Always There* will encourage African-American families to examine and bring forward their quilting histories. This will enable Cuesta and her colleagues to continue building a comprehensive history of the African-American contribution to American quilting.

Shelly Zegart