

Art in America

WHAT QUILTS MEAN NOW

By Kayleigh Perkov

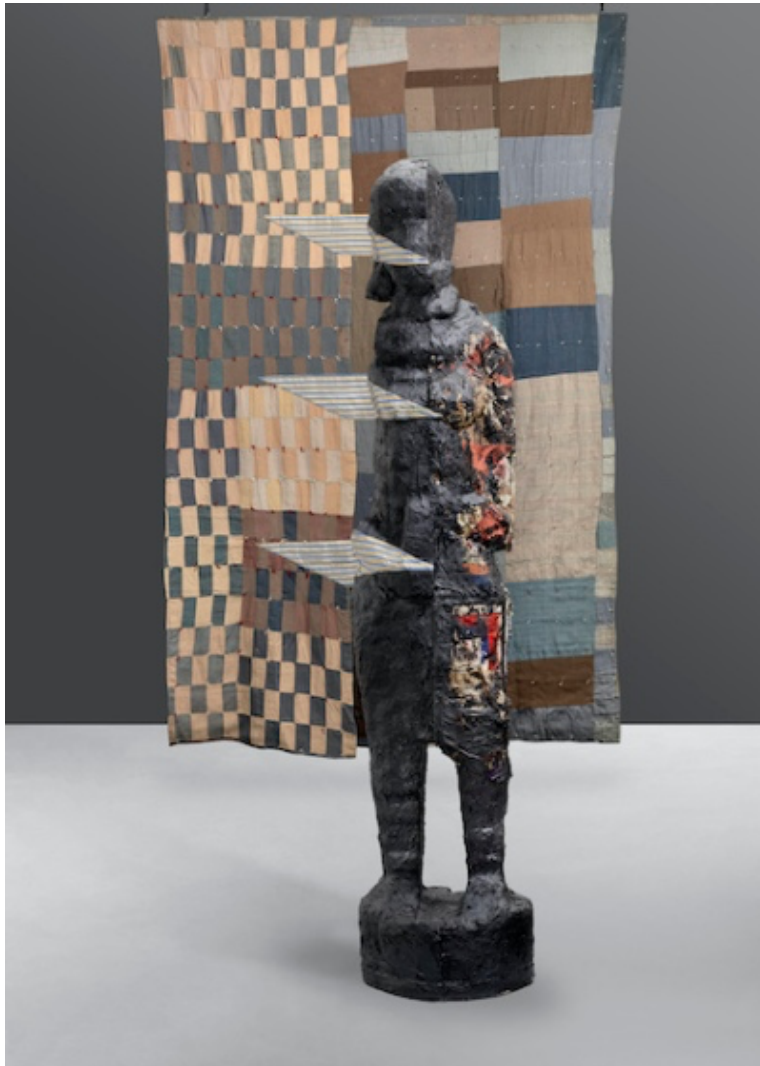
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Virginia Jacobs, *Krakow Kabuki Waltz*, 1987, cotton plain weave, pieced and quilted, 7 feet in diameter. COURTESY THE ARTIST. PHOTO © MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON.

The goal of the new exhibition “Fabric of a Nation: American Quilt Stories” (on view through January 17, 2022) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, seems—at first glance—straightforward enough. The show reflects the history of the United States over the course of some three

hundred years through fifty-eight objects drawn primarily from the MFA's own collection. Previous exhibitions have primed us to accept that quilts hold history in their very threads. Yet quilts are multivalent things; they speak different words to different ears. Do quilts function as autobiography, a manifestation of the maker's vision, or a fundamentally communal expression of purpose and meaning? Do they visualize broader aesthetic trends and evolving techniques? Are they embodiments of economic forces that bring commercially produced cloth into homes? Do they represent gendered training and its possible subversion? The answer to each of these questions is "yes and . . ."; quilts illuminate multiple facets of life.



Sanford Biggers, *A Deeper Form of Chess*, 2017, quilt, assorted textiles, polystyrene, aqua resin, and tar. COURTESY THE ARTIST. © SANFORD BIGGERS. PHOTO © MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON.

Among the most investigative contemporary artists in "Fabric of a Nation" is Rowland Ricketts, whose *Unbound Series 2. No. 3* (2017–18) connects the materials of decorative arts—particularly indigo and cotton—to enslavement and imperialism. This piece is a diptych that comprises a woven red, white, and blue coverlet next to a simple wooden grid, suggestive of the frame that normally supports an artwork. Through an intense manipulation of the weft—

adding in heavy undyed wool and linen followed by selectively pulling out sections—Ricketts has created the appearance of an overlay, suggesting a larger geometric pattern with a central void. By applying the formal devices of absence, overlay, and structural exposure to traditional materials such as cotton, indigo, linen paper, and wool, the artist conveys his ongoing concern with questions of national identity and the too-often coerced and unacknowledged labor that bolsters it.



Carla Hemlock (Haudenosaunee, Kanienkeháka [Mohawk]), *Survivors*, 2011-13, cotton plain weave and glass beads.

PHOTO © MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON.

In another striking instance, Carla Hemlock's *Survivors* (2011–13) uses Iroquois symbols and the names of forty-eight First Nations and Indigenous groups to create layers of meaning that are accessed differently. In the exhibition catalogue, Hemlock notes that “[s]ome of my work is double coded in ways that an Iroquoian Person can read the quilt through symbols, while others may view the same quilt and see its unique designs as purely decorative.” Similarly, Bisa

Butler's *To God and Truth* (2019) is wonderfully dense in historical references. The quilt reimagines a photograph of turn-of-the-century Black baseball players in a kaleidoscope of color. Butler touches on both the history of objects and the theme of overlapping and parallel histories through her use of textiles associated with Africa, including West African wax printed fabric, kente cloth, and Dutch wax prints. These fabrics all speak of specific histories—for example, the role of Dutch wax cloth in European colonialization of the Gold Coast and its adoption by Ghanaians in the late nineteenth century. But take a step back and Butler's bold, colorful depictions of Black baseball players can also be read as a lesson in Black beauty and masculinity. In these examples and others, quilting's social context is given full weight, yet it is not overly determined by one narrative; instead viewers are invited to read—differently, given the knowledge they bring—a number of intersecting histories.



Unidentified artist, *Hoosier Suffrage*, before 1920, cotton plain weave, pieced, embroidered, quilted.
PHOTO © MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON.

In the prologue to the exhibition catalogue, historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich frames this show as moving the viewer “decade by decade from sailing ship to rockets, [inviting] us to consider

incongruities among works displayed in the same section. Seeing a Rio Grande Blanket or frazada in the same section as a Baltimore album quilt is a reminder that the supposed age of domesticity shared a timeline with the Mexican War.” In this way, the MFA gives us an object lesson in contrapuntal reading, in which marginalized histories sometimes support and sometimes dispute the dominant cultural narrative. The ability to treat quilts as multivalent objects derives from painstaking scholarship, enabling the curators to identifying the background links between traders, makers, and consumers. For example, a selection of whole cloth coverlets from the eighteenth century should not evince the homey make-do scrappiness of many people’s imagination, as they are in fact luxury items created through a commodity chain that depended ultimately on enslaved labor. Similarly, one Indian cotton quilt from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century is discussed in relation to a widening network of trade routes, Britain’s protectionist Calico Acts, which restricted the sale of Indian fabrics in England, and a growing dissatisfaction with colonial rule in the United States.

Such breadth of concern has been hard won. In fact, it has been exactly fifty years since this conversation ignited with the Whitney Museum of American Art’s hugely influential exhibition “Abstract Design in American Quilts” (ADAQ), which treated quilts as ahistorical pieces, celebrated for their formal beauty. The show sparked a critical debate, drawing in potent advocates for Black and feminist viewpoints. In the decades that followed, both historic and contemporary quilts were intensely documented and analyzed. “Fabric of a Nation” thus represents the culmination of a long, multiphase process that changed the definition of quilts from anonymous household items to highly expressive works of art to physical emblems of a complex web of makers, commodities, and ideas that have helped shape American life.



“Abstract Design in American Quilts,” 1971, exhibition view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
PHOTO COURTESY THE INTERNATIONAL QUILT MUSEUM, LINCOLN, NEBRASKA.

“ADAQ” opened without much fanfare. It was the summer off-season in New York; many art world regulars were out of town, leaving only tourists and stragglers. Yet momentum grew. Art critic Grace Glueck’s New York Times preview described the show’s curators—Jonathan Holstein and Gail Ann van der Hoof—as a “nice young couple” who shared a “mania” for quilts. The exhibition was formed entirely from their collection, which at the time contained more than three hundred quilts piled in their Manhattan apartment. As Holstein characterized the pair’s shared vision: “quilt makers painted with fabrics, and we began to judge them as painting.” He was arguing for a change in perspective. Previously, craft and folk art were seen as a foundation for contemporary fine arts; this exhibition argued the inverse, that modern painting provided a lens to view earlier craft traditions. Many choices were made to align the quilts with modern art. For example, the show emphasized “pieced quilts” that employ flat, pattern-driven compositions and eschew figuration. Moreover, the quilts were hung tightly on frames to emulate canvas painting. A day after the exhibition opened, Holstein’s vision was vindicated with a glowing review from New York Times art critic Hilton Kramer, who offered a challenge to the broader art world to “rethink the relation of high art to what are customarily regarded as lesser forms of visual expression.” The notion that quilts are art spread like wildfire; reviews appeared in publications national and regional, general interest and niche. The show was so popular that its run was extended at the Whitney, and it went on to travel both nationally and internationally. Years and even decades afterward, “ADAQ” was heralded for revealing the artistic value of the quilt.

Like most narratives of discovery, however, the story of “ADAQ” would be better framed as a moment of encounter in an asymmetrical power relationship. From the start, “ADAQ” was sharply criticized by feminists. In her 1973 essay “Quilts: The Great American Art,” Patricia Mainardi took Holstein to task for attributing all quilts to anonymous makers. Mainardi argued for viewing quilts not purely as aesthetic objects but as products of women’s social role in particular times and places. To do otherwise was “to turn history upside down and backwards,” forcing us to understand these objects through the work of later (largely white and male) artists. Spurred by conversations with artist Faith Ringgold (soon to become one of the best-known artists to engage with the quilt form), Mainardi examined the lived experience of American Indian women and enslaved Black women who enriched the quilting practices that came to the United States from Europe. The urge to recover information about these “anonymous” women became one of the main legacies of “ADAQ,” leading art critic Lucy Lippard to claim in another exhibition catalogue, *The Artist and the Quilt* (1983), that the quilt was the “prime visual metaphor for women’s lives.”



“Abstract Design in American Quilts at 50,” 2021, exhibition view, International Quilt Museum, Lincoln Nebraska. PHOTO BRETT HAMPTON.

The decades after “ADAQ” saw many in the quilting world create the institutions required to preserve historical knowledge. The Kentucky Quilt Project began in 1981 under the leadership of quilt dealer Bruce Mann, who was apprehensive about exporting so much cultural heritage out of the state. Many regional nonprofits emerged modeled on Mann’s success. There were also correctives to the work of documentation, such as the pioneering efforts of author and quilter Carolyn Mazloomi, who advocated for the recognition of Black quilters by founding the African-American Quilters of Los Angeles in 1981 and the Women of Color Quilters Network in 1985. Museums were established: the San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles began in 1977 as a storefront in Silicon Valley; the National Quilt Museum was founded in Paducah, Kentucky, in 1991; and the International Quilt Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska, began as a study center in 1997 and is now the world’s largest publicly held collection of quilts, with nearly six thousand pieces. These institutions—along with a score of others across the US—are actively doing the work of documentation and have helped birth a broad field of quilt studies. “ADAQ” is now a part of this history, and its fiftieth anniversary is being celebrated—and critically scrutinized—by the quilting world. The International Quilt Museum this year offered “Abstract Design in American Quilts at 50,” which included a rehang of the original show along with an exploration of its global impact. Yet the threat of anonymity lingers; quilters are still concerned that their history

might be lost if they don't play an active role in its preservation. A 2021 Facebook post from the Quilt Alliance, promoting National Quilting Day, featured an image of an anonymous quilt from "ADAQ" with an ominous text: "Once an unlabeled quilt is separated from its maker or owner, it becomes a mystery. Which of your quilts are at risk of becoming mysterious?" But attribution alone cannot capture the history of a quilt, and what it means to document a quilt is thrown into question in several exemplary recent exhibitions.



"Rosie Lee Tompkins: A Retrospective," 2020, installation view at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

PHOTO IMPART PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY BAMPFA

"Rosie Lee Tompkins: A Retrospective," lately presented at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), highlighted the limitations of individual authorship. The show drew on a 2018 bequest from psychologist and writer Eli Leon, who donated more than 3,000 quilts made by Black Americans, including some 500 by Tompkins, who died in 2006. Though Tompkins designed and pieced all the works in the exhibition, her status as a maker is complex. "Rosie Lee Tompkins" is a well-known pseudonym for Effie Mae Howard, chosen to protect her privacy. Moreover, Leon frequently bought quilt tops from Tompkins to have them seamed and quilted by other hands in keeping with the long tradition of shared labor in quilting. Perhaps most complicated—particularly within the standard discourse of contemporary art—are Tompkins's strong Christian faith and her belief in quilting as a form of prayer. Her desire for privacy and a focus on the self as a conduit for God's will might vex some. As co-curator Elaine Yau remarks in the catalogue, "Leon sought to highlight her originality and independence, while [Tompkins] understood her quilting as fully dependent on and connected to the divine." Such discussions are a needed corrective to the occlusion of Black spirituality. Art historian Bridget

Cooks notes in her study *Exhibiting Blackness* (2011), a despiritualized “modernist” emphasis on pure abstraction and individual authorship was particularly evident in the widely popular “Quilts of Gee’s Bend” exhibition that toured the country for much of the last decade.

The BAMPFA show deftly juggled considerations of Tompkins’s spirituality, the commercial fabrics she used, and her relationship with Leon as a patron and primary conduit of her works to the greater public. The quilts themselves are rich in both sensual interest and social specificity. For example, one quilt with a subdued black-and-white palette comprises fabrics from T-shirts and ties, giving a complex picture of Black masculinity and how Tompkins reacted to it. The printing on the T-shirts has the sheen and irregularity one might expect from a job done quickly in response to breaking news: one references basketball legend Magic Johnson’s announcement of his HIV-positive status; another, O.J. Simpson in the midst of his murder trial. Shown with these thin cotton T-shirts are crosses made of highly textured ties and a veil-like layer of white embroidery—Bible verses and Tompkins’s own numerology—suggesting the artist’s personal reckoning with these public figures. Overall, this quilt, and Tompkins’s work more broadly, exhibits a tension: how to weigh the import of authorship alongside the material culture from which each quilt draws and the market context each is absorbed in.



Sanford Biggers, *Ecclesiastes 1 (KJV)*, 2020, antique quilt, assorted textiles, and wood, 68 by 77 inches by 3 1/4.
COURTESY THE ARTIST © SANFORD BIGGERS. PHOTO LANCE BREWER.

“Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch,” which appeared earlier this year at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, also presented quilts as social documents. Biggers evokes historical shifts through decorative and structural manipulation, both applying surface ornamentation and cutting and suturing quilt bodies. Works like *Ecclesiastes 1 (KJV)*, 2020, feature geometric cutouts that create shadows, which Biggers emphasizes with barely perceptible black gauze overlays. The very use of the word “codeswitch,” meaning the ability to communicate differently based on audience, implies a fluidity of signification and meaning. Biggers’s pieces—which combine found quilts with layers of paint and textile accumulations—emphasize that quilts are codeswitchers par excellence, referencing the aesthetics of Japan, Islam, and the Pattern and Decoration movement as well as various American communities. In some works, the outlines of human figures are spray-painted on quilt tops like the chalk outlines of crime victims.

With particular potency, Biggers’s exhibition also evoked the use of quilts as cryptic guideposts along the Underground Railroad. As the story goes—and as was passionately repeated by museum attendants during the show—the quilts could be read only by those who knew the embedded code; otherwise, the patterns remained unremarkable, their messages hidden in plain sight. This history is contentious terrain; many quilt scholars now regard the Underground Railroad tale as apocryphal. Yet Biggers allows for a complex understanding of storytelling and how it connects to the present. His temporal remixing, according to art historian Kellie Jones in her book *South of Pico* (2017), “signals heterochrony, the possibility of multiple time frames coexisting. . . . [These] objects and performances hold different textures of time that create their own histories.”

Biggers doesn’t just illuminate different historical narratives, he considers different experiences of learning history, which can in turn engender varying visions of the future—or as Jones phrases it, there is both “slave self-liberation and space travel” in his works. That is not to say there is no longer any tension regarding the goals of quilts and documentation. In the *Journal of Modern Craft*, quilt historian Janneken Smucker noted that one found quilt after another in “Codeswitch” was listed simply as “antique quilt,” obscuring the specificity of its original production. This omission again highlights the ongoing threat of anonymity that plagues quilters. Yet Biggers’s exhibition insisted on viewing quilts—and history—as an active project, one that undergoes revision: cutting, pasting, overlay, and stretching.

Fifty years ago, the appeal of quilts rested on nostalgia; after the turmoil of the 1960s, their connotations of warmth and communal self-sufficiency proved appealing. Namelessness, as seen in “ADAQ,” invites romantic projection. But nostalgia is harder to accomplish in 2021, given that every aspect of once-standard US history is now contested. Artists and scholars, drawing on laboriously and lovingly gathered documentation, have created complicated new understandings of the quilt. This is a very good thing. Contemporary exhibitions of quilts have left the comfort of nostalgia behind for the cacophony of the multivalent. It can be overwhelming to take into account so many makers, materials, commercial networks, consumers, and institutions. We may not be able to read all the codes. Yet allowing for this complexity is surely one step in giving the quilt its full due as a cultural object.



Sanford Biggers, whence/wince, 2020, antique quilts, charcoal, 151 by 89 by 85 inches.