

# Uncoverings 1980

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## ***Special Presentation***

# **Afro-American Women and Quilts**

## **Introductory Essay**

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When I first began my research of "Afro-American Women and Quilts," I did not know anyone else was engaged in a similar investigation. For about twenty years, I had researched and studied quilt history. Occasionally, I acquired information about black quilt makers, which I put in my general information file. During the Bicentennial Year, there was great emphasis on learning about one's ethnic heritage. I thought, why not study Afro-Americans' contributions to quilts as a specific project? I extracted from my general information file all references I had about black quilt makers to form the nucleus of this project. I then began, in earnest, to acquire more data.

Later, I learned that there was intense research being conducted on black women's quilts. I found that there were at least a half-dozen masters' theses or doctoral dissertations being prepared on the subject. In fact, most of the research on black women's quilts was coming from the world of academia - from ethnologists, from anthropologists, folklorists and art historians.

The knowledge of the existence of this other research gave me pause. I wondered about the usefulness of what I was doing. Was I futilely going over plowed ground? I read and studied what was available of the academicians' research, before continuing with my own. Why did I decide to continue? It was my perception that there was considerable difference in research from the point of view of the academicians, and from my point of view, working as a quilt historian. This was not a qualitative evaluation of the two types of research - an idea that one was superior to

the other. It was simply that the two types are different.

Working as a quilt historian, I am investigating the role of quilts, in an historical context, in the lives of black Americans. This means quilts made by black women, and quilts *not* made by black women, but which have a relationship to their lives. Why did I include quilts made by white women in my "Afro-American Women and Quilts" project? A study of these quilts portray, in a very vivid manner, the concepts of a large segment of white Americans about black Americans, at various points in American history.

For example, in the pre-Civil War slavery days, quilts made by white Americans, such as Slave Chain, or Underground Railroad denote sympathy for the plight of the black slaves. No stronger partisan political statement from this era can be found than the Radical Rose quilt, with its symbolic black center. And to think it came from that second most non-political group of Americans - women!

Next, take a look at the early part of the 20th century. There was increasing industrialization, a movement from rural to urban areas by both blacks and whites, usually to specific and separate living areas, and the rise of black ghettos. The result was increased isolation of the races. Consequently, there were countless white Americans who did not know one black person. There were white people in certain areas who had never seen a black person. So how is this historical period portrayed in quilts of white Americans? Often, they resorted to using the information available to them from the popular communications media of the time — magazines, newspapers, books and the radio. Unfortunately for blacks, during this period, they were seldom presented in any manner except a stereotypical one. Unfortunately, for whites, many believed these stereotypes represented a true picture of blacks. So, from this period, we find quilts with "little wall-eyed pickaninnies," obese Mammies with huge blood-red lips, and lazy "Rastus"-type men. I firmly believe that few women would undertake the huge amount of work involved in quilt making to ridicule anyone. At this point in time, the makers sincerely believed they were constructing quilts which realistically portrayed black people.

What about quilts made by white Americans in the latter part of the 20th century - the present time? Have their concepts of black people changed? Yes, radically. Quilts made today display a great sensitivity to the black experience. There has been a thorough study of African art history resulting in quilts with authentic African designs. There have been quilts made about noted Afro-American historical figures such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. From a *quilt historian's* point of

view, one is compelled to include quilts made by white Americans about black Americans in order to obtain a full and complete picture of "Afro-American Women and Quilts."

For the most part, the university scholars have concentrated their studies on a specific type of Afro-American quilt. This is a quilt with an African design heritage - an ethnic quilt. These are appliqued quilts, appliqued in the African manner, with motifs that are highly symbolic, rather than realistic. These are also pieced quilts, whose designs reflect African textile construction techniques. They are variously called strippy quilts, string quilts, improvisationally pieced quilts or asymmetrically pieced quilts. Contrary to what many people believe, these exuberant, unorthodox, often humorous ethnic quilts by Afro-Americans, are not the work of unskilled quilt makers. I, too, have researched the African design heritage quilt. It is included in my study as part of the picture, but not the whole canvas.

An historical approach requires me to scrutinize *all* types of quilts made by black women, including the Euro-American traditional quilt. The Euro-American traditional quilt, made by black women, is not given much credence by academic researchers. Why? It does appear the academicians, more or less, dismiss Euro-American traditional quilts by black women, as *derivative*. All Afro-American quilt making was derivative. The making of bed quilts was a wholly new and learned skill acquired by the Africans in America.

Although there were no bed quilts in sub-Saharan west Africa, the imported west African slave women seemed to have made the transition into the craft of quilt making with relative ease. The slave woman's affinity for quilt making appears to have developed because in her background, she already had a familiarity or the skills necessary for making quilts - applique, piecing and embroidery. So, while the object (the bed quilt) was new to her, the techniques for making it were not.

The strands of the story of "Afro-American Women and Quilts" are many and varied. Some components are:

- the slave-made quilts that represent the black women's earliest attempts at the craft of quilt making;
- the ethnic quilts that demonstrate the tenacity with which the cultural ties with Africa were retained;
- the black-made Euro-American traditional quilts that represent the assimilation of the American culture; the American in Afro-Americans; and
- the historical changes in the perceptions of black Americans by

white Americans, as demonstrated in quilts made by whites, in which blacks are the prime subject matter.  
And my research of Afro-American quilts goes on.