

African American quilting is almost as old as the history of America. Black slave women were needed for spinning, weaving, sewing and quilting on plantations and in other wealthy households.

African American Quilts in Early America

Although the quilt fabrics and patterns used were those of upper class whites, some African American household slaves became highly skilled in creating these quilts.

Little time was left in the day for these women to do their own sewing. We know some made scrap quilts or other bed coverings for their families but little has survived to be studied today.

The WPA slave narratives collected in the 1930s included some references to quilting. One woman proudly told how her mother, "used to quilt the prettiest quilts you ever see...." They were sold to white people to earn a little money.¹ Tragically all slaves didn't have this opportunity. Many lacked sufficient clothing and blankets with nothing left to make a quilt.

Life After Emancipation



After the Civil War, many African American women went to work in households as domestics while others helped out on small farms. It was still a difficult life of working from dawn to dusk. Quilts were made for everyday use out of necessity. Scraps, discarded clothing, and feed sacks, were the materials used. In making "string quilts," strips of various fabrics were sewn together. The result was then cut into blocks and made into a quilt. Sadly we have few examples of quilts made by African Americans during this period because of the heavy wear they received.

Pine Cone Quilt - An African American Favorite

The Pine Cone or Pine Burr quilt is a three dimensional quilt made of overlapping triangles. These triangles are put in a circular pattern starting at the center giving the look of a pine cone. Quilt Historian, Cuesta Benberry tells us, "From early to late twentieth century, the Pine Cone quilt was popular among southern African American quilters".² This style quilt was considered a masterpiece work much as fine appliqué was considered in Caucasian communities.



Migration to the Cities

During the 1920s more and more African Americans began to move into the northern cities. One contributing factor was the boll weevil infestation that destroyed many farms in the south. Also industrialization created new opportunities for employment in the north. Most women found they had little time to quilt after a long day at their factory jobs.

Later when they retired some women re-discovered quilting. The city brought new opportunities for quilting through church and senior centers. Magazine patterns were also more available in the city. Over the years more and more African American women have had the opportunity to enjoy quilting for pleasure rather than necessity.

Possible African Roots

Some intriguing theories have been proposed that link African American women's quilting to their African roots. Strip construction, large-scale designs, strong contrasting colors and variations from symmetrical patterns all appear to reflect textile patterns found in parts of Africa. In studying the roots of African American quilts the difficulty lies in the fact that few documented quilts exist today.



Though the physical evidence of surviving quilts is gone the fact that plantation slaves made pipes with designs matching African pottery art indicates women might have used African textile designs in their quilts. To learn more about these pipes go to the "Black History by the Shovel Full" webpage listed below.

Story quilts, such as two examples of biblical story quilts made by Harriet Powers, lead us to wonder if many other such quilts were made by African American women. As Harriet Powers was born a slave in 1837, we might assume this art dates back some time. We do know this technique of creating a story with appliqué has been handed down through the generations and these folk quilts are still made by African American women today.

African American Quilts: Unique or Not?

Quilt historians have found that, for the most part, black women made their quilts in the same styles that were popular with the general population during any given period. As quilters draw from a common history one cannot look at a quilt and easily identify the cultural background of the artist. There has always been a great deal of overlapping in quilting styles among different communities and cultures.

To add to the confusion, economic status usually dictated the kinds of quilts made by women regardless of their cultural heritage. Poorer women have always had to make do with scraps and discarded clothing. White and black women alike found "string" quilting to be an efficient way to use this fabric.

African American Quilting Today

Still it's hard to imagine that heritage hasn't had an impact on African American quilts. Surely their common experiences affected the taste of early African American quilters and there is no doubt that black women today are making striking quilts that reflect African culture. African American quilt historian, Cuesta Benberry, points out, "Quilters are making conscious and deliberate efforts to incorporate African themes in their works. Some persons begin by using African textiles in their quilts; others take courses in art history or engage in ambitious projects such a researching design tradition in a specific African tribes."³



Overall we find that African American quilters today are eclectic in their approach including the making of quilts based on African textiles to others in the tradition of story quilts. Their quilts range from work with a strong African influence to traditional quilting. While some African Americans are producing stunning art quilts many are making quilts using the same new and old patterns that quilters in general enjoy.

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Thank you to Louanne LaRoche for this photo of the square in squares quilt.
Thank you to Hartley Bennett for the photograph of the Pine Cone Quilt.

References:

¹ p 48, ["Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society"](#), by Ferrero, Hedges & Silber

² p 11, ["A Piece of my Soul: Quilts by Black Arkansans"](#), by Cuesta Benberry

³ p 62, ["Always There: The African American Presence in American Quilts"](#), by Cuesta Benberry

["Kansas Quilts and Quilters"](#), by Brackman, Chinn, Davis

["Quilting in America: Beyond the Myths"](#), Laurel Horton (Editor)

["Quilts a Living Tradition"](#), by Robert Shaw