

State of California

California Museum of Afro-American
History and Culture
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TRADITIONS IN CLOTH

Afro-American Quilts/West African Textiles

When viewing traditional quilts, feelings of great warmth on a cold winter's day come to mind. Rightly so, with many quilts, especially those fashioned by Afro-Americans, the function outweighed any aesthetic concerns. Yet scholars have come to realize that aesthetic concerns were very important in the making of functional objects. The Afro-American quilter seemed to have a preference for a certain type of design while not fully realizing its origins.

In understanding the exhibition "Traditions in Cloth," the gallery visitor must first realize that the tradition of piecing together fabrics by Afro-Americans has a long and varied history. Close examination reveals two main forms of Afro-American quilts: those which were patterned after a Euro-American quilting tradition and those whose design characteristics suggest design transmissions from West Africa. Both forms are valid.

The objective of the exhibition is to show design parallels between Afro-American quilts and West African textiles. Towards that end I have brought together varied collections of Afro-American quilts representing both forms and a significant collection of West African textiles, on loan to the museum from the Arts and Sciences Foundation in Los Angeles.

One will note that the design characteristics in the Gladys-Marie Fry Collection of quilts reflect the Euro-American tradition in quilting. These quilts, made by slaves prior to 1865 at a time when they were thought to possess few skills, are examples of fine needle work and an overall unified design. Fry has collected Afro-American quilts for the past twenty-five years and writes that her "fascination with quilts probably began as a small child growing up in Tuskegee, Alabama. Almost all of our bed covering were hand-made quilts," and "the two most common techniques of quilting were applique and pieced."

The Fry Collection contains a floral quilt attributed to "Yellow Bill" which was made on the William Dean Plantation, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1852. It is of particular interest because it is one of several quilts in this exhibition made by males. There are a number of documented accounts acknowledging slave men as skilled craftsmen, but very few references to their quilting abilities.

Eli Leon, a private collector in Oakland, California, has an extensive quilt collection. He has collected quilts for the past ten years and Afro-American quilts for four of those years. His collection is composed

primarily of contemporary quilts pieced in a very traditional manner. The quilts by Angelia Tobias of Oakland, a woman in her early thirties, were pieced following a very old stripping technique (ca. 1900) learned from her grandmother in Los Angeles. When one considers all of the quilting information readily available at check-out counters in a variety of stores, one begins to realize how strong familial influences are and how traditions are continued, regardless of outside influences.

Leon's interpretation of his quilts (briefly stated in this catalogue) is interesting. This is the first time that any of the Leon Collection of Afro-American quilts have been exhibited.

The Roland Freeman Collection of Afro-American quilts are part of a travelling exhibition organized by Freeman entitled "Something To Keep You Warm." The quilts were fashioned by homemakers from the Mississippi Heartland in southern Mississippi and are very good examples of African parallels in Afro-American textile designs.

Maude S. Wahlman has produced a wealth of scholarly work and research on the parallels between West African textiles and Afro-American quilts. Her work has been very valuable in cementing a connection between the West African aesthetic and the Afro-American aesthetic in textile design. Her essay gives a comprehensive overview of West African/Afro-American textile techniques.

Quilt historian Cuesta Benberry probably has more contact with quilters than any of the other lecturers and essayists. While she writes, lectures and collects quilts, more importantly she nurtures and encourages the continuance of the Afro-American quilting tradition.

All varieties of Afro-American textiles are important, whether they are Euro-American or African inspired. Some are more important for their historical rather than aesthetic significance. Through the essays presented in this catalogue and the lectures presented during the length of the exhibition, "Traditions in Cloth" will provide an overview of Afro-American quilts and quilters, while focusing specifically upon quilts which exhibit design parallels in West African textiles.

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