

art connections

summer 2003

a teacher resource guide

Contemporary Art Quilts: Joan Rigal

This teacher resource
guide connects the classroom
to the exhibition

To make a quilt you take three pieces of cloth - top, bottom, and filling in between - and sew them together to make a kind of padded blanket. A simple idea that leads to strange and exalted complications, takes thousands of woman-hours and has much to say about American history.

-Robert Hughes from *Amish, The Art of the Quilt*

Contemporary Art Quilts:

Joan Rigal, presented in
Dublin Arts Council's gallery,
July 16 -- August 30, 2003.

Quilts and quiltmaking have a long and somewhat controversial history. Most sources agree that quilts were being made long before the Colonization of the United States, perhaps even as early as the times of the pharaohs in ancient Egypt. The first quilts documented in the United States date back to the seventeenth century, but quilts did not become common in the United States until the mid-1800's, when commercial fabrics became easily accessible.

Art quilts are a natural outcome of traditional quiltmaking, but quilts were not taken seriously as an art form until the early 1970's. In 1971, the Whitney Museum of Art curated the exhibition *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, re-defining quilts from mere "historical objects of interest," to a respected art form. The exhibition and catalog suggested that these antique quilts had "...similarities to modern abstract painting and {noted} how their makers had found design solutions that would not be 'discovered' by artists until a century later." Amish quilts dating back to the early 1800's are particularly associated with modern painting with their unique color choices and clean, geometrical design. The Amish quilt continues to look contemporary, even today.

Loosely defined, the art quilt is a contemporary work that explores the same range of expression as a painting, sculpture, or photograph. They are beautiful and evoke emotional responses from the viewer. Some are representational in nature, while others are abstract - each is an expression of its creator. While art quilts will often have titles and artist statements that further explain the motivation for the quilt's creation, some are presented purely as abstractions, leaving the viewer to make up his or her own mind about the work. Art quilts have a clear and direct relationship to the folk art quilt from which they descend, and like most forms of art, have developed over time based on historical, political, cultural and societal changes. To fully understand the art quilt, some time must be spent exploring the history of the quilt itself.

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A Brief History of the Quilt in the United States

The earliest quilts documented in the United States date back to the first part of the 18th century. The most common quilt tops found during this time were: (1) the Wholecloth, made from one large plain piece of fabric, or several large pieces of the same fabric joined together; (2) the Appliqué - small pieces of fabric “applied” or sewn on to the quilt top for decoration; (3) the Medallion - the quilt top is dominated by a single motif or medallion surrounded by complementing borders; and (4) Pieced or Mosaic Piecework - the top is made from many small pieces of fabric, assembled in geometric patterns and sewn together to create the whole.

During the Industrial Revolution, the textile industry grew considerably, with more and different kinds of fabrics being produced all over the world and imported to the United States. Therefore, the wholecloth quilt became less popular while the piecework quilts, utilizing a variety of fabrics in rich and vibrant colors, gained popularity. A common block or piecework quilt found during the mid-1800’s was the *Friendship Quilt*. These were quilts made for one person by a group of friends or an entire community. Each person was responsible for creating at least one block for the quilt top. Then, all would gather together to complete the quilt.

Another popular quilt style of this time was the *Crazy Quilt*. This type of quilt top was made from the tiniest scraps of fabrics and was often made when the quiltmaker had a lot of scraps of expensive fabrics, like velvet or satin. The seams that joined the scraps would be covered with decorative hand stitching or intricate embroidery. Therefore, these quilts indeed looked crazy, or at least very different from the wholecloth and medallion quilts that had been so popular previously.

Quilts and quilting were very popular during the *Arts and Crafts Movement* of the mid-nineteenth century. The Arts and Crafts Movement, originating in England, emphasized the use of natural, unadorned materials, good workmanship, and simple designs. This was a major shift from the ornate and decorative styles that had once been so popular. Suddenly the desire for the busy crazy quilts diminished while straightforward designs, like the simple *patchwork* quilts, enjoyed a resurgence in popularity. In fact, there was a renewed interest in crafts in general, with many people turning away from machine-made goods for handmade furniture, pottery, and weaving. Quilts were no longer just functional items to place on the bed for warmth, but, if made with artistic intent, good materials, and original designs, were considered art.

During the Depression, the quilt saw another resurgence in popularity. In 1937, President Roosevelt estimated that one-third of the nation was “ill-fed, ill-housed, and ill-clad.” Women turned to quilting out of necessity and to create social opportunities, since little money was available for entertainment. Scrap quilts returned as households attempted to use everything available to save expenses. This renewed interest in quilts was essentially over by 1945, the end of World War II, due in large part to the number of women who had left their homes to enter the working world. Quilts, and the process of saving fabrics for quilts, were a reminder of difficult times.

During the 1960’s and into the 70’s, there was a revival of the Arts and Crafts Movement, as well as a general longing for simpler times, with young people rebelling against technology and modern living. Again, quilts regained popularity, as an interest in *American Folk Art* and antiques became more in demand. In 1971, The Whitney Museum of Art held the exhibition *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, and suddenly quilts were thrust into the forefront of the Folk Art craze. While many had appreciated the technical accomplishments of quiltmakers, it wasn’t until quilts were seen as works of art that the design and artistic nature of quilts was fully appreciated.

As the 70’s continued, the United States again faced difficult economic times, and, as had been the pattern, quilts and craft making in general became popular as people stayed home with an abundance of free time. Quilt exhibitions began to appear in major museums across the United States. “The antique quilt exhibitions of the ... 1970’s did more than reawaken interest in America’s quilted bedcoverings. These exhibitions moved quilts from beds and the horizontal plane to walls and the vertical. And because many of the quilts exhibited were patterned in intricate, boldly colored geometrics akin to twentieth-century art, the modern art audience could not resist the temptation to label these antique creations as startling precursors of modern art, worthy of their newly acquired positions in the art world.”

The Art Quilt

Once the quilt gained acceptance as a work of art in its own right, quiltmakers began to explore the surface of the quilt in the same way a painter might explore the surface of a canvas. In the past, quiltmakers had experimented with color and design, like with the crazy quilt, but never before had they explored outside the “strict rules” of quilting to create original designs with fabric and thread.

Quilts have emerged from the world of function to the walls of homes, museums, and businesses all over the world. They are expressive works of art, and tend to be content driven. In other words, the quiltmaker attempts to communicate something through his or her work. **Narrative quilts**, quilts that tell a story, have received international attention and are the subjects of children’s books. **Abstract designs** that test color and design require the viewer to think about the artist’s intent, as well as the emotion the quilt design evokes. Some contemporary art quilts have a particular or specific message, idea, or experience being communicated by the artist. Many contemporary quilt artists attach or assemble other media to their work (like buttons and jewels) or paint right on their fabric to enrich their work. In all cases, when hung on the wall, the effect of the work when viewed is the same as when looking at any media of art, and the beauty and artistry of the art quilt cannot be ignored. *“The art quilt is different from its predecessors. It is art for walls, not beds, created by artists abandoning media like painting, printmaking and ceramics to express themselves in original designs of cloth and thread.”*

Other Quilting Traditions

Many other cultures in the United States and throughout the world have their own quilting traditions with rich and varied histories. Some have been influenced by the quiltmakers of the United States, while others have traditions of their own. Two specific and important groups of quiltmakers will be briefly explored here: The Amish quiltmakers of Lancaster County, PA, and the quilting traditions of the African-American culture.

The Amish Quilts of Lancaster, PA

The Amish are a religious community who came to the United States beginning in 1737 to escape religious persecution in Europe. While there are Amish communities in twenty states throughout the United States, the largest number live in Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Ohio. The Amish of Lancaster, PA have had a significant impact on the world of quilting, and their quilts continue to be coveted by collectors all over the world.

While the Amish have a strong quilting tradition, it appears that their interest in creating quilts did not come with them from Europe. The earliest documented Amish quilt is from 1849, long after their arrival in Pennsylvania. And while it is popular to think that quilts were made for thrift alone, it is also widely believed that there were simpler ways to keep your family warm than the thousands of hours and stitches it took to create these beautiful quilts.

The Amish quilts of Lancaster County are uniquely different than those found in other Amish communities throughout the United States. They feature large, geometric color fields with deep, saturated colors. They do not have busy patchwork patterns, but their own distinct designs, the favorites being bars, squares and diamonds. The favorite format is the central medallion with some variation found from family to family or community to community. Prints, patterns or scraps with any kind of design in the fabric, or imagery like baskets and animals, are never found on Lancaster County quilts.

Another distinctive element of Lancaster County quilts is the elaborate and beautiful quilting, often done in contrasting thread colors. The large color fields favored by the Lancaster County quilters allow for delicate and intricate quilting designs which enhance, rather than distract, from the overall beauty of the quilt.

African-American Quilts

Like the Amish, the African-American slaves did not necessarily bring a quilting tradition with them to the United States, but adopted the European quilting traditions of their slave owners. That is not to say that the textile designs prevalent in African-American culture did not influence the quilting traditions of the African-American, only that quilting was not prevalent to this culture prior to their arrival in the United States. “African men and women remembered African artistic techniques and traditions when they came to the New World. They mixed and sorted their own traditions, then combined them with Euro-American and Native American ideas to create their unique creolized arts. Their combined ideas were passed down from generation to generation, thus preserving many African art traditions.”

Most experts agree that there are commonalities in African-American quilting traditions. These include: (1) the use of strips of fabrics; (2) large designs; (3) bright and vibrant colors; (4) [asymmetry](#) or off-beat patterns; and, (5) [improvisation](#) in design. But the most recognized quilting tradition among the African-American culture is that of the narrative or story quilt. The most famous narrative, or story quilts, are two Bible quilts created by Harriet Powers, an illiterate former slave from Athens, Georgia. These quilts, completed in 1886 and 1898, told stories from the Bible in individual quilt squares, with the images appliquéd to the quilt top. While most 19th century African-American quilts were deemed unimportant by society, these two quilts were identified as significant works and carefully documented. Ms. Powers' first Bible quilt can currently be found in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. While these two quilts "remain the supreme examples" of the pictorial story quilts, many contemporary African-American quilters have adopted this form for their own works, including Faith Ringgold, Yvonne Wells, and Sarah Mary Taylor. These artists are creating quilts that are based on historic and current events, as well as their own experiences as artists, women, and African-Americans.

[The AIDS Memorial Quilt](#)

Quilts have long been associated with issues of politics and social reform. Since the late 1800's, quilts have been connected with the abolitionist movement, Civil War relief, fundraising for charitable causes, women's rights issues, and most recently and famously, the crisis of the AIDS epidemic. In 1985, Cleve Jones, a long time gay rights activist from San Francisco, conceived the idea of the AIDS Memorial Quilt as a way to raise consciousness about the disease, honor the victims of AIDS, and assist in the grieving process of those who have lost a loved one to the illness.

The first panel for the quilt was made by Jones in 1986 to honor the death of his best friend. Since then, over 40,000 lives have been memorialized as part of this ongoing project. While the quilt is too large to be placed on exhibition in one place, portions of the quilt are constantly being displayed. The AIDS Memorial Quilt is the largest ongoing art project in the world.

The Contemporary Art Quilts of Joan Rigal

"The touch of fabric - its color and forgiving nature - has been a love of mine since I began working with it many years ago. It seemed natural to go from clothing to quilts to art quilts as I grew and matured in my life. Fiber is a wonderful and natural way to express what is deep within oneself - especially a woman - a wife - a mother - a nurturer of the spirit. To cultivate the artist within has been exhilarating and makes me happy. I am happiest when I am working in my studio alone with music; feeling and thinking about design and color - then crafting my creation using my whole being to make a single art quilt."

Joan Rigal is a quilter and artist living and working in Waterville, Ohio. In 1979, Joan was introduced to quilting through a class and learned the basics of quilting, both with the hand and the machine. While her quilts today are far from "traditional," those basic principles are where Joan returns when experiencing problems with her art quilts.

Since that first class, Joan slowly transitioned from what is thought of as traditional quiltmaking to creating art quilts for the wall. She includes a variety of techniques in her quilts, including painted fabrics and paper, fusing fabrics, and using a variety of threads and yarns. Her designs are inspired by nature and many of her quilts are based on flowers found in her garden. Many art quilt artists choose to work in large format - some quilts covering entire walls. Joan, however, has elected to make small works that can be framed and hung on the wall. Her series, "Small Works, A New Perspective," is a series of small works with an urban theme. Her idea is that the works be small but dynamic in their ability to depict form, shape, line and perspective in a new way.

What Joan found in the creation of these small works was a freedom to ignore straight lines and matching seams. "This technique enabled me to use many colors in one small quilt. I felt much like a painter must feel, dipping a brush in a palette of paint and applying it to the surface of a canvas."

Joan also recognizes the importance of quilt history, and while her works have evolved from these traditional principles and techniques, the enduring strength of design found in Amish quilts has always influenced her art. "From the beginning of my quiltmaking, I loved the solid colors and analogous color scheme of Amish quilts that seem passionate and so alive.... Recently, I've returned to the direct design of Amish quilts and enjoy making contemporary adaptations of them by machine quilting and the use of many colorful threads."



top to bottom:
Downtown, Joan Rigal, 2001.
Rear Window, Joan Rigal, 2001.

Contemporary Art Quilts: Joan Rigal will be on exhibition in Dublin Arts Council's gallery July 16 - August 30, 2003. Joan Rigal will discuss her quilts at the exhibition opening reception, Wednesday, July 16 from 5:00-7:30pm. This reception is free and open to the public.

Ms. Rigal will also conduct a workshop titled *The Amish Nine Patch* on Saturday, August 2, 2003, from 9:30am - 4:00pm at Dublin Arts Center. In the workshop, Joan will discuss the effectiveness of color choices, as well as asymmetry and bordering. Participants will construct their own Amish Nine-Patch quilt top and enjoy demonstrations of hand and machine quilting and binding. Participants need to provide their own sewing machine and have a working knowledge of how to use it! A complete materials list is available upon registration.

For more information about this exhibition, the gallery talk, or the workshop, contact Dublin Arts Council at 614/889-7444 or visit our website, www.dublinarts.org. Dublin Arts Council is located at 7125 Riverside Drive, Dublin, OH 43016. Gallery hours are: Tuesday and Wednesday, 9:00am - 9:00pm; Thursday and Friday, 9:00am - 5:00pm; and Saturdays, 9:00am - 3:00pm. The gallery is free and open to the public.

Social Studies.

Discuss the various groups of people who came to the United States from Europe to escape “religious persecution.” What does that mean? Why was the United States a safe place to travel?

Look at the history and migration of the Amish. How does their quilting reflect their way of life?

What was the Industrial Revolution and how did it affect the United States? The textile industry?

When was the sewing machine invented and by whom?

What were the textile mills and what influence did they have on the textile industry; the Industrial Revolution?

What is the Quilting Bee? Why was it important?

Quilts have a long reputation for influencing politics, policy, and public opinion. The AIDS quilt is an example of this - what are some other examples in history when the quilt was used for political purposes?

What was the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Celebration and why was it important?

Who was Harriet Powers and why is she important? Ask your students to research Ms. Powers and come up with 8 important facts. Then, have your students write and illustrate their facts on 8 equal sized squares. Make a quilt out of the squares of information.

Show an image of the quilt “The Sunflowers Quilting Bee” by Faith Ringgold. Who are the women portrayed in the quilt? Who is the man? Ask your students to select one of the individuals in the quilt and research who they are and why they are important.

Use the book “Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt” to discuss slavery and the Underground Railroad. What are landmarks, and why are they important in map making? What kinds of landmarks did Clara use in her quilt? What route might her map take and why? Which states were free? Look at a map of the United States and create a route a slave trying to escape slavery may have taken. Ask students to make a pictorial map from their home to school. What landmarks do they pass? How can they be represented on the map?

Language Arts.

Students, working in small groups, should research quilts and quilting in the United States. Then, each group should select a quilt - either from the included CD rom, a book, or a website, and with only a date for when the quilt was made and the quilt history research already completed, write a fictional history for the quilt. Who made it and who did it belong to? In what state was it made, and where did it end up? How did it get there? The history should be fairly specific and include dates and facts about the era their quilt was made as well as descriptions of the quilt maker(s). Once their fictional history is complete, then ask the students to research the real history of the quilt. Finally, have them compare and contrast the fictional and historical histories of the quilt.

Ask students to select a quilt and use their words to describe the quilt. They should use very descriptive language. Ask them to read their description out loud while another student draws the quilt on paper with markers or colored pencils. Then, compare the real image with the image drawn from the description. Are the two images similar? Different? How could the description have been more clear?

Harriet Powers retold favorite stories from the Bible in her quilts. Ask your students to rewrite one of their favorite stories. It can be a story from a book they have read or an experience they have had. Ask them to illustrate their story.

Read the book “Stitching Stars, the Story Quilts of Harriet Powers,” by Mary Lyons in the classroom or silently.

Ask your students to look at a narrative quilt by Faith Ringgold and to tell the story in words that Ringgold is telling on her quilt. Read the book “Tar Beach.”

Look at various stories depicting the Underground Railroad, including “Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt” by Deborah Hopkinson, “Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky” by Faith Ringgold, and “Follow The Drinking Gourd” by Jeanette Winter. Compare and contrast the stories - how are they similar? How are they different?

Math.

Look at the “All American Star Quilt” on the CD rom. This quilt is a tessellation. What is a tessellation? Find other examples of tessellations in quilt designs. Ask your students to create a quilt design that is a tessellation.

What is a pattern? What kinds of patterns can be found in quilts? Look at colors, design, and shape. Ask your students to create a quilt pattern.

Visual Arts.

The quilts made by the Amish of Lancaster County, PA have been compared to works of the abstract expressionist movement of the mid-1900s. Compare and contrast the images of the Amish quilts to an image of an abstract expressionist painting (selected from images on the CD rom). How are they different? How are they similar? Look at color choices, shapes and patterns, size of the work. When was the quilt created? When was the painting created?

Quilts and quilting are often considered a Folk Art. Define folk art. What other types of art are considered folk art and why? What does it mean when someone is called a self-taught artist, and how is the self-taught artist related to folk art? Why are the folk arts important to United States history?

Compare Vincent Van Gogh's painting "Sunflowers" with Faith Ringgold's quilt "The Sunflowers Painting Bee." Compare the style of the painting with the quilt. How are they similar? How are they different? What do you think Faith Ringgold was trying to communicate in this quilt?

Music.

Some believe that African-American slaves sewed information into quilts about the Underground Railroad and safe houses along the ways. Read "Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt" to illustrate this concept. Music was another way the African-American community communicated during slavery. Learn one of the freedom songs sung by slaves.

Studio Activity.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt is an example of a Friendship Quilt. Individuals or small groups of people create the smaller quilt squares. Then, all of the squares are sewn together to create the quilt top.

Ask the class to select an issue that is important to them - something related specifically to their class, their school, or to the greater community, like hunger or homelessness. Ask each student to create a square of equal size, that relates to the selected issue. They could use poetry or writing, pictures, collage - whatever media best communicates their thoughts about the issue. Once all of the squares are completed, punch holes where appropriate and sew the quilt together. Display the quilt in a prominent place for the whole school to see.

vocabulary:

abstract designs: Designs without recognizable subjects; a design that does not try to represent a person, animal or object in the real world.

American Folk Art: Folk Art is a broad subject encompassing a variety of art forms from every period in American history. It includes paintings (portraits, landscapes, genre scenes), sculpture (weathervanes, whirligigs, carousel horses), textiles (quilts, needlework, coverlets), furniture, pottery, decorative arts, and architecture. Typically, Folk Art is created by individuals with no formal training in their choice of media, identified as a self-taught artist.

Arts and Crafts Movement: A design movement that originated in England and emphasized the use of natural, unadorned materials, good workmanship, and simple designs. This was a major shift from the ornate and decorative styles of Victorian times. Proponents of the Arts and Crafts Movement believed that nothing should be in one's home that was not useful or believed to be beautiful.

assemblage: The attaching of items, usually not thought of as art objects, to a work of art.

asymmetry: The parts of a design are organized so that one side differs from the other without destroying the overall harmony.

Crazy Quilt: A quilt style popular in Victorian times, it is a type of quilting that utilized the tiniest scraps of fabric. The seams between the scraps were covered with lots of hand or machine stitching, or intricate embroidery.

Friendship Quilt: A quilt made for one person by a group of friends, each making at least one block for the quilt top. The AIDS Memorial Quilt is an example of a Friendship Quilt.

improvisation: To do something without advanced preparation or a set plan.

Narrative Quilt: Also called pictorial or story quilt, it is a quilt that seeks to communicate a particular subject or series of events. Harriet Power's *Bible Quilts* are excellent examples of Narrative Quilts.

patchwork: Also known as piecework, it is the method by which a quilt top is made up of many pieces of different fabric.

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The American Folk Art Museum, <http://www.folkartmuseum.org>

Websites about Harriet Powers:

<http://www.womensearlyart.net/powers/>

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/quilt/harriet.html>

<http://www.mfa.org/handbook/portrait.asp?id=350.5&s=1>

http://www.onlineathens.com/stories/090501/ath_hpowers.shtml

<http://www.historyofquilts.com/hpowers.html>

African American Quilts: <http://www.womenfolk.com/historyofquilts/afam.htm>

Video:

Faith Ringgold, The Last Story Quilt, Portrait of an Artist, Created and Produced by Linda Freeman.