

INSPIRING READS

Comfort and remembrance: Storytelling in African-American quilting

Gaye Newton delves into the rich history of Black quiltmakers throughout the ages, exploring how they have told stories and honoured their ancestors through their quilts

The quilt is a work of both art and function: patterns and pictures that radiate beauty from within a frame on the wall or keep a child warm on a bitter winter night. The quilt tells the story of a family, a special place, a spark of imagination, a culture or perhaps a point in history.

As with so many others, the quilt has long told compelling stories for the African-American culture. It often reflects the quilters' African roots in large patterns, intricate designs and bright colours of typical western African textiles. These quilts frequently tell stories handed down through various generations. An African-American quilt of the 1700s was most often made from bits of old clothing and anything

resembling fabric the enslaved women could find. Today, these women's descendants can make a quilt from the finest fabrics. But each quilt is so much more than the sum of its parts.

The story of Black people in the United States is complicated. From the early 1600s to the present, it has been fraught with the pains, horrors and injustices of enslavement, discrimination and oppression. But it is also about hard-won triumphs, precious freedom won, the strength to survive and thrive and the courage

and raw cotton. For a fortunate few enslaved women, quilting skills were also a way to a better life.

Harriet Powers

Harriet Powers (1837–1910) is often called the Mother of African-American quilting. She is remembered for her story quilts, created to depict tales of the Bible or events with a moralising message. Only two of her quilts are known to still exist: The Bible Quilt, which resides in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and The Pictorial

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to walk through doors opened by the sacrifices of ancestors. While there is still struggle and hardship, there is also joy, celebration, family and a future wide open with possibilities. These messages have been sewn into thousands of quilts.

Quilts in the Slavery Era

For Black people, the American experience was slavery from about 1620–1865. During this time, upper class and wealthy households had enslaved women to create elaborate quilts for them. These women also used those skills to make quilts for themselves and their families, using whatever scraps they could find including old clothing, feed sacks

Quilt (p59), which can be found in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley

In the mid 1800s, Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (1818–1907) had a talent for quilting. She saved the portion she was allowed to keep from the sales of her elaborate quilts and eventually bought freedom for herself and her son. They moved to Washington, D.C, where she became quilter and seamstress for Mary Todd Lincoln, the First Lady of the United States. Keckley is the creator of the Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt (right), which features various American symbols including an embroidered eagle and the word 'Liberty' in the middle.



Above and below:
Michael A. Cummings' Harriet Tubman Leading a Family to Freedom and Homage to Gee's Bend Quilters both honour African-American history

Right: Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley's Mary Todd Lincoln quilt, made for the First Lady of the United States. Photo courtesy of the Kent State University Museum



Photo: Joanne Arnett

The Quilted Story of the Underground Railroad

From about the late 1700s to the end of the Civil War, a multi-state network of free Black people and white abolitionists secretly helped enslaved people escape to northern free states. This was known as the Underground Railroad.

Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Doband have theorized on the role of quilting in *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. They describe the oral history passed down through Ozella McDaniel Williams' family wherein symbols were said to have been stitched onto quilts and used to convey carefully coded messages, such as routes to follow, safe houses and warnings. These quilts may have helped save countless lives.

Contemporary African-American Quilting

Today's most accomplished Black quilters have exhibited quilts in museums around the world and received countless prestigious awards. Each has a unique style and

focus, but they are all stewards of a rich culture and superb storytellers...

Bisa Butler

From about 1915–1970, the Great Migration saw Black people leave the south of the United States in large numbers, seeking industrial jobs and a better life in northern states. This story was extensively explored in the book *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson. In response, renowned artist Bisa Butler created the stunning quilt *The Warmth of Other Suns*. This quilt is a life-sized vision of the experience portrayed in the book.

Butler's unique art style involves portraits in the form of quilts, with subjects often coming from historical photographs. She carefully researches the time periods and subjects, then she lets her imagination produce vivid images in order to tell their stories.

Her portrait quilts come to life in layers of silk, wool, cotton and velvet. In the *Smithsonian Magazine* she stated, "I use West African wax printed fabric, kente cloth and Dutch



Photo: Christopher Burke Studio, New York City

Wrapped in Love by Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi. Photo: Rezvan Mazloomi





Photo: Joseph Hyde



Photo: Jermaine Bell



Above, right and below: Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi's work often documents injustice faced by ordinary people



Photos: Rezvan Mazloomi



wax prints to communicate that my figures are of African descent and have a long, rich history."

Michael A. Cummings

In 1968, Shirley Chisholm became the first African-American woman to be elected to Congress. In 1972, she was the first African-American woman to run for a major political party's nomination for President of the United States. Commemorating this achievement, quilter Michael A. Cummings created the quilt, Shirley Chisholm for President. Commissioned by the Clinton Presidential Library, the quilt is a part of their 2022 exhibition entitled 'Women's Voices, Women's Votes, Women's Rights'.

Inspired by Harriet Powers, Michael A. Cummings is passionate about exploring history. Cummings transforms his research on the history of African-Americans into vibrant, narrative quilts. "This method of storytelling has been passed down to generations of African-American

textile artists," he says. "I was introduced to storytelling in textiles by colourful Dahomey cloths in Africa. They are constructed using the appliqué process, which is the method I use for all my story quilts." His subjects have included historical standouts Josephine Baker and Harriet Tubman, along with various notable events in African-American history. As he observed African-American history unfold throughout his lifetime, Cummings made his own unique contribution. "I created story quilts about the past and present that related primarily to my own African-American experience. [These types of quilts] are a continuing tradition that goes back to Africa."

Carolyn Mazloomi

In 1961, a group of civil rights activists called the Freedom Riders rode buses across the American South, protesting segregation. They were frequently met with brutal violence at whites-only facilities, and arrests were common. In honour of these

Above: Stephen Towns creates quilted works such as *The Prophet* (above left) as well as paintings

Right and above right: Michael A. Cummings references the African-American origins of jazz in *African Jazz 10*

Far right: Harriet Powers' *Pictorial Quilt* depicts various bible scenes, as well as tales of morality and natural phenomena

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brave people, the Women of Color Quilters Network – an organization founded and led by Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi – created quilts for the exhibition 'We Who Believe in Freedom'. These quilts were additionally featured in Dr. Mazloomi's book of the same name.

Much of Dr. Mazloomi's own work reflects the lives of ordinary people facing injustice. The stories she sews into her quilts are about people who she believes deserve to be seen, heard and understood. She explains that these quilts are so much more than fabric and thread.

"Sewing fabric pieces together imbues cloth with spiritual power, and that power is strengthened with every stitch of the needle. This is the 'spirit of the cloth': sewn acts of resurrection, resistance, connecting, empowering."

Stephen Towns

In 1831, an enslaved man named Nat Turner led a rebellion in Virginia. Turner enlisted roughly 75 other

enslaved people and led them in an insurrection, during which several people were killed. Turner was captured and executed six weeks later. This major incident unfortunately led to stricter laws regulating the lives of enslaved people.

In his series of quilts, *Rumination and Reckoning*, Stephen Towns explores the life of Nat Turner and his historical uprising. Turner was an enslaved child taught to read – a rare occurrence at the time. In Towns' quilt, *Special Child*, a young Turner is shown reading to his grandmother. *Black Sun and The Prophet* depict an adult Turner with red ribbons on his arms, representing enslaved people's sacrifices and bloodshed. The series frequently features the night sky highlighted with materials such as glass beads and metallic thread. Towns' quilts address the influence of history on today's society and tell stories of the African diaspora. He explains his choice of quilts as a medium for those stories. "Drawing and painting were my first loves,"

Towns says. "Because I have always used African-American history as a backdrop for my work, I think it's only natural that I would adopt quilting into my artistic practice after learning how important the art form was throughout history."

A Never-Ending Story

Quilts have played an important role in telling the 400-year-old story of Black people in the colonies that became the United States. They tell stories of families, key people and moments in history – and the way to freedom. A quilt is an instrument for giving warmth and comfort in the cold, and love from the hands that made it. So, it's appropriate that it should be entrusted to tell a story so poignant and so filled with tragedies and triumphs. These are stories wrapped in the safety of family.

