



In the 200 or so years that patchwork quilts have been made in America, they have come to symbolize comfort, warmth, home, and tradition, embodying life's continuity in the memories they evoke of mothers, grandmothers, and more distant relatives. The quilts in Something Else to See: Improvisational Bordering Styles in African-American Quilts were made by twenty-one African-American women who grew up in the South, many of whom are currently living in the San Francisco Bay Area. While these quilts date from the 1950s to the present, as many as four generations of quiltmakers are represented in the exhibition. The oldest quilter, Rosa "Honey" Pierre was born c. 1885 in De Soto Parish, Louisiana and died c. 1973. All the quilts are from the extraordinary collection of Eli Leon, and they represent a special genre of African-American quilt Leon calls "Afro-traditional." Something Else to See focuses on the borders of these quilts, none of which employ the four-sided symmetry of the standard American tradition. Afro-traditional quilt borders can be anything from one- to four-sided, matched or unmatched, and used separately or in conjunction with additional borders. Many of these styles are familiar as well in West and Central African textiles. Something Else to See, which was guest curated by Leon, will be on view through March 14. The exhibition will reopen on April 12 and extend through June 7, 1997.

Leon began collecting in the early 1970s, at first not seriously, and without any inkling that this genre of African-American quilt existed. He came to this understanding in a flash of recognition. Frequenting flea markets and yard sales, he looked for quilts "that were just a bit different." Observing him photographing quilts in front of his house in Oakland, California, an African-American neighbor promised to come over and take a look at the entire collection. One day she dropped by with three friends. He remembers it this way:

"I had one [African-American] quilt that had been universally ignored by other people -- most everyone was interested in antiques and this one was from the '50s -- it had bright colors, strong graphics and big stitches. When the four women came upon it, it was like an explosion. They opened it out -- the first and only quilt that this had happened to. They really liked it, which opened my eyes to how much I liked it myself. They didn't know that this was a black quilt but they went right for it -- it seemed pretty clear that some sort of cultural aesthetic was involved."

Finding more African-American quilts through ads he placed in Bay Area papers, searching out the quilters, assembling and verifying information about them, their families, and their histories became a passion.

Leon's interviews with the quilters, which have been excerpted and included in the exhibition labels, inform us about the way they work and think and what's important to them. These stunning quilts are distinguished by boldly contrasting colors, irregularities in pattern and structure and unmeasured piecing. The artists tell us how the spirit of improvisation works: Laverne Brackens begins a quilt without a pattern in mind -- she just works with the material until she gets it "to look like a quilt." Similarly Sherry Byrd (Brackens' daughter) doesn't like to do the same thing over and over so she "builds" her quilt as she sits at her sewing machine. Byrd prefers to work without measuring because "it just takes the heart out of things." The quilters often use scraps or leftover patchwork, sometimes using them as found as Arbie Williams does in her Britches quilts made out of whole pairs of pants. Maple Swift's Strip is pieced of plain, plaid, and striped materials, some of which were once terrycloth towels.

The artists in Something Else to See shift or alter designs for aesthetic as well as practical reasons, sharing a desire to make designs to excite the eye and keep it moving. Willia Ette Graham arranges her pieces to "change it up, to pick your eye back up again -- like flashing a light in your face in the dark." Not wanting her quilts to look flat, she "puts something in there to lift your sight up." The central checkerboard pattern of Graham's Medallion, an explosive contrast of yellow, black and green, celebrates offbeat alignments and shifts in scale, and "keep[s] you searching for something else to see."

The quiltmakers learned their "freehand" ways of working from their mothers and grandmothers. In his catalogue essay, Leon stresses the continuity of tradition passed along from one generation to the next in African-American families, and suggests that these quilts express values that have African roots. Linking a quilting style to a particular people, Leon suggests that a black cultural aesthetic was maintained during the period of slavery and transformed in America into a new cultural expression.

An exhibition catalogue, Something Else to See: Improvisational Bordering Styles in African-American Quilts, published by the University Gallery in conjunction with the exhibition, will be available at the Gallery.

The University Gallery, located on the lower level of the Fine Arts Center, is open to the public Tuesday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from 2 to 5 p.m. The Gallery is also open during evening performances held in the Concert Hall of the Fine Arts Center. For further information, please call the Gallery at (413) 545-3670. The Gallery is wheelchair accessible.