



# Remember Us: Sewing Our Past and Present Together

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# Remember Us: Sewing Our Past and Present Together

Founded in 1997, Sisters in Stitches Joined by the Cloth is a quilting guild with members from the greater Boston area, South Shore, Springfield, and Worcester. The group came together to keep the stories of their ancestors alive through quilting, a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation. These artists depict stories of the African American struggle, slavery, and the racial conflicts of the present day. However, the quilts are not only a way for them to share hardships and dark times. These quilts stitch together memories of joy, perseverance, and celebration. The guild shares their passion for quilting through exhibitions and workshops across Massachusetts.

Guild members first collaborated with Mount Holyoke College's student Association of Pan African Unity (founded in 1968) in the spring of 2017 for a gallery showcase as part of Mount Holyoke College's Black History Month celebrations. Today, the Museum is thrilled to be working with both groups. The Guild and APAU members contributed text to pair with each quilt to enrich this exhibition.

The featured quilts represent work by members of the guild as well as "round robins" made by multiple quilters, which exemplify core values of quilting—collaboration and community. Each quilt represents a story of perseverance and reflects the quilters' ability to find beauty in the face of hardship. The quilts on view are joined by objects and prints from the Museum's collection that explore how these different narratives are interconnected.

-Relyn Myrthil '19, Arts and Community Engagement Intern

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Susi Ryan (American, b. 1961)

Earthly Women, 2001

On loan from the artist

Guild logo for Sisters in Stitches Joined by the Cloth,  
designed by Gina E. Ryan

Members of Sisters in Stitches Joined By The Cloth with guild banner. Left to right:  
Lesyslie Rackard, Karen Beckett, Christle Rawlins-Jackson, and Susi Ryan.



Lesyslie Rackard (American, b. 1949)  
The Laundress, 2016  
On loan from the artist

In the early 1940s, my aunt Maggie Bell left from Daytona Beach, Florida and moved to Poughkeepsie, New York to work in a summer resort as a laundress to help support her sister and family members. She migrated north, which back then was a means of survival (North Star Block). My aunt ironed shirts, sheets, pillowcases, and my mother was a domestic worker. For this quilt, I used an appliqué technique with embellishments. The Laundress's dress was one of Auntie's old house-dresses. You would think using the washboard with Fels-Naptha bar soap would be hard on their hands and back, but my mother didn't mind at all, she called it her quiet time. In 1948, at the age of 27, Auntie arrived in Boston, soon after her brother and sister-in-law, to settle in the South-End Neighborhood. This quilt is in remembrance of them.

– Lesyslie Rackard

When looking at The Laundress, I am reminded of my own mother. Days when she took care of me as a child, taking care of all her motherly duties. I would wake up from my midday nap to the sound of steam releasing from the iron. She always welcomed me with a gentle “Hi Japehto,” and I would hug her legs as she continued to iron the curtains she sewed. I think of the colors light green and bright orange from this memory. The sun shining through the bare windows. The air is warm and the setting is quiet. In moments like these, I really cherished the presence of my mother.

– Jessica Gould '20, Association of Pan-African Unity



Left to right:

Flat iron, 19th century  
American  
Cast iron

Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, Mount Holyoke College  
SK 2006.205.INV

Textile remnants, 19th century  
American  
Silk and cotton

Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, Mount Holyoke College  
SK 2006.1040a-m.INV

Hand crank sewing machine, 1850–1900  
American

Painted iron, brass, and wood  
Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, Mount Holyoke College  
SK 2006.537.INV

We brought together the objects in this case because they are poignant physical representations of what a laundress would have used in her work and may date from the same period as the Underground Railroad. The “North Star” pattern at the upper right of the quilt is symbolic of enslaved people's escape to freedom as well as the artist's aunt's journey north to start a better life for herself and her loved ones. I wanted to contextualize the contrast between the soft fabric patterns and heavy history that these quilts grapple with through these objects.

– Relyn Myrthil '19



**Christle Rawlins-Jackson (American, b. 1960)**  
**Fort to Fort: View from Cape Coast, 2006**  
 On loan from the artist

This quilt depicts the view as you're driving along the road from Cape Coast Castle to the Elmina slave forts in Ghana. I was taken by the peaceful and serene atmosphere of the fishing villages that were in extreme contrast to my experience inside the dark dank slave dungeons. Using the cathedral window pattern, I was compelled to create a visual record like the pictorial carvings found on Dogon wooden granary doors.

– Christle Rawlins-Jackson

I felt you there  
 And I knew you intended for me to survive  
 Now I'm meeting you here  
 Standing on your shoulders  
 I feel you around me  
 I look towards your light  
 That you protected so it could be my own

– Epyana Smith '18, Association of Pan-African Unity



Unidentified Dogon artist (from the Bandiagara  
Escarpment, Mali)  
Granary Door, first half of the 20th century  
On loan from Eugenia and Robert L. Herbert

These doors were used to cover the small, window-like openings of grain-storage buildings. This particular door is from the Dogon people in West Africa, south of the Niger bend. Carved into the wood are patterns and depictions of ancestors and sacred animals to protect the harvest. The detailed facade is made up of two panels held together by iron staples and accented with a simple sliding lock mechanism. In Rawlins-Jackson's quilt, we can see the influence of the Granary door's structure with the intricate cathedral window, wood-like border, and use of symbolic animals and cowrie shells. This was her way of mimicking the Granary door's sacred figure carvings. I wanted to have these two pieces side by side to highlight both the textural differences and similar embellishments. Rawlins-Jackson also speaks to the fact that this quilt is capturing a memory of her ancestors just like the Granary door.



Lesyslie Rackard (American, b. 1949)  
We Hold the Dream, 2017  
On loan from the artist

The words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. inspired me to make this wall hanging which resonated from his speech over fifty years ago. It is right in line with what we are dealing with today. What do you think he would say to our young people in this day and time? I think he would tell them to continue to put their hands up in peace and to speak out against injustices to our people. So for that, “We Hold the Dream” still.

– Lesyslie Rackard

Youth of this world, remember your power. Remember your soul, the textures of hope, love, and pain that make up the ancestors that fill every atom of your body. Youth, you can change the world—one person at a time. This body is a tool to disrupt the boxes that keep us humans controlled—only boys do this, only black people are this, only adults can make a difference. I am done being told I cannot change the course of the future. I am done being told my brown skin makes me less valuable than my white siblings. Youth of all color and ages—we are family. Remember this . . . to adapt and grow we must value each other’s perspective on life. There are many dimensions that we youth live in. We deserve to grow from each other’s stories.

Youth—rise up and defy the laws of identity and free your body.

– Key ’20, Association of Pan African Unity



Sheila Lutz (American, b. 1953)  
 The Journey North, 2017  
 On loan from the artist



Sheila Lutz (American, b. 1953)  
 44th President, 2017  
 On loan from the artist

The three design blocks depicted in this quilt have connections to the Underground Railroad. The block at the top—the 8-point north star—is also featured at the top right corner of The Laundress quilt. The design carries two messages—one: prepare to escape, and two: follow the North Star to freedom in Canada. North was the direction of traffic on the Underground Railroad and this signal was often used in conjunction with the song “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” a reference to the Big Dipper constellation which points towards the North Star. The next square holds the “bow tie signal” which was a sign for slaves to dress and travel in their best so that they might be seen as free men and women. The last pattern is called “flying geese” and was used as a signal for slaves to follow the direction of geese as they migrated north in the spring.



Lesyslie Rackard (American, b. 1949)  
The House of Giles Family Tree Quilt, 2018  
On loan from the artist

Our Family Hands that draw us close and pull our hearts home full of warmth and happiness. In memory of Naomi Giles Howell.

– Lesyslie Rackard

Life and death

Warm, golden memories of my cousin

Innocence is promising and radiant

Innocence is fleeting

Innocence taken away too early

Life and death is a thin line

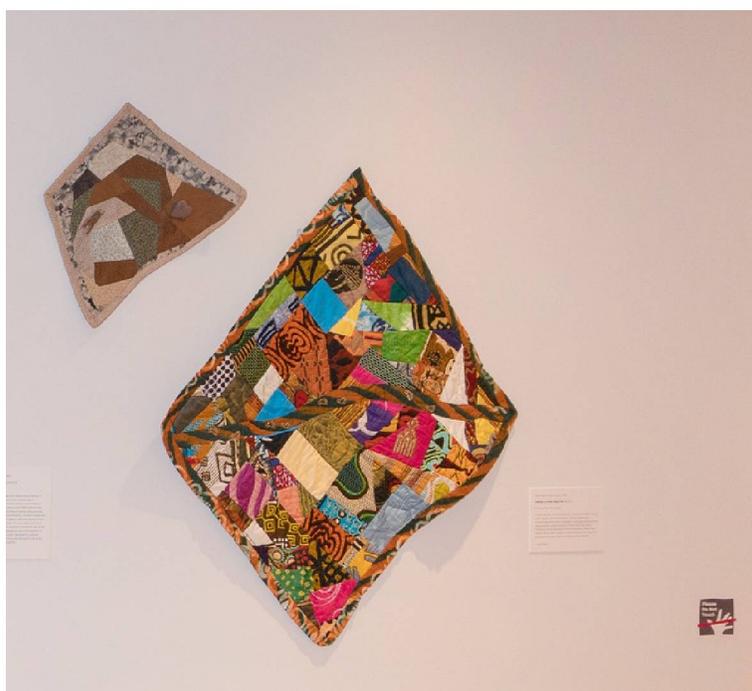
Her hands will always be there to remind us, to carry us, to join us

Left too soon, she unites with the others

Together in spirit

A place where her whole family will eventually be

– Emilee Aguerrebere '20, Arts and Community and Engagement Intern Spring 2019 and Jennifer Villa '21, Collections Intern 2018-2019



Susi Ryan (American, b. 1961)  
Hidden in Plain Sight No. 1 and No. 2, 2016  
On loan from the artist

This is a geographical map quilt, depicting 26 acres of land purchased by Venture Smith in Stonington, Connecticut in 1770. The exact location was hidden in plain sight for almost 100 years, until 2009 when public historians Marta Daniels and Nancy Byrne rediscovered the land, with credible documentation. Venture Smith was enslaved in colonial New England, sold into slavery from Guinea, West Africa for a piece of calico fabric and four barrels of rum in 1739. The twigs from Venture's 26 acres symbolize the wood he chopped to earn his freedom in 1765 while the rock on the map quilt represents a glacial erratic on Venture's land previously thought to be a key marker for mapping the property.

A new version of Venture Smith's 26 acres hidden in plain sight. Made with African fabric, hand quilted and embellished with silver footsteps, representing Venture's descendants unbeknownst to them that they were following in the footsteps of their Ancestor, when they would launch their boats for swimming and fishing, from property that was once owned by Venture Smith.

– Susi Ryan



Lesyslie Rackard (American, b. 1949) (with contributions by  
Karen Beckett, Christle Rawlins-Jackson, and Susi Ryan)  
We Are: Home - #4, 2016  
On loan from the artist

This quilt is part of Sisters in Stitches Joined by the Cloth's "Round Robin" series. All the Sisters make a center block, then the center is mailed to the next Sister to add a border or embellishment around that center and then sent to the next Sister. Afterwards, the quilt is sent back to the quilter who started the center. When the quilt returned to me, I added the border of houses that represented the journey to each of our homes.

– Lesyslie Rackard

Round and round, away I go  
From hand to hand, traveling stitches  
Different spirits are woven in.  
Round and round, on doors I knock  
Row by row, piece by piece. Steadily moving.  
Home is never too far away when you carry me with you.

– Jennifer Villa '21, Collections Intern 2018–2019



Naomi Henry (American, b. 1943)  
Jazz Divas, 2006  
On loan from the artist

A two-sided quilt, a tribute to women of color—the Jazz Diva's. Jazz is played from sunrise to sundown on any given day somewhere in the world. The Jazz Divas were stars in their own time. This quilt took a year to make, machine-pieced, and long-arm quilted with musical instruments and musical symbols.

– Naomi Henry



Manuel Álvarez Bravo, (Mexican, 1902–2002)

Las Lunas [The Moons], ca. 1965 negative

Gelatin silver print

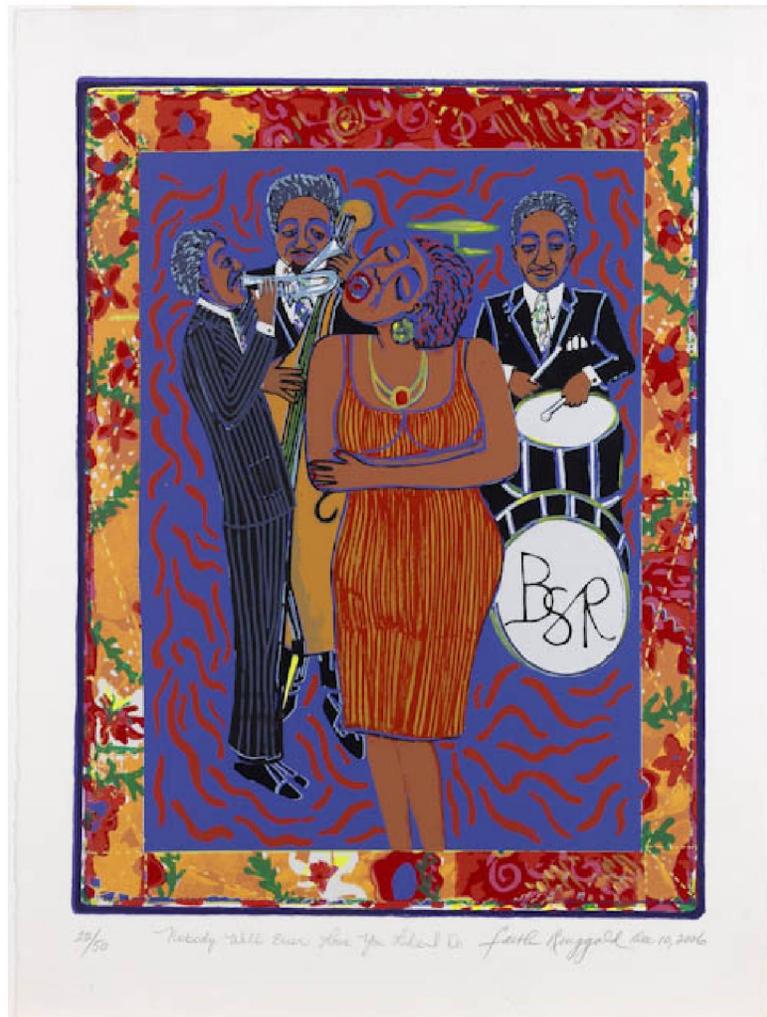
Gift of Marilyn and Wilson S. Mathias in honor of Barbara

Lord Mathias (Class of 1934)

2000.5.1

Álvarez Bravo's black and white photograph depicts two unidentified children—barely half of their faces visible—facing away from each other under two white painted disks. Rackard's quilt includes three silhouettes of her niece in the colors of the Pan-African flag. I chose this pairing because the juxtaposition of color, size, and use of text (or lack thereof) communicates a similar message of the innocence and basic struggle of identity that a child of color is born with. Martin Luther King Jr.'s quote "Children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin" speaks of a time that we are still working towards. A time that children like these will have to bring to fruition.

– Relyn Myrthil '19



Faith Ringgold, (American, b. 1930)  
Nobody will ever love you like I do, 2006  
Silkscreen

Gift of Harold and Janet Tague (Janet Hickey, Class of 1966)  
2007.7.12

Pairing the Faith Ringgold print with the Jazz Divas quilt was an obvious decision to me. They sing together as one with a shared color palette of vibrant primary colors and depict powerful, female musicians of color. In Jazz Divas, the colors beautifully melt into each other, mimicking the sun's journey and showing that jazz can be played at any time throughout the day.

– Relyn Myrthil '19



Sheila Lutz, (American, b. 1953)  
Bow Tie – Dress Your Best, 2015  
On loan from the artist

The “bow tie signal” was a sign for slaves to dress and travel in their best so that they might pass as free men and women. This quilt brings to mind the story of Ellen and William Craft. Ellen was a light skinned slave, the biological daughter of her enslaved mother and white master; William was a dark skinned slave. The couple married in 1846 but according to the law, enslaved men and women could not legally wed, so they devised a plan to escape to freedom together. However, to do so they had to disguise themselves. During a brief respite from work on the week of Christmas 1848, the pair fled from Georgia to Boston—Ellen posing as the male master and William as her slave. They finally sailed to England, where they published the book *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* in 1860. Ellen Craft dressed her best and passed as a wealthy, white male during the entire journey and to this day is an icon to academics working at the intersection between black studies and gender studies.

– Relyn Myrthil '19



Donna Clark, (American, b. 1950s)  
4 Tiny Treasure (2), 2007  
On loan from the artist

Donna Clark loves batik fabrics and uses colors that complement each other in a purposeful way. The artist drew inspiration from the Housetop pattern quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph and Gee's Bend, which use "squares within squares." I invite you to compare this quilt with Bendolph's Housetop Variation in the Museum's Weissman gallery. The similarities are striking, yet the quilts are individualistic in their use of color and stitch patterns.

– Relyn Myrthil '19

