Creativity

The Alabama Women Who Made Their Quilts a Part of Modern Art

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Quilter Jorena Pettway reading in her room, 1937. Photo by Arthur Rothstein. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Loretta Pettway (Gee's Bend)
Blocks and Strips, 1980
Greg Kucera Gallery

As the Alabama River wends its way south and west, it meanders in a series of bends before emptying its muddy waters into Mobile Bay. Along the way, about 30 miles from Selma, one of those bends cuts deep into the land to form an isolated peninsula, which is filled by the hamlet of Gee's Bend.

Gee's Bend (now also known as Boykin) is home to generations of African-American families whose ancestors were brought to the area as slaves, back when the South was covered in plantations. The story of the people of Gee's Bend is, therefore, similar to many

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ıth: one marked by inequality, institutionalized racism, and poverty. But the history of Gee's Bend is also a story of

Loretta Pettway Bennett (Gee's Bend)
B.J., 2007
Greg Kucera Gallery

Loretta Pettway (Gee's Bend)
It's in the Pockets, 1980
Greg Kucera Gallery

Quilts are the artistic treasures of Gee's Bend. Benders, as locals are called, have been stitching these exquisite textiles since the

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erhaps even earlier (some date the tradition back to ton plantation in the early 19th century). Eventually, as interest in the artworks spread, the quilts left the bend and

Initially, of course, the quilters of Gee's Bend—primarily African-American women—were not aiming for museum walls or international acclaim. Quilts were essential to daily life. In winter months, they were used to fight off the bitter cold in bed or to cover wood-slatted walls, thus keeping blustery drafts at bay. They were likewise spread out on the floor, where updrafts seeped in through creaky floorboards.

But the quilts of Gee's Bend aren't like typical quilts. Their distinct designs have a lot to do with the past and present of the place in which they were made, as if history seeps into the fabric.

Mary Lee Bendolph (Gee's Bend)
Arrow, 2005
Mount Holyoke College Art Museum

Mary Lee Bendolph (Gee's Bend)
Ghost Pockets, 2003
Mount Holyoke College Art Museum

The settlement inauspiciously came into existence in 1810, when Joseph Gee made the trek from North Carolina to take over the land, slaves in tow. His white nephews inherited it, increased the slave holdings, then sold the people and land to another relative, Mark Pettway, who brought more slaves and built a grand plantation house on the property.

After the Civil War and emancipation, the freed slaves of Gee's Bend became sharecroppers (many kept the Pettway name). But with the economy in disarray and no local infrastructure, the area fell into poverty. Photographs from 1937—many taken by Arthur Rothstein, who was dispatched to the area by the New Deal federal government—show fallow fields and a smattering of ramshackle cabins.

Yet the photographs also show a tight-knit community, which is reflected in its quilting tradition. The list of surnames of Gee's Bend quilters reads like a family reunion—Pettway, Bendolph, Kennedy, Bennett—sometimes four generations deep. Mothers taught their daughters and granddaughters to gather fabric scraps sourced from sackcloth, old shirts, or pant legs, and patchwork pieces together. But there was always an emphasis on individuality—a sense of improvisation and originality known as "my way" quilting. Nevertheless, after decades of quilting, it's clear the thousands of wildly different quilts still fit into a family.

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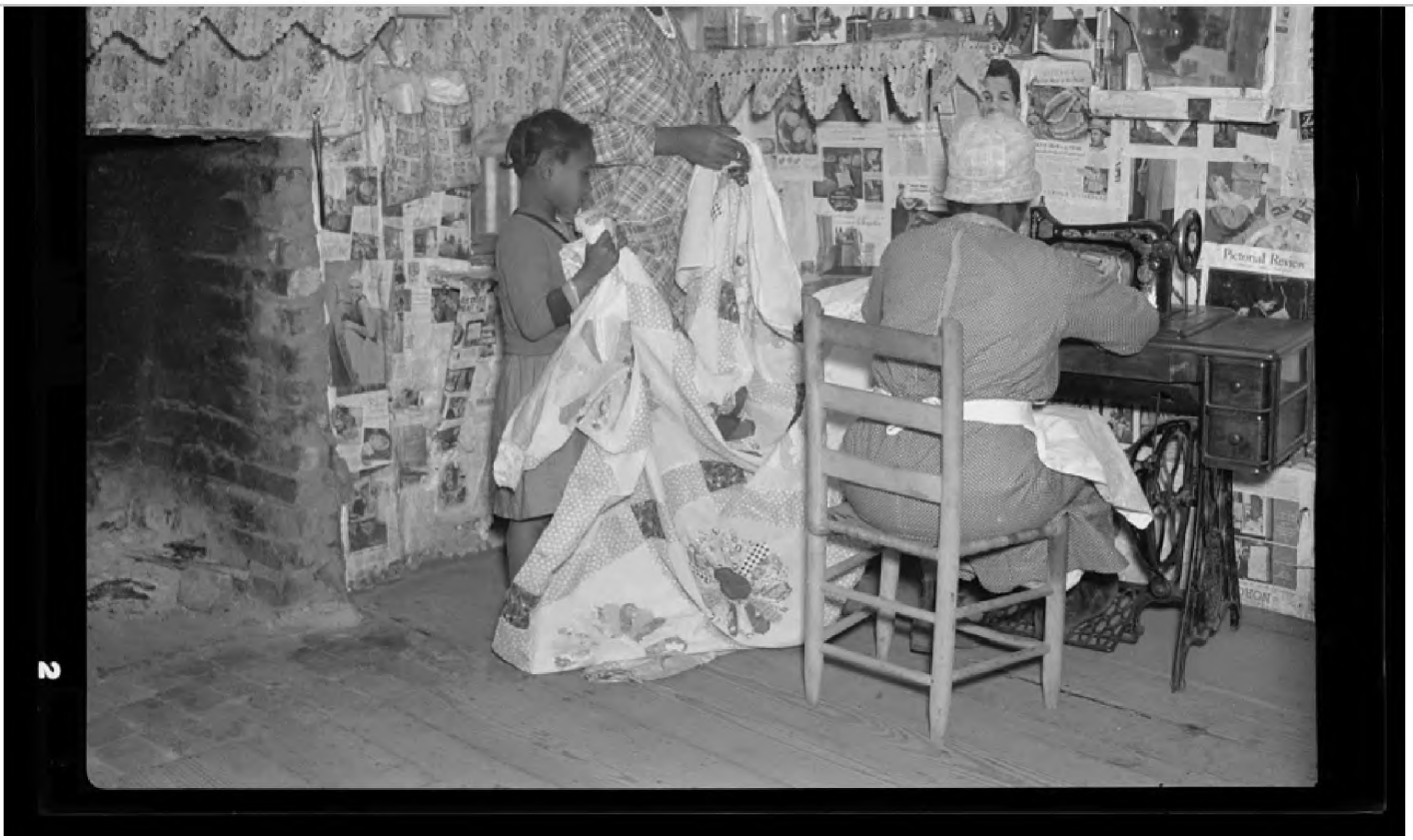

Quilter Jorena Pettway sewing a quilt with Jennie Pettway, 1937. Photo by Arthur Rothstein. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

As with some other arts, however, quilt-making has traditionally struggled for recognition as a fine art. Like weaving and embroidery, quilting is often seen as merely a craft, or "women's work," as opposed to painting and sculpting, which were traditionally considered more manly, high-art forms. In terms of art world acceptance, the women of Gee's Bend had an added disadvantage: their blackness.

Calling these quilts "outsider art"—with their imperfections, and untrained creators—only serves to shine a light on the walls the art world builds around itself and, by extension, the people and traditions that are being excluded.

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There are undeniable flashes of Frank Stella, Paul Klee, and Piet Mondrian, and hard-edge painters such as Ad Reinhardt. In fact, many Gee's Bend quilts predate like-minded works by their more famous abstract art cousins.

A resident of Gee's Bend sews a quilt, 2010. Photo by Carol M. Highsmith. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The quilter Gloria Hoppins, for instance, seems to have similar geometric fascinations as Josef Albers, while the mystique and calm depths of Pearlie Pettway Hall call to mind the meditative mind

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These comparisons, however, tend to overshadow

The exhibition was the brainchild of Bill Arnett, a white art dealer from Georgia, who, through his Tinwood Alliance, took a liking to what he called "black vernacular art." Soon, Gee's Bend quilts that had sold for a few bucks (if they sold at all) were going for tens of thousands of dollars. Jane Fonda gave Tinwood a million dollars in support, and Kathy Ireland licensed the quilt designs for a home goods line of furniture, lamps, and bric-a-brac.

Gee's Bend hasn't changed that much, though. Money—some of which got entangled in legal disputes with the Arnett family and other outsiders—found its way to many of the quilters, but over 50 percent of the community's population still lives below the poverty line. Women in Gee's Bend still quilt, though, and their works continue to tell an American story that's still being sewn. ■

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