

Quilting: An Examination of Harriet Powers and Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley.

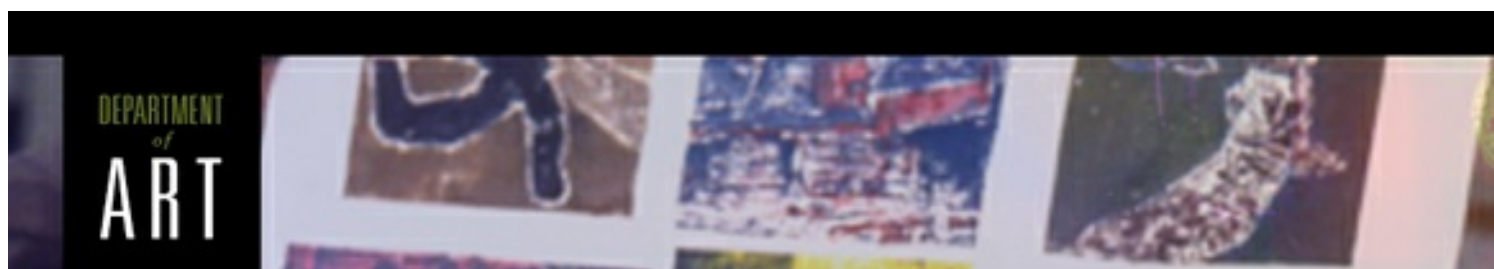
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Quilting: An Examination of Harriet Powers and Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley

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Abstract

African American quilting exhibits a long and rich history in antebellum and post\2013 bellum America. Although hindered by their social status as slaves, African Americans were adroit artisans adept at producing exceptional quilts for personal use as well as for the plantation household. In the few surviving examples, slave quilts demonstrate a range of geometric improvisation, decorative patterning, and asymmetrical ornamentation. African American quilts are unique in their ability to articulate personal histories and narratives, religious ideologies, and communicate messages through color, pattern, and emblematic imagery. A close investigation of African and Euro-American



design aesthetics is crucial to understanding the hybrid quality of quilts produced by slave women. Within this research, I specifically explore the lives and quilts produced by ex-slaves Harriet Powers and Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley\u2014notably, Pictorial Quilt II (1895\u20131898) and the Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt (1860\u20131862). In addition to the historical underpinnings of textile production in colonial America, my research also explores the iconographic complexities of African American quilting, and examines how these quilts functioned as a necessary resource for social, spiritual, and political endeavors. Given that slaves were generally provided commercial blankets every third year, sufficient bed cover was essential and provided a means for slaves to engage in quilting bees\u2014social events that offered communal kinship, slave courtship, and psychological respite from the hardships of daily life. Moreover, covert messages evident in slave quilt imagery, played a pivotal role for slaves escaping north through the Underground Railroad. I conclude with the life and work of contemporary artist and quilter, Faith Ringgold. Her artistic quilts and creative storytelling about slavery and freedom, reiterate the lives of enslaved African American women\u2014women like Powers and Keckley. In, *Quilting: An Examination of Harriet Powers and Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley*, I hope to thoroughly demonstrate how African American quilts functioned on several levels in nineteenth\u2013century America; and in part, were used not only as tools to compensate for meager supplies, but as special objects that are spiritual, communicative, and artistically extraordinary. In short, I hope that my research expresses the fundamental value, dynamism, and exceptional skill embedded in nineteenth\u2013century African American quilts.

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