

# ACCIDENTALLY ON PURPOSE:

The Aesthetic Management of Irregularities in  
African Textiles and African-American Quilts



*Eli Leon*

FIGGE ART MUSEUM



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Figge Art Museum  
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Ogy Blazeovic (Figures 63, 64 and 128)

Katherine Wetzel (Figure 5); © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Eli Leon (portrait photographs, except for Cora Lee Hall Brown, Mary Lue Brown, Thomas Covington, Odessa Doby, Floydzezella Singleton, Eula Thomas, Mary Jane Timmons, Anna J. Webb, which are family photographs)

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## In Memory

<i>Elzora Abram</i>	<i>Georgia Ann Johnson</i>
<i>Eliza McDowell Barber</i>	<i>Roberta Lee Johnson</i>
<i>Cora Lee Hall Brown</i>	<i>Ruby Lewis</i>
<i>Mary Lue Brown</i>	<i>Hattie Mitchell</i>
<i>Monin Brown</i>	<i>Dymon Moreland</i>
<i>Pearlie Harper Caddell</i>	<i>Elizabeth Munn</i>
<i>Charles Cater</i>	<i>Minnie Nobles</i>
<i>Ruth Charlotte Clay</i>	<i>Kattie Pennington</i>
<i>Trina Clay</i>	<i>Bettie Levader Phillips</i>
<i>Alberta Collins</i>	<i>Mattie Pickett</i>
<i>Thomas Covington</i>	<i>Francis Sheppard</i>
<i>Odessa Doby</i>	<i>Eula Thomas</i>
<i>Louisa Fite</i>	<i>Mary Thompson</i>
<i>Cara Girard</i>	<i>Ozzie B. Thompson</i>
<i>Willia Ette Graham</i>	<i>Mary Jane Timmons</i>
<i>Emma Hall</i>	<i>Venella Tyler</i>
<i>Versie Harrison</i>	<i>Anna J. Webb</i>
<i>Jewell Harts</i>	<i>Gussie Wells</i>
<i>Ida Harvey</i>	<i>Isiadore Whitehead</i>
<i>Gladys Henry</i>	<i>Arbie Williams</i>
<i>Elsie Howard</i>	<i>Beddi Wilson</i>
<i>Mary Liza Hughes</i>	



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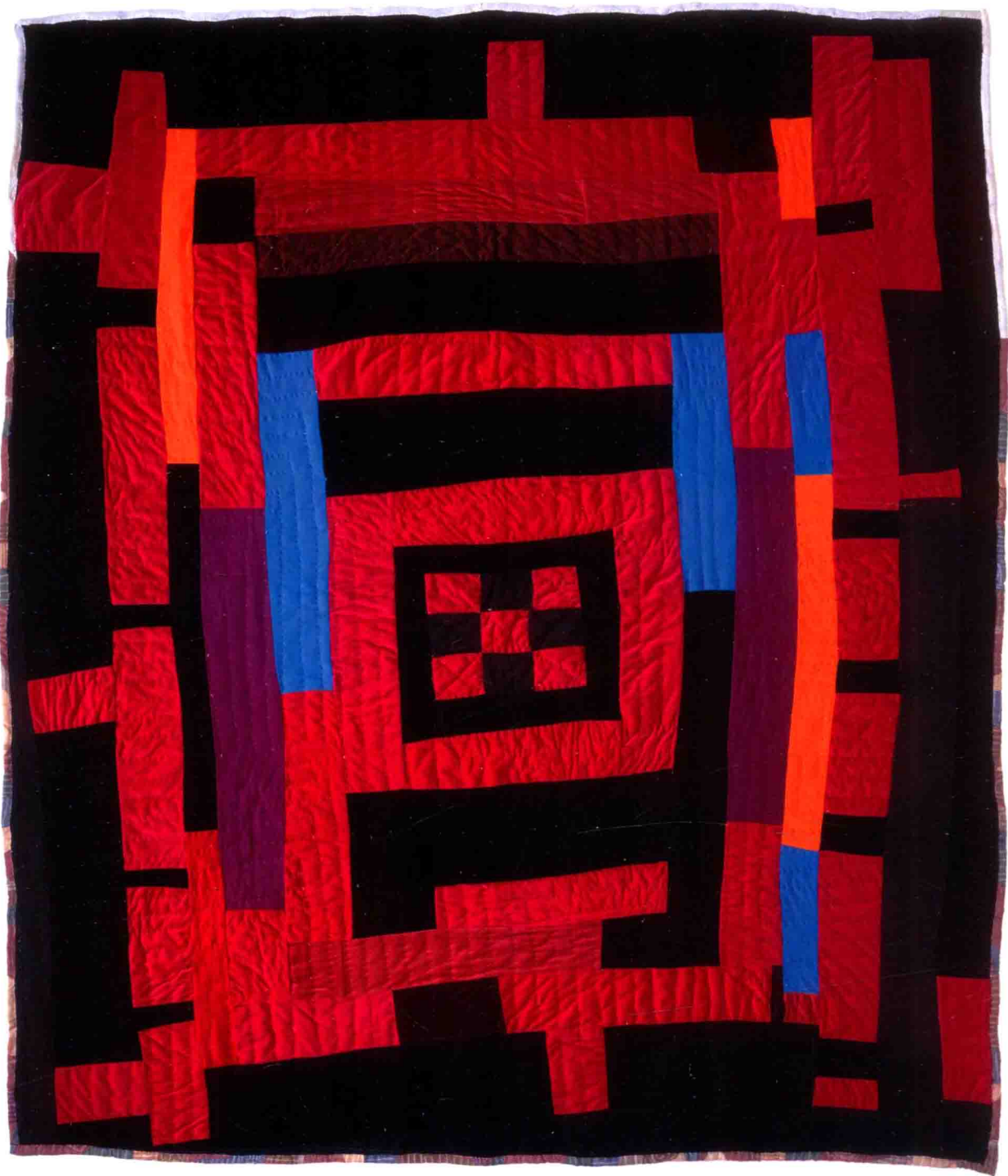


Figure 1

*Nine-patch Medallion*. Pieced by Gladys Henry, Butler, Texas, prior to 1996. Quilted by Laverne Brackens, Fairfield, Texas, 2004. 72"x 83" Front: robe velour, velveteen, interlock knit, wool jersey, polyester doubleknit, suede cloth, cotton flannel, wool flannel blend. Back: poly/cotton sheeting, rib knit.

## Preface

Aesthetic dispositions carried across the Atlantic by captured Africans appear to have informed a quilting tradition so powerful that to this day it preserves its identity in a special province of African-American quilts. Such “Afro-traditional” quilts are made by people who have no formal art training and who usually do not consider themselves artists; they learned their craft by watching their mothers, aunts and grandmothers, who in turn learned from previous generations – an astonishingly short line to the patchwork practices of enslaved Africans.

This catalogue and exhibition focus on the design relationships between this province of contemporary African-American quilt and West and Central African textile traditions. Although we have no documentary evidence for a direct transmission of African textile designs to the New World, these essays demonstrate that the design and construction of some African-American quilts share a variety of features with what has come down to us of West and Central African styles. These include structural characteristics such as “cross-strip banding,” strip construction, “modular medallions,” and other-than-four-sided bordering arrangements, which are briefly touched upon here, as well as a penchant for improvisation, the principal subject of this work.

Improvisation, pervasive in West and Central African art and familiar as a basic element of African-American musical forms, is the vital force in Afro-traditional quilting. The artists maintain a generous attitude toward the accidental, embracing innovations that originate beyond the conscious domain. They use approximate measurement, stepping up the order of variability by dealing creatively with the tricky “piecing” situations that ensue. They favor “flexible patterning,” in which the design is conceived as an invitation to variation; rather than repeat, the pattern may materialize in a sequence of visual elaborations. Other variable elements, such as pre-cut scraps, shifts in scale, and multiple patterns, distinguish their work.

These approaches are antithetical to the standard American quilting tradition – practiced by both blacks and whites – in which great value is placed on precise measurement and exact pattern replication. They bear a keen likeness, however, to the improvisational practices of the textile makers of West and Central Africa. How might such a connection have come about?

From interviews conducted by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s with thousands of former slaves, it has been possible to reconstruct the context in which pre-Civil War African-American quilting took place.

“Piecing” a quilt refers to the process whereby small patches of fabric are sewn together to make the decorative layer of the quilt called the “quilt top.” For an appliquéd quilt top, cutout decorations are sewn onto a larger piece of material. When such a top is sewn (quilted) to the batting and (often unpieced) backing, it becomes a quilt.



My one-hundred-plus hours of interviews are archived on about 200 CDs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries, Archives and Special Collections: "Eli Leon Interviews with African-American Quiltmakers." I refer to them in my endnotes as e.g., UN-L: EL: CD 45B (10/85-12/85), Tracks 6, 7.

Africans enslaved in America were in need of bed-cover. In the opening chapter of this catalogue we see clear evidence that the quilting practices they developed to satisfy this need offered aesthetic satisfaction as well as practical benefit, making a pleasure of necessity. Thus, displaced Africans were in a position to transmit to their American progeny attitudes and practices learned in their native lands.

Additional evidence for this creative endeavor comes from various nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources and examples, as well as research by myself and others. For over a quarter of a century I have collected "Afro-traditional" quilts (see p. 37), studied their design, and interviewed their makers, who testified to the influence of their

parents and grandparents, some of whose forebears may have been brought from Africa as recently as the mid-nineteenth century. These interviews were designed, among other things, to uncover attitudes about improvisation. Although irregular pattern repetition was long denigrated by the dominant culture, whose influence was so inescapable that even highly improvisational quiltmakers sometimes disavow the practice, a good number of the quiltmakers I contacted endorsed it wholeheartedly. In my second chapter, which makes up the bulk of this catalogue, I have quoted these quiltmakers liberally. Their eye-opening descriptions of techniques and aesthetic preferences give new meaning to the phrase "accidentally on purpose."

—Eli Leon



## Introduction

It is a pleasure to introduce Eli Leon. He is a world-class scholar of black-made quilt-tops. He is constantly learning, interviewing, assessing, and writing on what turns out to be one of the strong currents of art in our country. Women of color, working within the Afro-traditional design heritage (as opposed to European-oriented traditions of patterning) have richly shared with Leon their aesthetic ideals and aspirations. Thanks to his work and their cooperation, we move ever closer to the establishment of firm, systematic links between the textiles of West and Central Africa and textile action among key black quilters of the United States.

Already in Brazil such links have been discovered and analyzed. Bahia imported multi-strip textiles from Tukolor (i.e. Fulani from the Senegal River) the northern Yoruba city of Ilorin, and other West African sources. They were worn with pride by the famous *bahianas*, black women selling *akara* [bean fritters] and other treasures of classical Yoruba and Fon cuisine in the streets of Salvador. In the summer of 1983 Venice Lamb studied my photographs of such trade cloths and was able to confirm precisely African west coast provenances.

Brazilians call such textiles *panos da costa*, "cloths from the coast." In Bahia there were even

at least three Afro-Brazilian narrow loom weavers, Ezequiel Geraldo de Conceicao, Alexandre Gerales da Conceicao, and Abdias do Sacramento Nobre. They worked respectively in and around 1900, the 1940s, and the 1970s- 80s. They wove, on an improvised loom, narrow strips in the African manner which were then sewn together to make powerfully striped cloths with off-beat phrasing of the weft-blocks.

Working my way through such collections in Brazil I stumbled upon a textile equivalent to the Rosetta Stone. It was an Afro-Brazilian cloth made around 1940 from sewn together store-bought strips [*fitas*] of striped European trade cloth. The *fitas* were chosen precisely because, when sewn together, their intersecting striped patterns deeply satisfied African-influenced tastes for narrow strips in vibrant off-beat combinations. This exact substitution occurred again in the rise of *aséesente* and *aséesenti* cloths among respectively the Saamaka and Ndjugá maroon civilizations of black Suriname in northern South America.

In the United States we have an Africanizing wool blanket made around 1890 by Luiza Combs of Hazard, Kentucky. She herself had been born in West Africa. As I remarked in my book, *Flash of the Spirit*: