**The Quilts of Gee’s Bend**

Within the small, remote community of Gee’s Bend, Alabama, four generations of African American women have produced patchwork quilts. These quilts were born from resourcefulness, with fabric salvaged from worn-out clothes and feed sacks, but in the hands of Gee’s Bend women these everyday materials evolved into marvels of individual expression. Bound by geographic isolation and a shared history of enslaved ancestors, the quilters of Gee’s Bend have long experimented with bold geometric shapes and a fiercely independent design process. Internationally recognized as masterpieces of American art, select quilts have been displayed in museums around the world.

The quilting tradition in Gee’s Bend (also called Boykin) goes back as far as the early 1800s, when the community was the site of a cotton plantation owned by Joseph Gee. Enslaved women pieced scrap cloth to make bedcovers and passed along their design techniques to daughters and granddaughters. During the era of tenant farming in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the women of Gee’s Bend made quilts to keep their families warm in shacks that were untouched by advances of indoor plumbing, telephones, and electricity. These products of necessity have become celebrated works of free-spirited creativity. The five quilts in this gallery are a recent museum acquisition through the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, a community partnership dedicated to supporting African American artists from the southern United States.

*This exhibition is supported in part by The Elise M. Besthoff Foundation.*

**Nettie Young (American, 1916–2010)**

*“Stacked Bricks” quilt*, 1928, Cotton and corduroy

Museum purchase and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2017.167

This is the oldest quilt in the exhibition, made in 1928 when Nettie Young was only 11 years old. Young recalled that she learned how to piece a quilt by imitating her mother’s work using scraps of cloth. Many of the Gee’s Bend quilters recall the area’s unique quilting tradition of encouraging young women to create their own designs rather than follow established quilting patterns. Patterned textiles, including big horned sheep, bowling pins, heraldic crests, and abstract geometric shapes, make up this quilt. Patches of pink silk fabric almost entirely degraded over the past ninety years, likely due to chemicals in the dye. In 2019, as part of conservation efforts, a supportive layer of dyed pink bobbinet (tulle) covered the damaged areas to restore integrity to the quilt structure and protect the cotton batting.

**Ella Bendolph (American, 1904–1995)**

*“Strips” quilt*, c. 1955, Corduroy, wool, nylon knot, and cotton/polyester blend

Museum purchase and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2017.168

The fabrics used in Ella Bendolph’s strip quilt came from used clothing, including well-worn denim faded from daily use. The quilt’s color harmony and geometric shaping come from the eye of the quilter and the materials available rather than from following an established pattern. Known as “my way” quilts by the Gee’s Bend quilters, this improvisational quilting style has been likened to the spontaneity found in the rhythm of jazz.

**Qunnie Pettway (American, 1943–2010)**

*“Bricklayer” variation quilt*, 1975, Corduroy

Museum purchase and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2017.170

In 1972 the Freedom Quilting Bee, a sewing cooperative in Gee’s Bend and nearby Alberta, Alabama, secured a contract with Sears, Roebuck and Company to sew pillow covers. Sears provided wide-gauge cotton corduroy in a variety of colors popular in the 1970s, including harvest gold, chocolate brown, avocado green, and the cherry red, cream, and orange used here. Freedom Quilting Bee workers like Qunnie Pettway took home leftover fabric from the pillowcase construction. This corduroy material, which had never before been used by area quilters, brought a new texture and renewed energy to Gee’s Bend quilts, appearing widely in the women’s personal sewing projects of the 1970s. Qunnie Pettway was part of a large group of interconnected African American families sharing the same surname, descendants of people enslaved at a plantation owned by Mark H. Pettway from 1845 to 1895. Qunnie learned to quilt from her mother, Candis Pettway.

**Polly Bennett (American, 1922–2003)**

*Checkerboard-Four-Block Variation divided by a Cross quilt*, c. 1955, Cotton

Museum purchase, and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2017.169 Polly Bennett experimented with both patterned work, like this Checkerboard-Four-Block Variation quilt, but also free-form abstraction quilts that followed no known pattern. She recalled learning to quilt from her mother when she was about eight years old, and that by her late teens she started making quilts which she described as “a ‘get together.’ Just putting pieces together—any color, any sizes.” The cream-colored backing on this quilt is made from pieced bleached sugar sacks, with the remnants of a blue stamped label reading “Pure Cane Granulated…Bayamo…Product of Cuba.”

**Mary Lee Bendolph (American, b. 1935)**

*Work-clothes quilt*, c. 2002, Denim and cotton

Museum purchase and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2017.171

Mary Lee Bendolph is one of the current memory keepers in Gee’s Bend. She has continued the quilting traditions into the contemporary era when the community’s quilts achieved fame through PBS documentaries, art collectors, and museum exhibitions. Speaking often about the women’s traditions and their meaning, Bendolph sees the transformation of old clothing into quilts, evident on this *Work-clothes quilt*, as a metaphor for surviving hard times and a way to remember the historical deliverance of African Americans from slavery. In a 2006 interview, Bendolph invoked the biblical account of the liberation of the Israelites in Egypt as a parallel to the African American experience. “First we was in Egypt and we came through the Red Sea,” she said. “The old things are a reminder of the Red Sea, away back in time; they remind you of where you have been and where the Lord has brought you from. So you want to keep it. Take what the Lord done bless us and use it.”