

LESSON #11

Museum Connection: Art and Intellect

Lesson Title: Stories in Fabric: Quilting in the African American Community

Purpose: The purpose of this lesson is to introduce the art of telling stories through quilts by examining the work of Harriet Powers. Students will learn about the quilting technique known as appliqué and why Harriet Powers chose quilting as a way to express her thoughts and feelings.

Grade Level/Content Area: Intermediate Elementary, Art

Time Frame: 3-5 class periods

Visual Art Essential Learner Outcomes

Outcome II- Historical, Cultural, and Social Context

The student will demonstrate understanding of the visual arts as a basic aspect of history and human experience.

Expectation A- The student will determine ways in which works of art express ideas about one's self, other people, places, and events.

Indicators of Learning- 2 Creative Expression: Inspired by selected art works from different times and places, the student will create images and forms that express ideas about one's self, other people, places, and events.

Objectives:

- Students will describe how artist Harriet Powers used quilts to tell stories.
- Students will create a quilt block that tells a story about themselves.

Visual Art Standards

2.2.a. (Grade 4) Identify technologies, processes, and materials from different times and places used to create visual art.

2.2.b (Grade 5) Describe the origins of selected forms of expression and stylistic innovations used in the visual arts.

3.1.a. (Grade 4) Experiment in media, processes, and techniques to express thoughts and feelings that have personal meaning.

3.1.b. (Grade 5) Manipulate art media, materials, and tools safely.

4.1.c. (Grade 5) Use criteria recognized in exemplary models to support responses to personal artworks and the artworks of others.

Reading State Standards

1.4.h. (Grade 4) Connect the text to prior knowledge or personal experience.

2.2.b. (Grade 4) Use graphic aids: photographs, drawings, sketches.

Vocabulary

Appliqué – A quilting method in which cloth cutouts are sewn or fastened to a larger piece of material

Muslin – An undyed woven cotton fabric frequently used as the underlayer of a quilt.

Quilt – (n.) A bed coverlet of two or more layers of cloth filled with padding (such as down or batting) held in place by ties or stitched designs

Quilt – (v.) To stitch in patterns through the three layers that make up a quilt.

Quilting bee – A gathering of people for the specific purpose of producing or sewing a quilt

Story quilts – These quilts incorporate symbols and figures to tell a story

Utilitarian – An item that is created primarily for everyday use rather than for beauty

Materials:

For the teacher:

Teacher Resource Sheet 1 “They Sold Aunt Nettie Down South” Quilt by Barbara Pietila

Teacher Resource Sheet 2, “Bible Quilt, 1886” by Harriet Powers

For the student:

Student Resource Sheet 1 Quilting and Harriet Powers

Student Resource Sheet 2 My Story in Fabric

Student Resource Sheet 3 Story Quilt Block

colored pencils

Resources

Publications

Dobard, Raymond G. "Signs and Symbols." *Footsteps*. Jan./Feb. 2003: 27-31.

Flournoy, Valerie. *The Patchwork Quilt*. New York: Dial Books, 1985.

Freeman, Roland L. *A Communion of the Spirits: African American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories*. Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1996.

Freeman, Roland. *Southern Roads/City Pavements: Photographs of Black Americans*. New York International Center of Photography, 1981.

Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched From the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South*. New York: Dutton Studio Books, 1990.

Kordak, Mary. "The Quiet Legacy." *Footsteps*. May/June 2003: 6-10.

Lyons, Mary. *Stitching Stars, The Story Quilts of Harriet Powers*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1993.

Ringgold, Faith, Linda Freeman, and Nancy Roucher. *Talking to Faith Ringgold*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1996.

Ringgold, Faith. *Tar Beach*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991.

Sanders, Nancy. *A Kid's Guide to African American History*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2000.

Web sites

African American Quilters of Baltimore. <http://www.aaqb.org>

Brenneman, Judy Anne Johnson. "Quilts and Quilters ~ Yesterday and Today." *Women Folk*. <http://www.womenfolk.com>

National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. "Pictorial Quilts. 2003." 1 June 2003 <<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/collections/quilts/pictoria.htm>>

QuiltEthnic.com. African-American Quilting: Historical
[.http://www.quiltethnic.com/historical.html](http://www.quiltethnic.com/historical.html)

Teacher Background:

Quilting is the process of sewing together in continuous stitches (or tying with yarn knots) three layers of material-- a patterned top, an inner batting, and a backing often made of muslin—to create a bed covering known as a quilt.

In Colonial America, quilting and other needlework provided some of life's necessities. Responsibility for the spinning, weaving, and sewing of fabric into quilts and clothing fell to the women. Quilts provided warmth and were used by the slaves and free African Americans who made them. They were used on beds, floors, wagon seats, and any place extra warmth was needed. Enslaved women who worked the fields tied their babies to fence posts in old quilts to keep them safe while they worked. Special quilts called healing quilts were used to cover the sick and nurture them back to health. Quilts were used during religious ceremonies such as baptisms and burials. By adding sun patterns, crosses, and coffin shapes to a quilt, a memorial could be created for someone who had died.

Quilting was one of the few ways African Americans could record their past history and present life. Fabric scraps were cut into shapes and pieced together to preserve memories of their African heritage. The color choices, stitching patterns, and even tears recorded their desperate situation. An old scrap from someone's jacket could tell a story about that person by sparking a memory.

"These textiles clearly demonstrate the influence of the African American experience in America and throughout the Diaspora. They also remind us that the human mind, spirit, and talent can transcend the cruelest form of human

degradation – slavery. Although slavery denied these women their physical freedom, it did not diminish their creative talent and artistic genius." (Fry 83)

Quilting met another need: the need to socialize. Quilting parties moved among the slave cabins on a rotating basis. The women helped each other finish quilts. Men, women, and children took part in the quilting parties, for which permission from the master was required. Children heard stories and gossip while they sat on the floor under the quilting frame threading needles for the women. The men also socialized but traditionally they did not quilt. Held at different times of the year such as Christmas or end of harvest, special quilting parties included singing, dancing, games, and even a little courtship.

"Quiltin's wuz a heap of fun. Sometimes two or three families had a quiltin' together. Folkses would quilt some un' den dey passed 'round de toddy. Some would be cookin' while de others wuz a quiltin' an' den when supper wuz ready dey all stopped to eat. Dem colla'd greens wi'd cornpone an' plenty of ginger cakes an' fruit puffs an' big old pots of coffee wuz mighty fine eatin' to us den." (Fry 77)

Today, in Maryland, African American quilters continue the tradition, meeting to quilt together and socialize as their ancestors did. The African American Quilters of Baltimore host a Web site where their history reads:

The African American Quilters of Baltimore was founded in 1989 by three African American quilters seeking the community of other African American quilters. Their primary goal was to offer support and information for African American quilters in an environment of acceptance and welcome. Since that time, we have grown steadily and now include quilters of all skill levels, from beginners to professionals.

In addition, our members participate in projects in schools and libraries in keeping with our "Each One, Teach One" philosophy. Our biannual quilt show has become a popular event that also serves to enlighten the public as to the diversity of African American quilters and to express our pride in our work and our traditions. www.aaqb.org

The Quilting Tradition

In 19th-century America, many women engaged in some form of needlework. African American women sewed and quilted out of necessity to keep their families clothed and warm. Enslaved women and girls spent hours sewing and mending clothing and making quilts for the members of the master's household under the watchful eyes of the mistress of the plantation. They returned home at night and made quilts for their families, using worn clothes, sacks, old quilts, raw cotton, newspapers, and scraps from the mistress. Many enslaved people were issued a blanket every three years and slept on a dirt floor or a plank bed. The warm quilts offered some relief from these harsh conditions. Quilts had to be sturdy to endure years of hard use.

At night when they had returned home, enslaved women might gather to work on a quilt; these get-togethers were called quilting bees. A quilt would be stretched over a large frame and the women stitched and talked the night away. This was one of the few times African Americans were allowed to gather together for pleasure. Quilting was also a way for them to connect and express some of their talents. Slave quilts from this period were not recognized as works of art, and, indeed, few have survived for us to admire and value.

One quilting technique used by southern, enslaved women was appliqué: Small pieces of fabric were cut into shapes or designs and sewn to a larger piece of fabric. This technique is common in Benin, a West African country that was the source of many slaves. It is interesting to note that in Benin, men (not women) are the experts in appliqué. The subject matter may be animals, shapes, people, and other things in their environment. The products ranged from clothing to flags. Stories and traditions from Benin are evident in the quilts created by an enslaved woman named Harriet Powers.

Harriet Powers

Harriet Powers was born into slavery in 1837 in Georgia and raised on a plantation in Georgia. She was never taught to read or write but learned about the Bible during church services and from stories passed down orally. She probably learned how to sew from her mother or the planter's wife and most likely earned extra money as a seamstress throughout her life. She married Armstead Powers with whom she had nine children. The quilts that Harriet made while raising her family on a small farm, were utilitarian--everyone needed to keep warm on cold winter nights.

Later in life Powers focused on artistic expression in her quilts. She was 49 years old when she expressed her spiritual life in her first story quilt. A deeply religious person, she wanted to record stories from the Bible that would tell her spiritual journey. Her second story quilt included stories she had heard growing up as an enslaved child. Nature, shooting stars, meteors, snow, and eclipses were common subjects.

"How did Harriet learn to make these figures? She was an African American with African ancestors. She might have seen her mother, an aunt, or a grandfather making similar designs in the slave cabins when she was growing up. It's possible that she knew someone who had been born in Africa, then captured and brought directly to Georgia as a slave." (Lyons 33)

In 1886 Harriet entered her precious Bible Quilt in the Athens, Georgia, Cotton Fair--a fair similar to our present-day county fairs held in Maryland during the summer months. In the exhibition tent, amidst jars of preserves and pickles and other needlework, local art teacher Jennie Smith saw Harriet's story quilt. Impressed by the quilt's color and beauty, she offered to buy the quilt on the spot, but Harriet couldn't bear to part with her creation. Four years later, when Harriet needed money, she sold the beautiful quilt to Jennie for five dollars.

In 1895 Jennie entered the prized quilt in The Cotton States International Exposition in Atlanta. It was here in the "Negro" Building, constructed for ten thousand dollars raised by the African American community," (Fry 86) that the world was introduced to the artistic genius of Harriet Powers. Today, the Bible Quilt made by Harriet Powers is in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History.

Lesson Development

1. **Motivation:** Display Teacher Resource Sheet 1, "They Sold Aunt Nettie Down South" Quilt. Tell students that this is a quilt by Baltimore artist Barbara Pietila.

Ask students: What story do you see in the design of this quilt?

2. Explain to students that they will be examining the life and work of another famous quilter, Harriet Powers. Display Teacher Resource Sheet 2, Bible Quilt. Read aloud or have students read Student Resource Sheet 1, Quilting and Harriet Powers.

Ask students to ponder the thoughts of Harriet Powers as she:

- Reminisced about Bible stories from her childhood
- Chose feelings to express from her spiritual life
- Searched and scrounged for fabric
- Worked out the composition and style of each block, figure, and shape
- Cut out hundreds of small pieces
- Stitched the quilt top with thousands of stitches
- Sandwiched the quilt top, batting, and quilt backing
- Quilted the Bible Quilt together with thousands of stitches
- Sold this adored work of art for five dollars

Tell students that creating a quilt was a labor of love for Harriet Powers. Being a religious person, Harriet used Bible stories as the theme for one of her quilts. Ask: "If you could not read or write but wanted to tell a story about yourself, what would you choose to illustrate in fabric?"

3. Display Teacher Resource Sheets 1 & 2 again. Lead a discussion that allows students to share their interpretation of the quilts. Then, discuss the characteristics of Harriet Powers' quilts, and her interpretation of them. Be sure to touch on the broken vertical strips, simple shapes, contrasting colors, and use of patterned fabric, symbols, and subject matter.
4. Distribute Student Resource Sheet 2, My Story In Fabric. Students should use this worksheet to brainstorm the elements in their lives that they would want to include in their personal story quilt. Teachers should model this activity. A possible example: "In the Accomplishments block you could draw a graduation cap." Complete a sample drawing for the students.
5. Using colored pencils, students should draw their own ideas and feelings in each block. Students can take turns telling the class how they expressed their ideas in

some of the blocks. They may use their own ideas to fill in the blocks if the supplied ones do not apply.

6. Students should take their ideas from Student Resource Sheet 2, My Story in Fabric, and design a quilt block on Student Resource Sheet 3, Story Quilt Block. The finished drawing should capture a memory or tell about a meaningful event or feelings.
7. **Assessment:** Students should create a display card that explains their quilt block. They should include answers to the following questions:
 - What events, beliefs, aspirations, or people did you capture in your story quilt block and what did you preserve?
 - What does your quilt block show the world about you?
 - How is your work similar to that of Harriet Powers?
8. **Closure:** Have a class discussion about the following: How did Harriet Powers, a woman who could neither read nor write, record history? Why was it important to her? What does her artwork tell us of her spirit and talent?

Thoughtful Application

Have you ever created some type of art that captured a memory? What was the memory and what did you make? (Photo, painting, drawing, sculpture, banner, jewelry, scrapbook, collage, etc.) Could you create a work of art to honor someone who has done something great and not been recognized? What would it be? Where could you display it for many people to see?

Lesson Extensions

- Visit the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture.
- Read the book, *Stitching Stars: The Story Quilts of Harriet Powers*. Find out how a young white artist named Jennie Smith preserved the legacy of Harriet Powers' Bible Quilt, which eventually was given to the people of the United States.
- Read about Faith Ringgold and her story quilts in *Talking to Faith Ringgold*, or watch her videos, "The Last Story Quilt" and "Faith Ringgold Paints Crown Heights."
- Read *The Patchwork Quilt* by Valerie Flournoy. Discuss the importance of the fabrics in the quilt and the finished quilt in the story.
- Go to the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., to see Harriet Powers's Bible Quilt.
- Create a real story quilt block on muslin. Use the lesson, Creating a Story in Fabric.

They Sold Aunt Nettie Down South
by Barbara Pietila



© Barbara Pietila, Baltimore, MD

Teacher Resource Sheet 2

**Bible Quilt, 1886
by Harriet Powers**

For resource,
Open hyperlink(s) below

National Museum of American History, Kenneth E. Behring Center
Treasures of American History online exhibition

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_556462

Quilting and Harriet Powers

In 19th-century America, many women engaged in some form of needlework. African American women sewed and quilted out of necessity to keep their families clothed and warm. Enslaved women and girls spent hours sewing and mending clothing and making quilts for the members of the master's household under the watchful eyes of the mistress of the plantation. They returned home at night and made quilts for their families, using worn clothes, sacks, old quilts, raw cotton, newspapers, and scraps from the mistress's. Many enslaved people were issued a blanket every three years and slept on a dirt floor or a plank bed. The warm quilts offered some relief from these harsh conditions. Quilts had to be sturdy to endure years of hard use.

At night when they had returned home, enslaved women might gather to work on a quilt; these get-togethers were called quilting bees. A quilt would be stretched over a large frame and the women stitched and talked the night away. This was one of the few times African Americans were allowed to gather together for pleasure. Quilting was also a way for them to connect and express some of their talents. Slave quilts from this period were not recognized as works of art, and, indeed, few have survived for us to admire and value.

One quilting technique used by southern, enslaved women was appliqué: small pieces of fabric were cut into shapes or designs and sewn to a larger piece of fabric. This technique is common in Benin, a West African country that was the source of many slaves. It is interesting to note that in Benin, men (not women) are the experts in appliqué. The subject matter may be animals, shapes, people, and other things in their environment. The products ranged from clothing to flags. Stories and traditions from Benin are evident in the quilts created by an enslaved woman named Harriet Powers.

Harriet Powers

Harriet Powers was born into slavery in 1837 and raised on a plantation in Georgia. She was never taught to read or write but learned about the Bible during church services and from stories passed down orally. She probably learned how to sew from her mother or the planter's wife and most likely earned extra money as a seamstress throughout her life. She married Armstead Powers with whom she had nine children. The quilts that Harriet made while raising her family on a small farm, were utilitarian--everyone needed to keep warm on cold winter nights.

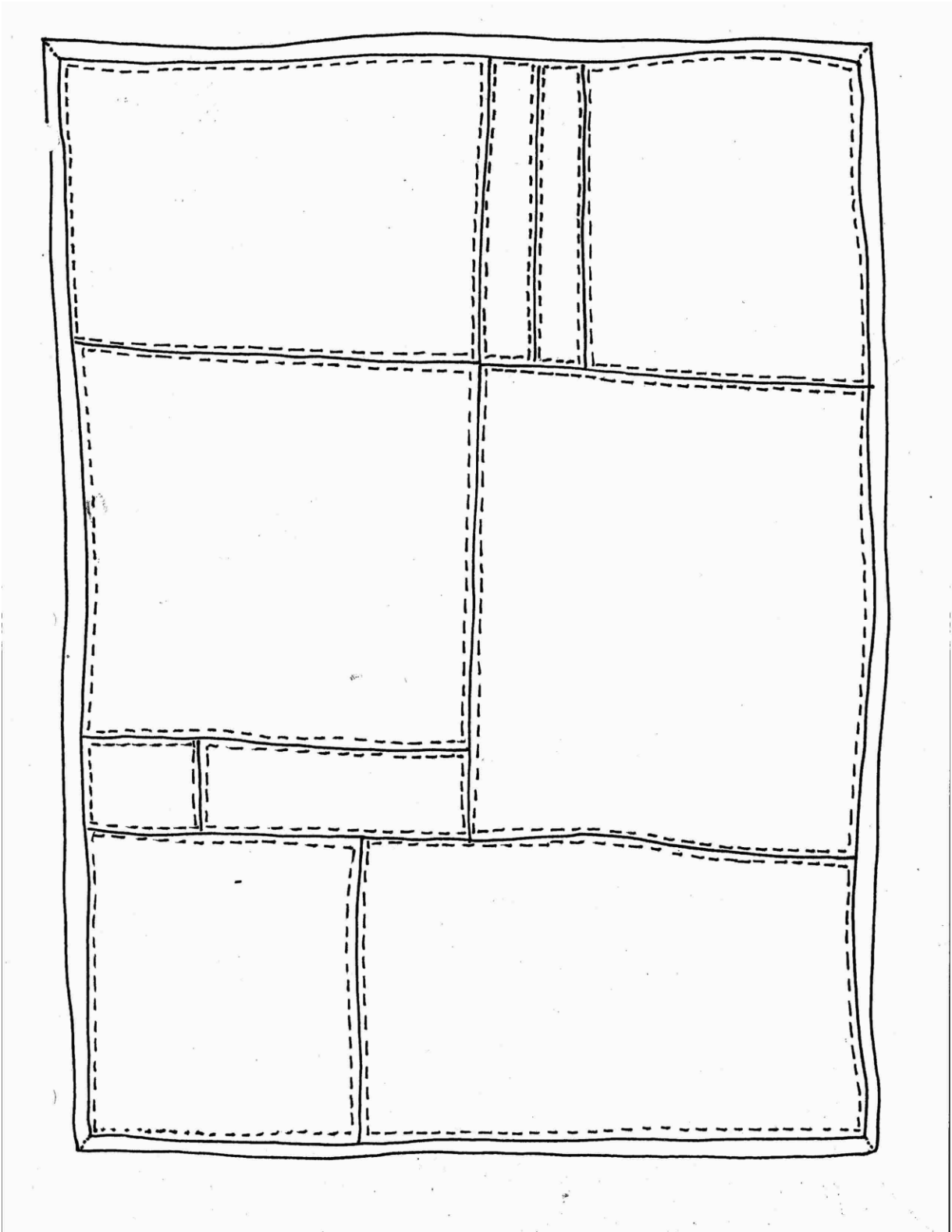
Later in life Powers focused on artistic expression in her quilts. She was 49 years old when she expressed her spiritual life in her first story quilt. A deeply religious person, she wanted to record stories from the Bible that would tell her spiritual journey. Her second story quilt included stories she had heard growing up as an enslaved child. Nature, shooting stars, meteors, snow, and eclipses were common subjects.

"How did Harriet learn to make these figures? She was an African American with African ancestors. She might have seen her mother, an aunt, or a grandfather making similar designs in the slave cabins when she was growing up. It's possible that she knew someone who had been born in Africa, then captured and brought directly to Georgia as a slave." (Lyons 33)

In 1886 Harriet entered her precious Bible Quilt in the Athens, Georgia, Cotton Fair--a fair similar to the present-day county fairs held in Maryland during the summer months. In the exhibition tent, amidst jars of preserves and pickles and other needlework, local art teacher Jennie Smith saw Harriet's story quilt. Impressed by the quilt's color and beauty, she offered to buy the quilt on the spot, but Harriet couldn't bear to part with her creation. Four years later, Harriet and Armstead fell on hard times and they sold the beautiful quilt to Jennie for five dollars.

In 1895 Jennie entered the prized quilt in The Cotton States International Exposition in Atlanta. It was here in the "Negro" Building, constructed for ten thousand dollars raised by the African American community," (Fry 86) that the world was introduced to the artistic genius of Harriet Powers.

Student Resource Sheet 2
My Story on Fabric



Student Resource Sheet 3
Story Quilt Block

