

African American Quilts of Alabama: Flowers without Roots?

By Robert Cargo, owner, Folk Art Gallery, Tuscaloosa, AL and Professor Emeritus, University of Alabama
[Essay written for the exhibition "African American Quilts from the Robert and Helen Cargo Collection," an International Quilt Study Center exhibition held at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, January 12 – April 1, 2001.]

Prior to about 1980, African American quilts, particularly those from Alabama, were scarcely known outside the black community that created them. They were made for the quiltmaker's personal use and when the quilts were worn out they were discarded. The theory was that the quilts could always be replaced.

A decade and a half earlier, however, Father Walter Francis, an Episcopalian priest active in the civil rights struggle in Alabama, was driving through remote, rural Dallas and Wilcox Counties in Alabama. At the home of Ora McDaniel, in a community called Possum Bend, Father Francis came upon a clothesline hanging with quilts of startling originality. That sight and the subsequent inquiries he made to follow up on his discovery led in time to the creation of the Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Quilting Bee of Alberta, Alabama. Chartered on March 26, 1966 that cooperative, which continues even today, is one of the oldest cooperatives in the country.

The energetic and imaginative priest conducted what today would be called market analysis. He determined that comparable quilts were available in reasonably significant numbers. Father Francis purchased in a short period of time a group of 70 quilts that he sent to New York for showing and possible sale. The response to the quilts was enthusiastic although it should be noted that the prices realized would be considered paltry in the extreme compared to today's market.

In New York the quilts attracted persons from the fashion industry, particularly Dianne Vreeland of VOGUE magazine, and persons from the arts world, among whom was Lee Krasner, the wife of Jackson Pollock. Articles on the quilts and the efforts of Father Walter appeared in the *New York Times* and in *House and Garden* magazine. On February 14, 1967, Lee Krasner was invited by the Art Department to visit the University of Alabama. A trip to Gees Bend and the Freedom Quilting Bee was worked into Ms. Krasner's schedule.

In the meantime, at Yale University, a doctoral candidate, Maude S. Wahlman, showed one of her professors photographs of quilts made by African-Americans in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi and proposed using them as the basis of her thesis. African-American quilts thus became the focus of academic study for the first time.

Although I had been a serious collector of Alabama quilts since the mid 1950s, prior to around 1980 I had never given a careful look at quilts made by African-American quilters. It was Dr. Wahlman, therefore, whom I credit with opening my eyes to this group of quilts. The use of unique elements, for example, long stitches, unusual color combinations, asymmetrical arrangements, and quilts with a lack of organization that were unplanned, chaotic even, I was in the process of learning, were often characteristics of the improvisational nature of these quilts. As a body, such quilts represented a radical departure from the more predictable works made by white quiltmakers whose works I had been accustomed to collecting.

As an invited speaker at the Museum of American Folk Art in New York City on the occasion of an exhibition of slave-made quilts curated by Dr. Gladys-Marie Fry in 1989, I made what I confess was, even to me, a rather daring prediction. Within ten years, I said, I foresaw these quilts

replacing Amish quilts as the focus of collectors' energies. Time, I believe, has proven the accuracy of that statement.

How did Dr. Wahlman characterize African-American quilts? They display, she said, the following characteristics: large design elements, bright colors and unusual color combinations, repeated variations of design elements, asymmetry, strip techniques which are used to build up larger elements, and improvisation. Such quilts represented a radical departure from the more predictable works made by white quiltmakers whose works I had been accustomed to collecting.

What are the origins of these quilts? Are they patterned after African aesthetics brought to the New World, remembered, and passed from generation to generation within the black family--so many memories after so many years that the African origins are no longer recognized by the makers?

Quilts in this collection, I believe, especially the older pieces and above all those quilts made by Lucile Young, constitute documents of inestimable value in this matter. If there were shortcoming to Dr. Wahlman's work, it might be stated in all fairness that her theories were based almost exclusively on contemporary examples. The Young quilts demonstrate that the characteristics identified by Dr. Wahlman in quilts of the 1980s were present in much earlier examples and were almost certainly present in those quilts that were worn out and discarded over the years. Until it can be demonstrated otherwise, I believe we must accept the Wahlman hypothesis.

If these quilts do not have their origins in remote Africa, then what are their origins? If they are not of African origin, we must conclude that they are like so many bouquets of exotic flowers, without stems, without roots. Let us conclude with the fervent hope that the research faculty and students at the University of Nebraska in years to come will succeed in giving roots to these beautiful flowers.