American Quilts from the Collection

September 9-October 21, 2018

How to use this resource: This packet is designed to be flexible. Use it to help prepare for a docent-led tour of the museum, to inform a self-guided tour, or to discuss selected artworks in your classroom, whether you’re able to physically visit the museum or not. The suggested activities (page 7) should be used in conjunction with in-depth discussion of at least one related artwork.

Many of the quilts in this exhibition are part of a larger collection that was acquired from local Amish communities, predominantly in LaGrange, IN, by David Pottinger. Pottinger donated this regional collection to FWMoA in 1992, making them the first quilts in the FWMoA collection.

About David Pottinger:

David Pottinger was the owner of a local plastics manufacturing firm who also dealt in and collected American antiques. Until the 1970s, most of the collected, published, and exhibited quilts came from the eastern United States. Pottinger himself had been buying and selling quilts from this region in his antiques store for years. With the initial interest of simply buying and selling Midwest quilts in his shop to introduce them to the market, upon more research he realized that there were enough quilts in the Indiana Amish families to start a regional collection. Through a friend, Pottinger met Amos D. Bontrager and his wife, Bertha, an Old Order Amish couple, who helped him gain access to the local but isolated Amish community to purchase Midwestern made quilts. Pottinger’s quilt collection is not a “best of the best” but showcases the variety of materials and patterns used by Amish communities to make this functional art form. Determined by region and community, Pottinger’s collection is distinctive for its encapsulation of Midwestern Amish design.

Purchasing the quilts required David to spend Fridays and Saturdays traveling from Amish house to Amish house, with Bertha making introductions, deciding on prices and learning the provenance of the artworks from the makers themselves. Becoming a fixture in the community from his quest for quilts, David eventually retired from his job in Michigan to open a general store in the Amish community in Honeyville, IN, at the request of the Bontragers.

History of American Quilts:

Quilting in America developed primarily through access to materials and by region, with each regional community defined by distinctive patterns and colors. Beginning in the colonial period when fabrics were scarce, first from the lack of storefronts and then from the war, patchwork quilts mixed wool, silk, cotton, and linen to create quilts large enough for use. African American quilting began with quilts made by slaves for themselves and their owners. These early quilts generally resemble those made by white women slaveholders and it wasn’t until after 1865, and the end of slavery, that African Americans began to develop their own distinctive style ofquilting. Today, the African American women of Gee’s Bend, Alabama are celebrated quilters for their pattern improvisation, use of bright and contrasting colors, visual motion, and lack of rules. Amish quilts also developed a distinct style, as they use only solid fabrics pieced from geometric shapes that do not include applique. Hand sewn, the isolated Amish communities continue to use simple patterns (Brick, Log Cabin) and Midwestern communities are known for their repeating block patterns, narrower borders, and fancier piecing. Native Americanquilting can be traced to missionaries who taught the women homemaking skills. Also developing their own unique style, the Lone Star design is a variation on the Morning Star designs already present in Native American culture.

Originally viewed as a household craft, quilts were not taken seriously in the art world until 1971, when the Whitney Museum of American Art organized their landmark quilt exhibition, Abstract Design in American Art.
Making a Quilt

Quilting is the process of sewing three layers together: the top fabric or quilt top, the middle batting or insulation material, and the back fabric material. The process ofquilting, whether by hand or machine, uses a needle and thread to join the layers of material together. Quilters can utilize various tools to assist them in their quilting beyond the basic needle and thread: rotary cutters, boards, pins, thimbles, rulers, fabric markers, templates, patterns, and sewing machines.

Quilt blocks (right) are patterned squares of fabric that are repeated with plain blocks to form the overall design of a quilt. Sewn to the back fabric, which is often a larger piece of one of the smaller patterned or plain squares found on the front of the quilt, there are various techniques that can be applied to the blocks. These techniques include applique, trapunto (3D effect), and embellishment (trim, piping, sequins, found objects).

Common Quilt Patterns
**Other Quilts Sometimes Displayed at FWMoA**

**NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt**

The AIDS Memorial Quilt is a quilt that serves as a memorial to celebrate the lives of people who have died of AIDS and AIDS related causes. It is the largest piece of community folk art in the world and is the first of its kind as a continually growing monument created piecemeal by thousands of people all over the world. It was begun in 1985 by AIDS activist Cleve Jones in San Francisco as a way to commemorate the lives of AIDS victims, who, due to stigma, were often denied memorials or funerals. Each panel is 3ft. by 6ft., approximately the size of an average grave, and is assembled into 12’ by 12’ sections, or blocks. The blocks can be seen at local displays, including here at FWMoA! Panels represent ordinary people and stars, like Freddie Mercury. The panels include many quilting techniques; applique, embroidery, patchwork, needlepoint, and other methods such as collage, spray paint, other fabrics (lace, suede, taffeta), decorative items, clothing, AND found objects that connect to the deceased person.

*Tar Beach 2 by Faith Ringgold*

Faith Ringgold’s mother was a fashion designer and seamstress who encouraged her creative pursuits from an early age. It was her mother who pieced and quilted her first quilt, *Echoes of Harlem*, echoing the collaborative, generation-spanning process of quilting in other communities.

*Tar Beach* is Ringgold’s most famous story quilt and also her first book. It tells the story of Cassie, who would lay on the roof of her family’s Harlem apartment building and dream of flying. The images on *Tar Beach* are painted on canvas, which is then quilted and combined with other patterned fabrics. Ringgold’s painted story quilts move beyond traditional distinctions between craft and fine art, helping bring quilts and fiber art into the mainstream art world.
Selected Images/Tour Script

A selection of these works will be discussed during a docent-led school tour. A PowerPoint presentation featuring larger versions of the images for classroom use may be found at fwmoa.org/PreK-12/

Themes: folk art, functional art, pattern, texture, Indiana history

Essential questions: (choose 2-3) How do objects, artifacts, and artworks collected, preserved, or presented, cultivate appreciation and understanding? How can the viewer “read” a work of art as a text? How do people contribute to awareness and understanding of their lives and the lives of their communities through art-making? How does art help us understand the lives of people of different times, places, and cultures?

Relevant standards: VA: Pr6.1.3a; VA: Re8.1.3a; VA: Cn10.1.4a; VA: Cn11.1.2a

Ideas to consider and look for throughout the exhibit

- Why is it so dark in here? Students may notice (or you may wish to point out) that the lighting used in the exhibition is a bit dim. This is to protect the fabric color from washing out and becoming dull. This is also why we ask that visitors turn their flash off when taking photographs in the museum. (VA:Pr4.1, Pr6.1)

- Why is the corner sewn up? Some quilts have the corners sewn up to show the stitching on the back of the quilt (and to help keep visitors from lifting up the corners themselves). Is the stitch pattern the same as the front?

- Why do the Amish make quilts? Aside from their functional use of keeping people warm, quilts were made to commemorate special occasions like birthdays, weddings, and anniversaries.

- How long would it take JUST YOU to sew a quilt? Remember, Amish communities do not have access to electricity, so everything they sew is done by hand. Therefore, quilts are a collaborative art. A community gathering, quilting is done by grandmothers, mothers, daughters, aunts, cousins, and neighbors. Quilting also allows the women to socialize and catch up on gossip.

- Think about your own bedroom and the quilt/blanket/bedspread you use. Does it have an interesting pattern or design? Why did you choose it? Could it be a work of art too? How does the way these quilts are displayed change how we see them?

Mattie Fry, Tumbling Blocks Quilt, Cotton

One of the more popular patterns, tumbling blocks allow the seamstress to incorporate multiple scraps and colors.

The design of contrasting colors creates an illusion of depth, giving this 2D work of art a 3D perspective.

Compare and contrast this with the psychedelic works in Litmus Test. How does the medium (or material) change the effect?

How would you describe the colors used? Quilts reflect the community they were created in so think about the fabric (cotton) and colors (dark). Do Amish people wear expensive fabrics and bright clothing?

Read the label and notice the credit line. When the museum acquired these quilts, they asked for donations from the community to help buy them. This one was purchased by the docents at the time!
Mrs. William A. Yoder, *Crossed Arrows Quilt*, Cotton

Describe the texture—how do you think this quilt would feel?

What pattern is on this quilt? Is the pattern consistent? What shapes can you find?

Are the colors consistent? For example, all four corners are blue but the top center squares are red and the bottom center squares are purple. Why do you think that is?

Quilts are often made out of scrap fabric, maybe the color dulled over time/ usages.

Mary J. Yoder, *Fans Quilt*, Wool

The fan pattern is another well used pattern and a typical Indiana design.

This quilt is made out of wool, not cotton. Wool is a heavier fabric. What might this quilt have been used for? Warmth, so a bedcovering/comforter

The black color is associated with Amish garments, predominantly their outerwear.

How does this quilt suggest movement?

Mrs. Daniel Helmuth, *Chevron Bars Quilt*, Wool

This is FWMoA’s oldest quilt!

This quilt is a lot smaller than the others. What do you think it might have been used for? Crib quilt/baby quilt, doll quilt

Note the dark, Amish colors. What do you think would be different about the quilt if the colors were brighter?

Is there a pattern to this quilt?

Amanda Yoder, *Plain Quilt*, Cotton sateen

This quilt was made for the quilter’s daughter’s wedding, which took place on February 5, 1935. If you look closely, you can see the 1935 stitched into the center of the quilt. Quilts were often gifted to individuals during milestone events, like weddings or births. Why do you think a quilt would make a good gift for a newly married couple or new baby?

This is a "plain quilt" because there isn’t a distinctive pattern. When you look closer, can you see all the stitching? Remember, Amish people don’t have access to electricity so this would have been done by hand. How long do you think that would take? Do you think more than one person would have worked on it?
Lizzie Ann Bontrager, *Lone Star Quilt*, Cotton

This quilt is extremely bright for an Amish quilt. How else is it similar or different from the other quilts?

Why do you think the pattern is called the Lone Star? What else does this pattern remind you of? Sheriff badge

Look at the stitching on the back of the quilt. Why do you think quilters made the backs ornamental?

Do you see an artist signature? Sometimes quilters would sew their names onto the quilts so people would know who they sewed them.

Mrs. Jerome H. Hochsteler, *Four Patch Diamond in a Square Quilt*, Cotton sateen

The Amish used black in a lot of their quilts. Is this one more colorful than others we’ve looked at though? How so?

Note the scalloped edges, how does this make the quilt stand out from the other quilts?

Do you think those edges takes special skill to quilt?

Does this quilt have a distinct pattern? How does that pattern compare to the others?

How do you think a cotton material like this quilt would compare to the wool material of other quilts?

Unknown, *Dresden Plate Quilt*, Cotton

This quilt is also extremely colorful for Amish quilts. How many different colors are used?

What is the pattern on this quilt?

Can you tell how we have hung the quilts? They are on blocks that have Velcro glued on and then the quilts have Velcro sewn onto the back of them. Why can’t we put nails in a quilt and hang it like a picture?

Mrs. Harry Bontranger, *Broken Dish Variation Quilt*, Cotton

This quilt is also colorful!

How is it similar/different to the *Crossed Arrows Quilt* pattern?

Are all of the quilt blocks the same pattern? The same color?

Do you think the squares were once all vibrant and have now faded or was that how the fabric was when the quilt was finished?
**Suggested Classroom Activities:** to be used in conjunction with a visit to the museum and/or an in-class discussion of selected artworks

**Art Projects and Discussion Starters**

- **Artist Project:** Faith Ringgold creates painted *story quilts*. Her most famous story quilt and book, *Tar Beach*, talks about her childhood. Read *Tar Beach*, paying close attention to how Ringgold tells her story visually. Have students pick a memory to make their own “story quilt” in a choice of media—consider assembling them into a class quilt!

- **Artist Project:** Ben Venom (http://www.benvenom.com/new/) creates handmade contemporary art quilts (his work will be featured at FWMoA October 27-January 27). Have students compare and contrast Amish quilts with Ben Venom’s. How has he manipulated the medium to fit his needs? Why do you think he chose this particular medium? See how creative students can be with fabrics in their artworks.

- **Artist Project:** Many artists like Judy Chicago and Cayce Zavaglia use elements of quilting, sewing, or embroidery in their art. Have students research other artists and movements (for example, yarn bombing) that incorporate folk and fiber art. Have them design a project that uses sewing and another media to create their art.

- **Technique:** Have students collect different kinds of fabrics from home (jean, cotton, leather, wool, newspaper, linen) and bring in needles and thread. How easy or difficult is it to sew in each fabric?

- **Technique:** Find a stitching guide online and have students try perfecting different stitch patterns. What projects can they create using these stitches? For example, cross stitching a bookmark or embroidering a pillowcase.

- **Class Quilt:** Have students make their own “quilt squares” out of fabric or another textile material. Use math to determine how big each square should be based upon class numbers. Then have students assemble their quilt squares to make a class quilt.

- **Pattern and geometry:** Use tangrams or something similar to design your own quilt block, then transfer it to paper to create a pattern, measuring each shape carefully (no tracing!). Decide on a color scheme for your quilt and use math to scale it up to cover your bed—how many blocks will you need to make an entire quilt? Calculate area: how much fabric of each color would you need?

**Extensions**

- **Math:** Have students break down the quilts using math. Find the area of the individual squares and then the quilt as a whole. What math equations and principles would quilters need to know?

- **Science:** Color Mixing/Dyeing fabrics. Historically, many families dyed their own fabrics and many artists made their own paints. Experiment with different inks and natural products like fruits, vegetables, or plants to create colors. When mixing colors, ask students how to make colors darker or lighter.

- **History:** When fabric was scarce, many colonists during the American Revolution stuffed their quilts with letters and newspapers as added insulation. Have students create newspaper bulletins and letters to and from colonists and their families. How might the information in the newspapers have differed from the information in letters?

- **English:** Faith Ringgold’s story quilts include the story of the image on the quilt. Have students write a short story (whether fiction or non fiction) that would transfer well to an image. Discuss which parts would be shown and how. Compare and contrast to how a book become a movie.

- **History/Art History:** research other types of American quilts from page 1. How do, for example, colonial quilts or those of Gee’s Bend compare with the Amish quilts visually? How does the history and culture of each group impact their designs and materials?
Further reading and resources


- Faith Ringgold on *Craft in America* discussing the process of creating the *Tar Beach* quilt (a different version from ours): [https://www.pbs.org/video/craft-in-america-faith-ringgold-creating-tar-beach-story-quilt/](https://www.pbs.org/video/craft-in-america-faith-ringgold-creating-tar-beach-story-quilt/)


- Quilt Exhibition at the IMA at Newfields: [https://discovernewfields.org/calendar/crazy-quilts-stitching-memories](https://discovernewfields.org/calendar/crazy-quilts-stitching-memories)