

Diverse Threads: Quilting and Embroidery in Baltimore

The Materials and Techniques of American Quilts and Coverlets

Elena Phipps, Department of Textile Conservation, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, August 2009

Early American colonists and artisans, originally from Europe, brought to the New World their own craft traditions centered primarily around the use of linen and wool. These familiar choices were adapted to the colonies, whose climate and environment enabled the introduction and raising of sheep for wool and, in some areas—though with less success—the growing of flax for linen. The cultivation of silk—an exotic fiber originally brought from China—was attempted, but short-lived, in the northern states, although silk was used extensively by the nineteenth century. Cotton thrived in the southern region, but was restricted to small-scale home production until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the invention of new mechanical equipment, including the cotton gin, special carding (for fiber preparation) and spinning tools, and new loom technologies facilitated its harvesting, spinning, and weaving on a large scale.

Quilts and coverlets were created from both homemade and commercially produced cloth. During the early colonial period and into the new republic, most commercial fabric was imported from England. Even goods that originated in foreign regions, such as the popular dye-printed calicoes from India and woven silks from China, were brought into the colonies via English ships. These were used in making quilts and also influenced American quilt design. By the mid-nineteenth century, most of the fabrics found in quilts were industrially produced and reflected the taste and achievements of the American textile industry. Specialty fabrics—particularly silk ribbons like those used in the Signature quilt—became popular by the second half of the nineteenth century.



Elizabeth Van Horne Clarkson American, ca. 1830, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Colors, Dyes, and the Dyeing Process in America

Prior to the development of synthetic dyes in the nineteenth century, early American dyers utilized natural dyes, derived from a variety of plants and animals, to create a wide-ranging color palette. Red colors ranged from the orange-red hue produced from the madder root (*Rubia tinctoria*) to the brilliant scarlet made from cochineal (*Dactylopius coccus*), the scale insect that grows on cactus from Central and South America. Most of the blue colors were from indigo leaves (*Indigofera tinctoria*), and browns derived from a variety of sources, including tannins found in galls and oak trees.

Numerous shades of color could be achieved by the dyers, depending on the quality of the dyes, the purity of water, the type of utensils used (a copper kettle, for example, could affect the color), and the addition of specific mordants, or metallic salts, used to fix the dye to the fiber in order to create a strong, lightfast color. Mordants included alum, iron, copper, tin, and chrome, and, along with other additives to the dyebath, such as cream of tartar, vinegar, or ash, were essential to the dyeing process.

The dyeing of textiles with natural dyes was both an art and a science. Indigo blue, for example, with its complex chemistry, required a series of steps to reduce and oxidize the dyestuff, in order to produce the durable, lightfast blue color. Turkey Red was another complicated dye process. Originating in India to produce madder red dye on cotton fabric, Turkey Red was a method that involved a sequence of immersions of the cloth into oils, milkfats, and dung, among other materials. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, books were published on the science and philosophy of dyes, thus heralding a

period of experimentation for the creation and use of a whole new category of synthetic dyes that flourished at the end of the nineteenth century and continue to be used today.

Printing Techniques for Quilts and Coverlets

Many techniques were employed for printing the fabrics used in American quilts. Apart from the dyeing of yarns or whole cloths with a single color by immersing the fabric into cauldrons of hot dyebaths, methods of applying designs onto the surface of fabrics ranged from hand-painting and stenciling to block, copperplate, roller, resist, and discharge printing.

Block printing involved the use of carved wooden blocks, whose surfaces were “inked” with dye thickened with gum arabic or other starchy substances and pressed directly onto the cloth. Some appliquéd quilts were made with floral designs from block-printed fabrics. Etched plates of copper were also used for printing, and in 1783 technological developments led to sheathing cylindrical rollers with etched copperplates for continuous printing, called roller printing. This new technology enabled printers to produce more yardage at a much faster rate.

Construction of Quilts

The creation of complex quilts composed of many small pieces of cloth requires systematic organization. For constructing pieced quilts, a template might be used for creating the basic design unit, such as a square, diamond, or hexagon. The template—sometimes a heavy card or paper, or even newspaper—ensured an even, regular unit size, thus enabling the quilter to join together the many pieces of fabric, following an overall design arrangement. Appliquéd quilts, also made by using fabric pieces, were constructed in a different manner. Appliqué is a versatile technique, enabling the sewer to compose visual patterns with multiple layers of solid-color and printed fabrics, creating depth and play in the overall composition.

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mtgc/hd_mtgc.htm

Maryland Center for History and Culture

Since 1844, the museum at the Maryland Center for History and Culture has amassed the largest collection of Maryland culture in the state. This collection encompasses more than 350,000 objects, from pre-settlement times to present day, and represents nearly every aspect of Maryland history and life.

Highlights of our museum collection include:

- Native American archaeological artifacts dating to 5,000 B.C.;
- the world’s largest assembly of paintings by members of the Peale family;
- nine portraits by artist Joshua Johnson—recognized as the first professional African American artist in the United States;
- the largest national collection of B. Henry Latrobe sketchbooks;
- Maryland landscape painting by Francis Guy;
- the largest collection of Samuel Kirk silver, as well as their archive;
- decorative glass created by John Frederick Amelung;
- painted furniture from the early 19th century—the “Golden Age” of Baltimore furniture production;
- a fashion archive of 12,000 garments and accessories spanning four centuries; and
- the world’s largest collection of Baltimore Album quilts.



- We are committed to preserving this collection and sharing it with everyone. Permanent and rotating exhibitions—as well as traveling exhibitions—highlight the best of the collection and continually present objects in new and changing ways within the context of today’s world.

<https://www.mdhistory.org/museum/>

Material & Memories: Elizabeth Talford Scott and the Crazy Quilt Tradition

Talford Scott’s work as the centerpiece of this collaborative exhibition which engages the crazy quilt form in dialogue with responsive works by the African American Quilters of Baltimore and the antique quilts in MCHC’s collection. Crafted from the scraps of family members’ clothing and decorative household fabrics, these quilts are deeply personal “landscapes of memory.” Of *Abstract #1*, Elizabeth Talford Scott said, “This is a family quilt, all something from the family. Everything that I didn’t want to throw out I saved a piece of it.”

In 1999, MCHC partnered with the Maryland Institute College of Art’s Exhibition Development Seminar to present *Eyewinkers, Tumbleturds, and Candlebugs: The Art of Elizabeth Talford Scott*, a retrospective of her work. *Material and Memories* reconnects MCHC as a community partner with the Baltimore Museum of Art’s anniversary show, presenting Talford Scott’s work at locations throughout Baltimore City.

<https://www.mdhistory.org/exhibitions/material-memories/>

Portrait of Elizabeth Talford Scott, 1997, Carl Clark, Collection of George Ciscle, Baltimore, MD., ©Carl Clark, Courtesy the estate of Carl Clark/Linda Day Clark



Abstract #1, Quilt, 1983, Elizabeth Talford Scott, 1916-2011, Baltimore, Maryland, Maryland Center for History and Culture, 2023.19.

American Visionary Art Museum

What is Visionary Art?

Like love, you know it when you see it. But here's the longer definition, straight out of our Mission Statement

"Visionary art as defined for the purposes of the American Visionary Art Museum refers to art produced by self-taught individuals, usually without formal training, whose works arise from an innate personal vision that reveals foremost in the creative act itself."

In short, visionary art begins by listening to the inner voices of the soul, and often may not even be thought of as 'art' by its creator.



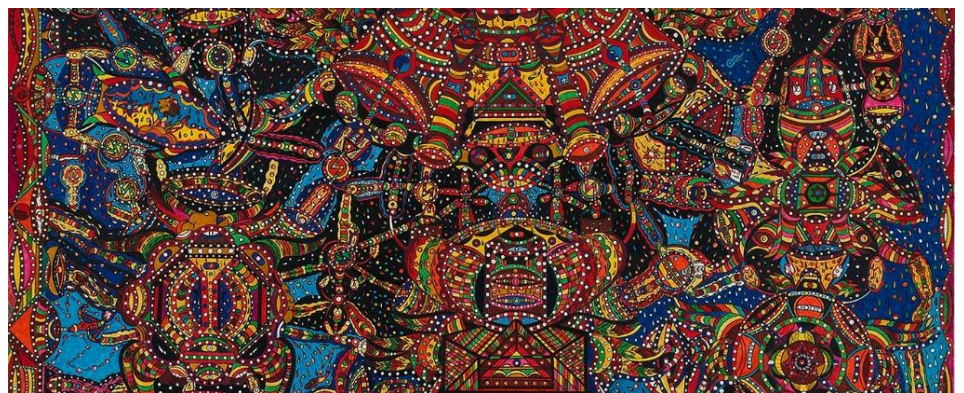
What is Art?

The ancients—the Greeks, Egyptians, Hopis, and the New Guinea tribesmen— were among earth's most prolific art-making peoples. Yet, none had any word for "art" in their respective languages. Rather, they each had a word that meant "well made" or "beautifully performed." Our American Visionary Art Museum believes that this view of what art really means is as perfect an understanding of art as ever was. It speaks to an art incumbent upon all its citizens, pervasive throughout all the arts of our daily life. Its emphasis is on process and consciousness, not mere artifact.

Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed his profound respect for the true artistry each member of a society can uniquely evidence to bless our communities, "If a man is called to be a streetsweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the Hosts of Heaven and earth would pause to say: 'Here lived a great streetsweeper who did his job well. '"

How is it different than folk art?

The German origin of the word "folk," or volk, suggests "of the people." The term "folk art" can be applied in the broadest sense: it's art of or by the people. At AVAM, we don't define visionary art as "folk art," or even "contemporary folk art," principally because organizations like the National Endowment for the Arts rightfully define folk art as art coming out of a specifically identifiable tradition. Folk art is "learned at the knee" and passed from generation to generation, or through established cultural community traditions, like Hopi Native Americans making Kachina dolls, sailors making macramé, and the Amish making hex signs. The "contemporary folk art" label isn't appropriate for AVAM either, since we like to show works created by self-taught artists who may have lived hundreds of years ago, alongside work that may have been created last year. The exhibition themes we choose to explore are, thus, innately timeless -with the power to inspire human beings in highly personal acts of creation. Unlike folk art, visionary art is entirely spontaneous and individualized.



When is visionary art not folk art?

The essential difference between the two, though both may at times use similar materials and methods, is that visionary artists don't listen to anyone else's traditions. They invent their own. They hear their own inner voice so resoundingly that they may not even think of what they do as 'art.' Dubuffet's beloved Art Brut Collections, formed exclusively from the "raw art" creations of non-artists, such as street people, hermits, factory workers, housewives and psychic mediums, motivated him to say: "Art is at its best when it forgets its very name." It is this listening to one's inner voice with such focused attention that contributes to the unusually large number of visionary artworks, many of which took decades to create. Yet there are still common threads. The most common theme of visionary artists worldwide is the

backyard recreation of the Garden of Eden and other utopian visions – quite literally building heaven on earth.



On trained artists

All of us at AVAM enjoy and respect the learning that comes from academic study or through apprenticeship to a trained artist. We dedicate AVAM exclusively, however, as a place devoted to the other path of mastery – the intuitive path of learning to listen to the small, soft voice within. We believe there is great power in not knowing what will or won't work, and we adhere to the importance of not being immersed in rule-based systems which can cloud one's vision. As in science, ignorance often gives birth to genuinely new inventions and a re-examination of what has already been dismissed. Jonathan Swift defined this kind of vision so perfectly: "Vision is the art of seeing things invisible." Discovering possibilities that others do not see is what visionaries do best.

Sure-Fire Recipe for Enchantment

1. Take one grand spirited theme that has inspired or bedeviled humankind from the get-go.
2. Add the works of the world's best self-taught artists – known and first-timers – that have wrestled in their lives and art with some key aspect of that theme.
3. Spice the exhibition text with insightful quotes, lyrics, factoids, and humor on diverse aspects of that same exhibition theme – interweaving timeless, global wisdoms.



4. Integrate key historic, scientific, and social justice underpinnings of each theme via the well-researched exhibition text, and dynamic creative partnerships.

5. Call up anyone (appropriate to theme) you/your staff have long admired and invite them to come take part in some way that is a new delight to them, too. (We did this successfully with Nobel winner Peter Agre, M.D., Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Andrew Newberg, M.D., Arianna Huffington, Matt Groening, Julia Butterfly Hill, Julian Bond, PostSecret's Frank Warren, Patch Adams, M.D., and more!)

6. Top with community based programming that makes a difference, i.e. theme-related film series, festivals, conferences, plus fab ops for grassroots communal play. Never bore – enchant!

7. Stay true at all times to AVAM's Seven Founding Education Goals, Definition of Art, Definition of Visionary, and Founding Mission Statement.

Esther and the Dream of One Loving Human Family

AVAM announces the return of its most beloved exhibited works in the national museum's 23-year history, the exquisitely tender testimonial embroideries created by Holocaust survivor, Esther Nisenthal Krinitz. AVAM premiered the works in 2001 that then traveled to 42 other museums around the world. Curator and museum founder, Rebecca Alban Hoffberger, states, "With the blessing of Esther's family, we proudly commit to an all-new, five-year, expansive installation, "Esther and The Dream of One Loving Human Family." Our goal is to juxtapose the power of Esther's work and story with the experience of other innocent victims of cultural genocides, historic and current—including South African Truth and Reconciliation embroidered testimonies and works gathered from Lily Yeh's partnership with Rwandan Tutsi genocide survivors—to urgently underscore the great danger of demonizing any human being as an undesirable 'other.'"

This special exhibition also features a partial recreation of Esther's modest farm home, a thatched-roofed country cottage that Esther stitched in her first picture so that her daughters — and now visitors alike — could see her pre-war happy childhood home.

Told without a tinge of anger, Esther's thirty-six, intricate needlework and fabric collages depict how then 15-year-old Esther and her younger sister survived the Nazi invasion of Poland by separating from their observant Jewish farming family on the road to the extermination camp and posing as Polish Catholic farm girls.

Esther began her series of fabric pictures in 1977 at the age of 50, while working in Frederick, Maryland as a designer and seamstress in her own ladies dress shop. Although trained as a dressmaker and highly skilled in needlework, Esther had no training in art and no concept of herself as an artist. Yet, her first pictures were so well-received by her family and friends, and so personally

satisfying, that Esther went on to do others, eventually beginning a sequential narrative series that grew increasingly complex. With the addition of her embroidered text, Esther's art powerfully illustrates her story of survival as a child and her uncanny creative intelligence to have done so. The high quality, colorful execution and honest charm of her artistry gives unique and unforgettable testimony to her family life as a happy country child whose peace was upended by war. Esther accomplishes this with a sweetness of spirit and lack of bitterness that conveys a near miraculous visual recall of detail and results in conveying an upfront experience of war, family, faith, and childhood. Everywhere Esther's love of nature predominates, best captured in the moment where the honey bees she tended, swarmed to run off two, too inquisitive, Nazi soldiers.



Esther Krinitz, Janiszew Prison Camp, 1994. Embroidery and fabric collage. Courtesy of Art and Remembrance.

Having premiered Esther's works nearly 20 years ago, AVAM is particularly honored that Esther's family has enthusiastically sought to again collaborate in exhibition of Krinitz's work for a far expanded 5-year exhibition. Due to the record-breaking crowds that the tapestries generated, they returned to AVAM in 2003-2005 and then again in 2012-13 for the exhibition "The Art of Storytelling: Lies, Enchantment, Humor & Truth." This newest installation opens mid-February 2019 in a timely return emphasizing the need for greater societal recognition of the sacred gift of life inherent among all human beings.

<https://www.avam.org/exhibitions/esther-and-the-dream-of-one-loving-human-family>

Lexington Market

Lexington Market, originally known as Western or New Market, was started at the western edge of the city at the turn of the 19th century to take advantage of the trade with the recently opened Northwest Territory. The first market shed was built c. 1805 on land once belonging to John Eager Howard. It grew quickly along with the city, which was advantageously situated on the western most harbor along the East Coast. This access to transatlantic trade routes, then the railroads, were major factors to the growth of Baltimore through the 19th century. After a visit to the market, Ralph Waldo Emerson dubbed it the "gastronomic capital of the world."



Lexington Market (1956): View of vendors' stalls inside Lexington Market. ~ Source: Enoch Pratt Free Library, Maryland's State Library Resource Center

The larger and more established public markets, like Centre, Hanover, and Broadway markets, were often used for court ordered auctions of enslaved people. Having been located at the edge of the city, there is not much evidence that such sales were common at Lexington Market. The only information found so far indicates that at least one such auction did take place here in 1838. A monument was recently erected here to memorialize the woman sold at that court-ordered auction and a runaway enslaved man who had worked at the market. Their names were Rosetta and Robert.

Hotels and taverns proliferated near public markets, including this area around Lexington Market. It was a common practice during this time to arrange business meetings in hotels and taverns, to such an extent that bartenders and inn keepers would take and relay messages for regular customers. The meetings could be business or social. Transactions discussed could be anything from starting a chapter of a fraternal organization to the selling and buying of real estate, farm animals, or enslaved people. Many slave traders got their start in this manner--Slatter, Woolfolk, and Purvis to name a few. An example of an ad from the early 19th century informed buyers of people "to apply at Mr. Lilly's Tavern, Howard Street" and another directed buyers to "Fowler's Tavern near the New Market, Lexington Street." The latter of these might be William Fowler's Sign of the Sunflower, which was located in this area.

Although the original intention of the market was to sell Maryland-grown produce, by the turn of the twentieth century, the market offered an international selection as thousands of immigrants moved to Baltimore, becoming both vendors and customers. The city kept the price to rent a stall at the market low to encourage aspiring business owners. This practice was particularly beneficial for immigrants who had few job opportunities upon entering the country. As a result, immigrant communities grew around Lexington Market and helped establish a diverse community in West Baltimore. The new products offered at the market contributed to the international fame it would attain at the turn of the century.



Lexington Market (1937): View of the main entrance to Lexington Market.
Source: Enoch Pratt Free Library, Maryland's State Library Resource Center.

While the form of Lexington Market has changed dramatically over the decades — an early frame market shed was replaced in 1952 following a 1949 fire and the city significantly expanded the market in the 1980s — the community of vendors and locals continues to draw crowds of residents and tourists daily.

<https://explore.baltimoreheritage.org/items/show/63>