EDUCATOR GUIDE:
From Heart to Hand: African-American Quilts from the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts
Dear Educator,

Thank you for your interest in *From Heart to Hand: African-American Quilts from the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts*. Whether you have booked a guided tour, a gallery/studio program, or a self-guided visit, this resource guide is designed to make your experience more enriching and meaningful. Please use it with your students in the classroom before and after your museum visit. It provides questions to guide close looking, topics for discussions, and activities that will help engage the key themes and concepts of the exhibition. Art and writing projects have been suggested so that students can explore ideas from the exhibition in ways that relate directly to their lives and experiences.

Please feel free to adapt and build on these materials and to use this packet in any way that you wish.

School programs at MAM are aligned with the Common Core Standards as well as the goals laid out by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and promote literacy and evidential reasoning, content knowledge and critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity.

MAM invites students and teachers to:

· **look closely**, find clues, and solve puzzles
· **become engaged** with an artwork, in a debate
· **discover connections** between facts and feelings, art and life
· **be inspired** to create their own stories and artworks
· **feel empowered** to find their own place at mam

We look forward to welcoming you and your students to the Montclair Art Museum!

Petra Pankow
Director of Education, Montclair Art Museum
FROM HEART TO HAND: AFRICAN AMERICAN QUILTS FROM THE MONTGOMERY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Though the origins and materials may be humble, quilts have become regular features in art museums in the past several decades. In 2004, as part of its commitment to support and collect the work of regional self-taught artists, the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts began its collection of African-American quilts with an acquisition of forty-eight quilts created by women between 1945 and 2001. In late 2008, the Museum added ten more quilts of this same variety to its collection. This exhibition brings together examples from both groups, along with several quilts on loan from featured artist, Yvonne Wells of Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

These acquisitions came during a time of rising interest in quilts made by African-American women, many of whom hail from isolated rural areas. Several communities in Alabama, including Gee’s Bend and Eutaw, have received attention as a result of the scholarship that focuses specifically on the historic context of these quilts, as well as a new appreciation for their aesthetic appeal.

The exhibition is divided into three thematic areas:

- **Tradition: Patterns from the Past**
- **Improvisation: Practical Invention**
- **An Unconventional Canvas: The Quilts of Yvonne Wells**

These groups introduce traditional patterns of pieced quilts, expand on the designs distinct to each quilt-maker or region, and focus on examples from the work of one of Alabama’s most respected contemporary self-taught artists.

**Tradition: Patterns from the Past**

Quilting has been a part of American culture for centuries. Patterns, popularized regionally by settlers who used them, eventually achieved national acceptance and became part of the larger quilt vocabulary. Proper execution of these patterns was something that many quilters strived for, and when it was achieved, it was a source of pride.
This collection of quilts demonstrates the maker’s familiarity and adherence to a variety of traditional pieced designs and techniques that have come to define what a quilt “is”. Each has stitched top-to-batting, each has pieced tops, and many top pieces are hand-cut and hand sewn.

The purpose behind these fabric quilts was to provide warmth and protection. They are often used as bed-covers and draped across beds. Because of this, patterns have evolved to produce a more decorative sculptural effect, playing on the principles of line to define the bed’s space and using pattern to create vibrancy.

**Improvisation: Practical Invention**

Quilt patterns often evolve stylistically and materially as they travel from region to region. As the patterns travel, the designs may change, taking on new names and meanings. Colors may become more significant to one culture or region than another, and therefore become more predominant. Elements of the quilt square may be rearranged, while maintaining the same generalized pattern, and might take on new meaning with the variation.

While changes due to cultural transmission may account for some of these variations there was also a reaction against the precision expected in creating the traditional pieced quilts. Many women chose instead to create quilts derived from their imagination and the practical concerns of their household. Using cast-off fabrics from old work clothes or scraps from other quilts, these women constructed improvised, visually interesting and completely practical quilts.

**An Unconventional Canvas: The Quilts of Yvonne Wells**

Tuscaloosa, Alabama’s Yvonne Wells’ work is emblematic of the type of advances that quilters make outside of the discipline of following traditional patterns. Although Wells’ mother had quilted, she never taught her daughter the craft and, as a result, Yvonne Wells’ early career quilts displayed a patient respect. Beginning in 1979, she created practical quilts, primarily for her own use, that were pieced and hand-sewn according to the traditional method.

Around 1983, the quilts created by this retired educator began to assume a narrative approach, and she dispensed with most of the pieced quilt restrictions, adopting the technique of appliqué. Wells
takes inspiration from subjects and events that resonate with her: the Holy Bible, Civil Rights and other events from Alabama History, as well as elements of popular culture often find their way into her work. Many of her quilts deal with abstracted themes of emotion and human relationships.

Some of Wells’ techniques mimic those used by painters. Her compositions often exist in her head until they are cut out and laid on top of the fabric square that is destined to become the quilt top. From there, she adds fabric accents, found objects, beads and other bric-a-brac to the quilts. All of Wells quilts are completely hand made—she uses no templates, nor does she use a sewing machine. When a quilt is finished, it resembles a relief painting as much as it does a quilt, because it is not intended to be placed on a bed, but hung on a wall where it is interpreted and appreciated as a two-dimensional work of art.
Yvonne Wells (b. 1939)
Active Tuscaloosa, Tuscaloosa County, Alabama
*Rosa Parks I*, 2005
Cotton/polyester blend, polyester, cotton, plastic buttons
Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts Association Purchase 008.9.6
TAKE A LOOK

Take a close look at image on the previous page.

• What are some of the different details you notice? What figures and things do you see?
• What colors, shapes, and patterns do you notice? How are they combined into one large picture?
• Talk about how all these different elements make up a story.
• Who is the main character in this story and how does this person relate to other details in the picture?
• What else is going on in the image? Please back your statements up with things you see in the artwork.
• Can you find a fitting title for the work?

EXPLORE

This artwork was made by Yvonne Wells, a retired school teacher from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Wells uses fabric to create “story quilts,” piecing different patterns and materials together until they form pictures that we can read like a story. This quilt is celebrating the contributions of Rosa Parks to the Civil Rights Movement. By refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger in a segregated Montgomery, Alabama bus in 1955, Parks sparked a city-wide bus boycott, which would be an important first step for integration in the American South.

• Give some examples of how the use of printed or colored fabric and shapes made out of cut-out materials help the artist to tell her story.
• What do you think the big round shape at the center represents?

DISCUSS

Rosa park’s courageous act of civil disobedience put the wheels in motion for larger and more widespread protests: the Montgomery Bus Boycott, sit ins at many restaurants and lunch counters that wouldn’t serve black customers, and many marches, most notably the great March on Washington, all aimed at stopping racial discrimination and advancing jobs and voting rights for African Americans throughout the country.

Well’s Civil Rights quilts include a tribute to Rosa Parks with a huge bus wheel that could also represent the changing wheel of time.

Carma Wadley, Deseret Nea, July 23, 2011
• As a group, discuss some pressing social or political issue in your school or community. Identify the problem and what you would like to do about it.
• What sort of group action might you take to bring about change?
• How could you get the word out and get other people to participate?

YOUR TURN

Rosa Park is just one important figure in the African American Civil Rights Movement. Research other important players in this significant chapter of American history. Create a portrait of this person that will tell their story and accomplishments. Share your portrait with the group by describing the profile you have created of this important civil rights figure.

FURTHER READING


http://www.biography.com/people/rosa-parks-9433715#synopsis

http://mmfa.org/exhibitions/piecing-together-history-civil-rights-quilts-yvonne-wells/
Yvonne Wells (b. 1939)
Active Tuscaloosa, Tuscaloosa County, Alabama
Yesterday: Civil Rights in the South III, 1989
Cotton, cotton/polyester blend, wool, polyester, plastic buttons
Gift of Kempf Hogan 2004.20.8
TAKE A LOOK

Take a long and careful look at the quilt on the previous page.

- What is going on in this picture?
- Back up your assumptions by pointing to evidence in the image.
- What questions do you have? Go around the room listing all the things you cannot figure out in the image.

EXPLORE

This elaborate composition by story quilter Yvonne Wells shows her ability to combine a variety of events, places, and people into a coherent whole. Identify the following scenes in the picture:

- A black man rows a white man ashore (aboard a slave ship or the Mayflower)
- People picking cotton
- A lynching
- A segregated bus
- Ku-Klux clansmen burning a cross

- Why do you think Yvonne Wells chose red for the background?

In addition to these more general milestones of African American History, Wells refers to specific events in the course of the American Civil Rights movement. Match the following events/historic photographs to specific areas of the quilt:

- The earthen dam that was a tomb for three Civil Rights workers in Mississippi.
- The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, in which four young girls were killed during a bombing.
- Alabama Governor George Wallace’s stand in the schoolhouse door, intended to prevent the integration of the University of Alabama.
- Fire hoses and attack dogs used by Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor against protesters in Birmingham, Alabama
- Civil Rights marchers, surrounding Dr. Martin Luther King at the March on Washington.
- The Alabama State Capitol, which up until 1993 flew the Confederate flag atop its dome. The red background represents fire, bloodshed, and the tumult of the Civil Rights era.
DISCUSS

Images are a powerful tool to get across messages and stir the public’s emotional responses. Many of the scenes Yvonne Wells represents in her quilt are based not just on the events they depict but on the iconic news photographs that have carved them deep into the memory of the American public.

Look at the three images to the left, of protesters being attacked by dogs and fire hoses and George Wallace blocking an entrance to the newly-desegregated University of Alabama.

- Discuss the relationship between those photos and Yvonne Wells’ corresponding depiction on her Civil Rights quilt.
- What do you think Yvonne Wells’ purpose was when creating this quilt?
- Why do you think she gave it the title Yesterday?

YOUR TURN

Living through the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama has shaped Yvonne Wells’ work. While her quilts are carefully made and very interesting to look at, they are also a form of activism, reminding us how important it is to remember the events that happened in the segregated South more than 50 years ago.

- What is an issue you think would be important to feature in an artwork today?
- How might different sorts of materials (including but not limited to fabric) help to convey that story?
- Create a collage about your cause of choice and share with the class.

FURTHER READING

http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/06/18/193128475/how-the-civil-rights-movement-was-covered-in-birmingham
Nora Ezell (1919–2007)
Active Mantua, Tuscaloosa County, Alabama
*Nora’s Necktie Flower Garden*, 1994
Polyester, cotton/polyester blend, plastic and wooden beads, cowrie shells
Gift of Kempf Hogan in honor of Bethine Whitney
2005.9.2
TAKE A LOOK

Take a close look at image on the previous page.

• What is the first thing you notice?
• What different patterns and designs do you see?
• What materials were used to create this work?
• How do you think the artist put this work together? What steps would have been involved in her process?

EXPLORE

Alabama Quilter Nora Ezell created *Nora’s Necktie Flower Garden* by arranging a large number of neckties (which she had purchased in a thrift store at 75¢ apiece) in elaborate flower patterns. She then attached them on the quilt top by using *appliqué* and added intricate embroidery. Individual panels were then attached to each other by using *patchwork*.

• How long do you think it would take to create a quilt like this?
• Do you think this quilt was intended to be used as a blanket? Why? Why not?

Nora Ezell only came to quilting in her 60s. Born in Mississippi and raised in Alabama as one of 10 children, she learned how to sew and quilt from her mother, who was a seamstress, and her sisters, each of whom had a slightly different approach to the craft. After spending much of her adult life in Paterson, NJ, where she worked in the textile industry, she only seriously took up quilting in her retirement. In 1991, she was recognized with the Alabama Folk Heritage Award and in 1993 she was awarded the prestigious National Heritage Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts. Nora Ezell continued making quilts until well into her eighties. A quilt of this *Flower Garden* type required some 160 hours of labor to create the top, as well as another 37 hours for the embroidery.

Made by women who did not have the means to buy ready-made blankets and comforters for their often quite large families, many quilts were initially created out of readily available (often recycled) fabrics to offer warmth and comfort on cold fall and winter nights by. However, artists like Yvonne Wells and Nora Ezell decided to move away from making functional quilts to those, which were intended for display. Many of them have ended up in museums or the home of quilt

*I like to put a little bit of me in my quilts because I think this is the one thing that lives on after us.*

*Nora Ezell*
collectors.

DISCUSS

• Think about different objects in your own house that you would consider art and which were either made by you or someone else. What is their purpose? Were they meant to be functional objects (like a cup or blanket) or decorative (like a picture hanging on the wall)?
• What stories do these objects tell?
• What importance does functionality have in the context of handmade objects? Are things that are made by hand but that you can use in everyday life still art?

YOUR TURN

Nora Ezell said that she likes “to put a little bit of me in my quilts because I think this is the one thing that lives on after us.”
• What do you think she meant by that and how does it relate to this particular quilt?
• What would you make that would allow you “to put a little you in it”? What materials would you use? What story would your piece tell and in what way would it make your work live on after you?

FURTHER READING

http://arts.gov/honors/heritage/fellows/nora-ezell
Catherine Somerville (1870–active to ca. 1960)
Active Aliceville, Pickens County, Alabama
Log Cabin (Pig Pen Variation)/Checkerboard, ca. 1950–1960
Cotton, cotton/polyester blend, polyester
Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts
Association Purchase
2004.21.19
TAKE A LOOK

Look closely at the quilt on the previous page.

• What colors do you notice?
• What shapes do you see?
• Imagine the quilter arranging these different shapes. What did she start with? What shape came next? What overall pattern can you make out?
• What materials did the quilter use?
• Imagine touching this quilt. What different textures do you think you might feel?

EXPLORE

Like many quilts by African American quilters in the South (and quilts in general), this one was made from used materials. Catherine Somerville used discarded work pants (which are often called britches), took off their pockets, cut them to size, and arranged them in a log-cabin pattern. She started with the center square and arranged rectangles around it, started from smallest (the length of the blue inner square) to largest (the length of the beige square). This nested-box design is also often called house top or pig pen.

• Please explain the names of the quilt patterns log cabin, house top, and pig pen.
• Point to irregularities in the design and pattern.
• Why do you think Catherine Somerville didn’t stick with a more regular, centered pattern?

Quilts usually consist of a pieced top, an inner layer called batting, and a backing, usually one large piece of fabric. Quilters place these three layers on top of each other and stitch or quilt them together.

• Can you make out and describe the lines formed by the quilt stitches?

Catherine Somerville’s quilt is unusual in that both the top and the backing are pieced from smaller pieces of fabric, making it a double-sided quilt with a pig pen design on one and a checkerboard design on the other side.

DISCUSS

This quilt was made as a practical object from used clothing. Life was hard for African Americans living in the rural South and with no money to buy
fabric (or blankets, for that matter), many women used whatever was at hand, old work clothes, old shirts, or leftover fabric from handmade dresses. Quilts were needed to keep warm in houses which didn’t have central heating and were often piled on in several layers.

- Do you think something that was made to fulfill a practical purpose can still be considered art?
- In your view, what makes (or doesn’t make) Catherine Somerville’s quilt “art”?
- Have a discussion about what makes something art in general.

YOUR TURN

Using construction or origami paper or fabric, construct your own log cabin quilt square. What happens when you use two colors only? What design possibilities emerge when you use three colors or more?

FURTHER EXPLORATION

This variation on the Log Cabin pattern features the use of solid-colored fabrics for at least half of each block. The blocks are not uniform in size, and Sallie Gladney has placed bars of fabric at the right side of the quilt in rows three, four, and five to compensate. The small bits of pieced patterned fabric are most likely scraps, which is why piecing is an ideal practice for quilters, as the smallest bits can be utilized. According to many folk quilters, part of the pleasure of making a quilt is being able to fashion a beautiful object from discarded materials or leftovers of other sewing projects.

Sallie Gladney (1896–1991)
Active Bossier City, Bossier Parish, Louisiana Log Cabin Variation, 1989
Mary Maxtion (b. 1924)
Active Boligee, Greene County, Alabama
Everybody Quilt, ca. 1991
Cotton, cotton/polyester blend, polyester, wool, rayon
Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts Association Purchase
2004.21.9
TAKE A LOOK

Look closely at the quilt on the previous page.

• List all the colors you notice.
• How many different patterns can you find?
• What geometric shapes did the artist use to put these patterns together?

EXPLORE

Some of the patterns used here are classic quilt block designs. Can you find...

• an arbor window (a grid made of diamonds)
• a half log cabin (long rectangles arranged in an L shape)
• an eight-pointed lone star

Other designs are more whimsical:

• Can you spot a flower, an animal, and letters of the alphabet?

Mary Maxtion’s version of the Everybody Quilt is a colorful and highly structured geometric design. In the language of quilts, this collection of blocks made from different patterns would be known as a “sampler,” but among the African-American quilters of Alabama they are sometimes known as Everybody Quilts. Assembling a quilt from smaller blocks allows quilters to work on a smaller scale before putting the larger whole together at the end.

“...It’s got all kind of patterns; that’s because it’s made of left-over blocks from other quilts. Most everybody that has pieced a quilt has pieced one of these ...The “P” on mine is for my middle name, Pearl.”

Mary Maxtion

DISCUSS

• Compare and contrast Mary Maxtion’s Everybody Quilt with that of Addie Pelt (left). What similarities can you find? How do the differ from each other.
• Which of the two would you put on your bed? Why?

Addie Pelt (1921–1999)
Active Boligee, Greene County, Alabama
Everybody Quilt, ca. 1988
YOUR TURN

Using construction, magazine, or origami paper or fabric and felt, construct your own quilt block. You can either use a traditional pattern like a log cabin, arbor window, lone star, etc. or come up with your own design. Once you are done, combine your block with those of your classmates to create an “Everybody Quilt”.
GLOSSARY

**Appliqué** - a sewing technique by which smaller pieces of fabric are stitched onto a surface

**Backing** - The back fabric of a quilt in the 3 layers: top, batting, backing

**Batting** - The filling in a 3-layer quilt, enclosed by top and backing.

**Boycott** - To refuse to buy something or to take part in something as a way of protesting.

**Civil Disobedience** - The refusal to obey laws as a way of forcing the government to do or change something

**Lynching** - Lynching is when an angry mob commits murder. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, black people were sometimes lynched by mobs without being given a fair trial.

**March on Washington** - A peaceful march of 250,000 people on Washington D.C. to call for the passage of a civil rights act. This is when Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

**Montgomery Bus Boycott** - A boycott of the Montgomery, Alabama buses held to protest against racial segregation. It began when Rosa Parks was arrested for not giving up her seat on the bus to a white passenger.

**Patchwork** - sewing together smaller pieces of fabric to form a larger whole.

**Piecing** - assembling the top layer of a quilt by sewing together different pieces of fabric, often in patterns.

**Quilting** - In general, the process of making a quilt. Specifically, the small running stitches that hold the three layers of a quilt together.

**Quilt top** - The top layer of a quilt, usually pieced out of patchwork pieces and attached to batting and backing by quilting stitches.

**Segregation** - Segregation is the separation of people in their daily lives based on race.

**Sit-in** - A form of non-violent protest where a number of people occupy an area and refuse to move.
TRADITIONAL QUILT BLOCKS

rail fence  arbor window  bear's paw

courthouse steps  log cabin  pig pen / housetop

lone star  nine patch  flying geese