Western Pennsylvania has a long and distinguished history of quilting. The African American community has advanced the local quilt tradition by incorporating cultural nuances, styles, themes, textures, and artistic quality while maintaining and advancing the techniques of quilting and fiber arts. To showcase the African American quilting community, the History Center will open an exhibit, *Bold Improvisation: 120 Years of African American Quilts*, on January 19, 2003. The exhibit will not only showcase 45 impressive African American and African quilts compiled by collector (and Pittsburgh native) Scott Heffley, but also paintings and textiles illustrating African and African American creativity.
T he exhibit will be supplemented with numerous quilts and fiber art textiles from Western Pennsylvania on loan from local quilters, and curated by this author. These additions to the show will further define African American quilt traditions and further an appreciation of the genre. Visitors to the History Center, and the other venues it will travel to, will gain a greater appreciation and understanding of the African American quilt community around them.

African Americans are not new to the quilt or textile industries. Contrary to accounts that say quilting, embroidery, weaving, etc., were introduced to Africans during their enslavement in the Americas, these forms of textile work actually have centuries-old traditions in Africa. Complex weaving techniques of the Akan, Mande, Fante, Fulani, Yoruba, Ewe, and tens of other ethnic groups that are the ancestors of African Americans, created and advanced adinkra, kente, adwinasa, asasia, Kuba cloth, bogolanfini (mud cloth), and indigo styles of textiles (see sidebar).

Transplanted to the western hemisphere, these techniques were utilized by enslavers and fused with European techniques to develop the American quilt and tapestry. Although made by slaves, antebellum quilts often represented the cultural styles of European Americans such as the Amish, English, and Germans. Still, much of the Africans’ own quilt work continued to incorporate African traditions. As Gladys-Marie Fry stated in her book, Stitched From the Soul, “African American quilt styles are eclectic — ranging from quilts with strong African influences to those that almost completely merge with Euro-American design traditions.” Collections of quilts in the Smithsonian Institution and other museums attest to the skill and quality of quilts made under American bondage.

After emancipation, African Americans were able to make quilts that more honestly reflected their lives and were symbolic of their perspectives of the world. In Bold Improvisation, quilts dating from the 1880s will contrast with more recent works. Contemporary quilts from Western Pennsylvania range from the American traditional to the more artistic and symbolic forms of
expression of Black art. Maintaining and even advancing the techniques of textile work, local quilt-makers have produced machine and hand-stitched quilts and fiber art of the highest quality and appreciation. Quilts and textiles are traditionally utilitarian; made as bed coverings or for body comfort. But quilts as works of art — made for hanging, display, or exhibition — have led a revolution into fiber arts. Here the quilt-maker expresses a greater freedom in design and bolder, more provocative visual nuances, all the while maintaining a cultural continuity that defines such work as African American.

Local quilt-makers utilize the full range of African American fabrication, allowing them to indulge in traditional American quilt styles and create in the African American cultural aesthetic. Local quilt-makers have produced traditional log cabin, embroidered, pieced, appliquéd, crazy-patched, stamped, and braided quilts. Some have been embellished with cowry shells, beads, gems, and buttons.

Michaeline Reed has produced some traditional quilts; her Fans has a quilted border surrounding 25 blocks, each 12-inches square, of multi-colored hand-held fans. Also of the more traditional style is Lillian Carter of New Kensington, whose 1930s-era quilt was strictly utilitarian: a white base and pink stripes on a 12-inch block with flowers in the center of each block. Carter's quilt for years found a place on the master bed of her home, and later the home of her daughter, Willamae Frazier.

Afrocentric and other cultural themes flourish in local quilts. Sandra German draws from the African American cultural aesthetic to produce a wide range of color and pictorial-dominated, machine-made quilts. Her Going Gingko illustrates a forested area with a brook plus incorporates diamond-simulated beads. German also produces thought provoking images that range from African American women to self-expression. Ruth Ward draws from African American history in her memorable Underground Railroad quilt, Shadows: a silhouette of African Americans following the North Star through a wooded terrain at night. Tina Brewer creates dynamic works of fiber art that have spirited scenes of cultural symbolism. Brewer doesn't consider herself a quilter.

African ethnic groups were innovators of numerous complex weaving techniques. Here are some commonly used terms.

Adinkra cloth is native to the Akan ethnic group of West Africa, a people who predominate Ghana. The Adinkra is a ceremonial tapestry that incorporates traditional sacred symbols with moral principle in the cloth. Adinkra is commonly black or black stamped and was used during funerary rituals.

Kente is the royal cloth of the Akan people. Largely worn by Ashanti people of Ghana, it is the cloth that drapes the king, queen, chief, chieftesses, or other hierarchy of Ashanti kingdom. Similar Kente patterns are worn by other ethnic groups in the traditional region.

Adwinasa and Asasia are textile weaving techniques of Ghana. Adwinasa means “fullness of ornament” and is worn as a regalia piece. Asasia is silk woven cloth.

Kuba cloth is native to the Congo of Central Africa. It is made from raffia grass native to the area and woven to make geometric patterns.

Bogolanfini or mud cloth is native to Mali and so named because it is a strong cotton weave dyed with clay pigments that resemble mud.

Indigo was used to dye cottons for women's wrap-around garments. Found throughout West Africa but primarily in Nigeria and Guinea.
in the traditional sense, but as a trained professional artist, she uses the fabric as the medium for which she creates.\footnote{7}

In 1989, the African American quilt community formed the African American Heritage Quilters Guild. The AAHQG presented a number of local shows and offered the opportunity to develop quilting bonds that are socially traditional in quilt circles. Although the organization no longer exists, former members are involved in many other quilt groups in Western Pennsylvania. Gerry Benton is president of Quilt Company East, and along with Karen Womack and Marguerite Gloster, helped stage their summer 2002 show at Community College of Allegheny County, Boyce campus. Vivian Benton is chapter coordinator of the National Quilting Association and editor of its magazine, Quilting Quarterly.\footnote{8} Quilt guilds and/or groups in Western Pennsylvania range from memberships of nearly 100 to smaller groups such as Uncommon Threads, a small group of new and former AAHQG members. Because of its small size, people new to the quilting tradition, such as Johnnie Howard, have been able to draw from the experience of other members and discover their own creativity in quilting.\footnote{9}

There are many African American quilters in Western Pennsylvania, some members of established organizations and/or guilds while others making their quilts for personal and family needs. African American quilters range from the commercially artistic to the self-expressed hobbyist. These quilters have made a significant impact in the regional quilt community, and in some cases have influenced the national quilt genre as well. \textit{Bold Improvisation} will be a fascinating showcase for the work of some of these talented quilters.\footnote{2}

\textit{Bold Improvisation} curator Scott Heffley will speak about the exhibit at the History Center on Sunday, January 19, 2003. Visit www.pghhistory.org for more information.
1. Scott Heffley is Conservator of Paintings at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo. He has collected African American quilts for nearly 20 years; his collection is managed by Smith Kramer Fine Art Services, Kansas City, Mo., which is curating the traveling portion of the exhibit.


3. Interview with Michaelene Reed, Pittsburgh, August 14, 2002.


5. Interview with Sandra German, Monroeville, Pa., August 8, 2002.


8. Interviews with Gerry Benton, Wilkinsburg, Pa., June 26; Karen Womack, Pittsburgh, August 6; Marguerite Gloster, Pittsburgh, August 7; and Vivian Benton, Ross Township, Pa., August 29, 2002.

9. Interview with members of Uncommon Threads at the East Liberty Public Library, Pittsburgh, June 6, 2002; interview with Johnnie Howard, Pittsburgh, August 9, 2002.

**Bibliography**


