

Exhibit elevates the art of hand-stitched stories

By Patricia Robert

“The clue is in the title,” Laura Vookles said about the “Wall Power!” exhibition on view at the Hudson River Museum through Sept. 21.

On loan from the American Folk Art Museum in Manhattan, “Wall Power!” is a collection of 20 handmade quilts ranging from the mid-19th century to the late 20th century. To complement the exhibition, Vookles, the chair of Hudson River Museum’s curatorial department, selected five quilts from its collection.

“‘Wall Power!’ was the title chosen by the American Folk Art Museum to highlight the fact that these works of artistic design can hold the wall, much as a painting would,” Vookles said. “In fact, the exhibit is meant to make the viewer appreciate these quilts as the works of art they are — as opposed to just falling under the label of ‘Arts & Crafts’ — and the people who made them, mostly women, as artists.”

Vookles added that, while it cannot be proven, there is speculation among scholars that major artists of the 20th century, especially those known for minimalist work, were influenced by quilts, especially quilts with patterns of squares within squares.

“There is a similar aesthetic, so one can’t help but think it is a possibility,” she said.

Quilts included in “Wall Power!” came from Amish and Mennonite communities of Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana, as well the African- American communities of the Deep South, in particular Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Many of the quilts are “orphans” made by unknown artists. The labels that accompany the quilts describe the period when they were made, why certain fabrics were used — such as cotton and wool, and not the velvet and silk favored in the Victorian Age — and the influence of U.S. history and traditions.

One such label, about a category called “Revival Quilts,” contains the following description: “Considered more up-to-date even as they took their cue from an earlier era, revival quilts were also perceived as more healthful... The quilts seen here demonstrate these shifting design principles with a series of colorful cotton examples from the 1920s and 1930s. They also represent an ongoing creative impulse, present throughout this exhibition, to look backwards while moving forwards, finding inspiration in the work of the past while seeking opportunities for innovation and imagination.”

A label for the section on 19th-century foundations includes an unattributed quote from Safford & Bishop’s “America’s Quilts & Coverlets” that could apply to many quilt artists: “My whole life is in that quilt... my hopes and fears, my joys and sorrows, my loves and hates. I tremble sometimes when I remember what that quilt knows about me.”

Folklore has forged the image of a “quilting bee” in which a group — usually all female — sits in a circle and sews, working on a solo project or a collective one. While an accurate image, Vookles pointed out that originally, in the 1800s, these events took place after an individual designed and made the quilt top. The “quilting bees” were for adding a fabric that gave the structure needed to display the quilt. Here, too, there is beauty to be found, according to Vookles.

“If you look at ‘Center Diamond Quilt,’ which came from an Amish artist circa 1900, you will see a red square in the center, bordered in black, which is itself bordered in a deeper shade of red,” Vookles said. “If you go up and look at it closely, you will see the work of those in the

quilting bee — beautiful stitches all in the same pattern. In its own way, it is a form of group artistry.”

Because their work came to be known in the late 20th century, there is information about the four African-American quilters in “Wall Power!” — Alean Pearson (b. 1918) of Oxford, Miss.; Mary Maxtion (b. 1924) of Boligee, Ala.; Leola Pettway (1929–2010) of Boykin, Ala.; and Lucinda Toomer (1888–1983) of Macon, Ga.

The label for this section of the exhibit reads in part, “Each of these African-American–made quilts is infused with stunning dynamism, expressing visual and material energy that seemingly will not be contained by strict geometry. Although they may draw on traditional Euro-American or revival patterns, these examples do not prioritize symmetry, and the quilters have exercised the freedom to make personal variations of color, fabric, and overall design.”

The artists who made the five quilts from the HRM collection are also known. Three quilts are from the 19th century and two from the 20th. One of the earlier ones, ‘Hunterdon County Signature Quilt,’ piqued Vookles’ interest.

“This quilt is done in a block pattern which is ideal for adding names. There are 42 names included, all in the same hand,” Vookles said. “Through [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com), I’ve been able to trace the names and discovered their relationships. They did, in fact, live in Hunterdon County [N.J.]. There is reason to believe this was a fundraising quilt where people paid to have their name included. It is entirely possible that the quilt was then sold, also as a way to raise funds.”

Also on view is the ‘Bicentennial Quilt,’ made in 1976 and presented to the Woman’s Institute of Yonkers to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

“Wall Power!” was originally curated by Stacy C. Hollander and on view at the American Folk Art Museum in 2019. The tour that brings the exhibit to Yonkers was coordinated by Folk Art Museum curator Emelie Gevalt.

“There are so many different ways to look at these quilts,” Vookles said. “But we know they have a following, and are popular, as there was a line of people waiting to get in when we opened the exhibit on June 18th.”

The Hudson River Museum, 511 Warburton Ave., is open Thursday to Sunday, from noon-5 p.m. Tickets cost \$8 for adults, \$5 for students (with a valid ID), senior citizens 62 and older, and veterans; and \$4 for youth ages 3-18. Admission is free for museum members and for children under the age of 3.