NO TWO ALIKE
AFRICAN-AMERICAN IMPROVISATIONS ON A TRADITIONAL PATCHWORK PATTERN - ELI LEON
SOUTH CAROLINA STATE MUSEUM
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INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Style — we use the word often. We talk of a car’s stylish details or the latest clothing style. In an art historical context, “style” refers to distinctive visual characteristics shared by works of a particular era, locale or culture. An African-American improvisational style then is an overall approach to organizing visual space and elements such as color, line and shape — an approach based on cultural preferences and tradition infused with a sense of impromptu innovation.

An artist’s style is that combination of elements that makes a work uniquely her own. The artists in this catalogue, 20th-century African-American quilters, speak of making the quilts “something of your own,” of piecing “something different from somebody else.” Each quilter is talking of style, of individuality and personality expressed through her work.

Style as an individual expression is even more pronounced in this exhibition where the organizational focus is on a specific pattern, the Square-in-a-Square. There is in this show a visually exciting blend of tradition and innovation, for the quilters have taken a standard format and have used it as a loose set of guidelines within which they were free to improvise.

Eli Leon outlines in his catalogue essay the aspects of the improvisational vision these women share — the practice of making exceptions to established rules, of using scraps and measuring with the eye instead of with the ruler, of working from an inner sense of freedom and spontaneity. Improvisation is at the core of each creation, insuring that No Two quilts are Alike.

It has been a pleasure to work with a scholar/collector of such passion and vision — and with a collection of such breadth and diversity that allowed nearly unlimited options from which to organize an exhibition. Eli Leon has been extremely generous with his time and his collection, spending countless hours on the telephone with us as we assembled this exhibition. His insightful essay adds depth to the study of African-American aesthetics and provides a framework from which to consider the relationship of these quilts to the “standard-traditional” approach.

We wish to acknowledge the support of the co-sponsoring institutions who will host the exhibition as it travels the country—the National Afro-American Museum Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio, the Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum in Colorado Springs and the Vermont Folklife Center in Middlebury.

Many individuals committed their energy and enthusiasm to this project and many more will catch that enthusiasm as a result of viewing their efforts. Eli Leon expresses his appreciation to Suzanne Baiserman, Marcia Donahue, Leonard Glasser, Nancy Higgins, Chere Lai Mah, Glenna Matthews and Mara Rivera for editorial readings of his manuscript; Cathy Luchetti, Gwen Head, Robin Hernderson, Sandra McPherson, Gary Titus, Pat Turner, Toni Vincent and Tom White for their valuable input in the selection of quilts for an earlier version of this exhibition at the Berkeley Art Center; and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for support of research leading to this publication.

No Two Alike is an acknowledgment and a celebration of the creative gifts of the 20 quilters whose outstanding work is shared through this publication and exhibition. Our sincere thanks go to each of them.

Polly T. Laffitte
Chief Curator of Art
No Two Alike
African-American Improvisations on a Traditional Patchwork Pattern

Eli Leon

“So that’s what you piece for, something different from somebody else.”
Arbie Williams

A good number of African-American quilts are peppered with irregularities that until recently were esthetically incomprehensible to most Northern Europeans and their American progeny, who expected textile designs to consist of identically repeated imagery and abhorred variation that resulted from what they considered a lack of control. In sub-Saharan two-dimensional art, on the other hand, precise repetition is merely one option among many—black African textile artists having commonly enjoyed a play between the familiar and the novel. Indeed, it has been widely noted that improvisation, within the confines of traditional restrictions, pervades the arts of West African peoples, thus providing a context for its prominence among their descendants on this side of the Atlantic.

Central to this exhibit is a Square-in-a-Square pattern used by both “standard-traditional” and improvisational American quilters. While standard-traditionalists—whether black or white—ordinarily see it as a succession of concentric square frames of uniform width surrounding a center square whose size does not vary with repetition, the improvisational quilters featured here—20th-century African-Americans—typically handle it with varying degrees of flexibility. As it happens, improvisational renderings of this Square-in-a-Square motif (sometimes called Pig Pen, Window Pane or Log Cabin by African-American quilters) may also be found in the embroidered cut-pile mats (“velvets”) of the Bakuba peoples of central Africa, suggesting African roots.
of the African-American style. Consider, for example, the Bakuba velvet illustrated in figure 1. The center "squares" range widely in size, may assume rectangular shapes, and may be filled with any of various designs, including the Four-patch \( \square \) and Nine-patch \( \square \) patterns commonly found in American quilts. The motif in figure 2 is more regular, but undergoes an emphatic shift in scale at one corner. Working in the improvisational mode, both African and African-American textile makers apparently conceive of their pattern—whether drawn from an established source or from a model in the mind—as a set of guidelines within which the artist is free to elaborate, rather than as a fixed entity. When Arkansan Lee Wanda Jones (figure 11) was first learning to quilt, her mother would tell her: "It's nothing about making it a little different. It's still the same pattern. You just added something of your own to it."

Texas quiltmaker Minnie Nobles never repeats her Square-in-a-Square motif exactly (as a standard-traditional quilter would normally be taught to do at an early age), but takes the call for replication as an invitation to improvise. In her extraordinary rendition of this design (figure 3), even such a fundamental requisite for regularity as uniform-width framing is the exception; indeed, variations in width are effected within, as well as between, individual frames, and these structures don't necessarily have four sides, but may instead be two- or three-sided.

Nobles' approach, moreover, is consistently improvisational. A frame may change color, not just at the corners, but wherever a seam is required. The finished quilt "blocks"—like the variable motifs in Bakuba velvets—may be decidedly out-of-square. The three blocks in each outer strip align with their counterparts across the quilt but not with the more sweeping variations in the wider center strip, where Nobles offers a choice of medallions—an over-

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**Figure 3. Square-in-a-Square. Minnie Nobles, Big Springs Community, Texas, c. 1975.**

**Minnie Nobles**

Minnie Nobles (1901- ) has lived in the country in Rusk and Cherokee counties, Texas, all of her life. She lost her mother when she was a child and only learned to quilt in her twenties, enjoying putting different pieces together and "letting them be pretty." She did domestic work for a living while rearing her two children. Throughout the construction of her Square-in-a-Square, Nobles maintains an improvisational approach. Her basic block is never repeated exactly, but comes out differently every time.
sized, out-of-center candidate vying for this distinction with the odd-shaped, unembellished occupant of the customary medallion position at the quilt's center. This central plain block, however—pieced of numerous small squares of checked fabric—mimics the center sections of every other block in the quilt, a stunningly improvisational qualification for medallion status.

While Nobles' quilt is, thus, highly idiosyncratic, her flexible treatment of the Square-in-a-Square motif and her innovative handling of other aspects of quilt construction/design (inseparable processes in this mode) are the rule among improvisational quilters, as illustrated by this exhibition. Practices such as measuring approximately, using scraps as found, incorporating accidents into the finished work and making frequent exceptions to whatever rules may have been established, are all aspects of a vision in which incidental contingencies, accepted as spontaneous offerings, are skillfully managed to contribute to the beauty and individuality of an artist's work. Accordingly, quilter Laverne Brackens (figure 4)—an eloquent spokeswoman for improvisation—talks of "off-centering the centerpiece," displaying odd selvages, turning printed stripes in different directions, stripping lengthwise and widthwise in the same quilt, enlarging blocks that are too small for the current need with long strips of fabric, and working out the pattern as she goes along, all to effect a "different look," "change it up" or "give that quilt a offset look."

Maple Swift, who reports that there is "very little scrapping that I throw away," used scraps as she found them for a rectangular block variation that she calls "Pig in the Pen" (figure 5). She allows both the rectangles and their frames to vary in size and shape, improvising an optional divider bar that may be set either vertically or horizontally. Pig pens, she explains, are similarly divided when it's time to wean the piglets. Hannah Nelson (figure 7) strategically positioned a lone red square at the center of her central block, while Lee Wanda Jones (figure 11) and

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**Laverne Brackens**

Laverne Brackens (1927- ) helped her mother (Gladys Henry) tack quilts when she was a child, but didn't get interested in making them herself until much later. Always on the go, Brackens could never sit still long enough to work on quilts. But when a 1987 accident forced her early retirement, she found in quilting an occupation she could still handle. "The whole time I was on crutches and everything, I was piecing quilts, because I could use my left foot [for the sewing machine]. Doctor won't let me do nothing else. Nothing else I can do. So I just set down and quilt."

A friend supplies Brackens with factory scraps, and she likes to see what she can do with them. Some of her ideas come from her dreams; others she works out as she goes along. "I didn't have no certain pattern in mind. I just started working my material until I got it to look like a quilt." She can cut out the pieces for three quilt tops in a day and "go back the next day and maybe do two of them." If she feels like it, she can do all three, but it may take her until midnight.

Her work, along with that of her mother, daughter (Sherry Byrd) and granddaughter, was shown in 1996 at the *Four Generations of African-American Quiltmakers* exhibition at the High Museum in Atlanta, Georgia.
MAPLE SWIFT

Maple Swift (1944— ) grew up in a quilting family in and around rural Ozan, Arkansas, where she has lived all of her life. When she was 11 or 12 she got interested in the quilting of her live-in grandmother. "I'd get in her way," she explained, "and that's how I really learned." Her grandmother started her with the Nine-patch pattern and showed her how to strip a quilt, putting different colors together so that they would "show up." From the first, Swift loved to make quilts. The quilters in the community provided her with new patterns that her mother would help cut and assemble. "I was easy to catch on," she explained. "They could show me something once or twice, and they wouldn't be bothered with me asking them no more."

Swift did factory work, trained as a cook and prepared meals in a school cafeteria while raising her family, until her arthritis became too disabling for her to continue. In 1990, she was caring for small children in her home and making quilts to support herself, most days spending four to six hours piecing and racking quilts. She gets intensely involved. "I get about halfway through with one and it go to looking real good to me—I'm just anxious to get through so I can see what it really look like."

She can machine-piece an eight-pointed star block in a half hour without measuring or using a pattern. Able to tack two comforters a day and "still see about my babys and cook in between times," she sells her productions or gives them to relatives and to people who have lost their home in a fire. In 1989 she made and sold about 30 bedcovers.
Swift, again, (figure 14) set lone Square-in-a-Square blocks at their quilts' centers, and Zetta M. Dempsey (figure 8), Sherry Byrd (figure 22), Laverne Brackens (figure 4), Delia Lacy (figure 10) and Alberta "Missie" Freeman (figure 6) filled their entire visual fields, or nearly so, with single representations of this changeable motif.

Jones has employed the familiar "Road to ..." model in naming her quilt Road to Nowhere (as in Road to Oklahoma and Rocky Road to Kansas). Such "Road to" patterns would ordinarily be repeated over a quilt's surface, but Jones used her Square-in-a-Square pattern as a starting point only, working out a one-of-a-kind overall design as she went along instead of replicating an established pattern. Her quilt, then, has not only been pieced but named improvisationally, in both cases drawing on, but ultimately transcending, existing tradition.

Employing perhaps the most common of block-style quilt organizations, Gladys "Kitty" Jones (figure 15) and Mable Battle (figure 24) adapted the overall block format (diagram a) to accommodate non-uniform blocks, Jones varying nothing but square-size and frame-width for a black-and-white minimalist rendition. Nobles, Swift (figure 5), Arbie Williams (figure 16) and Mary Lee Kelly (figure 18) followed yet another popular African-American organizational format (diagram b) in which the textile is constructed of alternate wide/figured and narrow/unfigured strips with the design motifs in the figured strips separated by narrow divider bars. One might expect these four quilts to look more or less alike, sharing not only their block pattern but their overall structure, but that is clearly not the case. Similarly, Gladys Henry (figure 19) placed a strip of Square-in-a-Square blocks, separated by narrow divider bars, down the center of her quilt.

**ALBERTA "MISSIE" FREEMAN**

Missie Freeman (1914- ) was born in Castle Oklahoma and reared in a quiltermaking family in the country near Boley, Oklahoma. A profound hearing loss from childhood has severely limited her ability to speak, but she grew up milking cows, "chopping" cotton, churning butter, cooking for the family and making quilts. After her mother died in 1967, she moved to California so her five sisters could take care of her. Sewing, quilting and crocheting are now her main activities. "She can see something and look at it, and she can make it," according to her sister, quiltermaker Bettie Phillips. "She used to get the Sears Roebuck catalog, see a dress in it, and make it herself."
HANNAH NELSON
Hannah Nelson was living in a retirement home in Ozan, Arkansas and not available to be interviewed when her Square-in-a-Square quilt was collected in 1990. Just about everything in her rendition of this pattern has been allowed to vary—number of frames per block, pattern of contrast, color scheme, frame width, etc.

ZETTA M. DEMPSEY

Zetta M. Dempsey lived in or around Oakland, California. This powerful rendition of the Square-in-a-Square pattern, in which the quilter has filled most of her visual field with a single representation of the motif, was found among Dempsey’s possessions after her death in the mid-1980s.

BETTIE MAE HART
Bettie Mae Hart (1902-1991) lived in the country in Rusk County, Texas all of her life. She learned to sew as a very young child. "When I learned to sew, I didn’t know how to hold material, and they had to pin my sewing to my clothes before it wouldn’t get away from me." She started piecing quilts when she was nine or ten, always watching her mother. "I could see her doing it, and then I’d want to do some of the things that I could see her do." Hart liked quilting and always used scraps to piece her blocks, both to economize and because she’d "hate to cut up the material."

She raised 11 children while working in a cannery and doing farmwork and housework for other people and made a point of giving quilts to every member of her family. "Every child I got, you can walk in their house, and they can show you the quilt that I fixed for them. All my grand kids, when they got married, I give them quilts."

The Square-in-a-Square pattern was traditional in Hart’s family and locality as well as in the wider African-American community as represented in this exhibition; a 1919 wedding gift to Hart and her husband from her mother-in-law was done in this pattern, as are two quilts by her former neighbors, Delia Lacy and Minnie Nobles.
Delia Lacy (1902- ) has lived in the country in Rusk County, Texas, all of her life. With a typical lack of formality, she and her sisters learned to quilt from their mother. "I just started piecing—if I did it wrong, she show me." Lacy can "quilt out a quilt in a week's time" and provides bedcovers to all her children and grandchildren.

Figure 10. Medallion. Pieced by Delia Lacy, Big Springs Community, Texas, c. 1975 or earlier. Quilted by her cousin, Willia Ette (Lacy) Graham, and Johnnie Wade, Oakland, California, 1995.
Lee Wanda Jones (1934–) was raised in the rural outskirts of McCaskill, Arkansas. When she was eight or nine years old, she started helping her mother piece quilts. Her family encouraged her from the first. Her grandmother, she remembers, would get excited if she made a doll quilt or a little scarf or pillow and would be sure to make some use of it, just to let Wanda know that she was happy to see her sewing.
Bessie Mae Frost (1920– ) was born in Shreveport, Louisiana. She started making quilts when she was nine years old. "Whenever [my mother] would sit down to piece," she explained, "she’d give me my needle and thread too, and I would sew right along with her." Frost often measures, but, "Some of them I didn’t. A lot of times I was using pieces that was already cut, and I didn’t want to throw them away. I just sew them together—make them fit. Sometime I like them like that. It’s from your own feeling, and when you get them together, long as it suits you—you’re pleased with what you done. If it fit and be pretty, that makes a quilt."

Frost eventually migrated to California. She lived in Oakland in the 1980s when she made her *Square-in-a-Square*—one of those quilts from scraps that she was able to "make fit."

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Mrs. Hardaway and her sister are reputed to have lived in Tyler, Texas. They've grouped their Square-in-a-Square blocks into nine sets of four—a familiar arrangement in American quilts, but executed here with approximately, rather than precisely, measured pieces—and added a single border of leftover blocks. Borders that don’t match or aren’t four-sided may be found in African textiles as well as in improvisational African-American quilts.
Gladys "Kitty" Jones
Kitty Jones (c.1900-1974) was from Forest, Mississippi. Her elemental rendition of the Square-in-a-Square pattern owes its sense of motion to the range in size of the inner squares and the variable widths of their single frames. Jones gave this quilt top as a wedding present to a nephew in Fresno, California c. 1973. It was eventually quilted by his wife, Atleaver Jones.

ARBIE WILLIAMS

Arbie Williams (1916– ) grew up on farms and ranches in Texas and Oklahoma, where she started piecing quilts by age 10 or 12. Over the years, Williams worked as a cocktail waitress, maid, cook, nurse, seamstress, beautician and farmer in addition to raising nine children. She migrated to California in 1945 and took up quilting again after the last of her children was grown, setting out to provide a quilt for each of her descendents. She soon discovered that her work was widely admired and has since acquired a national reputation.

Williams has been featured in the exhibitions, Who'd a Thought It, Models in the Mind and Something Else to See. She was one of six quilters interviewed in the KGO television production “A Stitch In Time.” Her quilts have hung in the U.S. embassy in Botswana and our consulate in Johannesburg, and she has been awarded a National Heritage Fellowship for her quiltmaking by the National Endowment for the Arts. The city of Oakland named July 27, 1991, “Arbie Williams Day.”

Williams was invited to show her quilts at the “Reunion on the Mall” at Bill Clinton’s 1992 inauguration. In 1994 she had a cataloged one-woman show, Arbie Williams Transforms the Britches Quilt, at the University of California in Santa Cruz—a first for a traditional African-American quilter—and taught workshops in a style of her own, in which untrimmed sections of pants are incorporated into her quilts.

Also in 1994, the Smithsonian Institution sought her participation in their “Festival of American Folklife,” featuring one of her quilts on the event’s poster. In 1996, her work graced the Tree of Life inaugural exhibition of the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, and she and her britches quilts were the subject of “Old Pants Find New Life,” a video that accompanied the traveling exhibition, Recycled Re-seen: Folk Art from the Global Scrap Heap, curated by the International Folk Art Museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

For a while, Williams volunteered at Highland Hospital in Oakland, California, troubleshooting for a group of elderly women who made quilts for AIDS babies. “These women all know how to piece quilts,” Williams explained, “I just started it. I’m sort of a guide.”

MARY LEE KELLY
Mary Lee Kelly (1916-1979) moved from Orrville, Alabama to Oakland, California during World War II—no doubt as part of the 1940s westward migration to take advantage of the high-paying war-industry jobs then available on the West Coast to African-Americans. Her *Square-in-a-Square* quilt closely follows a common African-American and African organizational format, in which the textile (exclusive of borders) is constructed of alternate wide/figured and narrow/unfigured strips with the design motifs in the figured strips separated by narrow divider bars.

GLADYS HENRY

Gladys Henry (1906-1996) grew up in the country. She watched her mother and grandmother make quilts when she was a girl. After she married at 18, she started making them herself. A dressmaker in Freestone County, Texas, and consequently well-stocked with scraps, she made and sold many a quilt, using designs she invented, bought at the dry goods store, borrowed from friends or based on crossword puzzles. Her daughter (Laverne Brackens) was impressed as a girl by Henry's ingenuity: "My mother could start out on a little design, and she'd make it out into what she want to make it out into. She'll just keep working to it and putting to it until it come our the way she want it."

When her quilt was intended for home use, Henry often recycled miscellaneous scraps and leftover patchwork in a medallion format, placing a patterned block or two, or a special piece of cloth, at the center. Or she might arrange assortments of blocks and scraps in the quintessentially African-American strip format, as in her *Square-in-a-Square*. These are the types of quilts that caught the fancy of her offspring. In 1996, four Henry family quilters (see Laverne Brackens and Sherry Byrd) were honored in an exhibition of their work at the High Museum in Atlanta.

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Mrs. Hardaway and her sister (figure 13) grouped their *Square-in-a-Square* piecework into nine sets of four, another familiar quilt arrangement, but here executed with approximately measured, rather than precisely measured, pieces. The one entirely unprovenanced quilt in the show (figure 20) employs the square-in-a-square concept on multiple levels, with groupings of *Square-in-a-Square* blocks serving in turn as elements in the larger *Square-in-a-Square*. Following a naming custom by which a pattern that included *Nine-patch* blocks (for example) as elements in larger *Nine-patch* assemblages would be dubbed "Double *Nine-patch*" , this quilt might well be called "Double *Square-in-a-Square*" or "Double Pig Pen."

Sherry Byrd, who is unequivocal about not liking "to do the same things over and over" and feels that measuring "just takes the heart out of things," carried the practice of choosing a different fabric wherever seaming is required to a new high (figure 22), turning up the volume by chopping her frames into vibrantly colored and boldly contrasting segments. The resulting 3-D effect is checked near the perimeter by the quilt's only unbroken frame (rendered in solid black) and finally tempered, in the outermost borders, by a faint echo of the bold interior. In yet another *Square-in-a-Square* variation, while allowing the sizes and shapes of many elements of the design to vary, Marzella Tatum (figure 21) adeptly executed a series of alternating solid-peach and checked-pink zig-zags to look like an overall diagonal pattern she'd seen in a book. Following the zig-zagging paths from left to right as they jog upward, substituting red for checks and occasionally yellow for peach in the border sections, we encounter no breaks in continuity, although Tatum varied her basic pattern as she moved from strip to strip, only using a true *Square-in-a-Square* in the second strip from the left. "I placed my pieces till I got them to go like I wanted them," she
SHERRY BYRD

Sherry Byrd (1951- ) started helping her grandmother (Gladys Henry, the local seamstress in Freestone County, Texas) tack quilts when she was six or seven years old. By age eight or nine, she was piecing doll clothes from her grandmother's scraps.

She worked in restaurants from age 11, doing everything from dishwashing to cooking. A 1972 graduate of Sam Houston State University, she taught school briefly when she was newly married, moving to Houston around 1973, before her first child was born, then to California in 1977 and back to Texas in 1997. Despite a strong desire to make beautiful things, she only occasionally finds time to piece quilts; eight children and a home sewing job take up most of her time. But she can piece a quilt in eight hours if she "goes straight at it," working her fastest when she "sees the colors falling together." Once she knows that the quilt is going to look good, she gets excited and wants to see the results.

Byrd's quilts have been widely seen in the U.S., travelling to more than 20 museums as part of the exhibitions, Who'd a Thought It, Models in the Mind and Something Else to See. In 1996, her work shared the spotlight with that of her mother (Laverne Brackens), her grandmother, and one of her daughters in Four Generations of African-American Quiltmakers at the High Museum in Atlanta. Heralding their new image as a world airline, British Air has purchased one of her quilts and the rights to reproduce sections of it in their advertising. The design will be one of 40 or so by ethnic artists from around the world intended to grace, among other things, the tail fins of their planes.
explained, and “just cut them to make them come out.”

Although Mable Battle (figure 24) sometimes uses concentric pairs of four-sided, single-fabric frames in her blocks, exceptions abound. Occasional frames, for example, like those of Nobles, Williams (figure 17) and Hardaway and sister, have only three sides done in a particular color or print. Battle, who “just started out going around a square, never gave thought to trying to really match anything or sticking with one set size,” generally had enough material on hand for the last side, as is evident from her use of the omitted fabric in subsequent blocks, but she chose not to use it—to “create a different look.” "Post Oak Grapevine" is her name for this design, which she didn’t think “anyone would notice as being a pattern.” The title refers to something that “grew on its own,” like the grapes and post oak trees that thrived untended on her family’s property during her girlhood in East Texas.

African-American quiltmaking evolved in a context of imposed poverty, where creative adaptations were essential to the efficient recycling of worn-out clothing, dressmaking scraps, and other salvageable castoffs. An African heritage of decorative patchwork, however, and traditional mastery of improvisation, appears to have fostered a renaissance of artistic expression under these harsh conditions, setting the stage for a fine marriage of art and necessity. Indeed, an African-influenced esthetic favoring improvisation, largely rejected in the Euro-American-dominated, standard-traditional quilt tradition, may underlie the design-cum-execution of a special province of African-American quilt, exemplified by the work in this exhibition, in which the artist-craftsperson relaxes her vigilance regarding precision, allowing for a range of outcomes.

Curiously—due, perhaps, to the ubiquitous and enduring poverty that prevailed under slavery—improvisational design is, if anything,
more pronounced in this genre of African-American quilt than in the textiles of many African peoples. It is noteworthy, moreover, that African-American improvisational quiltmakers sometimes report placing a high value on their smaller scraps. "If you got lots of big pieces of material," Lee Wanda Jones explains, "it’s really not exciting to patch up anything."

It is, then, not entirely surprising that a selection of artists holding this philosophy, albeit starting with the same pattern, would produce a set of quilts no two of which are alike. On the contrary, the range and vitality of the work in this first quilt exhibition to focus on diverse African-American expressions of a single motif suggests an enduring affinity for variation and constitutes nothing less than a celebration of improvisation.

MABLE BATTLE

Mable Battle (1918- ) grew up in the country in Cherokee County, Texas. Her mother started teaching her to quilt, showing her how to put pieces together, when she was six or seven years old. "In my family," Battle reported, "if a girl didn’t know how to quilt, she didn’t amount to very much." Indeed, there was no lack of quilts at home; after the quilt box was full, the family piled more on top, seeing how high they could go. A mother of one, practical nurse, and ordained National Evangelist minister, Battle’s designs often come to her when she’s dozing. She likes to vary the way she puts her pieces together. "Seem like a light would turn on in my head," as she puts it, "to be different." In addition, she "likes those strong colors—that’s just in me. As far as quilts is concerned, I always like something for the bed to be rather loud. So that’s one reason why I always try to reach and get every bright piece of red or green or blue, or anything that is colorful."
NOTES

2. Gardi and Seydeu, "Arkilla Kerka," p. 32; Twining and Baird, Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia, p. 136; Adams, "Kuba Embroidered Cloth." p. 26. In European and Euro-American traditions, repetition was practiced in weaving and batik, where it is not a given, as well as in printed patterns. Repetition is now less dominant, partly as the result of the increasing appeal of African and Latin American designs. Asian, Southeast Asian and usually East Indian designs "repeat" even when they are not made by a printing press. Conversely, West Africans introduce some interruption or irregularity, even where they practice stamping. (Monni Adams, personal communication)
4. For additional improvisational works by Mable Battle, Maple Swift, Sherry Byrd, Laverne Brackens, Gladys Henry and Arbie Williams, see Leon, Who'd a Thought It; Models in the Mind; Arbie Williams Transforms the Britches Quilt; and Something Else to See.
5. For Bashoba, Bangende, Bangongo, Benapiang and Bakete (branches of the Bakuba) examples, see Washburn, figs. 58; Wahlman, Signs and Symbols, figures 32, 35, 46, 147.
6. The Kingdom of Kuba was outside the slaving area, but the coastal regions of the former Kongo territories were not. Early examples of cut-pile embroideries collected in Kongo and Angola are worked and patterned like those of the Bakuba (Meurant, Shoowa Design, p. 111). In fact, although West Africans arrived in North America in greater numbers, the Bantu of Central Africa comprised the largest homogeneous culture group (including a common language) among the enslaved Africans and are believed to have had the strongest impact on the development of African-American culture. (Holloway, "The Origins of African-American Culture," pp. 2, 8, 9, 16, 17; Thompson, "Kongo Influences on African-American Artistic Culture," pp. 150, 152.)
8. For additional examples of Square-in-a-Square quilts in various formats, see Vlach, The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts, figures 58; Wahlman, Signs and Symbols, figures 32, 35, 46, 147.
9. Even frames that are structurally four-sided may be completed by this quiltmaker in a different fabric.
10. When two or more blocks with three-sided frames in the same fabric are found, we assume that the quiltmaker had a choice of maintaining four-sided framing. In this case, the quiltmaker was available for confirmation.
11. See Leon, Who'd a Thought It; Something Else to See; Vlach, The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts; Wahlman, Signs and Symbols.
12. Not including the Bakuba. The Bashoba in particular, one of many branches of the Bakuba people, are masters of improvisation.

WORKS CITED


