

OF SALT AND SPIRIT

BLACK QUILTERS

IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH



TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE

About the Exhibition

The American South serves as a homeplace to a rich material culture that is inseparable from Black life. Quiltmaking arguably remains one of the most enduring approaches to meaning and memory making within Black culture. Black Southern women, who are historically situated at the helm of this art form, have dedicated generations to preserving history through quilts. Mainstream discourse, however, has often exploited and erased their artistic contributions. These actions, paired with disregard for the South as an artistic center, led to the decentering the lives and perspectives of those that matter most—the makers.

Black quilters' hands have stitched a visual archive that maintains centuries of knowledge about the region and its complexity, from enslavement to today. Black folklorists like Roland L. Freeman (1936 – 2023), who spent decades documenting the lives, processes, and creations of Black quilters across the South, understood the need to preserve these narratives. They sought to portray Black quilters through a lens of care and personal autonomy. They understood that quilters' race, gender, and class should be considered critically, but not used to diminish who they were and what they created.

Over the past twenty years, MMA has amassed one of the largest quilt collections in the American South. Through a reparative approach, *Of Salt and Spirit* combines 51 handmade and machine-stitched quilts from MMA's permanent collection with decades of research and ephemera from Roland Freeman to shape a love letter to Black quilters of the South and showcase the stories of everyday people whose lives were as vibrant and varied as the quilts they created.

Curator Dr. Sharbreon Plummer combines thorough research, innovative interpretation, and community engagement to form a cohesive, experiential study of American art through a Black feminist lens. The exhibition seeks to illuminate the processes and practices of Black Southern quilters and demystify cultural narratives assigned to their artistry while celebrating the enduring impact of quilting on communities and generations. Join us on a journey of discovery and appreciation, where every stitch tells a story of resilience, creativity, and cultural identity.

Overview

This Resource Guide highlights 5 works that are on view in each section of the exhibition that explore the themes of *Homecoming*, *The Gathering*, *Aesthetics of Place*, and being *Bound by Love*. Spend time looking closely at each work and dig deeper into personal meaning-making with the accompanying Close Looking questions.

Introduction	Homecoming	The Gathering	Aesthetics of Place	Bound by Love
				
<p>Gustina Atlas (born 1937), <i>Variation on Dresden Plate Quilt</i>, 1998, Fabric; quilted, 81 1/2 x 80 in., Collection of Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Gift of the Kohler Foundation, Inc., 2022.9.13 Home state: Mississippi & Texas</p>	<p>Essie Mae Buck (1932–2021), <i>Chickens</i>, 1993, Cotton; machine pieced, appliquéd, hand quilted, 90 x 89 in., Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Museum purchase, with funds from the Searcy Fund, 2008.092 Home state: Mississippi</p>	<p>Hystercine Rankin (1929–2010), <i>Memory Quilt</i>, ca. 1994, Fabric; appliquéd, hand embroidered, hand quilted, 88 x 82 in., Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Museum purchase, with funds from the Searcy Fund, 2006.101 Home state: Mississippi</p>	<p>Mary Mayfair Matthews, (1938–2011), <i>Folk Scenes Quilt</i>, 1992, Rayon, cotton polyester blend, lace, lamé, buttons; hand pieced, appliquéd, embroidered, 86 1/4 x 74 in., Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Gift of the Kohler Foundation, Inc., 2022.9.78 Home state: Tennessee</p>	<p>Emma Russell (1909–2004), <i>Star Quilt</i>, 1978, Cotton blend; hand pieced, appliquéd, hand quilted, 81 x 77 in., Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Gift of the Kohler Foundation, Inc., 2022.9.106 Home state: Louisiana</p>

Featured Works

1. **Gustina Atlas** (born 1937), *Variation on Dresden Plate Quilt*, 1998, Fabric; quilted, 81 1/2 x 80 in., Collection of Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Gift of the Kohler Foundation, Inc., 2022.9.13
2. **Essie Mae Buck** (1932–2021), *Chickens*, 1993, Cotton; machine pieced, appliquéd, hand quilted, 90 x 89 in., Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Museum purchase, with funds from the Searcy Fund, 2008.092
3. **Hystercine Rankin** (1929–2010), *Memory Quilt*, ca. 1994, Fabric; appliquéd, hand embroidered, hand quilted, 88 x 82 in., Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Museum purchase, with funds from the Searcy Fund, 2006.101
4. **Mary Mayfair Matthews**, (1938–2011), *Folk Scenes Quilt*, 1992, Rayon, cotton polyester blend, lace, lamé, buttons; hand pieced, appliquéd, embroidered, 86 1/4 x 74 in., Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Gift of the Kohler Foundation, Inc., 2022.9.78
5. **Emma Russell** (1909–2004), *Star Quilt*, 1978, Cotton blend; hand pieced, appliquéd, hand quilted, 81 x 77 in., Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Gift of the Kohler Foundation, Inc., 2022.9.106

Helpful Terms

- Quilt: From the Latin word meaning “stuffed sack,” a quilt is a multi-layered textile traditionally composed of two or more layers of material stitched together with batting in between. Quilts are made up of mainly three layers: the quilt *top*, the *batting* in the middle, and the *backing* on the bottom.
- Pattern: The consistent design repeated in every block to make up the overall design.
- Block: One of a series of components, usually a square or a rectangle, that is a complete design itself. It is combined with other blocks to make up the entire quilt top.
- Piecing: To sew two or more fabric shapes together to make a block.
- Binding: The fabric strip used to encase the raw edges to create a finished edge.
- Top: The upper, usually decorative, part of a quilt.
- Batting: The soft filler that is the middle layer of a quilt.
- Backing: The bottom or back layer of a quilt.
- Utilitarian: Designed to be useful or practical rather than attractive.
- Crossroads Quilters is a group of women, most of them African American, who work both individually and in groups to produce a variety of quilting projects through the arts organization Mississippi Cultural Crossroads in Port Gibson, Mississippi. Many quilts are made completely by one artist. Some quilters collaborate to divide up the steps of (1) designing the **pattern** and sewing **blocks**, (2) **piecing** the blocks together, (3) quilting the strips, and (4) ultimately **binding** and finishing the quilt. Each quilter’s work is unique, yet it is part of a tradition of creating beauty with this **utilitarian** art form.

Exhibition Section 1: *Homecoming*

This street is like my grandma's patchwork quilt
Kaleidoscope, appliqued with multicolored
threads of embroidery.

A golden sun, blue skies, carpeted with the green
the yellow, the red, the white, the black, the brown, and
the checkered.

—Margaret Walker, "A Poem for Farish Street"

The South serves as a home base for Black folklife. It has sustained cultural heritage across time and space in undeniably magical ways. Central to this phenomenon is Mississippi, which can be thought of as a rhizome whose continuously expanding roots house the origin stories of Black life in the United States. Over centuries, Black residents have witnessed life-altering transitions from emancipation to Reconstruction, the Great Migration, and the continuous fight for civil rights. For those who remained in the South, survival meant resisting and adapting in the face of hardships.

Quilts are a material representation of the memories, legacies, and labor of those who sustained and shaped Black communities. Their squares and seams tell stories—of place, love, loss, and simply existing. Black quilters of the South are the archivists of everyday life. As active observers of their surroundings, their work brings together color and composition to create a visual language that speaks to the beauty of Black life.

Artwork 1: Gustina Atlas, *Variation on Dresden Plate Quilt*



Gustina Atlas (born 1937), *Variation on Dresden Plate Quilt*, 1998, Fabric; quilted, 81 1/2 x 80 in., Collection of Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Gift of the Kohler Foundation, Inc., 2022.9.13.

Background Information:

Gustina Atlas (Gus-tee-na At-lus) (born 1937), often known as “Miss G,” was born in Claiborne County, Mississippi and lived there most of her life. Growing up, Gustina had no interest in quilting even though her mother and all the women in their neighborhood quilted. She left Port Gibson to attend college but returned to teach mathematics at the local high school. She retired in 1993 after 31 years of teaching. After retirement, Gustina found herself “bored” and soon became involved with quilting at the arts organization Mississippi Cultural Crossroads with the Crossroads Quilters. She was taught to quilt by master quilter Hystercine Rankin (Her-tuh-seen Rain-kin) and soon began creating her own award-winning quilts.

Gustina calls herself a “loud-color person” in reference to her use of bright, bold colors in her quilt designs. She does not like to use stencils for her patterns and prefers to create her designs freehand.

An accomplished quilter will complete an estimated 40,000–50,000 stitches by hand for an average queen-sized quilt design. How many stitches do you think Gustina Atlas has done in her 30 years of quilting?

Dresden Plate Quilt Pattern:

The Dresden Plate Quilt Pattern owes its name to the German city of Dresden. There, porcelain plates were produced featuring elaborate flowers, fruits, and foliage. The plate designs inspired the floral resemblance displayed in the Dresden Plate quilt pattern, popularized in the 1920's. Three main components make up a Dresden Plate quilt block: a circle, petals that radiate out from the circle (typically 16 to 20), and the background fabric.

Questions for Closer Looking

- When looking at this quilt, what shapes stand out to you?
 - Look closely. How were those shapes created?
 - Where do you see those shapes repeated?
 - Do those shapes resemble anything to you?
- What do you notice about the colors in this quilt? How would you describe them?
 - Do you see any of those colors repeated?
 - If so, where? Is there a pattern to how they are repeated?
- What are the common uses for quilts? (possible responses: *as a blanket, to provide warmth, to spread on the ground for a picnic*)
 - When thinking about these common uses, what comes to mind, knowing that this quilt is on view at the Mississippi Museum of Art?
- What materials are often used to make quilts?
 - *After fielding responses, provide this info sprinkle: In some communities, quilting originated out of necessity. Quilters would piece together fabric scraps from worn, tattered clothing or flour or feed sacks into bed coverings to keep warm. This utilitarian use of cast-off objects is one of the earliest examples of recycled art.*
- Think of a painting. What does an artist do to create a painting?
 - Now, consider the process of a quilter. What do you think are all of the steps that a quilter goes through when creating a quilt?
 - *After fielding responses, provide this info sprinkle: Consider the process of selecting fabrics and materials, deciding on what design to create, choosing where to place the fabrics, and creating each individual stitch that goes into joining the materials together.*
- There are an infinite number of patterns a quilter could choose to create. There are many patterns that are symbols or have meaning behind the design. When looking at this pattern, what do you think it could symbolize/represent?
 - *After fielding responses, provide this info sprinkle: This quilt is a variation on the Dresden Plate design. This design originated in the 1920's and is inspired by a design of porcelain plates created in Dresden, Germany adorned with images of flowers.*
 - Now knowing that this quilt pattern is inspired by floral imagery, what more can you see?

- *The artist that made this quilt is Gustina Atlas from Port Gibson, Mississippi. After her retirement from teaching, she had a lot of free time on her hands. Gustina accepted an invitation to visit Mississippi Cultural Crossroads. It was this invitation that led her to working with the Crossroads Quilters where she learned the art of quilting. "Miss G," as she is known, has made or has been a part of making many quilts since learning this craft in 1993.*
 - Quilting is a practice that can be done by an individual artist or with the help of other quilters. What are some of the advantages of working with other people/artists?
 - What might you learn?
- Think of a time that you made something with your own hands: Maybe you made a drawing or some type of artwork, or maybe a recipe or a work of creative writing. Maybe you built something. How long did it take you to make this, from start to finish?
 - How did you feel once you finished the project?
 - Did you share it with anyone? What did it feel like to share your hard work with others?

When looking at this first quilt, you likely noticed the layout of the pattern and the repetition of elements shown in this quilt. As you begin looking at the next quilt, notice how this next artist has used repetition in her design and the potential variations you may find in her repetition.

Artwork 2: Essie Mae Buck, *Chickens*



Essie Mae Buck (1932–2021), *Chickens*, 1993, Cotton; machine pieced, appliquéd, hand quilted, 90 x 89 in., Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Museum purchase, with funds from the Searcy Fund, 2008.092

Background Information:

Crossroads Quilter Essie Mae Buck (1932–2021) carefully pieced *Chickens* by using the process of appliquéd. Traditional appliquéd quilting involves using needlework to attach pieces of fabric to a separate layer of background fabric to depict a picture or design.

Here, each chicken was sewn on top of the same coral fabric and stitched beside alternating floral green squares to create visual interest with a checkerboard pattern. The chickens are each made from a unique fabric which makes them stand out.

Close Looking Questions:

- What do you notice in the squares in this quilt?
- What are some of the differences you notice about some of the chickens?
- Noticing the posture of the chickens, what do you think they are doing?
 - Why do you think the artist has the chickens turned facing different directions?
 - Have you seen a flock of chickens pecking for seed or food before?
 - What do you notice about the one chicken not in that posture? (It appears to show a chicken sitting on eggs)
 - Why do you think this chicken is sitting atop a pile of eggs?
- What can you notice in the only coral background square that does not show a chicken? (There is a basket full of eggs)
- Looking closely at the green with floral print squares, what can you notice?
- What are quilts typically used for? (As a blanket to provide warmth and comfort)
- Thinking about how quilts are often used as a bed covering or blanket, why do you think the artist included chickens in her quilt design?
- What settings would you normally see chickens in?
- What colors or patterns repeat in this quilt design?
 - Do any of the chickens appear to be cut from the same fabric?

When looking at *Chickens* by Essie Mae Buck, you likely made observations about the posture and action of the chickens shown in this quilt. You probably also noticed the repetition of the pattern. As you spend time with this next quilt, see what differences and similarities you can find between *Chickens* and *Memory Quilt*.

Exhibition Section 2: *The Gathering*

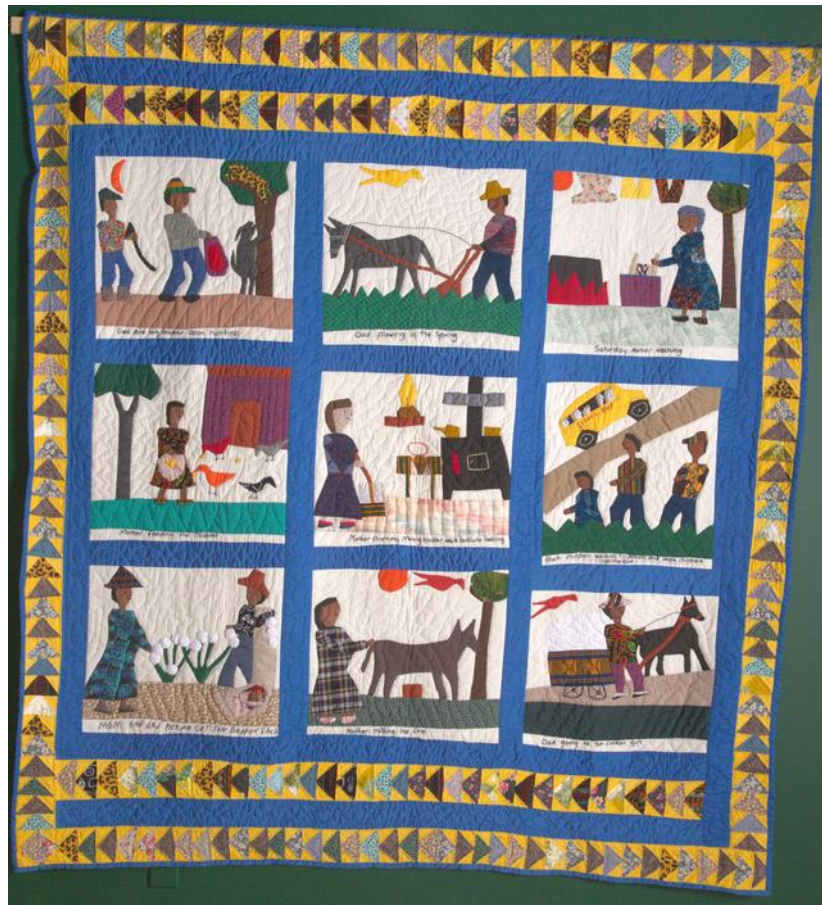
“She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order.”

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

The ritual of gathering is one of the most cherished aspects of quiltmaking. From early plantation life to the front porches and kitchen tables of today, quilting circles and bees have remained sacred places for Black quilters to come together. These moments of connection are sites of personal liberation. They allow Black women to forge sisterhood, share resources, and hold space for one another’s needs. Historically, Black quilters were often excluded from mainstream guilds because of differences in technique and approach, which were usually tied to race. Thus, Black women formed their own quilting groups as safe spaces for exploration and learning.

Quilting in a cooperative format is also part of a lineage of mutual aid, civic support, and entrepreneurship for Black women across the South. Groups such as the Tutwiler Quilters and Crossroads Quilters (featured in this section) have played a key role in ensuring compensation and creative visibility for Black quilters in Mississippi.

Artwork 3: Hystercine Rankin, *Memory Quilt*



Hystercine Rankin (1929–2010), *Memory Quilt*, ca. 1994, Fabric; appliquéd, hand embroidered, hand quilted, 88 x 82 in., Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Museum purchase, with funds from the Searcy Fund, 2006.101

Background Information:

Hystercine Rankin (Her-tuh-seen Rain-kin) (1929–2010) was born September 11, 1929, in Jefferson County, Mississippi. She lived on a farm in the Blue Hill Community. Her mother taught for a few months each year in a one-room schoolhouse, and her father was a sharecropper. In 1939, a white man shot Rankin's father on the highway and left him. After her father's death, her family moved in with her maternal grandmother. At age 12, Rankin's grandmother taught her to quilt out of necessity to be able to cover and provide warmth for her ten siblings. She was taught hand stitching. Her grandmother had high standards, so any time mistakes were made they were pulled out and redone.

In her late teens, Rankin married her husband Ezekiel. By the time of her marriage, her mother had passed away, so Rankin and her husband took in her remaining seven siblings. Rankin and her husband farmed and canned food items. After working outside in the day, Rankin would quilt in the evening or whenever she had spare time. She kept up her family's tradition of giving each child a quilt when they left home.

Rankin did not consider herself an artist until 1981 when she was invited to become the resident artist in Lorman Mississippi's Junior High School. Her residency allowed her to recognize the artistic nature of her quilts. In 1982, Camille Cosby, wife of Bill Cosby, bought several of Rankin's quilts. Through interest from famous folks and with the help of a local arts organization, Mississippi Cultural Crossroads, Rankin gained a following and received many commissions. The money she earned from her commissions paid for her siblings' and children's college educations, as all seven later graduated from Alcorn State University.

Her experience in the arts community allowed Rankin to explore new themes in her work like memory and social issues. In 1988, Rankin became master quilter and teacher at the Mississippi Cultural Crossroads.

Close Looking Questions:

- What do you see in this quilt?
- What do you notice about the border?
 - Is there a pattern to how the triangles are oriented?
- What do you notice in the fabrics that make up this quilt?
- How would you describe how this quilt design is organized?
- Do you see any animals?
 - What kind? Where? What color are they?
- Do you see an orange chicken? Does it look like a real chicken?
- Do you see any shapes that look like people?
 - Who do you think they might be?
 - What does it look like they are doing?
- What time period do you think these images are from?
 - What do you see that makes you say that?
- Do you see any words on this quilt? (Have students read it if they are able)

Dad and big brother coon hunting.

Dad plowing in the spring

Saturday, Mother washing

Mother feeding the chickens

Mother churning making butter while biscuits baking

Black children walking to school and white children ride the bus

Mom and dad picking cotton Baby on sack

Mother milking the cow.

Dad going to the cotton gin

- What are those words doing? (They're telling a story.)
- What words are used to describe the people shown in this quilt? (Father, Mother, Brother)

- How do those relate to one another?
- What do those words tell us about their relationship to the artist of this quilt?
- The name of this artwork is *Memory Quilt* by Hystercine Rankin. What is a memory?
- Each square on the quilt shows a memory from the artist's childhood that was important to her. Can you choose one of the squares that you like the most?
- What do you like about it?
- What images would you include in a quilt of your memories?
- Does anyone in your family sew or make quilts?
 - If so, what kinds of quilt designs do they make?

When looking at this work you likely noticed the relationship between the figures shown in the quilt and perhaps their relationship to the quilter who made it, Hystercine Rankin. You likely also made a connection between this quilt and the previous quilt, *Chickens*, noting that chickens appeared in both quilts. Your observations may have also included a mention of the setting that these quilts depict. As you begin looking at the next quilt, see what you can notice about the setting and time period of the next quilt.

Exhibition Section 3: *Aesthetics of Place*

“We are deeply, passionately connected to black women whose sense of aesthetics, whose commitment to ongoing creative work, inspire and sustain. We reclaim their history, call their names, state their particulars, to gather and remember, to share our inheritance.”

—bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*

Black quilters in the South have faced a complex journey as the interest in their work has ebbed and flowed. Early white scholars often presented their research in a way that removed the quilters’ voices. Centering their own interpretations instead, they compared Black Southern-made quilts to paintings by white European artists like Piet Mondrian and Henri Matisse, implying a need for added validation. In response, Black researchers and folklorists have spent decades pushing against terms like “improvisation” and “primitivism” and fighting for a more holistic interpretation of the culturally specific aesthetics of Black quiltmaking.

Documentarian Roland L. Freeman was invested in showcasing the depth and breadth of what Black quiltmaking. He spent nearly three decades building relationships with Black quilters across the United States, with a special interest in the South. His 1996 book, *A Communion of the Spirits: African-American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories*, was the first significant counternarrative to years of misrepresentation. The quilts in the remainder of this exhibition were collected by Freeman during his travels and represent some of the many Southern quilters he befriended.

Artwork 4: Mary Mayfair Matthews, *Folk Scenes Quilt*



Mary Mayfair Matthews, (1938–2011), *Folk Scenes Quilt*, 1992, Rayon, cotton polyester blend, lace, lamé, buttons; hand pieced, appliquéd, embroidered, 86 1/4 x 74 in., Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Gift of the Kohler Foundation, Inc., 2022.9.78

Background Information:

Mary Mayfair Matthews (1938–2011) was known for her intricate and well-known expressive quilt work that involved themes of family, tradition, and resilience. Born in 1938 in Senatobia, Mississippi, Matthews attended school through the third grade and began working in cotton fields until her late twenties. Matthews learned to read through books and magazines, where she saw an advertisement for a scholarship to an arts school. This sparked her journey for storytelling through fabric and earned her recognition in the folk-art community. Matthews took her personal experiences of abuse and loss and turned them into bold, vibrant colors of rural Southern life.

Mary Mayfair Matthews was known for experimenting across multiple mediums to express her creativity. From painting to doll-making, as well as quilting, Matthews used whatever spoke to her to depict her memories of life in rural Mississippi along with personal dreams and aspirations. Although she grew up with a mother and

grandmother who quilted, she did not fully lean into her artistry until the early 1990s, following the loss of her son.

Folk Scenes features a variety of vignettes that showcase small town life. They offer a peek at everyday experiences that range from humorous to unfortunate. Her use of materials including metallic thread, lace, and buttons, allude to Matthews' desire to not be confined to a traditional definition of quilting. The dimensional figures appliqued in each block also reflect her style of doll-making in a two-dimensional way.

Close Looking Questions:

- What do you see in this quilt?
- What do you notice about how the materials are assembled?
- What elements do you notice that are three-dimensional or have some form to them?
 - What comes to mind when you think about the word *collage*?
 - What materials are often used to create a *collage*?
 - **Collage refers to a composition made of layers often of different materials. Collage is typically made from paper, magazine, glue, etc.**
- How does this quilt resemble a collage?
- In this quilt, what elements do you see that represent manmade objects? (**Car, House, Chair, Fence, Basket, Jump rope**)
 - What elements do you see that are not people or manmade objects? (**Horse, Tree, Flower, Sun, Cow, Dog**)
- What actions are you noticing in this work? (**Riding horse, picking flowers, jumping rope, walking the dog, child pulling an adult, car wrecking into a tree**)
 - Are any of these actions familiar to you?
- How are the sections of this quilt divided or organized?
- What stories could be told by each individual square?
- The artist that made this quilt, Mary Mayfair Matthews, also worked in other art forms, including hand-made doll making. Knowing that this artist was experienced in creating human-like dolls, what details do you notice about the figures in this work?
- What elements can you find in this quilt to inform you about the time period represented? (**Style of clothes, clothesline, types of materials and fabrics used in this quilt**)
- What do you think informed the artist to create these scenes? Do you think she experienced these events firsthand? Is she depicting stories she's been told?
- How do you think this quilt preserves or reflects Southern life?

In this quilt, you were able to notice even more narrative figures and events or actions, much like the previous quilt, *Memory Quilt*. The previous quilts featured recognizable features, like people and animals, organized in repeating squares or frames to create the overall quilt design. As you look at this next quilt, note the overall organization of the work.

Exhibition Section 4: *Bound by Love*

“And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.”

—Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”

Familial ties in quilting extend beyond repurposing articles of family members’ clothing. Black women have long gathered with their assigned and chosen families to construct quilts and share stories. Today, it continues to be an intergenerational tradition.

Throughout Roland Freeman’s travels, he observed how quilters frequently collaborated. Some makers invoked memories of loved ones through stylistic choices and techniques that originated with their ancestors. In other instances, mothers and daughters morphed into teachers and students, blending their individual creative practices into quilts that showcased years of shared learning. This act of exchanging visual language and familial knowledge represents more than artmaking. It becomes a way of ensuring that home, and its memories and lessons, will not be forgotten.

Artwork 5: Emma Russell, *Star Quilt*



Emma Russell (1909–2004), *Star Quilt*, 1978, Cotton blend; hand pieced, appliquéd, hand quilted, 81 x 77 in., Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Gift of the Kohler Foundation, Inc., 2022.9.106

Background Information:

Emma Russell (1909–2004) was a fifth-generation African American quilter who grew up in the unincorporated Doloroso community of Woodville, Mississippi. She and her sister, Annie Dennis (1904–1997), who is also featured in this exhibition, learned to quilt from their mother, Phoebe Johnson, also featured in this exhibition.

According to her family's oral history, the tradition dates back five generations, passed down from mothers to daughters, and traces back to Phoebe Mae, an enslaved woman who was a plantation seamstress in Maryland. Sisters Emma and Annie carried on the quilting tradition passed to them and, in turn, taught others.

After studying at what is now known as Alcorn State University (formerly Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College), Russell moved to Bienville Parish, Louisiana, just across the Mississippi River. As she created, Russell kept careful books of her costs and wrote frequent correspondence about the act of creating her work. This translated into the larger work of she, her sister, and their mother, who, in the 1970s, began documenting African American quilting traditions. She worked with photographer Roland L. Freeman to conduct this

documentation. Together, they published photo essays and took care to document the actual artists and processes behind much of the quilting work that was getting attention across the south.

It is written that even as a child, Emma loved quilting, noting that she and her close friend “would hook school and go sit in a cave in the woods and piece all day.” Traditions are evident in her creative process. Across her work, Russell utilizes many classically used patterns and techniques.

Lone Star Quilt Pattern:

The primary pattern of *Star Quilt* is a Lone Star pattern. This pattern is known for its large single 8-pointed star in the center of a quilt top. It is commonly believed that this pattern originated in the early 1800s and was used primarily within Native American tribes to replace buffalo robes. Within Native American cultures, the Lone Star symbolized honor, pride, and identity. It is described as a great pattern for utilizing leftover scraps of fabric from any cut. Lone Star quilts require incredible organizational skills and a lot of tiny pieces of fabric.

The Lone Star, also, served a functional purpose in Native American culture, but exists solely as a work of art in Russell’s execution. This blend of styles and purposes highlights the versatility of Russell’s artistic skill and enunciates the boundless scope of Black southern quilters and their respective stylistic choices.

Close Looking Questions:

- What do you notice?
- What colors do you see? What shapes do you see? What textures do you see? What patterns?
- How does this quilt differ from the previous quilts you’ve looked at?
- What do your eyes focus on within this piece?
 - How do the colors or shapes effect how your eyes “move” around this quilt?
- What do you notice about the different fabrics used in this work? Do you notice any patterned fabrics?
- What do you notice about the stitching?
- Other than the large central 8-pointed star, what else do you see in this quilt?
 - When noticing the flowers, what pattern can you find in how they are laid out?
- What kind of flowers do you think those are?
 - What might those flowers represent?
- Why might there only be one star?
 - What might the “lone star” represent?
- The title of this work is *Star Quilt*, and it features a Lone Star quilt pattern. The artist that created this quilt is Emma Russell. Russell is a fifth-generation quilter. What does fifth generation mean?
- The section of the exhibition this quilt appears in is called *Bound by Love*. This section highlights familial ties in quilting and the tradition of passing on this art through familial lines. Both Emma Russell’s sister and mother have quilts on view in this exhibition section as well. How might quilts like this one be a good avenue for sharing traditions?

The practice of making something with your own hands can be a very personal experience. The next time you look at or curl up in a quilt, think about who made it. Pay close attention to the details in the pattern and the intentionality of the stitching. Think about the story it tells.

How might you help preserve it and pass it on?