

## Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt

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### Overview

Forty-three quilts from the isolated African American town of Gee's Bend, Ala., in a show exploring the influences underlying this community's quilt-making. [Read Editorial Review](#)

- Average Reader Rating: ★★★★★ [1] [Write a Review](#)
- Genre Type: Fiber

### Details

**This event has already occurred.**

### Editorial Review

#### 'Gee's Bend': A Strong Foundation

By Michael O'Sullivan

Washington Post Staff Writer

Friday, July 6, 2007; Page WE21

On view at Baltimore's Walters Art Museum, "Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt" may look a little familiar to those who remember the 2004 stop of "The Quilts of Gee's Bend" at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

No, it's not the same show. Although both were organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Tinwood Alliance, this touring exhibition takes a narrower focus, looking at the influence of architecture, the environment and traditional design motifs on quilting in the now world-famous African American community of rural Gee's Bend, Ala. An accompanying show of photographs of Gee's Bend and its residents by Baltimore artist Linda Day Clark adds another layer of insight.

As with the last iteration, it helps if you think of "Architecture" as a show that's less about homemade blankets than about modern design. That point was central to understanding the Corcoran show, and it's critical here. Those expecting a more traditional quilt show will be disappointed, as were several museum-goers during a recent walk-through, who could be overheard loudly complaining to their companions about the "cockeyed" and "out-of-whack" patterns on view. As with the shaped canvases of contemporary painter Elizabeth Murray, many are not even rectangular.



(Mary Lee Bendolph, a Gee's Bend quilter, works on one of her pieces/Matt Arnett, 2006)

And that's a good thing.

It's not as if the Gee's Bend quilters have thrown all tradition out the window, though. Many of their quilts are based on patterns well known to quilting aficionados. Patterns such as the "log cabin," the "courthouse steps" and the "snowball" make appearances, albeit with frequently improvised deviations that sometimes make the underlying structure disappear. (Even the local names for the patterns are different. In Gee's Bend, they're called "housetop," "bricklayer" and "bow tie," respectively.) As Gee's Bend quilter Louisiana Bendolph puts it, her quilts typically start out as housetop, a pattern based on concentric squares that evokes the roof of a house viewed from above, but very quickly get "un-housetop."

In addition to references to buildings -- one quilt by Essie B. Pettway is based on a photograph of the facade of the Southern Poverty Law Center building in Montgomery, Ala. -- several of the works in "Architecture" call to mind the landscape where the quilters live. Look at another quilt by Lucy T. Pettway, a quilter whose common surname reflects that of the slave owner on whose plantation her ancestors (and those of many others) lived. You'll soon see a kind of map emerge from the quilt, echoing the layout of houses, roads, river and fields of this isolated town.

As the wall text notes, it's a town rich in often-painful history: After the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke there in 1965, inspiring black residents to register to vote in larger numbers, ferry service across the Alabama River to nearby Camden, and its courthouse, was discontinued. Astonishingly, the Gee's Bend ferry service was restored only last year.

That sense of seclusion -- and the inaccessibility of material goods -- can be seen in the popular use of denim and flannel from recycled work clothes in the Gee's Bend quilts, which also make use of whatever else is handy: mattress ticking, double-knit, silk, velveteen. Among the most texturally (not to mention visually) satisfying quilts are those that incorporate scraps of corduroy, left over -- and, in one case, hoarded for 25 years -- from a 1970s pillow-sham-making assembly line run by Sears.

But using worn-out clothes or fabric remnants isn't what makes the Gee's Bend quilts special. Nor are the elements of personal or social history that creep in. Quilts have always documented lives in their patchwork way. It's the complex, jazz-like visual rhythms of the designs that swing (and sing) so sweetly and unexpectedly. They're asymmetrical and un-square; they're neither "brainstormed" nor "thought out," to use the words of a high school visitor to Gee's Bend from Baltimore's Kids on the Hill arts and civic engagement program.

Rather, they are felt more than planned; intuited more than

built. If there is an underlying architecture here, it is an unseen one whose blueprints have as much to do with internal as external makeup. As Loretta P. Bennett says of her own quilt, on view near the show's exit, "I wanted to be like a window into my background and my childhood and where I came from."

### Reader Reviews [\(Read all reviews\)](#) [1]

#### quilting at its best ★★★★★

*Posted by mosbyng on Jul 17, 2007*

The Gee's Bend Quilts exhibit is something any quilter can be proud of. These women stepped outside of the box of traditional quilting because of having to be creative with few resources. The results are beautiful abstract designs that embrace the essence of their culture. I loved the exhibit

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#### Average Reader Rating:

★★★★ [1]

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