



BIRD OF PARADISE QUILT TOP

Artist unidentified

Vicinity of Albany, New York; 1858–1863

Cotton, wool, silk, and ink with silk embroidery; 84 ½ × 69 ⅝"

Gift of the Trustees of the American Folk Art Museum, 1979.7.1

Photo by Gavin Ashworth, New York

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE OBJECT

The *Bird of Paradise Quilt Top*, made during the Civil War period, is thought to be an unfinished marriage or wedding quilt. This idea is supported by the vertical rows of appliquéd blocks that feature pairs of birds and other animals. In addition to these animal pairs, other symbols of union and fertility can be found on the quilt top; they include birds tending nests of eggs, flowers, and fruits. The only aberration appears in the two top blocks of the quilt. A single female figure is appliquéd onto one block, but the square next to her is nearly empty, save for the decorative leaves and flowers. Newspaper templates, including a template of a male figure, were found with this quilt top, suggesting that perhaps the quilt was never finished, and the marriage it was intended to celebrate never took place.

The quilt top also features depictions of famous nineteenth-century racehorses and of an elephant named Hanible, who had traveled throughout New York State during this period with his trainer.

RELATED LESSONS

- “Counting Quilts” (pre-K–1)
- “Exploring Folk Art Through Poetry” (2–3)

COUNTING QUILTS

PRE-K-1

GRADE LEVEL: PRE-K-1

NEW YORK STATE LEARNING STANDARDS: THE ARTS; ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS; AND MATHEMATICS, SCIENCE, AND TECHNOLOGY
ESTIMATED TIME: ONE 60-MINUTE PERIOD

OBJECTIVES

- Students will practice their observation skills, looking closely at an appliqué quilt top from the mid-nineteenth century.
- Students will practice their counting skills and apply mathematical concepts in the exploration of this work of art and in the creation of their own collage quilt.
- Students will represent their families symbolically through numbers and designs.

MATERIALS

- Images of *Bird of Paradise Quilt Top*
- Quilt materials, such as paper, fabric, or felt, and pieces for collage and supports; glue sticks

LESSON ACTIVITIES AND PROCESSES

Introduction

- Ask the students to share their knowledge and understanding of quilts and quiltmaking. If possible, share a sample of a quilt. The American Folk Art Museum has quilts in its “touch” collection; please call 212. 265. 1040, ext. 381, or e-mail grouptours@folkartmuseum.org to arrange a visit.
- Define “quilt” and identify some of the differences between quilts and other bedcovers: A quilt is a bedcover that consists of three layers—generally two layers of fabric and an inner layer of padding—that are stitched together to hold the layers in place. Quilting also refers to the often decorative stitching that connects the layers and holds the batting, or to the padding in place between the top and bottom layers.
- Share the idea that sometimes the designs on a quilt are just for decoration, while at other times a quilt’s designs may have special meanings. Quilts may be decorated with patterns or with depictions of various creatures or objects.
- Point out to the students that quilts were made centuries ago and are still made today.
- Tell the students that they will be using counting and math to uncover the hidden meaning of this particular quilt top.

Discussion

- Observe and discuss the quilt top as a class. Encourage the students to look closely. Ask open-ended questions to provoke responses and sharing:
 - What do you see?
 - Who sees something different?

- Encourage the students to use their own words to describe what it is they see in the quilt top and where they see it, rather than just have them use their fingers to point.
- As a class, evaluate the quilt in terms of concepts of “more than,” “less than,” and “equal.” Have the students practice counting and comparing amounts. For example:
 - How many birds are in this square?
 - Which square has the most birds? Which has the fewest?
 - Are there other places on this quilt where you can find a pair of animals?
- Write a running record of the numbers that are mentioned by the students in their observations of the quilt.
- Point out to the students that the number two comes up repeatedly when we count the elements of the quilt. The hidden meaning of the quilt has to do with the number two; it is a symbol for a married couple or a wedding. The pairs of animals stand for two people in love or two people starting a family.

Activity

- Introduce the idea that the students may symbolize their own families in the creation of their collage quilt.
- How many family members are there in the students’ families? How many adults? How many children? Tell the students that these numbers will be repeated in their quilt designs to symbolize their families.
- Have the students use precut paper, fabric, or felt shapes to decorate their quilt squares; alternatively, they may also cut out their own shapes. Different size shapes and figures may be employed to indicate adults and children. For example, a family of four may be represented by four figures—one adult figure and three child figures—in one quilt square, while another quilt square might be decorated with one large heart surrounded by three smaller hearts.
- Have the students explain the designs in writing on the back of their quilt squares. (Assist younger children in writing out the explanations.) For example: “There are four members in my family, one adult and three children.” Older students may include the mathematical equation $4 = 1 + 3$.
- Have the students investigate one another’s quilt squares, counting the elements and decoding the meaning contained in the designs. The students may “quiz” one another by turning the quilt squares over to find the correct answers.

PRE- AND POST-LESSON ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS

- As a class, tally the different “family numbers” and create a pictograph or bar graph charting the number of members in each student’s family.
- Explore quilts and quilting from a storytelling perspective. Create story quilts inspired by a specific family memory.

- Visit the American Folk Art Museum for a guided tour. Conduct this lesson before or after your museum visit.
- The “Coming Together: Creating a Community Quilt” lesson designed for grades 2–3 may be adapted for use with younger students and taught in conjunction with this lesson.

ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION METHODS

- Students were able to apply their counting and mathematical skills to the observation and discussion of the presented quilt top.
- Students created quilt squares that accurately symbolize their families through numeric values and joined the squares to a collage quilt.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Recommended Books for Students

Cline-Ransome, Lesa. *Quilt Counting*. New York: SeaStar Books, 2002.

A description of how a special family quilt is made, put in rhymes that follow the numbers one to ten and back again.

Critters A to Z in American Folk Art. New York: American Folk Art Museum, 2003.

An alphabet of animals portrayed in folk art carvings, quilts, paintings, and many other media.

Flournoy, Valerie. *The Patchwork Quilt*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1985.

The story of a girl helping her grandmother and mother to make a beautiful quilt that tells the story of her family’s life. The quilt, made from scraps of old clothing, becomes a special remembrance and comfort when the girl’s grandmother passes away.

Hines, Anna Grossnickle. *Pieces: A Year in Poems & Quilts*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 2001.

Poems about the four seasons accompanied by photographs of quilts made by the author.

Johnston, Tony, and Tomie DePaola. *The Quilt Story*. New York: Putnam Juvenile, 1985.

The story of a star-covered quilt that provides warmth and comfort to two little girls, generations apart.

Jonas, Ann. *The Quilt*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1984.

Describes a little girl’s quilt full of memories, imagination, and dreams.

Micklethwait, Lucy. *I Spy Two Eyes: Numbers in Art*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1993.

A counting book that asks children to find elements in works of art from a wide variety of styles, cultures, and time periods.

Paul, Ann Whitford. *Eight Hands Round: A Patchwork Alphabet*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991.

Introduces the letters of the alphabet with names of early American patchwork quilt patterns and explains the origins of the designs by describing the activity or occupation they derive from.

Recommended Books for Teachers

Hollander, Stacy C., and Brooke Davis Anderson. *American Anthem: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001. An exploration of American folk art from the colonial period through the present as seen through highlights from the American Folk Art Museum's collection. *Bird of Paradise Quilt Top* is illustrated and discussed on pages 133 and 344–345.

Warren, Elizabeth V., and Sharon L. Eisenstat. *Glorious American Quilts: The Quilt Collection of the Museum of American Folk Art*. New York: Penguin Studio in association with Museum of American Folk Art, 1996.

Describes the American Folk Art Museum's quilt collection with chapters on whole-cloth quilts, chintz quilts, signature quilts, appliqué quilts, pieced quilts, log-cabin quilts, show quilts, revival quilts, Amish quilts, African American quilts, and contemporary quilts.

Recommended Websites

EDSITEment Lesson Plan "History in Quilts":

www.edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=241

EDSITEment Lesson Plan "Stories in Quilts":

www.edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=242

EDSITEment Lesson Plan "Family and Friendship in Quilts":

www.edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=346

National Endowment for the Humanities lesson plans with links to online resources.

International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln:

www.quiltstudy.org

Database of images and information regarding historic and contemporary American and international quilts.

National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C., Quilt Collection:

www.americanhistory.si.edu/collections/quilts/

A selection of images of quilts, including those categorized as patriotic quilts, album quilts, Amish quilts, and more.