



FREEDOM QUILT

Jessie B. Telfair (1913–1986)

Parrott, Georgia; 1983

Cotton with muslin backing and pencil inscription; 74 × 68"

Gift of Judith Alexander in loving memory of her sister, Rebecca Alexander, 2004.9.1

Photo by Gavin Ashworth, New York

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The concept of a freedom quilt can be traced at least as far back as the Civil War, when women were urged to subvert the slave-owners' beliefs by embroidering antislavery slogans and images into their needlework. Although the existence of Underground Railroad quilts has not been documented except through oral tradition, the idea that quilts were used to encode paths to freedom has persisted into the present. This is one of several freedom quilts that Jessie Telfair made as a response to losing her job after she attempted to register to vote during the 1960s. It evokes the Civil Rights era through the powerful invocation of one word, *freedom*, formed from bold block letters along a horizontal axis. Mimicking the stripes of the American flag, it is unclear whether the use of red, white, and blue is ironic or patriotic—or both.

RESOURCES

American Folk Art Museum:

www.folkartmuseum.org

Arnett, Paul, and William Arnett, eds. *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*. Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 1999.

Benberry, Cuesta. *A Piece of My Soul: Quilts by Black Arkansans*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000.

Callahan, Nancy. *The Freedom Quilting Bee: Folk Art and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987.

International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln: www.quiltstudy.org

National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C., “Quilts, Counterpanes & Throws: A Selection from the National Collection”: www.americanhistory.si.edu/collections/quilts

The Quilt Index: www.quiltindex.org

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.



ASSEMBLAGE OF CROWD SCENES

Purvis Young (b. 1943)

Miami, Florida; late 1970s

Paint on found wood; 98 ½ × 58 × 2 ½"

Gift of T. Marshall Hahn Jr., 1995.22.2

Photo by Gavin Ashworth, New York

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Many small elements make a whole in *Assemblage of Crowd Scenes*, a huge work tied together by similarly colored, rough-hewn frames. The various squares of images are turned at different angles, though the entire assemblage is weighted by the large, green, rectangular painting at the base, which anchors the otherwise quiet palette. The activity within the painting, however, stands in stark contrast to the muted colors. A crowd of figures gathers with upraised arms, hips thrust, in a stance that is simultaneously celebratory and urgent. Some scenes include vehicles, and in one composition the all-seeing eye, a motif commonly employed by the artist, is apparent. According to Young, when painted blue the eye represents oppression by the white man upon people of color. *Assemblage of Crowd Scenes* presents a tremendous visual cacophony that underscores the often fast, loud, and crowded life of its maker's urban environs.

RESOURCES

American Folk Art Museum:

www.folkartmuseum.org

Arnett, Paul, and William Arnett, eds. *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*. Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 1999.

Conrad, Shaun, and David Raccuglia. *Purvis of Overtown*. DVD. New York: 77 Films, 2006.

Foreman, Skot, ed. *Purvis Young: Possession*. Dania Beach, Fla.: Skot Foreman Fine Art, 2001.

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.

Longhauser, Elsa, and Harald Szeemann. *Self-Taught Artists of the 20th Century: An American Anthology*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books in association with Museum of American Folk Art, 1998.

ART AS PROTEST

QUESTIONS FOR CAREFUL LOOKING

- What is happening in these images?
- What can we say about how each of these works was made?
- What patterns can we find?
- What similarities and differences can we find between the two objects?
- What moods emerge for you from these works?
- What more can we find?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- How does artist Jessie Telfair communicate her message in *Freedom Quilt*? Consider her tools for communication. How does repetition affect the visual impact of the piece, as well as its message? How does the color influence your interpretation?
- Telfair was an African American woman who was fired from her job in the 1960s after she had attempted to register to vote. This experience prompted her to create a series of “freedom” quilts, of which this is one, to express her feelings about the event. What is the primary feeling you perceive in the quilt? What do you see that gives you this feeling?
- Do you think the *Freedom Quilt* is an effective means for Telfair to communicate her message? How else might she have expressed these feelings, artistically or otherwise?
- At first glance, Purvis Young’s *Assemblage of Crowd Scenes* might seem unrelated to *Freedom Quilt*. But on closer examination, how does the construction of *Assemblage of Crowd Scenes* relate to the construction of *Freedom Quilt*?
- Look carefully at the figures in *Assemblage of Crowd Scenes*. What feeling do you get from them? How does Young communicate this mood? How does this mood relate to the mood in Telfair’s *Freedom Quilt*?
- These works by Young and Telfair have both been discussed as protest pieces. What do you think each is protesting? What do you see that gives you this idea? Do you think one piece is more effective as a protest piece than the other? What do you see that gives you that idea?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- What are some implications of the word *freedom*? How has the meaning of this word changed or taken on new implications in different periods of American history?
- What is disenfranchisement? In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who suffered disenfranchisement and who fought it? In what ways is disenfranchisement an issue today?
- Do you think that creating works of art is an effective mode of protest? Why or why not?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Ask students to create an “homage” piece to someone who has fought for a local or national cause, using painting, drawing, or collage techniques. How can you employ either ordered repetition and patterning or assemblage to make a potent statement that relates to the subject’s plight?
- Have students attend a local protest of either small or large scale. Did they notice any mobile protest art? Using photographic documentation of the event, ask students to recreate the scene they witnessed, using both collage and text.
- Purvis Young’s first creation was a mural in his neighborhood in Miami. Take a walking tour of murals in your school’s area. Have students note the themes they discover in the murals. Do any of the murals portray ideas of struggle or resistance?
- Have students select an issue about which they have strong opinions, then ask them to create a work of art expressing their opinions using painting, drawing, photographic, or collage techniques.