

Museum of International Folk Art News

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GEE'S BEND QUILTS AND BEYOND

Louisiana Bendolph, Mary Lee Bendolph, Thornton Dial, and Lonnie Holley

November 15, 2007 through March 15, 2008



Louisiana P. Bendolph, Housetop Variation, 2003, Cotton, 90 x 81 inches
Collection of Tinwood Alliance

Santa Fe—*Gee's Bend Quilts and Beyond* takes an in-depth look at the creative vision of a master quilt-maker, Mary Lee Bendolph, and the intersecting artistic worlds in which she participates.

This exhibit examines Bendolph's inspiration and creative process as well as her profound connection to the cultural practices and expressive traditions from which her work arises. In making her quilts, Bendolph tears discarded clothing into simple strips

and blocks of fabric. Her quilts, both highly refined and geometric, are remarkable for their creativity, in contrast to prescribed quilt making traditions seen elsewhere in the country. What is most impressive about Bendolph's striking quilts is that she did not consider them works of art, rather they were a necessity to keep out the cold winter weather, for the bed and as insulation on the walls.

She drew her inspiration for these quilts from everyday life; her back yard, a barn, or a person. The strips of fabric from worn clothes did serve as memorials for the individual who wore those clothes. She tried to imbue in her quilts of recycled clothing the difficult and impoverished life the residents in Gee's Bend lived. Her early quilts were not influenced by any outsider as the white population of Camden, Alabama, the closest large city to Gee's Bend, cut the ferry service to Camden. This prevented black residents from across the river from participating in the civil rights actions taking place in Camden in the 60s. Ferry service has just recently been restored.

Twelve dramatically designed, richly colored, improvisational quilts created by Mary Lee Bendolph and her family members — her mother Aolar Mosely, her daughter Essie B. Pettway, and her daughter-in-law Louisiana P. Bendolph — will be presented alongside complex and evocative found object sculptures by noted African American self-taught artist Thornton Dial and visionary "yard art" artist Lonnie Holley.

There is a sharing of philosophies, themes, and attitudes between the work of Lonnie Holley and Thornton Dial with the women. Holley and Dial worked in different media than the women, but there is a give-and-take—both personal and artistic—between the quilt makers and Dial and Holley; the idea of using recycled materials for example, a tradition found in African American artists from the South. This has created a sense of joint participation in a vernacular African American aesthetic continuum that disregards artistic categories previously used to characterize (and separate) the work of these artists. Upon meeting the men, Bendolph had never before met anyone who called himself an artist.

By 2005, the quilts by Mary Lee Bendolph and the other women of Gee's Bend had been "discovered" and exhibited many times in museums around the country. These women would travel by bus to the exhibitions and their world view was expanded by seeing their quilts in context of the other art on view at the museums.

In the exhibition are intaglio prints created by Mary Lee Bendolph and her daughter-in-law Louisiana P. Bendolph. Now, with greater confidence and the recognition their work was receiving, they enjoyed exploring this new artistic genre because they could now be recognized as artists without the previous qualifiers such as folk, craft, black, or rural.

These prints along with documentary films about all of the artists provide further context for their creative exchange. As the deep social and aesthetic networks of these artists intersect, they give rise to new pathways of artistic influence, resulting in a powerful mixture of communal and individual creative energies.

The New York Times said that the quilts created in Gee's Bend are "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced."

Mary Lee Bendolph, Gee's Bend Quilts and Beyond Louisiana Bendolph, Mary Lee Bendolph, Thornton Dial, and Lonnie Holley is co-organized by the Austin Museum of Art and Tinwood Alliance, Atlanta. The exhibition is presented by Fidelity Investments. The exhibition catalogue is sponsored by Anderson Rogers Foundation.

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For images please contact Steve Cantrell at 505-476-1144 or steve.cantrell@state.nm.us.

The Museum of International Folk Art houses the world's largest collection of international folk art, with permanent exhibitions Multiple Visions: A Common Bond in the Girard Wing and Familia y Fe in the Hispanic Heritage Wing. Changing and traveling exhibitions are offered in the Bartlett Wing and exhibitions highlighting textiles are featured in the Neutrogena Wing. Lloyd's treasure chest offers visitors interactive displays about collections and how museums care for collections.

The Museum of International Folk Art is a Division of the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs.

Information for the Public

Location: The Museum of International Folk Art is located on Museum Hill™, Camino Lejo off Old Santa Fe Trail.

Contact: 505-476-1200 or www.internationalfolkart.org.

Days/Times: Tuesday through Sunday, 10:00 A.M.-5:00 P.M.

Admission: School groups free. Children 16 and under free. New Mexico residents with ID free on Sundays. New Mexico resident Senior Citizens (age 60+) with ID free Wednesdays. Museum Foundation members free. NM Veterans with 50% or greater disability free. Students with ID \$1 discount. Single visit to one museum: \$8.00 for non-state residents; \$6.00 for New Mexico residents. Four-day pass to five museums including state-run museums in Santa Fe plus The Museum of Spanish Colonial Art \$18.00. One-day pass for two museums (Museum of International Folk Art and Museum of Indian Arts and Culture OR Museum of Fine Arts and Palace of the Governors) \$12.00. Group rate for ten or more people: single visit \$6.00, four-day pass \$16.00.