

The 2009-2010 Season is proudly presented by  
Star Tribune, Minnesota Monthly and Minnesota Public Radio

# **BLACK NATIVITY: A SEASON FOR CHANGE**

**By T. Mychael Rambo  
and Lou Bellamy**

**Directed by Dominic Taylor  
Presented by Target**

**December 3 - December 27, 2009  
Previews December 1 & 2**

## **Harriet Powers: An American Storyteller**

Hanging in the Smithsonian's American History Museum and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts are two quilts from the mid-1800s made by a woman named Harriet Powers who was born into slavery in Athens Georgia in 1837. Gladys-Marie Fry's research on antebellum slave quilts began with her examination of Harriet Powers' life and artwork, which Fry calls "visual masterpieces, jewels of creative imagination and artistic expression."<sup>1</sup>

Harriet Powers was a narrative—or story—quilter. A deeply religious woman, her interpretation of Bible stories is preserved in bold appliqué patterned blocks that depict scenes such as Adam and Eve naming the animals in the Garden of Eden (Fry points out that the rib from which Eve was made features prominently in the foreground of one of the panels), Jonah and the whale, and Noah's arc in which matching animals are paired with one another in different panels throughout the quilt. The representation of animals, angels and humans interacting and given the same prominence within the blocks brilliantly illustrates an alternate aesthetic than the dominant European tradition. Gladys-Marie Fry contends that Powers' quilt gestures toward the Fon people of the great Dahomey empire from which many Africans were exported into slavery in the New World,

in the Benin tapestries, stories from oral tradition and history are illustrated with appliqué figures. Animals are used to symbolize kings or central figures of proverbs or folktales. The influence of Benin appliqué on the Bible quilts executed by Harriet Powers, an ex-slave from Benin, has been firmly established by scholars, particularly in her technique and animal symbolism. Another intriguing aspect of Harriet Powers' quilts is the merging of Christian religious symbols with the African cosmology of the Bakongo people.<sup>2</sup>

It is possible that one of the reasons the animals play such a large part in Powers' quilts is because of how animals were used to represent people or special powers in the oral traditions passed through the generations from Africa. The monkey and lion tales still figure prominently in African American folkloric traditions, and the Br'er Rabbit tales are American interpretations of this system of order reflecting the primacy of wit over strength, the trickster role so prominent (often represented in African tales by Anansi the spider). These tales also mirror the playfulness and power of the major deities within the early African spiritual systems that cast gods as sometimes mischievous and spiteful as well. While Fry describes Powers as a pious fundamentalist—because she interprets the Bible literally—still the influence of her culture through her meditations and interpretations of these stories is quite significant.

---

<sup>1</sup> Fry, *ibid.*, 84.

<sup>2</sup> Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). 12.

Frequently, quilts overseen by a mistress were entered into county fairs and either went up for sale or, ironically, became a point of pride for the house. Even quilting parties illustrated power and prestige for white planters:

Occasionally, masters on some of the larger plantations, who were eager to impress their neighbors with evidence of wealth and importance, [sponsored or] helped to stage elaborate quilting parties.” One former slave remembered that “there was always plenty of food, [because the] masters were vying with one another for the honor of giving his slaves the finest parties.”<sup>3</sup>

Demonstrated in this detail is the rampant paternalism that guided the patriarchal Southern plantation. Cast as its naïve wards slaves were presented as childlike charges for which the goodly master was wholly responsible. However, even more telling is the great irony that when deemed important for them, white masters had the economic wherewithal to provide their labor forces with ample food and living conditions, yet regularly chose not to. It was, after all, the benefit of free labor of that allowed for the display of so much expendable wealth as to be able to throw lavish parties for slaves.

Even as their masters regarded these parties as fun and folly, quilters took advantage of the time to create pieces that they would either give to family members or sell. There is even documentation of slaves buying their freedom through the sale of their textiles.<sup>4</sup> One such woman was Mrs. Elizabeth Keckly, who used her sewing skills to buy freedom for she and her son. She then became a “prominent dressmaker in Washington D.C.” whose most recognized client was none other than the First Lady of the United States, Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln.<sup>5</sup> Other examples also exist.

Harriet Powers is particularly remarkable because there is so little information documented about her contemporaries and those artists who preceded her. “Early (pre-World War II) accession cards give detailed information about the white donor family for whom the slave made the textile,” but little to no information about the artist.<sup>6</sup> In fact, “such details as family military honors, political achievements, civic awards, and land ownership are frequently described,” for the white donor family, thereby attaching white American history to an artifact that was created by a black American artist who is often “dismissed with a sentence or two in which the slave is described as an ‘old negress,’ ‘unknown slave,’ or ‘slave girl.’” When slave quilt

---

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Gladys-Marie Fry from George P. Rawick, *Unwritten History of Slavery*, vol. 18 of *American Slave*, 24.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on Elizabeth Keckly, see James E. Newton’s “Slave Artisans and Craftsmen: The Roots of Afro-American Art.” James E. Newton and Ronald L. Lewis, eds., *The Other Slaves, Mechanics, Artisans, and Craftsmen*. (Boston: G.K. Hall., 1978).

<sup>6</sup> Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). 8.

makers are identified, the term ‘aunt’ (or ‘uncle’) precedes the name. [Gladys-Marie Fry] did not locate a single accession card in which the slave quilt maker is fully identified either physically or in terms of plantation duties, family ties, or artistic versatility.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, the lives of those black artists who left a legacy from the period are overwritten with detailed accounts of the white families who owned them.

However, because one woman happened across one of Powers’ story quilts at a county fair, more documentation is available about her quilt than almost any other artist from the antebellum period. Gladys-Marie Fry details the story in her article “Harriet Powers: Portrait of an African American Quilter.”<sup>8</sup> Oneita Virginia (Jennie) Smith was a local artist who had studied in Baltimore, New York and Paris. Upon returning to Athens, she took up the mantle in the Art Department at her alma mater becoming the director at Lucy Cobb for over fifty years.

At the Cotton Fair, Jennie Smith spotted Harriet Powers’ quilt and was immediately drawn to the artistry. She approached Powers and inquired as to the asking price. Harriet Powers told her that the quilt was not for sale, not for any price. Jennie Smith stayed in contact with Harriet Powers, offering to purchase the quilt should she and her husband fall upon hard times, which is exactly what happened nearly five years later. Powers brought the quilt to Smith’s home and spent a great deal of time explaining the intent of each panel and its importance. She was very reluctant to let it go, especially at half the price she had hoped to fetch for it. Her husband beseeched her to part with the quilt and accept Smith’s offering of five dollars for it. After leaving the quilt in Smith’s hands, Harriet Powers apparently returned with some frequency to visit the quilt and look upon it.

Perhaps because she spoke so passionately about what she had created and her artistic vision, Jennie Smith took it upon herself to document the story of the quilt, and how she happened to claim it, in an eighteen-page narrative that “help to set Harriet Powers’ quilt in proper artistic and historic perspective.”<sup>9</sup> However, as Fry points out, the narrative is riddled with personal conjectures and anecdotal musings on African Americans as “musical but not artistic, religious but still liars and thieves.”<sup>10</sup> This is the only written record of the quilt, Smith being only person to have left an eye-witness account of Powers. Fry found that census records indicated that neither Harriet nor her husband Armstead Powers could read or write.

---

<sup>7</sup> Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). 8.

<sup>8</sup> The article “Harriet Powers: Portrait of an African American Quilter,” was originally published in *Missing Pieces: Georgia Folk Art 1770-1976*. The article was reprinted and included as an epilogue to *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) pp. 84-91.

<sup>9</sup> Fry., *ibid.*, 86.

<sup>10</sup> Fry., *ibid.*, 86.

As Gladys-Marie Fry points out, “it is one of the ironies of history that, heartbreaking as it was for Harriet to part with her quilt, its sale to Jennie Smith preserved it for posterity.”<sup>11</sup> Fry did extensive work to corroborate the stories of natural events that Harriet Powers depicted in her quilt, such as “dark days” and meteor showers, with accounts of the weather from meteorologists and scientists of the era. Fry explains that this is one of the most significant things about Powers’ quilt and the accompanying narrative. Her accounts of real events turned out to be “startlingly accurate” as Fry did further research.<sup>12</sup> This places the personal account of one slave woman into a collective archive of oral histories that are given a renewed sense of purpose, relevance and authenticity. Today Harriet Powers’ quilts are rightly credited as masterworks of American folk art.

---

<sup>11</sup> Fry, *ibid.*, 86.

<sup>12</sup> Fry, *ibid.*, 86.