

P R E S S R E L E A S E

Williams College Museum of Art Presents
Quilt Masterpieces from Folk Art to Fine Art
June 11–August 21, 2005

Williamstown, MA— the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) presents *Quilt Masterpieces from Folk Art to Fine Art*, an American art exhibition featuring 25 quilts from the Newark Museum's exceptional collection. *Quilt Masterpieces from Folk Art to Fine Art* explores the major role that this art form has played in the creative and communal lives of women throughout American history. The quilts, ranging from the late 18th century to the late 20th century, tell the stories of the women who made them and the people around them; they communicate their values, social concerns and political views. Except for one, all of the quilts in the Newark Museum's collection were made by women — Native American, African American, Asian American, European American women — who passed down traditions, styles, designs and fabric from one generation to the next in an attempt to express themselves.

"The Museum recognized the value of this great indigenous folk art early on," stated the Newark Museum's Curator of Decorative Arts, Ulysses Grant Dietz, "and they bought." Referring to the opportunity to display the rarely seen quilts, he expressed delight. "Because they're quite fragile and need protection from the damaging light, we can't show them often," he said. "For the first time in my 23 years here, we have been able to undertake extensive conservation of many of the quilts from the collection."

Quilt Masterpieces from Folk Art to Fine Art is divided into four basic sections: (1) The Face of Quilts; (2) The Social Fabric of Quilts; (3) Quilted Memories; and (4) Contemporary Voices in Quilting. Visitors can explore a remarkable range of treasures, from the Museum's first purchase — *Wild Goose Chase*—made by an unknown artist sometime between 1800 and 1830 to the last one—*Potholders and Dervishes Plus*—made by

Sandy Benjamin-Hannibal of Brooklyn, New York in 1996.

The making of a quilt was a labor of love that required an enormous amount of time and patience. Early 19th-century quilts were made entirely by hand, requiring incredible patience and skill. The *Star of Bethlehem* quilt, for example, made in Perth Amboy, New Jersey in the early 1800s, consists of 800 tiny diamond-shaped pieces of printed cotton aligned perfectly so that the pattern is never unbalanced. Another, *Hexagon Patch*, started in 1792, was worked on for more than a decade by a mother and daughter who cut each patch from a pasteboard pattern and then basted it to a second pattern cut from newspaper; they then attached together the patches with 50 to 60 hand-sewn stitches.

One of the few occasions when women could meet regularly, a quilting was an opportunity to share patterns or traditions for a special wedding quilt while discussing issues such as religion, social reform or politics. Susan B. Anthony gave one of her first speeches defending the equal rights of women at a quilting. *Commemorative Album Quilt*, made in 1852, is an illustration of a token of affection that also conveyed the makers' sympathy for the Hungarians fighting for their freedom from the Austrian Empire.

This exhibition highlights a number of quilting traditions, most notably the "album quilt" and the "crazy quilt." In the "album quilt," each block is like a page in an album, often initialed or signed by one or more people. One of the most extraordinary examples of this type of quilt is *Bride's Quilt*, made as a remembrance of Emeline Dean's childhood home in East Orange, New Jersey when she left it to marry. The "crazy quilt" became popular in the early 1880s. This new craze, inspired by Japanese textiles and design as part of the Aesthetic Movement, offered an opportunity for individuality and originality in an era of rigid Victorian social rules. *Map Crazy Quilt*, which was made by Mrs. A. E. Reasoner in 1815, commemorates her husband's position as superintendent of the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad. It is one of only two known map quilts.

Quilts continue to play an important communal role for women in contemporary society, yet, many modern day quilts are created solely as works of art. *Rhythm/Color: Spanish Dance* was made in 1985 by Michael James, the only male quilter in the exhibition, who was trained as an abstract painter in the 1970s. Joy Saville's *1984 Interruptions* is another example that demonstrates the transition in American quilting from function to personal meaning.

Quilt Masterpieces from Folk Art to Fine Art offers an opportunity to explore the designs, fabric, technology, creativity and spirit of contemporary quilters as well as their historical predecessors. While much about quilting has evolved, their purpose remains the same. They are beautiful objects of personal expression, with stories that are part of the fabric of

American history.

Quilt Masterpieces from Folk Art to Fine Art was organized by The Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey. the exhibition was made possible through the generous support of: **The Coby Foundation, Ltd.**, the New Jersey Commission, and the Bay Foundation.

This exhibition is part of "American Traditions," an array of programming countywide at cultural, arts, and historical venues based on America's rich and varied heritage.

Coordinated with the help of the Berkshire Visitors Bureau, the spring and summer 2005 festival features performances, dance, artwork and exhibitions highlighting a vast range of historical and contemporary aspects of America. For information on "American Traditions" in the Berkshires, visit <www.berkshiresarts.org>.

Related Events

A gallery talk, given by Ulysses Grant Dietz, Curator of *Quilt Masterpieces from Folk Art to Fine Art*, will be held on Sunday, June 26, 2005 at 2:00 pm.

Ulysses Grant Dietz has been the curator of Decorative Arts at The Newark Museum since 1980. He received his BA from Yale in 1977, and his MA in Early American Culture from the University of Delaware's Winterthur Program in 1980.

Publicity images for *Quilt Masterpieces from the Newark Museum* and other current exhibitions are available for use.