

As a child, I remember watching my great-grandmother, Nannie, quilt. Every winter she pulled out the sewing machine and started to piece together different forms from fabric. Even though she is physically no longer with us, her quilts still line my family's beds in winter. These quilts are how we keep her memory alive.

Quilting has always interested me; I loved the look that comes from combining different fabrics and colors. As an artist, I never considered quilting a "real art" until I saw what one could really do with it. Artists like the women of Gee's Bend and Anna Von Mertens are at the forefront of what quilting is today. These artists are reinventing and expanding a form that has been around for thousands of years, pushing and morphing it in ways that have never been done before. They have experimented with the materials like any other artist would, taking the material and manipulating it to the point where it is revolutionary.

With my own art, I am constantly trying to push my form and technique; this occasionally requires reinvention. I have moved my own art from strict hard line realism to abstraction, trying to find a distorted and morphed version of what was originally there in the beginning. This experimentation with color and form required an exploration of the Cubist movement of the twentieth century. Cubists dealt with the idea of a form in space, whether that is in the three-dimensional or two-dimensional world. I am constantly dealing with the give and pull of working with the materials and subjects. Quilting provides me a way to branch off with my art because it has the ability to create abstract forms very easily with pieced fabric and stitch.



Samy, Ehab. *Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphics - 070315-380*. Digital image. *Ehab Web*. N.p., n.d. Web. 1 Dec. 2014.

Quilting has not always been viewed as an art form, however. It has had a long evolutionary journey before it reached my family in the twentieth century. Quilting's long history is first noted as beginning in 3400 B.C. where there are remnants of the oldest known quilt found wrapped around a carved ivory figure of the First Egyptian Dynasty.¹ During The Crusades crusaders transferred the textile to Europe from the Middle East.¹ Also, Colonists during the colonization of the new world brought the art of quilting with them to the New World.¹ "People in nearly every part of the world used padded fabrics for clothing, bedding, and even armor."⁹ Since the first quilt, there has been a long line of cultural history that has brought it around the world.

Above all, quilts were one of few textiles that supplied families with warmth, comfort, and memories, creating a lasting importance and impression on individuals. Traditionally made from the leftover scraps of worn out clothing and textiles, quilting has developed into a very loose term; quilts are simply classified as two pieces of fabric, joined in the middle by some form of padding.

Further, people have always attempted to tell stories through pictures. Look at the Egyptian form of writing; Hieroglyphs. These images are types of writing that express a story through the use of forms and pictographs. Most civilizations have attempted to develop a way to

document or collect information; for example, Mesopotamia and its creation of cuneiform, (the act of making wedge shaped imprints on clay tablets or other surfaces,) signals a need for individualism and order.

Language and imagery is a major part of a civilization's identity, what a civilization writes about is what they value; they have spent time developing and forming a written expression of themselves. What would we know of these foreign population's histories without the alphabets that the civilization created? The same could be said about quilting; what would we know about past individuals without their personal expression through fabric?

Pattern and color play a large part in the making of textiles. Usually, different groups of people have different opinions on what they would want to wear. This is evident in the creation of Pendleton textiles. When Pendleton first started, Joe Rawnsley, was the company's original blanket maker and designer. Traveling from tribe to tribe, he developed a consensus of what these populations would want to see on different textiles. Rawnsley "spent time with the local natives of northeastern Oregon to develop preferences of color and design," eventually he would translate the "ideas gleaned from the native peoples into blanket designs using modern technologies that could express pattern ideas in much greater detail and in more vivid colorations than could be expressed by traditional weaving methods."⁸ The overwhelming response to

textiles that were bright and vibrant is amazing; it is a way to recombine existing colors and patterns, transforming them into new textiles that could not of come about without the modern techniques brought by Rawnsley.

What can we learn from the quilters who came before us? Through the simple act of sewing, quilts have the ability to teach a broad array of techniques and history. Quilts map time, connecting different generations of families through a common practice. A family member could learn so much from a past grandmother or great-grandmother by observing what patterns their family member used, what fabric they sewed, what color combinations they employed; it all says something about that person, an individual perspective that is entirely all their own.

Quilts hold the memories of family members or people, for quilting has the ability to memorialize. Think about the act of sewing a dead family member's clothes into a quilt. In times of sadness you can "wrap yourself" into that person and remember them after they have passed, giving meaning to the quilt. There is a story to tell of the memories hidden within this single piece of sewn fabric. It is a physical representation of that person, even after their physical body and soul has passed along. A good example of this form of memorialization is the Aids Memorial quilt. Originally started in 1987 by a small group of strangers, their purpose was to memorialize the people that they feared history would forget. Since its origin, the small collective of quilts has grown to over 48,000 panels, each representing an individual that was affected by the disease. The collection is constantly moving around the country, spreading awareness about the disease and collecting money for Aids research. The quilts create a constant reminder of all the individuals lost to the disease. Friends and family create the panels that make



Van Breda, Michael F. *Cuneiform*. Digital image. Van Breda. N.p., n.d. Web. 1 Dec. 2014.

up the entire collective, a way to memorialize their fallen friends and family. Quilts are able to comfort us even after a person has passed.

Native Americans had a different type of textile that they wrapped themselves in. Native Americans worked with woven blankets, a less traditional form of quilting. Pattern and color were, and still are, a major factor in the construction of Indian textiles. Companies like Pendleton capitalized on the ability to create what the public wanted. Pendleton produces blankets that are almost “sacred” in Native American culture. They are so prized that “when an Indian baby is born, he’s often wrapped in a Pendleton blanket. When he graduates from high school, he might be given a Pendleton.

At weddings, the bride and groom often give Pendletons to their honored guests. And when someone dies in the Indian community, he may be wrapped in a Pendleton and the coffin lined with the blankets.”² This is the Indian’s form of quilting, a traditional textile that has long served as a very important part of Indian culture.



Stella, Frank. *Ctesiphon I*. 1968. MOCA - The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. *Moca*. Web. 1 Dec. 2014.

The making and wearing of textiles is a major part of life. Up until the twentieth century clothing was traditionally created by fellow family members; the textile industry was less industrialized. In today’s world, you can go to the store and pick up clothing for a few dollars. Clothing has become “inflated,” it is now an industry where the care and handmade quality is lost to the ability to sew fast and create on a mass-produced scale. The individuality and uniqueness of clothing has been lost; now, a person’s shirt is an exact replica of the person next to them; there is no individuality to it, no meaning. Native American tribes like the Inuit and Dene have, for centuries, constructed their clothing. Both of the tribes are located in the extreme arctic wilderness where clothing is a matter of life or death.³ Over the course of many generations, the knowledge of clothes-making was passed down the line of families; women learned about what the human body needed to survive. These crafters curated clothing that would keep their families warm in the harsh environment.

Thus, clothing, color, texture, shape, purpose and form all play a part in the development of textiles. The history of textiles and quilts is still ever-growing as people’s needs shift and change over time. Changing environments and human migration influence what people wear and how people spend their time. Every bit of clothing should have meaning, a purpose for why it is one color and not the other, why it is rough canvas and not a soft silk, why it is made the way it is.

Many different artists and movements have developed to push form and pattern in new ways. An artistic shift was created due to the work done by the artistic movement of modernism, the movement to break away from the traditional ways of working. The main leaders of the

quilting “revolution” were artists like Anna Von Mertens and the quilters of Gee’s Bend. The creation of information and idea has led to new ways of modern thinking, without these new ways of thought we would not have the modern forms of quilting and patterning that we have today. Modernism roughly spans the time between 1914 (World War I) and the 1970’s. Modernism is a movement that attempts to break away from established traditions in art.⁷ Mark Rothko, Frank Stella, and Roy Lichtenstein are just a few of the artists who participated in the movement.

Frank Stella, the twentieth-century modernist artist, has experimented with color, composition, and space. His work has moved from rectangular shaped line painted pieces, those like during the “Black Paintings” era, to three dimensional wall sculptures, like those in the “Polish Village” Series.⁴ Reinvention and evolution of himself and his art has been the catalyst for his creative career. Stella worked with color and composition on the picture plane during the early years of his five-decade career. Series of works like the “Black paintings,” “the Aluminum Paintings,” and the “Moroccan Paintings” all work with repeated line and pattern. Like in his work, *Ctesiphon I*, Stella experiments with repeated overlapping circles, sometimes encompassing whole walls, as he plays with the idea of ancient circular-plan town layouts. These first works, done from the 1950’s to 1971 were essential to his jump to the three-dimensional form. Stella’s work changed much after this shift in working with space. Stella became very interested in working with “real” space and has worked extensively with this medium for forty-three years. I find the pieces that Stella creates most interesting when he plays with shape in an interesting and unexpected way. For example, in his model for the *Gate House* Stella morphs shape in a very interesting way, pushing the two-dimensional world into the three-dimensional. Stella has had a long developmental process that I relate to in the way that I find myself moving between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional spaces that I experiment with in my own artwork. Studying artists like Stella, who have had large shifts in the way they work and think, has helped to create my own way of working and has surely been a large and influential portion of quilters and artists alike as they try to develop their own way of working and creating.

Notably, in a bend in the Mississippi River lies Gee’s Bend, a small town very much isolated from its surrounding areas. This community contains a small group of women who represent a small portion of generations of quilters. The Gee’s Bend quilters were discovered around 1996 when a photo of Annie Mae Young was published in the book, *A Communion of the Spirits: African American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories*. This photo showed Young with her great-granddaughter standing in front of a quilt that was laid over a pile of firewood. This quilt caught the attention of collector William Arnett, who was stunned by the modern abstract quality of the quilt. Arnett searched and researched to find the origin of



"Quilts of Gee's Bend Catalog." *Quilts of Gee's Bend*. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Nov. 2014.

the piece. During this exploration he soon found Gee's Bend where Young resided along with generations of other quilters. This inquiry resulted in the show, *Fabric of Their Lives*, at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, an intense retrospective of the quilts and people who crafted them. Gee's Bend quilts have a modern minimalist feel. These are large-scale fully formed abstractions that look like that of the twentieth century Modernists works. These women formed the patterns and compositions independent of the outside art world around them. Specifically, in this *Housetop* work there is a traditional structure but a unique color pattern and textile choice.

Additionally, the artist Anna Von Mertens, at her most basic level, is a quilter, but as you peel back the layers of the intricately sewn fabric you can see a medium that has so much more meaning behind it. Mertens incorporates layers of information and data in her work, ranging from Aura photography (the act of capturing a person's aura through the use of computers and cameras), to the mapping of stars in space at certain moments of time. In her series *Migrations, Invasions, Plagues and Empires*⁶ Mertens charts major events in the history of different civilizations. She charts information like the Black Death and the fall of the Roman Empire on multiple quilts that show the rings of trees from that time period. Mertens has many pieces where she looks to the stars to show major events, these series are *As the Stars Go By, Look to the Heavens, and Endings*.⁶

All of her pieces in these series show major events during different points of time. Especially in *As the Stars Go By*, she employs a litany of different events, some being the discovery of the new world by Columbus in 1492 to the September 11 attacks in 2001.

Up until her discovery of quilt making, Mertens had always worked with the traditional forms of art making (Printmaking, painting, drawing) until she asked herself the question, "Why do I have to express my art through these traditional forms? What is stopping me from creating with something unusual, say quilting?" This exploration led her to realize that quilting is an "intimate and urgent experience," it is a "story." She describes, "Quilts convey and tell a story in a more effective way, by literally and abstractly telling a story. Storytelling echoes through the visual, a visual that is based in the everyday."

Mertens starts with research, fully delving into her topic before she thinks about what the final work will look like. Whereas a painter or sculptor may not have any idea what the final product will look like, Mertens has a set plan for all that she will do. In her more recent works Mertens has broken away from the traditional quilt by creating work without a stitch. In her new series she paints with dyes directly on the fabric, alluding to the fact that the color *is* the fabric. Mertens is still very much influenced by her history in quilting; she is breaking down the craft to



Housetop. N.d. *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*. Atlanta, GA: Tinwood, 2002. 73. Print.

its most basic elements and pushing the raw materials as far as they can go. Her pieces, just by their nature, show a deep embedding of time, whether that be through the topics she is working with or the time she puts into crafting her quilt. Hand sewing gives the look of something that no machine could ever make. By the time a piece is completed there is an intimacy with the piece that has developed; she knows the material so well after working on it for weeks that it becomes an extension of herself. Von Mertens has a very unique style. She is very methodical in the way she works, collecting information and putting it to use in fully realized pieces. She could dye and sew for months before even one piece is done. Von Mertens has created her own form of quilting, expressing her thoughts through line and color that is entirely all her own.

How does this all relate? Art and information is constantly evolving. Quilting has taken a long journey from its early Egyptian origin. It has now become part of multiple generations of families. Quilting, like human beings, has evolved. Color, pattern, and form have changed greatly as time has progressed. Artists like Anna Von Mertens, Frank Stella, and the quilters of Gee's Bend have all helped to advance the practice of quilting and further it to the next stage of artistic growth. Quilting supplies warmth, comfort, and memories. After my exploration into quilting I see it as how I view my grandmother. There is no difference between her and her quilts; they are an extension of her. I hope that one day my artwork will become an extension of myself. Once I can see myself in my own work I have truly discovered who I am and have fully developed to the next stage in my artistic growth.

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²Schneider, Wolf. "Pendleton: No Oregon Town Has More Western Cachet." [Http://www.cowboysindians.com](http://www.cowboysindians.com). N.p., n.d. Web. 31 Oct. 2014.

³Weatherford, J. McIver. *Native Roots: How the Indians Enriched America*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992. Print.

⁴Stella, Frank, Claudia Bodin, Gregor Stemmrich, Markus Brüderlin, Hubertus Von. Amelunxen, and Holger Broecker. *Frank Stella: The Retrospective Works 1958- 2012*. Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012. Print.

⁵Chanin, Clifford. "Frank Stella, The Polish Village Series." *The Legacy Project*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2014.

⁶"Anna Von Mertens." *Anna Von Mertens*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Nov. 2014.

⁷Bose, Sudip. "What Is Modernism?" *Preservationnation.org*. National Trust for Historic Preservation, n.d. Web. 17 Nov. 2014.

⁸"Indian Trading Blanket History." *Indian Trading Blanket History*. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Dec. 2014.

⁹"History of Quilts." *History of Quilts*. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Dec. 2014

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