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American Artists x American Symbols

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At the College Art Association’s Annual Conference in 2024, the Association of Historians of American Art convened “The Work of American Art,” a panel that felt like a watershed moment for those in attendance. The introduction by Emily Clare Casey and papers by Bart Pashaw, Josh T. Franco, and Jenni Sorkin—and a response by Sharon Corwin—were all rich, but the discussion they generated was what felt truly historic. Eminent scholars, such as Wanda Corn, Eleanor Harvey, and Sarah Burns, offered their perspectives on the field’s not-so-distant origins and subsequent evolutions, while a more emerging scholar sounded an important warning of the neocolonial turn inherent in the field’s increasingly hemispheric aspirations. At one point, Franco suggested that artists working with nationalist symbols might offer useful models for how a term like “American” or “Americanist” can survive this time of redefinition and reappraisal. This idea led to a call for papers for the Colloquium published here about how artists have embraced, critiqued, and/or reformulated iconic American symbols in their practices over time—and what art historians and curators may be able to learn from these approaches as we continue to use terms like “Americanist,” despite its limiting dimensions, to cohere our field.

Perhaps Franco’s words spurred me to organize this Colloquium because my work on self-taught American artists often engages with how they reinforce and revise paradigms of American cultural identity in a variety of ways. Not only do their nontraditional paths to artistic fluorescence feel uniquely possible within a democracy—making them living embodiments of against-all-odds perseverance that Americans have always held dear—but they also frequently grapple with nationalist symbols and histories in their actual work.

Just as each contributor has come to this Colloquium with an artist and object(s) that help us rethink our approaches to the field, I offer a lesson based on Arcola Pettway (1934–1994) and her *Lazy Gal (Bars) Quilt* (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Arcola Pettway, *Lazy Gal (Bars) Quilt*, 1976. Corduroy, 81 x 89 in. High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Museum purchase and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2017.66. © 2024 Arcola Pettway/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Pettway is one of the less prolific artists associated with the legendary African American quilting community of Boykin, Alabama, colloquially known as Gee’s Bend.¹ She made the *Lazy Gal* quilt in the bicentennial year of 1976, which also marked the heyday of the Freedom Quilting Bee, a cooperative established a decade earlier in Alberta, Alabama, about ten miles up the road from where Pettway lived. The Bee was initially organized by Francis X. Walter, a white Episcopal minister who returned to the state of his birth in 1965 to lead the Selma Inter-Religious Project. Walter quickly recognized the extraordinary character of the quilts he saw while taking depositions from African Americans who had been illegally evicted or foreclosed on as retribution for voting in nearby Camden, the seat of Wilcox County, which is situated just across the river from the Bend. Presciently, he believed that locally made quilts could be sold at a premium in bicoastal urban markets not only to better support the livelihoods of their makers but also to benefit the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).²

Within weeks of spreading this idea through a few introductions and word of mouth, women from all over the county were raising their hands to participate. Their rapid enthusiasm was evidence not only of the systemically neglected need to offer better economic opportunities in Black Southern communities descended from plantation economies but also of the compelling courage driving the fight for civil rights across the South. Three weeks before freedom fighters led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and future Congressman John Lewis, among others, withstood the violence of segregationist police forces on Selma’s Edmund Pettus Bridge in a confrontation that became known as Bloody

Sunday, King had visited Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Gee’s Bend to recruit marchers.³ King returned to the area the following year, this time to Antioch Baptist Church in Camden, to encourage the community to vote in the 1966 election. Despite the protection guaranteed to Black Americans in the Voting Rights Act of 1965, white-supremacist voter suppression continued in Wilcox County, and the ferry service that gave Benders the best possible chance of casting their votes in Camden was cut off after King’s visit.⁴



Fig. 2. Framed pictures of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy hanging above sewing machines at the Freedom Quilting Bee’s headquarters in Alberta, Alabama, in 1974. © 1974 Patricia Goudvis

For Pettway’s generation, quilting and the Civil Rights Movement were deeply intertwined, a fact reflected in the dedication of the Bee’s first permanent home, in 1969, to the memory of King (fig. 2). Today, the Freedom Quilting Bee Legacy Museum is housed in that historic building, and at the time of this essay’s publication, its homepage prominently features Pettway’s quilt, presumably more because of how her quilt visualizes the freedom that is the Bee’s namesake than because Pettway was one of the quilters most associated with the cooperative itself.⁵ Pettway was a busy woman who farmed to feed her family of twelve. If she had time to work at the Bee, it was not often, and not many of her quilts appear to have survived into the 1990s, when the Atlanta-based collector William S. Arnett began building a collection that became the basis for art museums’ recognition of Gee’s Bend.⁶ Pettway’s cousin, Leola Pettway, by contrast, worked for the Bee regularly and was likely the source for the brightly colored corduroy fabric that Arcola used for her quilt. Four years before Pettway made her bicentennial quilt, the Bee had earned a contract with Sears and Roebuck, primarily to create cushion shams to be sold in department stores across the country. At their height, the women of the Bee were producing as many as sixty thousand shams within a six-month period. This contract brought an influx of corduroy into the community, and Bee quilters were permitted to bring home scraps that they repurposed into quilts and clothes for their own families.⁷

The palette of Pettway’s quilt—avocado green, coral red, denim blue, and various shades of brown and tan corduroy—is thus a reimagining of a more colorful union that is itself grounded in shades determined by consumer preferences for 1970s-era interior design. Corduroy’s pinwale structure makes it a difficult fabric to cut and piece at angles, perhaps one reason for Pettway’s decision to go “Lazy Gal,” a nickname that Benders gave to quilts

in which uninterrupted vertical or horizontal strips dominate, as opposed to the many small pieces of fabric improvised into the complex designs for which this community is most celebrated. Piecing or appliquéing stars in corduroy would have been difficult and time consuming, and yet Pettway was so effective in reimagining the basic bones of the flag that her quilt has achieved a kind of iconic status, appearing not only on the Bee’s homepage but also as the cover image for Jill Lepore’s 2020 book, *This America: The Case for the Nation*. But before it was a work of art preserved in a museum—before it was made available for image licensing—Pettway’s quilt was a blanket, one that allowed her family members to nestle themselves in the heavy warmth of a colorful corduroy flag, experiencing a buffer from the cold; perhaps the quilt was also a personal affirmation that the flag could be a source of pride and protection.

Pettway is but one example of the many American artists who have contended with the United States flag. Others include Norman Parish and Kiyon Williams, whose radical reconfigurations of personal and collective associations with stars and stripes are discussed here by Michael Lobel and Adria Gunter. Bald eagles, the Statue of Liberty, Predator drones, and the ideologically charged erasure of nineteenth-century American landscape painting are other signifiers examined by Francis Pohl (on Ben Shahn), Erin Pauwels (on Kay WalkingStick), and M. Stang and Charlotte Hecht (on Marie Watt), while Jonathan Walz (on Robert Rauschenberg) and Dina Murokh (on Isaac Julien) explore important inflection points in media-specific processes of signification. May they and the many other artists not discussed here who also critically engage with symbols of national identity continue to teach us to think critically and expansively about where we take the field. Pettway, for one, powerfully shows us how fragments that may seem disparate and discouragingly difficult to work with can nonetheless be pieced together into something deeply meaningful, which is both recognizable at first glance and even more moving as an American emblem once we understand the social and material circumstances of its making.

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Notes

¹ The term “Bend” references how Boykin is encircled by a curve in the Alabama River that has contributed to the isolation of the community, especially once the already-precarious ferry service was cut off in a 1966 act of voter suppression, which I discuss below. The majority of the people who remained in this community in the twentieth century are descended from enslaved Africans forced to work in North Carolina and then marched to Alabama, initially by Joseph Gee, who established a plantation there in the second decade of the 1800s. In 1845, debts forced Gee’s two sons to relinquish the Gee’s Bend plantation to Mark H. Pettway, a sheriff in Halifax County, North Carolina (where the Gee family had come from), who would move his family and more than one hundred enslaved people to the Bend. He forced all these men, women, and children, together with those already enslaved in the Bend, to bear his surname. Others may have been trafficked to the Bend as late as 1860, when the *Clotilda*—the last known slave ship to arrive illegally in the United States—ported near Mobile, about 150 miles away. A detailed social and geographic history of the Bend can be found in John Beardsley, “River Island,” in *Gee’s Bend: The Women and Their Quilts*, ed. William Arnett (Atlanta: Tinwood, 2002), 22–35. Quilter Arlonzia Pettway spoke about her great-

grandmother Dinah Young’s account of being kidnapped in Africa in 1859 and arriving in the Bend via Mobile to several interviewers during her lifetime, and her account is put in the larger context of the *Clotilda* by Lisa Gail Collins, in *Stitching Love and Loss: A Gee’s Bend Quilt* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023), 38–39.

- ² Following the success of the Montgomery bus boycott, the SCLC was founded in 1957 under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as an umbrella organization that would coordinate nonviolent civil–rights activism across the South. Precedents for how handmade textiles have been mobilized to support social and political causes from the Revolutionary period through the Civil War abound, and Laura Thatcher Ulbrich has documented many, in *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of An American Myth* (New York: Vintage, 2002). Walter’s price basis for the quilts was the weekly wage that he discovered women in the area were earning through the most commonly held occupation of domestic work. See Francis X. Walter, “Letter to Tom Screven,” February 2, 1966, box 255, correspondence folder 1.2, Freedom Quilting Bee Archive, Birmingham Public Library.
- ³ King told the assembled crowd, “To come here to Gee’s Bend and to see you out in large numbers gives me new courage and new determination. . . . I come over here to Gee’s Bend to tell you—you are somebody.” Quoted in *The Freedom Quilting Bee Legacy Inaugural Exhibition Catalogue* (Schaumburg, IL: Maxiam US, 2023), 14. In the historic funeral procession held for King in Atlanta on April 9, 1968, two mules from Gee’s Bend drew the farm wagon that bore his casket. An *Associated Press* image of this event is reproduced on a timeline presented at the Gee’s Bend Welcome Center. An essential text on the history of the Bee and its relationship to the Civil Rights Movement is Nancy Callahan, *The Freedom Quilting Bee: Folk Art and the Civil Rights Movement* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1987).
- ⁴ Ferry service was not restored until the 1990s. A brief documentary on the ferry is available from Retro Report: “How Geography Drove MLK’s Fight for a Ferry in Alabama,” March 7, 2015, *Retro Report*, video, 8:00 min., <https://retroreport.org/video/how-geography-drove-mlks-fight-for-a-ferry-in-alabama>.
- ⁵ Pettway was not, for instance, one of the ten quilters who signed the Bee’s Articles of Incorporation in April 1966. “Freedom Quilting Bee Articles of Incorporation,” February 2, 1966, box 255, correspondence folder 1.2, Freedom Quilting Bee Archive, Birmingham Public Library. Among those signatories was Minder Coleman, who was the former president of Gee’s Bend Farms, an agricultural cooperative that had been established in the Bend by the Farm Security Administration and who first met with Walter and became the Bee’s founding vice president. Estelle Abrams Witherspoon would become the Bee’s first and long–standing president, a participating quilter, and a frequent marcher in the Civil Rights Movement. Her mother, Willie “Ma Willie” Abrams, was also a member, and her daughter, Louise Williams, today serves as president of Freedom Quilting Bee Legacy.
- ⁶ Although the Gee’s Bend quilts were known outside of Alabama as early as the 1930s, when Arthur Rothstein photographed the community for the Farm Security Administration, and indeed made their way into art–world circles through auctions that Walters organized in New York and other cities in the 1960s, they were not widely exhibited until a series of shows that Arnett and his family organized starting in 2002 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The most published and exhibited works from the Arnett collection became the basis for the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, which has organized dozens of museum gifts and purchases of work by Gee’s Bend and other Southern Black artists, starting with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2014. Pettway’s quilt entered the collection of the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, where I am the senior curator of American art and Merrie and Dan Boone Curator of Folk and Self–Taught Art, through one such acquisition in 2017.
- ⁷ China Pettway, Arcola’s cousin, talks about her mother Leola’s time at the Bee and the quilt she made from the corduroy that her mother had brought home to make clothes. China reused the fabric from those clothes in her own quilt, which she made around the same time that Arcola created hers. See “Interview with China Pettway,” October 6, 2023, *Black Quilts from the High Museum*, video, 5:35 min., <https://link.blackquilts.high.org/video/interview-with-china-pettway>.