

# Reinterpretations of African Cultural Traditions in African American Fabric Arts

by

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## Abstract

African American cultural productions are influenced by African traditional culture. Retention of African traditional practices has varied across time, region and location. Forms and philosophies have been syncretized with other cultures, resulting in hybrid cultural productions. Still, evidence of African retentions can be found in music, dance, quilts, and other art forms. In this article, I examine the ways in which African cultural retentions are reinterpreted in contemporary fabric arts.

## Introduction

Using an African-centered perspective, this article examines African cultural traditions of the Yoruba of Nigeria, the Bakongo of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Ashanti of Ghana, and the ways in which these traditions are reinterpreted in contemporary African American fabric arts. A discussion on this topic will include the following works of art: *Rhythm in My Soul: The Dancer* and *Ashanti Gold*, by artist Sherry Whetstone, and *A Kiss From the Ancestors* and *Root Woman* by artist NedRa Bonds. My methodology involves primary research on African American quilts and fabric art and oral history interviews.

West African cultures believe that being in harmonious relations with the ancient ways of the ancestors is one of the highest callings. African art and dance are partially defined as social acts of establishing paternity and establishing communion with the founding fathers. He finds that African art and dance are partially defined as social acts of establishing paternity and establishing communion with the founding fathers (Thompson, 28). The Yoruba for example, are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, whose origins spring from the older kingdom Ile-Ife. Yoruba kings and queens are considered “divine,” and experience their status as one given to them by Olodumare; the supreme ruler of heaven and earth (Omojola, 32-33).

Olodumare, as almighty god, is the supreme embodiment of *Ashe* (the spiritual force to make things happen) which he bestowed upon the Orisha, whom are “messengers and embodiments of *ashe*” (Thompson, 5). Yoruba religion involves a belief in various spirits (i.e. snakes, birds, trees believed to be imbued with ash) and the worship of over four-hundred Orisha. Some of the primary Orisha that we are most familiar with includes Eshu-Elegba, known as the messenger god and honored with cowrie shells (symbolic of having currency) and the colors red and black; Ifa, god of divination to bring about change and to overcome challenge; Osanyin, god of herbal medicine (roots and root workers) often honored in the form of a bird; Ogun, god of iron and blacksmithing, honored with metal, knives, and machetes used in clearing the path; Shango, god of thunder and lightning, who is associated with the double-headed axe and honored in the colors red and white; and Oshun, goddess of love, fertility, and wealth, and honored in colors cool blue and brass yellow.

Yoruba art is created to honor the divine kings and queens, the above primary Orisha, and lesser religious deities. As kings, priests, priestesses, and other people of honored positions die, they leave behind many generations of descendents. Most African societies share a strong belief in an ancestral spiritual realm, a place where the energy of deceased ancestors is honored and kept alive through art, rituals, music, and danced performance (Omojola,33).

The Kongo culture, from the Democratic Republic of Congo in Central Africa illustrates its worldviews with a Kongo Cosmogram. Thompson (1983) states the world of the Bakongo is “profoundly informed by a Cosmogram – an ideal balancing of the vitality of the world of the living with the visionariness of the world of the dead” (106) and that death is not final, but merely an act in which all must past through in order to enter into eternal life.

Thompson's research into the Bakongo's complex system of Minkisi reveals the use of sacred medicines with healing powers (107). These powers are activated by ancestral energies. Cultural retentions of Minkisi are documented in the Black Atlantic arts of the Americas in the form of the Nkisi-charm (Nkisi is one charm and Minkisi is plural for two or more charms). In Haiti, they are called Pacquet Kongo and in Cuba they are referred to as Prenda (127). Nkisi are usually in the form of bundles, packets, or bags containing various sacred medicines such as earth, leaves, roots, shells, beads, feathers, wooden images, ceramics, and other objects (117).

In Africa, memorial heads made in the likeness of the deceased are placed on altars, used in funeral services, and used as tombstones on graves. A continuation of the Minkisi is also documented in folk art traditions of rural southern United States. References to these various African traditions are also seen in African American graveyard traditions. In contemporary society, photographs of the deceased are used. In addition to tombstones, shells, rocks (that have been painted white), jugs, pots, plates, clocks, fans, lamps, wheels, and a number of other items are also placed on contemporary African American graves. This tradition is believed to assist the deceased with crossing over into the afterlife. Thompson writes that graveyard decorations are used to honor the deceased and to guide their spirits to the other world, as well as to ground their spirits in a way that allows them to rest in peace instead of wondering the world, the cemetery, or returning to the house to haunt the living (132). It is believed that the last object that a person used or touched before dying is imbued with their spirits. Thus African American survivors might take those objects and bury them with the dead or use them to make charms to be placed on the grave. This act grounds the spirit (134). However, spirits can also be captured in bottle-tree charms and in spirit jugs or memorial jugs (142-45).

Examining the Minkisi tradition, which originated with the Bakongo culture in Central Africa, provides an excellent example of continuity and change in art forms and meanings. Although the associated meanings as it relates to linking the living with the dead and honoring the ancestors remains relatively intact, forms and modes of production change from location to location. The custom of placing charms and the last objects touched by the deceased inside a bag or bundle has been adapted in the United States where they are instead placed on the surface of memorial art objects. Maude Wahlman documents this tradition in the making of spirit jugs ("Mojo Working" 76). A continuation of this tradition is also seen in other forms, such as fabric art by NedRa Bonds.



Figure 1  
NedRa Bonds  
*A Kiss From the Ancestors*, 2005  
48 in. x 60 in.

Silk and cotton fabric, African fancy print, glass beads, and cowrie shells  
Photo by Pearlie Johnson

Tapered in royal blue fabric and framed in a patchwork of gold alternating squares, *A Kiss From the Ancestors*, 2005 (Figure 1) illustrates regal authority. *A Kiss From the Ancestors* is about passing the African music tradition down to the next generation. In this artwork, Bonds has sewn on images of strings, drums, and brass instruments to show this idea. According to Bonds, the two sets of eyelids that appear to be staring outwards from the background cloth are symbolic of the ancestors watching (Bonds, 2008). Bonds's subject, an adult figure dressed in white (a color associated with ancestral powers in West African cultures), who is kissing the forehead of a naked baby, draws the viewer inward for closer examination.

Once the ancestor kisses the baby's head, knowledge is imparted throughout its brain as illustrated in the way Bonds uses gold threads and fancy stitching to express this idea. *A Kiss From the Ancestor* can be viewed from the perspective of the Kongo Minkisi tradition. Bonds's use of shells and beads, and her use of yarn and fancy threads to create charm-like images in the face of the adult figure, is a contemporary link to placing charms on the surface of art objects not only to honor the ancestors, but more so, to imbue that work with *ashe*.

Reinterpretations of African cultural features in contemporary arts have been a widely used trend since being introduced in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The exhibition “Black Art Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African American Art” included a work by Renee Stout titled “Fetish #2” a life-sized figure of herself that reinterprets the Nkisi tradition of the Bakongo culture (Rozelle, 231). Yet, when working in fabric and mixed media, Stout draws upon the Kongo Minkisi tradition where in a similar way to Bonds, uses a variety of buttons, beads, and shells, empowering the vest that changes from a simple wearable garment into a work of art known as a “Conjuring Vest” (See Figure 2 for comparison). Amalia Amaki is another well-known artist whose works are adorned with buttons, beads, and jewelry, and who in addition, features the photograph of the beloved; a contemporary way on honoring one’s immediate ancestors (Robinson, 114).



Figure 2  
Renee Stout  
*Conjuring Vest*, 1996  
48 in. x 60 in.

Velvet, silk and cotton fabric, fancy threads, glass beads, buttons, cowrie shells  
Photo Courtesy of UMKC Belger Arts Center for Creative Studies

Honoring the deceased is linked to honoring birth, and is often thought of in terms of recycling souls. Arts that celebrate a link between funerals and fertility can be traced to many African cultures. The Ashanti (or Asante) culture in Ghana, West Africa, are a matrilineal group (chieftainship and heredity passed down through the female line) in which women are held in high esteem and are honored through the arts. The strong belief in entering an ancestral realm after death makes having children vitally important to most Africans. After death, one cannot become an ancestor without first having had children and leaving behind living descendents. It is also believed that the living can call upon their beloved's ancestral powers to intervene on their behalf, helping them to solve any type of problem. Thus, traditional beliefs in memorial heads and fertility figures are two statuary art forms that link the living with the dead.

According to Suzanne Preston Blier in *The Royal Arts of Africa*, Akan memorial heads, known as “mma,” are created in the likeness of the deceased, decorated and dressed in special cloths, then placed at the gravesite. Blier further explains:

In addition to serving as memorials, the mma were said to help promote fertility. With this in mind, women who had trouble conceiving often tended the grave sites near where the vessels were placed and presented food offerings to the deceased, the dead being encouraged to intercede on their behalf through this means” (1998, 159). Memorial figures, and fertility figures known as Akua’ba, are linked in Ashanti cultural traditions.

The Akua’ba figure acts as a charm and is used to aid women in conception and delivery of beautiful, healthy babies. Generally, these figures are carved in wood and blackened with varnish or smoke. The color black links them to activity of the night, also a time when spiritual powers are at their heights (Blier 160). The figures are short and thin with emphasis placed on an oval head. Neck rings are prominent, a reference to prosperity and to the fattening-up process for young women so they can get pregnant. Arms are extending outwards, and the breasts are accentuated (158). Most often, the figure is female in nature. This is because the Akua’ba is representative of fertility and womanhood, and not reflective of a desire for birthing a specific gender. The figure is fed and cared for by the woman, and carried with her wherever she goes as if it were a real child. According to Blier, once the woman became pregnant the Akua’ba was returned to the shrine as an offering (158), perhaps in the hopes of a successful pregnancy and the birth of a healthy child.



“Akuaba”

Figure 3

Sherry Whetstone-McCall

*Ashanti Gold*, 2006

17 in. x 22 in.

Featuring "Akua'ba Figures; Burlap, cotton fabric, African prints, lace, buttons, beads, and cowrie shells

Photo by Pearlie Johnson

Sherry Whetstone’s *Ashanti Gold* 2006 (Figure 3) was inspired by the Akua’ba fertility figure. In *Ashanti Gold*, Whetstone uses a variety of fabrics, including gold fabric and threads. To make this work, Whetstone first hand-drew the figures on paper and then used them as templates to trace and cut the fabric into the desired shapes. The figures were then appliquéed onto a burlap cloth. The figures are embellished with buttons, lace, beads, and shells, known as “Sherry Things.” The fabric art appears to depict a family setting. From left to right the figures include a male (with a flat square head and broad shoulders), a man-child wearing a vest, a woman-child dressed with beads and lace, and on the far right an adult female figure with protruding breasts. To further pronounce the figure as “woman,” Whetstone places a large cowrie shell at the “meeting of her thighs.” The composition is enclosed in a patchwork frame made of African Fancy print. African cultural traditions are also referred to in the ways these artists use cloth to conjure social change. Spirituality, folk beliefs, and religious ideas serve as inspirations for these fabric artworks.



Conjuring, which belongs to the supernatural realm, is an act performed to secure change. Conjuring can be part of the secular as well as the sacred. It is believed that the magical powers of conjuring results in transformation, transforming an evil into a good, which also includes transforming society (Anderson, 156). According to Anderson, “Conjure has had its greatest influence on religion. . . . The Bible was the primary means of carrying out the reshaping [of society]” (156). Christians and conjurers both stress a belief in processing “spiritual gifts” being “gifted” where such gifts could be spiritual or physical and/or artistic or linguistic (158). Both Whetstone and Bonds share a belief in divine order and often speak of experiencing spiritual visions or having artistic creations come to them in the form of dreams.

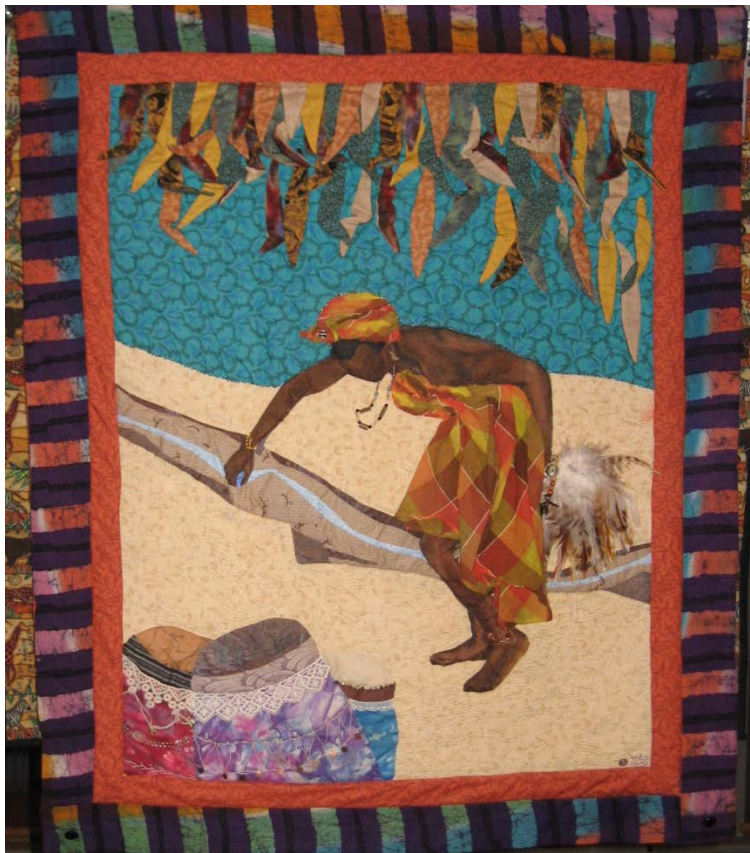


Figure 4  
Sherry Whetstone McCall *Rhythm in My Soul: The Dancer*, 1992  
40 in. x 30 in. Cotton fabric, watercolor, cotton lace, animal fur, beads and fancy threads  
Photo by Pearlie Johnson

*Rhythm in My Soul, the Dancer*, 1992 (Figure 4) was inspired by a spiritual experience and created by Sherry Whetstone. The central figure is a woman painted in brown watercolor. Instead of appliquéing brown fabric to create this image, Sherry chose to show off her artistic skill as a painter. “Of all my work,” she notes, “this is the only time that I have painted my subject instead of using fabric. I felt it was important for me to release more of myself in this piece” (Whetstone 2002). The work is considered a “fabric relief.”

What makes this artwork a relief is the way in which Whetstone has crunched and gathered up the fabric to create a sculptural effect, as seen in the cloth that the woman wears as a wrapper and headdress. This technique causes the cloth to extend outwards. The woman's wrapper, which is a multi-patterned cloth made of bright reds, greens, yellows, and orange, hangs from her body. Captured in the middle of a dance, the woman's back is bent as she moves rhythmically to the beat of African drums. The woman's facial features are not distinct, but the body and extremities are proportionately realistic. Her right arm is outstretched, and bears a beaded bracelet. Dangling from the woman's neck is a beaded necklace. With her left arm close to her backside, the woman is holding a rattle made of feathers, fur, beads, and cowry shells. She wears a beaded ankle bracelet on her left foot.



Figure 5  
Wrapper Style with Headdress and Beads  
Fante Culture from Elmina on the Atlantic coast in Ghana, Bakatue Festival, July 2, 2003  
Photo by Pearlie Johnson

Another reason that this wall hanging is considered a textile relief involves the way the pale yellow cloth has been constructed to look like grains of sand. Using the stipple quilting technique, Whetstone moves the fabric while controlling the sewing speed, making thousands of tiny stitches. This gives the cloth a grainy appearance. Over sixty hours were required to complete this single area. Stipple quilting is a technique used by other fabric artists, including Bonds and Ruffin. It is used primarily to create a sculptural effect with fabric and is often used in backgrounds. Hanging from the top border, across a cloth blue sky, are more than fifty small leaves. The leaves are made of wire covered in cloth, which allows them to be shaped and twisted so as to appear to be moving in the wind. Whetstone has also captured the way women from African cultures wear fabric wrapper-style along with matching headdress and beads (See comparison with Figure 5). *Rhythm in My Soul* is framed with a two-inch wide batik cloth from Tanzania.

In *The African Aesthetic*, Kariamuw Welsh-Asante puts forth the idea that an African aesthetic is concerned with the connection between mind, body, and feelings. She states that entities essential to this aesthetic include “spirit,” “rhythm,” and “creativity” (1993, 8-9). The importance of feelings is also furthered by Donald Matthews in *Honoring the Ancestors* (1998), where he states that “feelings” are an important part of the act invoking the presence of the Spirit (25-26). He writes:

The emphasis on faith as a deeply felt emotional experience of the divine, along with its African stylistic features, revealed this presence of spirit. Spontaneity, improvisation, call and response, polyrhythms, and bodily movements became the way African religion was expressed. . . . This religion of faith and feeling allows blacks to express their sorrows and their joys. . . . This space is spiritual space because it involves the worshipers in encountering the divine world in a way that allows them to get in touch with their own guilt and anxiety. . . . The rhythms of music provide a way for worshipers to enter into a liminal space between heaven and earth. (25-27)

The “liminal” space that Matthews refers to is the space occupied by the dancer in *Rhythm in My Soul*. Viewed from this space, her feet are planted solid in the sand (earth) and her head is bowed in reverence beneath the blue skies (heaven). Although the drummer's presence is not visible in the composition, viewers can imagine a rhythmic beat from the presence of the drums in the lower left corner. Arms out-stretched, back bent, and left foot positioned to step, the woman begins to dance.

Joseph M. Murphy explains the role of dance in conjuring spirit in *Working the Spirit*. In his chapter “Haitian Vodou,” Murphy writes that “Vodou is a dance of the spirit: a system of movements, gestures, prayers and songs in veneration of the invisible forces of life” (1994, 10). In his examination of the work of dancer Katherine Dunham, Murphy explains that first there must be a physic transformation in which the head is prepared to accept a visit from the spirit. Such preparations included anointing the dancer's head. Special herbs and ingredients are placed on the head and wrapped tightly underneath the headdress; a process that strengthens the dancer to be mounted by the spirit (23, 42).



Figure 6  
NedRa Bonds  
*Turn the Music Upside Down*, 2005  
38 in. x 48 in. Cotton Fabrics  
Photo by Pearlie Johnson

Omojola writes that it is the drumming that brings the spirit and the individual together (33-35) and that for the Yoruba “appropriate drums must be used for a particular deity” (33). The dancer and spirit speak or dialogue with each other through movement. This communication is facilitated through the sound of drumbeats; the drums call and the dancer responds with movement. Movements can be slow and easy or hard and vigorous, or a combination of both resulting in a pulsating climax where dancer and Iwa become one. In *Rhythm in My Soul: The Dancer*, Whetstone-McCall captures the woman as “art in motion,” engaging the viewer in symbolic movement and sound.

Another form of art in motion is captured in *Turn the Music Upside Down*, 2005 (Figure 6) by NedRa Bonds. This fabric artwork includes strip sewing and appliqué textile techniques. Fabric strips featuring doll-like images of women dancing are edge-sewn together to form the whole arrangement. Additional images of women and musical notes have been cut out and appliquéd onto the strips. The vertical strips are interrupted with two horizontal strips sewn across the composition. The focal point, however, is the androgynous figure created in a black-speckled fabric. *Turn the Music Upside Down* is about dance and music. It is also about music being adapted and reinterpreted. Bonds’s use of the globe as the figure’s head is to show the impact of African music and dance on the rest of the world.

The essence of dance in the African aesthetic is paramount in Robert Farris Thompson’s *African Art in Motion* (1974). From an African-centered perspective, Thompson finds that art is a reflection of the happenings of African people. He describes African art as a dance (xii). The movement of people, the movement of shapes and forms found in sculpture, and the movement of colors and patterns seen in textiles contribute to an African art aesthetic. Accordingly, the function of a given sculpture, textile, or dance has its origins in the people’s collective conscious of performance (xii). The icons of African art, then, are attitudes of the body. The stylized motion seen in figural forms is referred to as “attitude.” Attitude in art expresses the attitude of a people. Thus the bent knees of the figure in *Turn the Music Upside Down* can be compared to the bent knees of a dancer. Figural forms in fabric art can be compared to figural forms in sculpture and in the same way that Thompson writes, can also demonstrate the relations between people and objects of art (5).



Figure 7  
NedRa Bonds  
*Root Woman*, 2002  
Fabric and waterproof marker  
34 in. x 63 in.  
Photo by Pearlie Johnson

Bonds is well known for her unique figural forms, which are generally shown involved in some type of activity, movement, or gesture. In *Root Woman*, 2002 (Figure 7), the female figure is engaged in an act of conjuration. The activity going on between the woman's hands and the basket refers to the woman gathering herbs, roots, and perfumes for conjuring and making a healing potion. Conjuring is an action that has been traditionally linked to Vodou and many other religions. Raboteau (1978) explains that conjuring, which is the same as root work or hoodoo, is all that remains of the Vodou cult (75).

Vodou is the religion of Haiti, and is a combination of Fon, Yoruba and Kongo religions fused with Catholicism. It started with African captives in the French West Indies and Saint-Domingue. After the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), many Haitians relocated to Louisiana, and over time the Vodou religion evolved into “Voodoo.” What remained and grew into a tradition in and of itself is the widespread folk belief in “root work” (75).

In *Rootwork: Using the Folk Magick of Black America*, Tayannah McQuillar provides an explanation of root work: “[Rootwork is] a form of folk magick that uses the elements of nature to create change in ourselves, others, or our environment . . . rootworkers believe that we can use the unseen forces of nature to manipulate the tangible world” (3). Materials used in root work include hair and nail clippings, one's clothing or personal belongings, dirt, especially graveyard dirt, powders, roots, and herbs of various sorts that are used to make charms. Such charms can be used either as defensive protectors or offensive aggressors (Raboteau 1978, 82, 33). According to Raboteau and McQuillar, root work, hoodoo, voodoo, conjure, and divination have come to mean the same, and are now considered a religion, and are practiced in addition to one's religion. Therefore, Conjure and Christianity could coexist because, according to McQuillar, “You want salvation, go to church. You want something done, go to the Rootworker” (4), because conjure provides answers that Christianity cannot, and visa versa (Raboteau, 288). Thus, one can be a devout Christian and practice root work at the same time; even calling upon God to bless their acts of conjure.

Bonds comes from a family with a strong belief in the natural healing of herbal medicines. Her grandmother collected herbs and used them more often than medicine from traditional doctors. As a result, NedRa grew up hearing a host of stories associated with the powers of natural herbs and women who used them to get what they needed. As an adult, Bonds's interest in the supernatural, herbs, and potions was revived while living in Philadelphia after she became friends with a family who had moved there from New Orleans, and who owned and operated a root store. When she returned to Kansas City some years later, she maintained her new interest through products from the House of Hezekiah, an herbal store formerly located on the corner of Forty-Third and Main Streets. One day while shopping there, Bonds was inspired to create a series of fabric artworks to honor indigenous practitioners of root work.

*Root Woman* is an artwork from Bonds's series that celebrates women working in the healing arts. Women of root work seem to possess a special kind of spirit and seem to cultivate a special aura about themselves. This is maintained through makeup, clothing, fancy headdress or hairstyles, and in some cases, being born with a caul (Raboteau 1978, 276). A caul is the part of the membrane that surrounds the head of a baby at birth, and is thought to imbue the child with special powers (*Webster Collegiate Dictionary* 2012, s.v. “caul”). Bonds maintains the woman in *Root Woman* was born with a veil (caul) on her face.

She explains: “The concept of being born with a veil over your face stems from the story about people who have physical scars on their face, have special powers and special knowledge. Actually it is the afterbirth that is still on the face after the baby comes out of the womb that [is thought to] cause the scar” (Bonds 2003). To this end, NedRa has created a scar on the upper left side of the figure's face. The woman's head is shaven as well, which could be part of the special head preparations that priestesses take part in when preparing to invite spirits from the supernatural world.

As seen in *Root Woman*, among the herbs and ingredients being thrown into the basket is a card for the queen of hearts. Bonds explains: “My own grandmother was born with the veil. My mother's mother, Virginia, was a 'seer,' meaning that she saw and spoke with spiritual beings” (Bonds 2006). Her grandmother was thought to possess both spiritual and physical vision. Fortune-telling or imparting one's vision through the use of cards is also part of the conjure tradition (Raboteau 1978, 275). The woman in *Root Woman* is dressed in a white cotton blouse with a ruffled-lace neckline worn off the shoulders. This type of dress is similar to that worn by Yoruba priestesses in Brazil. Bonds has skillfully captured the mystery and aura of a conjurer in *Root Woman* through her added effects seen in the figure's head and face, dress, and gesture.

In conclusion, this article, which is accompanied by images of powerfully beautiful quilts, has presented an overview of the ways in which contemporary fabric artists use cloth to reinterpret African cultural traditions, making their own contributions to the arts of the African Diaspora, as well as, furthering the knowledge on the visual arts in Pan-African Studies. As demonstrated, African American quilters use of cloth in the same way as other artists who work in paint, to imbue their cultural productions with ancestral energy. These artists draw upon traditional cultural practices that not only enlighten the viewer, but also empower the viewer.

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