



# These quilts weave together America's rich, complicated history

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Boston's Museum of Fine Arts holds a patchwork of American stories — assembled one quilt at a time. Jared Bowen of GBH Boston has a look as part of our arts and culture series, CANVAS.

## Read the Full Transcript

- **Amna Nawaz:**

At Boston's Museum of Fine Arts these days, you can find a patchwork of American stories assembled one quilt at a time.

Jared Bowen of GBH Boston has our look as part of our arts and culture series, Canvas.

- **Jared Bowen:**

Of the nation's art forms, it's among the most deeply embed, quilts, not that we or even some of the most acclaimed quilters have always recognized that.

- **Michael C. Thorpe, Artist:**

Looking around the house, we always had quilts, either maybe on the couch or on the wall, which is crazy to me, because I never looked at them as like art objects.

- **Jared Bowen:**

But after leaving a career as a college basketball player behind, and realizing another career in photojournalism was not for him, a year-and-a-half ago, artist Michael C. Thorpe began quilting, something he'd always watched his mother, Susan Richards, do.

- **Michael C. Thorpe:**

She got a quilting machine. And I started playing around with it, and then started to understand that I could use that as, like, painting. And that's when it just exploded, because she showed me everything, and then I just I took it from there.

- **Jared Bowen:**

And it's landed him here, in the Museum of fine Arts, as one of the artists featured in the exhibition Fabric of a Nation: American Quilt Stories.

Thorpe's quilts are normally colorful and joyous, but he made this piece the day after George Floyd's murder.

- **Michael C. Thorpe:**

Basically, I kept coming back to, like, what do people think of Black men? And a lot of this came from putting the burden on the audience, you know, because everyone was talking about Black people are always burdened with telling people about the situation, living through the situation.

And I was just like, I want to relieve myself of that and give it to the audience.

- **Jennifer Swope, Curator:**

I think, if we can agree on anything, it's the story of our nation is a complicated one, and we're living that now.

- **Jared Bowen:**

Jennifer Swope curated this show and traces how the history of America has been woven together in quilts spanning centuries.

- **Jennifer Swope:**

There's always the incredible story of the American quilting bee, where early suffragists came together and plotted to expand the franchise of voting or to promote the ideas of abolitionism. And that's deeply baked into the idea of the American quilt.

- **Jared Bowen:**

Quilts told the story of cotton and corduroy landscapes, of rural family life, and of trauma.

- **Jennifer Swope:**

We have Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi's work *Strange Fruit II*, which is about the song popularized by Billie Holiday, which is graphically gut-wrenching.

It shows lynched bodies on a tree. It shows Ku Klux Klan figures. And that will give people pause, and rightly so.

- **Jared Bowen:**

But artist Bisa Butler's quilt is halting for its shimmering portraits of Atlanta's Morris Brown College baseball team from 1899.

How masterful is this piece? It's so layered. It's layered in theme. It's layered in practice.

- **Jennifer Swope:**

I think layered is the perfect word to use.

What I think she really wants people to do is to look carefully at each of these figures and recognize their individual humanity. And she does that really by creating these portraits in color and cloth.

- **Jared Bowen:**

Here, we also find one gallery transformed into a virtual temple. It features the only known surviving quilts by Harriet Powers side by side for the first time.

- **Jennifer Swope:**

She's an icon. What she was able to achieve is astounding.

- **Jared Bowen:**

A former enslaved woman, Powers is considered the mother of African American quilting. She renders life lessons in this pictorial quilt from the late 1890s.

But it was her Bible quilt, sewn a decade earlier, that made Powers a sensation, after it was exhibited in an Atlanta fair visited by nearly a million people, including then-President Grover Cleveland.

- **Jennifer Swope:**

These were the offspring of her brain, as she described them. And they were precious to her. And she brought such deep thinking. Like, her whole cosmology is part of those works of art. There's nothing unplanned, not deliberate about these two pieces.

- **Jared Bowen:**

As a strong tradition of quilting bees reminds us, quilts are commonly communal efforts.

Gee's Bend is an Alabama community that's taken on nearly mythical proportions for a quilting tradition that has passed from generation to generation since the 19th century.

- **Jennifer Swope:**

Aesthetically, the quilts of Gee's Bend are incredibly special. People have described the quilt as the product of what we might think of as a school of art, in a sense that it was a tight community.

- **Jared Bowen:**

Community prevails in these works, even for artists like Thorpe, who work independently.

- **Michael C. Thorpe:**

It takes a village to make anything.

And, literally, every piece of fabric get made come from my aunt's quilt shop, may come from just like a local fabric store, but it takes all these people. Everybody's contributing to it. It feels there's like a community behind me, because I couldn't do it without my mom, without my family, without all these people that make these amazing fabrics that I use.

- **Jared Bowen:**

Allowing for stitches that, in time, render the fabric of a nation.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Jared Bowen in Boston.