





# FABRIC OF A NATION

## American Quilt Stories

from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

*Fabric of a Nation* celebrates the American quilt—a living, vibrant art form—through a selection of nearly fifty exceptional objects representing centuries of human creativity and ingenuity. Long admired for their utility, beauty, and design, as well as for the sense of community they inspire, quilts have been present in American private and public life for generations. The quilts selected for *Fabric of a Nation* were created by women and men, known individuals and those yet to be identified, urban and rural makers, and members of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian American, and LGBTQIA+ communities. Through these works of art, spanning more than three hundred years, we explore how quilts have evolved alongside the United States.

As the country has changed, so too has the purpose and meaning of quilts. Early on, quilts and woven blankets were appreciated primarily for their warmth, and their artistry as decorative domestic wares was also acknowledged. But by the mid-nineteenth century, quilts were being displayed in fairs and other public places, and some makers began to see themselves as textile artists. Today, quilters



have expanded the medium to encompass a wide range of techniques, materials, and imagery. Some contemporary artists are using quilts to bring attention to social justice issues and to address difficult moments from the nation's past and present. All these works share one essential characteristic: an extraordinary power to tell stories.

The exhibition opens with two quilts that advocate for expanding voting rights, and whose designs are based on the American flag, a common motif in quilting. The earlier quilt, created before 1920, was made by an unidentified artist from Indiana who was promoting voting rights for women (fig. 1). It embodies the grassroots political will that fueled battles fought in statehouses across the country during the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919–20. The later work, *Vote*, was made in 1975 by Irene Williams, a quilter from Gee's Bend, Alabama, an isolated historically Black enclave in the central part of the state now well-known for its distinctive quilts (fig. 2). A decade before she made her quilt, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. came to Gee's Bend to encourage the residents of the community to exercise their right to vote, assuring them that "you are somebody." The importance of this basic right of citizenship clearly stayed with Williams. Other stories told through the quilts in *Fabric of a Nation* reflect the country's growing infrastructure, expanding borders, and ongoing struggle with slavery and its legacy. The exhibition also features works created solely as formal artistic expressions or to reflect personal positions and beliefs.

Quilting is often regarded as a democratic art form, accessible regardless of class, race, ethnicity, age, or gender. One exhibition cannot tell every story, but the wide range of makers represented by the quilts and related works shown here illustrates the diversity of communities, experiences, and quilt-making traditions in the United States.

*Adapted by Senior Curator Katie Delmez from text provided by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*



**Fig. 1:** Unidentified artist. *Hoosier Suffrage Quilt*, before 1920. Cotton plain weave, pieced, embroidered, and quilted; 73 1/2 x 74 1/2 in. Frank B. Bemis Fund and with funds donated anonymously. Photo © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



**Fig. 2:** Irene Williams. Quilt: *Vote, Housetop Variation*, 1975. Printed cotton plain weave, pieced; 89 x 81 in. Museum purchase with funds from the Frank B. Bemis Fund, The Heritage Fund for a Diverse Collection, and Gallery Instructor 50th Anniversary Fund to support The Heritage Fund for a Diverse Collection, and gift of Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the collection of Vanessa Vadim. Photo © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. © 2025 Estate of Irene Williams / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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**Cover:** Bisa Butler. *To God and Truth* (detail), 2019. Print and resist-dyed cottons, cotton velvet, rayon satin, and knotted string, pieced, appliqué, and quilted; 117 1/2 x 140 5/8 in. John H. and Ernestine A. Payne Fund, The Heritage Fund for a Diverse Collection, and Arthur Mason Knapp Fund. Photo © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston