



1970s

Cotton and polyester;  
running stitch

76 3/8 x 76 1/2 inches (194 x 194.3 cm)

American

The Ella King Torrey Collection of African  
American Quilts, 2006, 2006-163-4

### LET'S LOOK

How do you think this pattern relates to the pattern name, "Birds in Flight?"

What shapes and patterns are formed by the triangles?

How are the blocks similar?  
How are they different?

Do you think that the artist wants us to look at the quilt as a whole, or just one part?  
How do you know?

How is this quilt's design different than the other quilts you've seen that were made in Gee's Bend?

## "TRIANGLES IN SQUARES" QUILT

It is not known who made this quilt, but we do know it was made in Gee's Bend. Its back is made of red and blue corduroy remnants from pillow shams made by women at the Freedom Quilting Bee for Sears Roebuck and Company, the same fabric that Willie Abrams used in her quilt. Some of the oldest surviving quilts in Gee's Bend, from the 1920s and 1930s, feature triangle patterns. Similar patterns are also found in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Euro-American patchwork quilts, as well as in textiles and other surface adornments from West and Central African groups. Although the exact origin of triangle-based patterns in Gee's Bend is unknown, quiltmakers today agree that similar patterns have been passed down for generations.

This quilt is made up of three rows of three blocks, each featuring fifty triangles. The design is a variation of a quilt pattern known as Birds in Flight or Birds in the Air. The intricate pattern, consisting of many small pieces, would have required a skilled and patient hand. Following the direction of the triangles, our eyes bounce around from one corner of the quilt to another, never finding a place to rest. Similarly, migrating birds fly tirelessly to their new home, pausing briefly before moving on again. Could each triangle symbolize a single bird, and each block a group traveling together? Or perhaps each small triangle could represent a flock of birds, as the shape itself mimics the arrangement of birds in flight. What do you think?

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

### LANGUAGE ARTS/ENGLISH

*Elementary, Middle, and High School – Diamante Poems*

Taking inspiration from the shapes and patterns in this quilt, have students create diamond-shaped poems using the diamante poem

format. Discuss how patterns in language can respond to patterns in quilts.

### *High School – Gee’s Bend on the stage*

The play *Gee’s Bend*, written by Elyzabeth Gregory Wilder, follows two Gee’s Bend women who face segregation, family struggles, and the turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement. Quilting provides comfort and context to their lives. It is a deeply personal story of family, self-discovery, and artistic expression.

## MATH

### *Elementary School – Exploring Four-Patch Patterns*

Using either quilting tiles (one-inch squares and triangles that have two one-inch sides; available through ETA/Cuisenaire; [etacuisenaire.com](http://etacuisenaire.com)) or paper shapes with the same dimensions, have students explore the variations of four-patch designs. Each pair of students starts with twenty squares and twenty triangles (ten each of two different colors). Have them experiment with ways to arrange the pieces in a two-by-two square, making at least three different patterns. Groups then choose one design to share with the class. Which designs are the same configuration of squares and triangles? Remove duplicates and see how many different arrangements were found. Compare the designs and the shapes created. You can also try three-by-three squares, allowing for more design possibilities. Similar explorations can be pursued with sets of pattern blocks, which include additional shapes such as hexagons and diamonds.

## ART

### *Elementary, Middle, or High School – Capturing Flight in Art*

How have other artists represented flight or movement? For example, compare and contrast this quilt and Constantin Brancusi’s *Bird in Space*. What is each artist capturing about birds and flight? Find *Bird in Space* and other examples on ARTStor ([artstor.org](http://artstor.org)) and discuss similarities and differences. Have students create a work of art that captures their idea of flying.