



Early 20th century

Woven and printed cottons, silks, and wools with appliqué and pieced work; diagonal quilting
79 x 70 1/2 inches (200.7 x 179.1 cm)

MARIE HENSLEY
American

Gift of the Friends of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and partial gift of the Lindsey Family, 1996, 1996-107-1

LET'S LOOK

Many pieces of cloth were sewn together to make this quilt. What are the two basic shapes used?

Can you name five different patterns found in the pieces of cloth?

There are twenty-three symbols and shapes sewn onto the quilt. Look for: a red, four-pointed star inside a dark circle; a red cross; a fish; two eyes; and two snakes. What other symbols and shapes can you find?

Look for parts of this quilt where two or more triangles cut from the same plaid pattern have been turned and sewn together to create new shapes and rhythms.

PIECED AND APPLIQUÉ QUILT

There are over 1,600 pieces of cloth in this unusual, multicolored patchwork quilt! A variety of symbolic shapes, mostly cut from solid colors of cloth (red, black, or dark blue), are sewn on top of the complex arrangement of small triangles and rectangles of patterned fabrics. The nearly invisible quilting stitches run diagonally in wavy lines from the lower left towards the upper right. This quilt was probably used by its maker, Marie Hensley, as a summer bedspread since the middle layer consists only of thin cotton cloth. The bottom layer consists of the nine-patch pattern with variations.

Piecing, quilting, appliqué, and strips are needlework techniques that have been used in quilting throughout the world since ancient times. Piecing is the process of stitching together separate pieces of fabric to create a larger cloth, such as a quilt top. Quilting is the sewing that holds together the top layer, the middle filling layer, and the bottom layer. It reinforces the fabric, making it more durable, while trapping little pockets of air between the layers to provide insulation and warmth. Appliqué (the French word for "applied") means cut-out pieces sewn onto a larger fabric. Strips are made by sewing small pieces of cloth (often called strings) into long, narrow shapes that are sewn together to form a quilt top. The use of strips originated in West Africa and spread from there to the Caribbean and North America.

The sheer number of pieces and the variety of patterns—polka dots, plaids, paisley, floral, and stripes—may dazzle your eyes at first glance. The silk and wool fabrics were originally used in women's dresses, while the cotton pieces with floral patterns are probably from flour or feed sacks. Much of the quilt is sewn in strips that contain complicated variations. Some African American quiltmakers believed that varying designs and adding special symbols such as

eyes, crosses, and snakes would provide protection from evil. The multitude of patterned fabrics, the asymmetrical design (rather than a standard, repeated design), and the unusual appliqué symbols and shapes all reflect Hensley's individuality and her skill in visual improvisation.

This quilt was discovered between the mattress and coil springs of Hensley's bed soon after her death in 1932. Hensley's employer, Sarah Asherton Mendenhall, passed it on to her own great-granddaughter, Virginia Mendenhall Duval. It was purchased for the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1996.

ABOUT THIS QUILTMAKER

This quilt was made by Marie Hensley (c. 1870–1932), who worked most of her life as a domestic servant and seamstress for a wealthy family in the small town of Marion, North Carolina. Not much else is known about Hensley, but her quilt is strikingly similar to African textiles because it includes strips, multiple patterns, asymmetry, improvisation, secret symbols, and strong, contrasting colors.

Throughout West Africa, Asante and Mande men weave strips of cloth containing bands of different patterns on small, horizontal looms. These strips are then cut into desired lengths and sewn together to form larger designs in which the bands of patterns are staggered to create asymmetrical designs. In African cultures multiple patterns are combined in one piece of cloth to show status, or standing in society. Cloth woven for a king or a priest may include as many as thirty different patterns.

The Kuba people of Central Africa use asymmetrical patterning based on squares with tremendous variety including checkerboard, log cabin, and nine-patch patterns in their cloths. Kuba people were skilled at improvising, which required adapting to unpredictable shapes, sizes, and colors rather than using set patterns that repeat the same images and measurements. Marie Hensley's quilt design is also similar to cloths painted by *Mbuti* (em-BOO-tee) women, also from Central Africa, which contain strip designs with small squares, triangles, and diamonds in patterns that almost seem to move—rows of parallel lines twist and turn sharply next to black dots that jump in quick, syncopated sequences. Sherry Byrd, an African American quiltmaker, explains, "I really don't like to sit down and do all that measurin'. It just takes the heart outa things."

The symbols and shapes used in this quilt may be related to African, Haitian, or Cuban beliefs as well as Christian ones. Some are similar to appliquéd motifs found in cloth sewn by the Fon people of Benin in West Africa. In African cultures, symbols have deeper meanings that are only revealed at special times to special people. Because textiles were so important in African secret societies, they

probably continued to have special meaning for Africans who were forcibly brought to America. These meanings were often kept secret because enslaved African Americans were not allowed to practice their traditional beliefs and rituals.

A CONTEMPORARY QUILT ARTIST

Since the 1970s, Faith Ringgold (b. 1930) has made the world more aware of the achievements of African American women and women artists through her paintings, performances, books, and quilts. Born in Harlem, New York, where she still has a studio, Ringgold moved from painting on traditional stretched canvases to creating her “story quilts” after being inspired by stories of her great, great grandmother, an enslaved quilter in pre-Civil War Florida. In Ringgold’s colorful quilts and images of quilts (found in children’s books like *Tar Beach*), she typically places black women at center stage.

LET’S LOOK AGAIN

Much of this quilt is made of pieces of cloth sewn together in long strips. Can you find some horizontal strips and some vertical strips?

This quilt is not symmetrical, yet the design is balanced. Describe which shapes and colors balance one another.

Find some of the visual rhythms formed by the placement of the fabric pieces with polka dots. How could you describe them using words? Using sounds?

CONNECT AND COMPARE

- Make a list of all the symbols and shapes appliquéd on this quilt. Write a story based on your favorites.
- Not all African American quiltmakers emphasized African elements such as improvisation and asymmetry in their work. Look for African American quilts with repeat patterns. Which ones do you like best? Explain why.
- Compare paintings by African American painters Horace Pippin, Romare Bearden, and Jacob Lawrence to examples of African American quilts.

RELATED ART PROJECTS

- Collect old clothing with interesting patterns, textures and colors: neckties, blue jeans, cotton shirts, dresses, pajamas, and anything else with lively designs or colors. Make sure the clothing is clean, then take each piece apart carefully and make a stack of usable fabrics. Choose several to cut into squares and sew together in a simple four-patch or nine-patch design to create small pillows, pot holders, doll quilts, or patches for clothing.
- Trace your hands on pieces of felt and cut them out. Add fingernails and rings using permanent markers. Try different ways of arranging all the hands on a large piece of cloth (burlap works well). Decide as a class whether to use a symmetrical pattern or an improvised, asymmetrical design. The hands can be sewn or glued onto the cloth.

This quilt is included in African American Artists: 1859 to the Present, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by generous grants from Delphi Financial Group and Reliance Standard Life Insurance Company.