



## ***Bold Improvisation: 120 Years of African American Quilts*** **African American Quilters & Quilt Preservers of Western Pennsylvania**

African American quilt, fiber art, and textile creativity is as diverse as its origins. Drawing from an African ancestral tradition, the American experience, and the contemporary art aesthetic, African American quilters, fiber artists, and textile crafters are forging a cultural trail in fiber arts. Quilt makers, artists, preservers, and collectors are expanding the genre of African American fiber art.

*Bold Improvisation: 120 Years of African American Quilts*, a traveling show created from the collection of art conservator Scott Heffley and managed by Smith Kramer Fine Art Services, opens nationally at the History Center. The traveling exhibit includes 36 quilts, four textiles, and two paintings that are excellent examples of African and African American quilt, fiber art, textile, and art creativity. Heffley's collection dates to the mid-1880s, and includes traditional American and "bold" departures from tradition that show African influences in quilt work. *Bold Improvisation* is a discussion of African American quilt work that poses the question, "What is an African American quilt?"

To answer that question is to understand the origins of African American quilts, follow their journey from Africa to the Americas, the development of an African American aesthetic, and the flowering of contemporary artistic expressions of black culture. Only then can the diversity, complex style, and creativity of African American quilts be appreciated.

In addition to Scott Heffley's *Bold Improvisation* is an exhibit of 20 quilts contributed by African Americans in Western Pennsylvania. These quilts are a representation of the dozens of quilters and fiber artists in the greater Pittsburgh region. Pittsburgh has a rich legacy of artistic creativity, and is home to many legends of jazz, gospel, and pop music, the literary arts, fine arts, and social arts. African American quilters of the region are making an impression on the quilt genre that musical, fine, and literary artists have made in their art forms. Much like jazz, the quilters' range is diverse and broad, yet conforms to a particular cultural aesthetic. In the quilt work added to *Bold Improvisation* there are quilts that represent traditional forms, those that are artistically experimental, and personal expressions of creativity. These quilts improvise on European traditions with new expressions in fiber arts. Much like jazz evolved into big band, bebop, fusion, and contemporary, strains of traditional American and African styles serve as underpinning for standards in fiber artwork.

Western Pennsylvania quilters are multi-dimensional. They have the skills and knowledge of the standard forms of American quilting – their improvisation is the individual act of creating beyond that standard. This exhibit documents the history of quilt making in the region with preserved quilts that date to 1920.

African American quilters in Western Pennsylvania create story, memory, spiritual, and historical quilts. These quilts are infused with scenes about quilters' lives, history, culture, and families. Pictorial or abstract, geometric or full of symbolism, the quilts represent the tradition of African American quilting in Western Pennsylvania.

— Samuel Black, Curator, African American Collection  
Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania



*Robin Crawford* - Is an artist from Buffalo, New York, with a fashion design background. Her quilts have sold to many collectors and reflect her training as a designer and artist. She was a member of the African American Heritage Quilters Guild, South Arts, and Quilt Company East. Crawford states, *"I just love art, I will always do art. I let it come naturally and create as I go. It's fantastic and I think my work touches people."* ("The Spirit of Joy")