

QuiltSpeak

Uncovering Women's Voices in the North Carolina Museum of History's Permanent Collection

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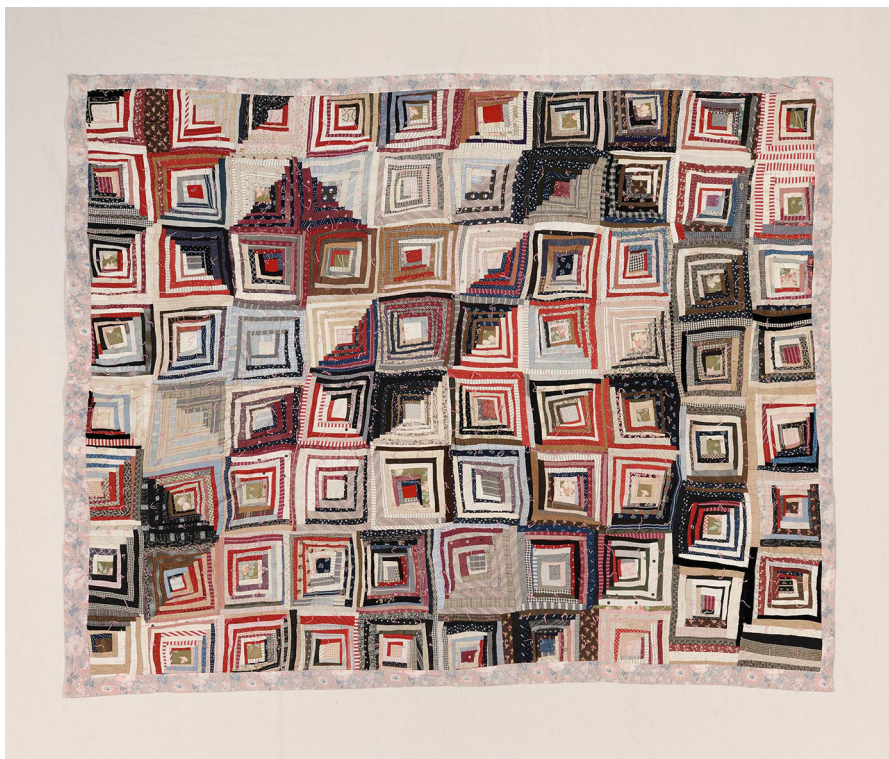
ABSTRACT: The exhibit *QuiltSpeak: Uncovering Women's Voices Through Quilts* provides a model for using material culture research to unearth the experiences of marginalized historical actors. Each of the forty quilts from the North Carolina Museum of History's permanent collection displayed in *QuiltSpeak*—made by a racially and economically diverse selection of quilters from the past two hundred years—served as a portal into a woman's life and a representation of her self-expression. Interactive elements empowered visitors to decode material culture themselves and connect their own experiences to the quiltmakers'. This article examines the exhibit's conceptualization, development, and outcomes with the contention that heretofore unheard voices can often be discovered right under our proverbial noses.

KEY WORDS: material culture, women's history, museum exhibits, museum collections, quilts

In 1907, Patience White (1830–ca. 1910) made a quilt. The seventy-seven-year-old had been born into slavery in Alamance County, North Carolina, and she continued to live and work there for the remainder of her life. A frugal woman, White included bits of more than one-hundred different fabric prints that she had been saving for decades in her Log Cabin pattern quilt. She pieced the small cloth strips by hand into seventy-eight blocks, which despite their asymmetry, fit together gracefully to form a shapely whole. Color shadowing gave the bedcover a dynamic sense of motion when viewed from a distance, and pink thread ties—rather than quilting stitches—held the heavy layers together. A floral cretonne—that cheap, printed cotton so prevalent in turn-of-the-century utilitarian quilts—served as the backing fabric. Upon completing her bedcover, Patience White gave it away—a gift of gratitude to the woman who taught her to read and write.

Patience White's teacher and the quilt's recipient, Lizzie Scott, was also the daughter-in-law of White's former enslavers. White had continued working for the Scott family after emancipation, and Lizzie may have employed her as

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Patience White, Log Cabin Quilt, Alamance County, NC, 1907, 66 x 82 inches, cottons, pieced. Collection of the NCMOH, Raleigh, NC, 1964.109.1. Photograph by Eric Blevins and D. Kent Thompson. (Courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History)

a housekeeper after the elder Scotts' deaths. How might White have felt about Lizzie Scott, a woman who helped her achieve an undoubtedly hard-won goal, but who had also been complicit—at least by association—in her oppression? Did she feel great pride in becoming literate at such an advanced age? How did she plan to use her new skills? White did not record her feelings on any of these matters. Only her quilt remains to connect us to her inner world—that of a creative woman who could transform available materials into objects of beauty and value.¹

¹ Patience White, "Log Cabin Quilt," 1907, collection of the North Carolina Museum of History (hereafter NCMOH), 1964.109.1. Close examination of the quilt revealed the presence of over one hundred different fabrics, which date from the 1880s through the early twentieth century. See Eileen Jahnke Trestain, *Dating Fabrics: A Color Guide, 1800–1960* (Paducah, KY: American Quilter's Society, 1998), 93–128; 1880 US Census, Population Schedule, Melville, Alamance County, NC, "Patience White," Ancestry.com; Mary Jane Allen to John Mebane Allen, July 25, 1856, in *Grandfather's Letters: Letters Written to John Mebane Allen by Relatives and Friends of the Hawfields* from 1852 to 1889, collected and arranged by Elizabeth White Furman (self-published, 1974), 80; Agnes Scott Haeseler to North Carolina State Department of Archives and History, August 12, 1964, Item History File 1964.109.1, NCMOH; Memorial Page for Patience Scott White (dates unknown), Find a Grave, memorial no. 24606805, citing Hawfields Presbyterian Church Cemetery, Mebane, Alamance County, North Carolina, maintained by RTerry (contributor 46537864).

Others have shared their feelings about Patience White's quilt, however. More than a century after its construction, Instagram user @hopscotchcotton viewed White's quilt, and wrote that it "made me cry sad and happy tears right there in the exhibit."² User @crisebtrue recorded, "this quilt stirred up strong emotions: I could feel the heart and creative passion of Patience."³ These viewers forged emotional connections with White's story and those of some forty other quilt-makers in the exhibition *QuiltSpeak: Uncovering Women's Voices Through Quilts*, which appeared at the North Carolina Museum of History (NCMOH) from May 4, 2019 to March 8, 2020. Curated entirely from the NCMOH's permanent collection, *QuiltSpeak* presented women's stories as told through quilts—a social history revealed through objects. The exhibit offered a model for mining an institution's collection and using the methodology of material culture scholarship to uncover the voices of women previously consigned to historical invisibility.⁴ The quilt-makers featured—women of different races, socioeconomic backgrounds, and eras—left behind few written records; but they did leave their quilts.⁵ And those quilts, when interrogated in new ways, proved surprisingly loquacious.

Conceptualizing *QuiltSpeak*

The NCMOH's mission, in brief, is to collect, preserve, and interpret North Carolina's history, and the institution has been doing so unofficially since the late-nineteenth century, and formally since 1902. The permanent collection contains approximately 150,000 objects, about four hundred of which are quilts. Quilt collecting at the institution has been ongoing since 1926, when curators acquired

² @hopscotchcotton, "Photo of a quilt," Instagram, September 22, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2u5zoVHFVh/>.

³ @crisebtrue, "Photo of woman in front of a quilt," Instagram, July 3, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bzd6fjEl5Gy/>.

⁴ Scholars of other types of material culture have used similar approaches. Kimberly Alexander "interw[ove] biography and material culture" in her examination of mid-eighteenth-century footwear, *Treasures Afoot: Shoe Stories from the Georgian Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 8–9, concluding that "many of the women featured in the shoe stories would be little known if not forgotten, had their shoes not survived." Centering shoes as a heretofore underutilized primary historical source enriched and complicated existing narratives about early American life, specifically anglicization in the pre-Revolutionary period. In Laurel Thatcher Ulrich et al., *Tangible Things: Making History Through Objects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), Ulrich and her coauthors used unexpected object pairings and source juxtapositions from the collections of Harvard University's museums to demonstrate the frequently artificial disciplinary boundaries between objects that nineteenth-century categorizations created. They argued that "objects and their entangled stories offer proof that the study of particular things can lead to far-reaching historical discoveries by revealing patterns, relationships, and complexities that would otherwise remain hidden," 20. Susan Tucker, Katherine Ott, and Patricia P. Buckler examined three centuries of American scrapbooks finding them uniquely situated to reveal intersections of "individual and group identity" in increasingly capitalist society. *The Scrapbook in American Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 3.

⁵ See Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 4. Prown argued for the value of material culture studies as an approach for accessing non-elite culture.

a showpiece chintz appliqué medallion bedcover made by a Confederate general's grandmother.⁶ NCMOH's quilts date from the late-eighteenth century through the early twenty-first, and their makers hailed from nearly every county in North Carolina. All of those with known provenance were made by women. Makers were overwhelmingly white—a result of past collecting practices rather than a reflection of who made quilts historically—but Black and Indigenous North Carolinians did make some of the quilts in the collection. Further, some quilts attributed to white women in our collection may have been made by the African American women they enslaved. Many of the museum's quilts had never been exhibited before. For those that had, past interpretations tended to focus on artistry and design rather than on the quiltmakers themselves. The collection's breadth, the quiltmakers' diversity, the quilts' utilitarian and decorative functions, their primary associations with women, and their limited past study made NCMOH's quilts ripe for further investigation and exhibition.

American museums present dozens of quilt exhibits each year, and some twenty institutions' missions pertain exclusively to collecting, preserving, and interpreting quilts.⁷ Since the Whitney Museum of American Art's 1971 groundbreaking exhibit, *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, curators have eagerly interpreted quilts as modern art, decorative art, folk art, outsider art, and through the lenses of social history, cultural history, economic history, and more depending on their professional proclivities.⁸ Quilts have served their viewing publics in numerous capacities. They have borne our collective yearnings for simpler times, representing for many observers static ideas of feminine domestic life.⁹ A surge in public quilting interest, known as the "Great Quilt Revival," overlapped with the national

6 Sarah Wilfong (Ramseur), "Medallion Quilt," ca. 1820, collection of the NCMOH, 1926.4.1.

7 See Barbara Brackman, "Antique Quilt Exhibits: Summer & Fall 2019," *Material Culture: Quilts & Fabric Past & Present* (blog), June 24, 2019, <https://barbarabrackman.blogspot.com/search?q=exhibit>. Brackman posts a twice-yearly roundup of quilt exhibits nationwide on her popular quilt history blog. "Quilt Museums on Our Must-Visit List," *American Patchwork & Quilting*, <https://www.allpeoplequilt.com/how-to-quilt/quilting-basics/quilt-museums-our-must-visit-list>.

8 See Jonathan Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition* (Louisville: The Kentucky Quilt Project, 1991), 10–13. Jenni Sorokin outlined the intersections of folk art and modernism as interpreted through American quilts with particular attention to the ways textiles—in overwhelmingly white, male art museum settings—have "long functioned as a material stand-in for otherness, specifically race, class, and gender," in Lynne Cooke et al., *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2018), 102. Also see John Beardsley et al., *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2002) for a celebrated example of a localized textile art tradition that has often been interpreted through a modernist lens; Linda Baumgarten and Kimberly Smith Ivey, *Four Centuries of Quilts: The Colonial Williamsburg Collection* (Williamsburg, VA: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2014) paid particular attention to the structures of international trade in their examinations of quilts from three continents; and Elizabeth V. Warren with Maggi Gordon, *Red & White Quilts: Infinite Variety* (New York: American Folk Art Museum, 2015), present a dramatic example of innovative exhibition design using quilts, though interpretation of the quilts themselves as folk art pieces is largely disconnected from the experiences of their anonymized makers.

9 Teri Klassen, "Representations of African American Quiltmaking: From Omission to High Art," *The Journal of American Folklore* 122, no. 485 (Summer 2009): 299.

Bicentennial. Handcraft enthusiasts rediscovered quilting—which had declined as a craft of necessity in the mid-twentieth century—as a means of expression, whether nostalgic, patriotic, or artistic.¹⁰ During this same period, scholars began considering quilts as primary historical sources worthy of academic study. Visual artist Sally Garoutte founded the American Quilt Study Group in 1980 with the mission of “disseminating the history of quilting as a significant part of American art and culture.”¹¹ As serious quilt study gained momentum, many researchers from multiple disciplines focused on the question of whether some Black quilters’ work included “African Retentions,” or design aesthetics passed down from their West African ancestors.¹² For others, quilt study prompted questions about consumerism, international trade, and the commodification of elite taste.¹³ For its part, the NCMOH has exhibited quilts reliably over the years. *Artistry in Quilts* (1974) spotlighted fine workmanship and quilt design; *North Carolina Quilts* (1988) offered a survey of bedcovers identified through the 1985–86 North Carolina Quilt Documentation Project; *Carolina Quilts: Layers of History* (1998) showcased a handful of key patterns and stories from the museum’s quilt collection; and *Stitched from the Soul: The Farmer-James Collection of African American Quilts* (2005) displayed a local collector’s assemblage of bedcovers with minimal accompanying interpretive information. These exhibits all tended to align with broader trends in quilt exhibition nationwide including two-dimensional gallery display, minimal historical contextualization, scant biographical development, and heavy emphasis on fine workmanship.

Did the world really need another quilt exhibit given the preponderance of the last fifty years? The NCMOH’s administration and staff thought so. Prioritizing women’s perspectives and voices has never been more relevant than now, when the #MeToo movement seeks female “empowerment through empathy” and #BlackLivesMatter affirms and centers the humanity and contributions of Black

10 See Paul Bonesteel, *The Great American Quilt Revival*, directed by Paul Bonesteel (2005; Asheville, NC: Bonesteel Films, Inc. and American Public Television), film.

11 Garoutte and the burgeoning American Quilt Study Group founded the academic journal *Uncoverings* in which they recorded their mission statement, *Uncoverings* 1 (1980): 77.

12 John Michael Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*, rev. ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 44–75; and Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs & Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2001), 7, were leaders of the “African retentions” interpretation, with Wahlman claiming, “most African American quilt making derives its aesthetic from various African traditions.” Gladys-Marie Fry approached these questions in *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South*, rev. ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), but suggested that focusing too heavily on the question of retentions could be “misleading,” 10. Likewise, Cuesta Benberry cautioned scholars not to exclude Black quilters whose work did not relate to West African textile design in *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts* (Louisville: Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., 1992), 21–30. Also see Klassen, “Representations of African American Quilting,” 304–16.

13 See Linda Eaton, *Quilts in a Material World: Selections from the Winterthur Collection* (New York: Abrams, 2007) for the ways quilts speak to the economic and political realities of the worlds their makers inhabited.

women.¹⁴ The notion of breaking the silence surrounding women’s experiences, not only as it relates to sexual abuse, but in reaction to myriad factors—racial oppression, gender inequity, lack of educational opportunity, exhaustion—that have silenced women’s testimonies in the past and present provided the museum with an opportunity for action.¹⁵ By asking new questions of old objects—about makers’ realities, experiences, and intentions—female stories and voices from the past emerge from the likeliest, yet frequently most underutilized, of places—the permanent collection. Assembling and preserving objects—those fundamental museum missions—have been challenged in recent years, with increasing emphasis on diversifying visitor experiences, building new audiences, and fundraising. Permanent collections are expensive to maintain (textiles particularly require specialized storage), they lack the novelty of traveling exhibitions of loaned objects, and as traditionally interpreted, they frequently underrepresent marginalized historical actors. These caveats aside, curating an exhibit solely from the permanent collection held appeal. What unexcavated interpretive gold might we uncover by looking carefully through our own storage rooms? Trevor Jones and Rainey Tisdale, in their “Manifesto for Active History Museum Collections,” argued passionately for strengthening the “meaning, vitality, and use” of permanent museum collections—reducing dead weight and then “mak[ing] the good stuff sing.”¹⁶ In *QuiltSpeak*, NCMOH staff sought to do just that.

Setting the Framework

Early planning discussions included the curator (me), textile conservator, registrar, chief curator, and designer. Throughout our initial conversations, the metaphor of speech repeatedly emerged. As curator, I was drawn to the idea that each quilt could speak—in the frequent absence of written sources traditionally deemed historically noteworthy—for the woman (or women) who made it. Whether consciously or less intentionally, each bedcover was an example of female self-expression, and each could give voice to its maker’s experiences. Hierarchies of race, gender, and social class affected all the quiltmakers featured, and these through-lines would help connect the women’s disparate stories. Showcasing the quiltmakers’ narratives in broader historical contexts would move beyond a myopic focus on fibers and stitches and link these quiltmakers to the societies in which they lived. A story-based approach would also deemphasize value-laden assessments of workmanship, which often limit

¹⁴ “History & Vision,” MeToo, 2018, <https://metoomvmt.org/about/#history>; “About,” Black Lives Matter, 2013, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.

¹⁵ Jenni Sorkin detailed critiques of how male art historians “had overemphasized anonymity, collectivity, and traditional forms” in the predominantly female medium of quilting while treating male artists working in other media as individuals in Cooke et al., *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, 98.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Wood, Rainey Tisdale, and Trevor Jones, eds., *Active Collections* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 2, 10.

interpretive possibilities in traditionally presented decorative arts exhibits.¹⁷ Many of the quilts in our collection had been made by ordinary people—not those connected to the levers of power. This allowed the *QuiltSpeak* planning team to expound upon a larger institutional goal—that of conveying that we are all history makers, whether or not we are rich, powerful, and famous.

In our meetings, the registrar and conservator advised on concerns about artifact condition. Some quilts were simply too fragile to be exhibited—even with extensive conservation. Although knowing this early in the project helped make key selections more straightforward, this hitch revealed the eternal tension between two central museum objectives—exhibition and preservation. Exhibition causes wear and strain—even when done to the highest professional standards—and some objects are too delicate to withstand it. This posed a challenge to showcasing the hidden voices we wished to surface—some quilts with compelling stories simply could not be used. While we might have substituted a large-scale photograph for the actual artifact, we felt that this would diminish the impact of some stories’ presentation in relation to others. We planned to include several of these unexhibitable quilts in the accompanying catalog, however, where all bedcovers would appear in photographic reproduction.¹⁸ Further, proper display requires time, space, and money for all artifacts, but especially for those objects in exhibitable but delicate condition. Sometimes, one fragile quilt required the same physical gallery space as three quilts in good condition due to mounting requirements, and specialized display platforms cost more than basic wall mounts. Questions of condition, space allocation, and budget pervaded the artifact selection process, forcing decisions to be less strictly focused on interpretive potential than I would have liked. These discussions did, however, lead us to include an exhibit panel about textile fragility, care, and conservation.

As the project developed, additional staff members—an educator, graphic designer, editor, videographer, scriptwriter, and marketing representative—joined the team. Testing hypothetical layouts with the exhibit designer revealed that the gallery space assigned to the exhibit would comfortably fit around forty quilts (accounting for condition-related space considerations) with extra room for interactive elements. Having this scope established early on—although ongoing dialogue and design modifications occurred throughout the development process—helped define parameters of how many voices and stories we would be able to feature.

Three guiding questions—which we hoped would shape visitors’ experiences of *QuiltSpeak*—informed our conceptualization of the exhibit. First: how can we learn

¹⁷ Laurel Horton articulated the racially fraught categorization of “good quilt making,” quoted in Fry, *Stitched from the Soul*, 10–11.

¹⁸ The 112-page exhibit catalog presented full-color photographs of all exhibited quilts (and several that proved too fragile to exhibit), detail shots, and maker photographs, where possible. Further, catalog text expanded the stories presented in exhibit label copy with fully annotated narratives. *QuiltSpeak: Uncovering Women’s Voices Through Quilts* (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of History, 2019). Quilt scholar Laurel Horton wrote the catalog’s foreword and served as a valued mentor during its creation.

to listen so that we understand what the quilts are saying? This question framed my own research process for uncovering the hidden voices I hoped to showcase, but it also served as a reminder that we wanted to put our visitors in the curatorial driver's seat as often as possible. Frequently, museum visitors are asked to simply "take our word for it" when viewing objects from the past. What if we could empower them to interpret textiles themselves? This would serve not only to demystify the curatorial process but also to provide visitors with tools for reading evidence that they could use in their own lives. For example, if viewers learned to differentiate between silk and cotton, they could then determine and compare the relative financial means of quiltmakers who used those differing materials. By distinguishing appliqué quilting from piecing, they could make educated guesses about whether a maker prioritized design over fabric savings (as appliqué typically uses more fabric but allows for easier curved lines). Together with showing how to read physical clues in bedcovers, we hoped to be transparent in our use of documentary sources. Most of the quilts in our collection came to us with notes or stories told by their donors (only two of the bedcovers exhibited in *QuiltSpeak* had anonymous makers). These memories demanded corroboration with material and written evidence, but they often provided our most intimate glimpses into quiltmakers' lives. By sharing these stories, questioning them, demonstrating how we compared them against other available data, and being forthright about lingering or unanswerable questions, we hoped to turn what could seem like authoritative bestowal of information into something more conversational.

A second guiding question was: how have the messages the quilts sent changed over time? While we did not seek to tell a strictly chronological history of North Carolina quilters or quilting, showing change over time proved crucial. The average North Carolina quilter in 1830 occupied a much higher social status than the average 1930 quilter. Why was this so? How did the post-Civil War textile industry boom in the state and the growing consumer economy affect individual women's access to fabric and quilting? Why was Eula Mae Bagwell (1886–1969)—a young woman of middling means in 1902—able to stitch a dramatic Lone Star quilt, whereas bedcovers of the same pattern eighty years earlier tended to be associated only with wealthy women?¹⁹ And how did key events and trends shape quilts' revelations? For example, Minnie Norris Johnson (1869–1962) used M1942 "Frog Skin" fabric—the US Marine Corps' first attempt at disruptive pattern camouflage—as the backing material of her circa 1943 Square-on-Square quilt. Johnson lived in Pender County, near the new Marine base at Camp Lejeune, which was constructed at the beginning of World War II.²⁰ War shortages limited her selection of piece goods yet simultaneously provided her access to newly

19 Eula Mae Bagwell (Jones), "Lone Star Quilt," 1902–3, collection of the NCMOH, 1998.129.1. For comparison, see Mary Rhodes, "Lone Star Quilt," 1825, collection of the NCMOH, 1947.71.1.

20 Minnie Norris Johnson, "Square-on-Square Quilt," 1942–45, collection of the NCMOH, 2003.37.1; Thomas J. Farnham, "Camp Lejeune," in William S. Powell, ed., *Encyclopedia of North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 166–67; Alec S. Tulkoff, *Grunt*

developed military textiles. World events shaped her life and quilting in a tangible way.

Finally, we asked: what might the quilts' voices reveal to us about ourselves? This question seemed the most amorphous but also perhaps the most compelling. We hoped that visitors would look inward and contrast their own experiences to those of the quiltmakers. How could we facilitate these encounters? Through effective storytelling, we hoped some of these connections would occur organically. Perhaps Katie Jane Bowden's (1889–1980) story of saving feed sack fabric to make her children's quilts would evoke memories of visitors' own frugal grandmothers and cause them to reflect on those women's influence in their lives.²¹ Or maybe Margaret Smith's (ca. 1830s–ca. 1905) experiences as a Black domestic servant in a white household would remind viewers of the sacrifices generations of women from their own families or communities made—and still make—by caring for other people's children in order to provide for their own.²² The exhibit team also planned to implement a framework for more structured visitor feedback through social media, hands-on creativity, and old-fashioned response cards.

While devising these guiding questions, the team sought front-end feedback from our exhibit's future visitors. We hoped to gather a baseline understanding of their expectations for a quilt exhibit at their state history museum. We targeted an insider audience for this survey—quilters. North Carolina boasts some ninety-five different quilt guilds—nearly one per county. These groups tend to be overwhelmingly female, but memberships vary widely by class and race, with some groups specifically attracting African American or Indigenous members, and others being racially mixed or predominantly white. Due to their interests, these future visitors were the most likely to have strong ideas about what to expect. We wanted to know what those expectations were. Producing and distributing a brief online survey, we received an encouraging 114 responses. Popular opinions included the desire to see “some of the oldest known quilts in North Carolina history” and the museum's “earliest quilts.” Other superlatives also dominated the results. One respondent wanted to see “the most intricate pattern in your collection,” and several wanted “blue ribbon winning quilts” and “award winning quilts by NC quilters.”²³ Perhaps these quilters' familiarity with and participation in quilting competitions influenced their desire for the exhibit to focus on the oldest, most intricate, and most acclaimed quilts, or maybe those criteria had shaped previous museum exhibits they had seen and therefore subtly set those same expectations

Gear: USMC Combat Infantry Equipment of WWII (San Jose, CA: R. James Bender Publishing, 2003), 37–38.

²¹ Katie Jane Fish Bowden, “Grandmother's Brooch Quilt,” 1930–45, collection of the NCMOH, 2010.79.1.

²² Margaret Smith, “Log Cabin Quilt,” 1875–1905, collection of the NCMOH, 1994.54.1.

²³ Respondents 23, 6, 42, 9, and 19, “Quilter Questionnaire,” via SurveyMonkey, NCMOH, December 2–10, 2017.

for this one.²⁴ Taking the pulse of likely visitors to the exhibit proved useful, as we learned that showing the recent, plain, and unlabeled quilts from our collection would require some explanation. In retrospect, a formal survey of non-quilters' expectations would also have been useful to gauge impressions from a wide range of potential exhibit users. Fortunately, summative feedback—as detailed below—would reveal that the exhibit ultimately resonated broadly with this nonspecialist demographic as well.

Listening to the Quilts

“Things are radically unstable,” Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and her coauthors observed in their reflections on the challenges and opportunities of material culture research.²⁵ Objects can tell multiple stories and reveal varying meanings when questioned from different angles. As both individual creations and products of the broader social, economic, and cultural frameworks their makers inhabited, the quilts in our collection demanded individualized genealogical investigation, broader material analysis, and historical contextualization to answer my primary—and somewhat whimsical—research question, “what are you saying?” By centering the makers themselves rather than prioritizing, for instance, design aesthetic or workmanship (though these factors certainly provided important clues to makers' experiences), I sought to uncover the details of women's lives. For example, could census and archival data support a donor's account that Espie Naomi Teague Williams (1893–1949), maker of a 1927 suit sample quilt, had been a Catawba County shopkeeper's wife in the early twentieth century? They did, and they also offered additional details. She, like many white Piedmont North Carolinians, had worked as a laborer in a textile mill in the 1920s. When she married Isaac Ivey Williams at age twenty-nine, she became a homemaker, birthed three children, and possibly helped with the dry goods business he owned.²⁶ Both Isaac and Espie died relatively young—he of pneumonia and pellagra (a disease caused by niacin deficiency) at age fifty and she of lung cancer at fifty-six, when their youngest daughter was still a teenager.²⁷ What could physical examination of the quilt itself reveal about Espie Williams's experiences and values? The sturdy thread ties she used to hold the quilt

²⁴ Exhibiting the “exceptional” has been a museum tradition since the Renaissance; see Benjamin Filene, “Things in Flux: Collecting in the Constructivist Museum,” in Wood et al., *Active Collections*, 131.

²⁵ Ulrich et al., *Tangible Things*, 7.

²⁶ Note by Doris Whitley, n.d., Item History File 1997.149.1, NCMOH; Espie Naomi Teague Williams, “Suit Sample Quilt,” 1927, collection of the NCMOH, 1997.149.1; 1920 US Census, Population Schedule, Hickory Township, Catawba County, NC, “Espie Teague,” Ancestry.com; 1930 US Census, Population Schedule, Maidentown, Catawba County, NC, “Esbie N. Williams,” Ancestry.com; 1940 US Census, Population Schedule, Maiden Town, Catawba County, NC, “Espie Williams,” Ancestry.com.

²⁷ “North Carolina Death Certificates”; “Isaac I. Williams,” Catawba County, March 19, 1940, citing DC no. 283, Ancestry.com; Espie Williams, Catawba County, April 15, 1949, file no. 9649, North Carolina State Board of Health, Office of Vital Statistics, Raleigh, NC.



Espie Naomi Teague Williams, Suit Sample Quilt, Catawba County, NC, 1927, 67 x 73 inches, wools, cotton. Collection of the NCMOH, Raleigh, NC, 1997.149.1. Photograph by Eric Blevins and D. Kent Thompson. (Courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History)

together (rather than running stitches) paired with the quilt's thick batting (middle layer) demonstrated that she prioritized warmth and efficiency over decorative stitchery, since fine quilting stitches are slow to create and hard to accomplish through hefty fill.²⁸ Comparing the 3x5-inch rectangular wool blocks used in the top of Williams's quilt to swatches in extant mail-order suit catalogs, such as those sent free of charge by Sears & Roebuck and Scotch Woolen Mills to rural store owners, provided material corroboration of the donor's story and also served to confirm the donor's dating.²⁹ Viewing Williams's quilt alongside other wool swatch quilts showed that her idea for reusing the wool rectangles was not original but part of a larger trend of adaptive reuse among those with access to sample books.³⁰ Williams's careful collection of more than four hundred swatches—likely saved from multiple outdated or unused catalogs—

²⁸ Barbara Brackman, *Clues in the Calico: A Guide to Identifying and Dating Antique Quilts* (McLean, VA: EPM Publications, 1989): 111.

²⁹ See Sears, Roebuck & Company, "Catalog no. 124" (Chicago: Sears, Roebuck & Co., 1912), 267 in Winterthur Museum Library, <https://archive.org>; NCMOH also holds similar examples in its educational (non-accessioned) collection.

³⁰ For a few examples, see Catherine DuVal Coleman Kemp, "Raised Wool Work Quilt," 1904, collection of Colonial Williamsburg, 2015.609.2; unnamed maker, "Suit Sample Quilt," 1900–20, collection of the NCMOH, 2017.77.46.

required patience and dedication. That each rectangular piece of wool had to be slowly and carefully detached from the page to which it was affixed to limit glue and paper residue attested to her endurance and frugality. Finally, how did Williams's life and realities fit in the broader context of her society? Her family provided a useful business in their rural community; they owned their store and home. Still, they lived modestly; and if Isaac's pellagra is any indication, they subsisted largely on the same corn-and-fat-pork-heavy diet as other rural southerners.³¹ Ultimately, Espie Williams's quilt speaks to the values and material resources of a middling-class rural woman who could provide warmth to her family with minimal cash outlay.

In other cases, questioning documentary and material evidence led to surprising departures from previous narratives. Perhaps the most iconic quilt in the NCMOH's collection, due to its widespread exhibition and publication, is a green-and-red appliquéd Cotton Boll pattern bedcover from Caswell County that had long been associated with Mary Frances Donohue Johnston (b. 1781-?) and dated to the 1850s. Johnston's descendants wrote in 1972, as they gave the quilt to the NCMOH, that when Mary Frances's daughter Sarah Johnston Long died in 1851, Mary "moved into [Sarah's widower's] home to take care of the house and her grandchildren. [Mary] probably made the quilt while living in the Long Home (1851-1870)."³² For some forty-five years, the museum had interpreted the quilt without critically examining the donor's story. Returning to the quilt and its accompanying research file with fresh eyes (and access to Ancestry.com) confirmed that Sarah Johnston Long did die in 1851. However, Mary Frances Donohue Johnston appears to have died (or otherwise left the picture) even earlier. By 1850, her husband, John Johnston, was living with a new wife, Nancy Johnston (1802-71). Following John Johnston's 1860 death, Nancy moved into the Long Home with Sarah's widower and children (as the donor recounted Mary as having done). When Nancy died in 1871, she bequeathed "1 Fancy quilt" to Monroe Long, who was the son of William and Sarah Long, and father of the quilt's donor.³³ The composition

31 Sources such as Jacqueline Dowd Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Lu Ann Jones, "Mama Learned Us to Work": *Farm Women in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Mary Katherine Crabb, "An Epidemic of Pride: Pellagra and the Culture of the American South," *Anthropologica* 34 no. 1 (1992): 89-103, helped contextualize Espie Williams's experiences within her broader society.

32 Note by Mrs. William Taylor Long, n.d., in Item History File 1972.92.1, NCMOH; Memorial Page for Sarah Donoho Sallie Johnston "Sallie" Long (1806-1851), Find a Grave, memorial no. 54122694, citing Long Family Cemetery, Hamer, Caswell County, NC, maintained by Carolina Caswell (contributor 4716413).

33 1840 US Census, Population Schedule, Caswell County, NC, "Jno Johnston," Ancestry.com; 1850 US Census, Population Schedule, Caswell County, NC, "John Johnston," Ancestry.com; 1860 US Census, Population Schedule, Caswell County, NC, "John Johnston," Ancestry.com; John Johnston will dated November 14, 1860, Caswell County, *North Carolina Wills and Probate Records, 1665-1998*, Ancestry.com; 1860 US Census, Population Schedule, Caswell County, NC, "Wm Long," Ancestry.com; 1870 US Census, Population Schedule, Milton, Caswell County, NC, "William Long," Ancestry.com; Memorial Page for Nancy Johnston (1801-1871), Find a Grave, memorial no. 54122706,



Nancy Johnston (probably), Cotton Boll Quilt, Caswell County, NC, 1860–1871, 86 x 105 ½ inches, cottons. Collection of the NCMOH, Raleigh, NC, 1972.92.1. Photograph by Eric Blevins and D. Kent Thompson. (Courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History)

of the quilt itself hinted at post-1850s construction. The Cotton Boll pattern, use of decorative corner blocks, and relatively thick sashing (strips separating design elements) are usually found in the 1870s and beyond.³⁴ Did this new evidence definitively prove that Nancy rather than Mary Johnston made the Cotton Boll quilt? No. But the reexamination called a previous interpretation into question, revealed Nancy Johnston’s existence and probable needlework skill, and provided a useful entree for introducing visitors to both the curatorial process and the critical reassessment in which responsible museums must continuously engage.

The deeper I delved, the more engrossing the quilts’ voices became. For example, an all-white stuffed-work quilt from Edgecombe County had arrived at the museum in the 1960s with an association to Cool Spring Plantation and specifically with planter’s daughter Mary Eliza Battle Dancy Pittman (1829–1905).³⁵ The densely

citing Long Family Cemetery, Hamer, Caswell County, NC, maintained by Carolina Caswell (contributor 4716413); Nancy Johnston will dated April 1, 1872, Caswell County, *North Carolina Wills and Probate Records*, Ancestry.com.

³⁴ See Brackman, “Cotton Boll or Anthemion,” *Material Culture* (blog), August 1, 2017.

³⁵ Unknown maker(s), possibly unnamed enslaved artisans, “Stuffed Wholecloth Quilt,” ca. 1810–20, collection of the NCMOH, 1964.60.1.



Corded Wholecloth Quilt, Associated with Cool Spring Plantation, Edgecombe or Nash County, NC, 1800–1850, 83 x 79 ½ inches, cotton. Collection of the NCMOH, Raleigh, NC, 1964.60.1. Photograph by Eric Blevins and D. Kent Thompson. (Courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History)

corded vine, vase, and flower motifs hinted at an early nineteenth century creation date, as such bedcovers saw great popularity as status symbols in the 1810–20 South.³⁶ Unless she was terribly out of fashion and made the quilt some thirty years after whitework’s peak of popularity, Mary Eliza was too young to have been the quiltmaker. Then who was? Her mother, Sallie Westray Battle (1802–40), or another woman of her generation, was a likelier candidate. Still, whether Mary Eliza, Sallie, or another white woman could be identified as the “maker,” the Battle Family, which had established Cool Spring in 1747, enslaved between four and five hundred people. Among these individuals were, according to a Battle descendant, “spinners, tailors, [and] weavers,” who made “all the work clothes . . . on the place.”³⁷ At the very least, these skilled craftspeople probably made the loosely woven backing of the quilt, which closely resembles the cloth used in work clothes of the era. They may have been involved to a much greater extent—designing, stitching, and cording the bedcover. Centering these enslaved artisans’ existence and possible involvement in creating this quilt would take its story in a different—and hopefully more accurate—direction than past interpretations.

³⁶ Laurel Horton, interview by author, July 11, 2018.

³⁷ Lois Yelverton, comp., *The Battle Book: A Genealogy of the Battle Family in America* (Montgomery, AL: The Paragon Press, 1930), 90, 93; Samuel Westray will, dated April 1, 1827, Nash County; James Smith Battle will dated December 8, 1847, proved August 26, 1854, Edgecombe County, North Carolina, Wills and Probate Records, Ancestry.com.

Beyond featuring compelling narratives, I hoped that the female experiences revealed through the quilts in the exhibit would be roughly demographically representative of North Carolina’s quiltmaking population over the past two hundred years. Achieving this goal meant pushing against the demographics of the museum collection. I chose to exhibit over half of the quilts made by African American women and all of those by Indigenous women from our collection, so that approximately one quarter of the quilts used in the exhibit were made by women of color.³⁸ Likewise, final selections underrepresented the museum’s collection of fancy showpiece quilts that were made for display rather than use in the mid-to-late nineteenth century—though some were included. Museum collections tend to overrepresent white elites—and NCMOH’s is no exception. But our project team made deliberate choices to keep the exhibit from perpetuating this disparity.

Taking initial research, guiding questions, and project goals into consideration, the exhibit fell into three interpretive sections based on the messages the quilts sent about their makers. The first, “I Control: Speaking of Skill and Power,” featured quilts made as displays of status. For wealthy white women in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, quiltmaking provided a means of showcasing their access to expensive fabrics, needlework ability (a key component of upper-class female education), and ample free time.

One such quilter was Louisa Green Furches (1830–1911), of Davie County. She was a perfectionist by nature who one relative remembered as a “lady with a definite personality.”³⁹ In 1852, she embarked on her wedding quilt project. Her daughter later recounted, “The quilt was in the frames [three] months.” Quilting elaborate scallops and leaves at eleven stitches per inch for hours each day took a toll on Furches’s hands, and her fingers began to “fester.” Her mother and sister Sarah pitched in to help with the quilting, but Louisa, seemingly dubious of the quality of her sister’s stitches, “took Sarah’s out.” This quilt did not contain scrap cloth or old clothes. Rather, the Furcheses sent Dave, a man they enslaved, over one-hundred miles via plank road to Fayetteville to purchase “oil calico,” a cloth said to “never fade.”⁴⁰ Louisa’s quilt attested to her status, her mastery of and pride in the skills

38 Historically, North Carolina’s African American population has fluctuated from around 20 percent to 30 percent of the overall population. Indigenous people have steadily comprised about 1 percent of the state’s population since the 1860s, when the US Census began specifically enumerating them. Until the 1970s–80s, other racial/ethnic groups formed an extremely small segment of North Carolina’s population. The *QuiltSpeak* team sought for the quilts exhibited to roughly parallel these demographics. I use the term “approximately,” because, while eight of the quilts exhibited had clear provenance associating them with makers of color, several others had likely been made with the participation of enslaved people. Further, two exhibited quilts lacked known maker information, and their makers’ racial identities were unknown. See Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, “Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States” (Working Paper No. 56, Population Division, US Census Bureau, Washington, DC, September 2002), <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2002/demo/POP-twps0056.pdf>.

39 Betty Etchison West, “Cana,” *Davie County Enterprise Record* (NC), February 20, 2014.

40 Note by Susan Furches Etchison Eaton, May 7, 1951, Item History File 1976.118.1, NCMOH.

her society equated with refined femininity, and her family's control over other human beings.⁴¹ This interpretive section of the exhibit also featured quilts made by enslaved women, people with limited control and power over their own lives, but who frequently mastered the skills of fine quilting. Though showpiece quilt projects—like the Cool Spring quilt—often arose to showcase wealthy white women's needlework skill, white needleworkers alone did not bring such bedcovers to fruition. Enslaved people—though usually unnamed by the white families who passed down showpiece quilts—frequently participated in making them.⁴²

The exhibit's second interpretive section, "I Provide: Speaking of Economy and Ingenuity," examined women's interactions with North Carolina's rapidly changing economy during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Due to the region's textile manufacturing boom and the expansion of advertising (especially in North Carolina's other major industry—tobacco), cheap fabric sources began to proliferate. Quilting was becoming available to a broader segment of society. Women whose mothers and grandmothers had lacked access to new cloth for quilting now had an abundance of fabric sources at their disposal. They used feed sacks, cigarette premiums, and myriad other byproducts of the growing consumer economy in their quilting. These women—of all races and social classes—tended to prioritize warmth and utility over display value.⁴³

One such quilter was Eliza Arrington (1906–84), a landowning African American farmer from Wake County.⁴⁴ When she married at sixteen, she learned to quilt from her mother-in-law. Her daughter remembered her frugality, writing, "she did not believe in wasting anything. She used every scrap of material, including 'feed sacks.'"⁴⁵ Arrington felt great pride in her sewing and created her own quilt patterns. Her strip quilt included sewing scraps and feed sack cloth of every color separated by red sashing. The thick batting would have provided warmth on cold winter nights, and the stitches were large due to the heavy cotton fill. Her daughter recalled "coming home from school to see my mother sitting by the 'tin heater' . . . sewing by hand a quilt of her own design draped across her lap. The beauty

41 Louisa Green Furches (Etchison), "Tennessee Beauty Quilt," 1852, collection of the NCMOH, 1976.118.1.

42 Fry, *Stitched from the Soul*, 14–36. Fry examined the complex and highly variable quilt-making relationships between enslaved seamstresses and their enslavers; Benberry, *Always There*, 21–30.

43 See Ruth Haislip Roberson, et al., *North Carolina Quilts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 24–28; Ethel Ewert Abrahams and Rachel K. Pannabecker, "Better Choose Me': Addictions to Tobacco, Collecting, and Quilting, 1880–1920," *Uncoverings* 21 (2000): 79–105.

44 While Black farm ownership was not rare, only about 19 percent of southern farmers of color fully owned their own farms in 1920 compared to around 54 percent of white farmers. See Bruce J. Reynolds, *Black Farmers in America, 1865–2000: The Pursuit of Independent Farming and the Role of Cooperatives*, RBS Research Report 194 (Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture, Rural Business Cooperative Service, 2002, 23), <https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/RR194.pdf>.

45 Ella Arrington Williams-Vinson, "Eliza Helen Rogers Arrington," n.d., in *Item History File 1993.494.1*, NCMOH.

of her smile and the satisfaction expressed on her face for having completed another quilt is a lasting memory.”⁴⁶

In addition to quilters like Arrington—who made bedcovers for their own families—this section addressed the complicated and unequal relationships of the Jim Crow era through the quilts that Black makers gave to white employers.⁴⁷ One example is the black and fuchsia “Letter H” quilt that Edith Faison Smith (1903–83), a Harnett County domestic worker, made as a 1955 wedding gift for Isham Rowland Williams, Jr., the son of her employer.⁴⁸ A disproportionate number of African American-made quilts in the museum’s collection arose from such circumstances, with whites donating quilts that had previously been given to them by the people they employed.⁴⁹ We hoped to use this example to engage visitors in thinking about the long-term legacies of inequitable museum collecting practices, such as past curators prioritizing relationships with white donors over African Americans.

The final interpretive section, “I Remember: Speaking of Memory and Forgetting,” broke free of the first two sections’ chronological underpinnings. Women have always quilted to remember, and this part of the exhibit featured the voices of quiltmakers whose creations communicated their own unique visions of the past. Annie Maude Johnson McCauley (1884–1968), of Alamance County, told her version of world history through her twenty-four block pictorial appliqué quilt.⁵⁰ She had grown up admiring a quilt that her great-grandmother owned, and when that bedcover passed down to another relative, she vowed to make one of equal beauty. Starting in 1935, the widowed history buff spent three years embroidering and appliqueing scenes from world, United States, and North Carolina history. The subjects ranged from a street scene in New Amsterdam to Robert Peary’s 1909 expedition to the North Pole to a young Abraham Lincoln daydreaming of his first love, Ann Rutledge.⁵¹ Taken together, McCauley’s tableaux provide the

46 Williams-Vinson, “Eliza Helen Rogers Arrington”; Eliza Helen Rogers Arrington, “Strip Quilt,” 1935–45, collection of the NCMOH, 1993.494.1.

47 See Susan Tucker, *Telling Memories Among Southern Women* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 145–47; Katherine van Wormer, David W. Jackson III, and Charletta Sudduth, *The Maid Narratives: Black Domestic and White Families in the Jim Crow South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 27, for the paternalistic relationships that defined domestic labor arrangements in the Jim Crow South and the gift-giving strategies that Black women often utilized to assert their own agency within such relationships.

48 Edith Faison Smith, “Letter H Quilt,” 1955, collection of the NCMOH, 2015.5.1; Lenoir Williams Tucker, “Edith Faison Smith,” n.d., Item History File 2015.5.1, NCMOH.

49 Of thirteen quilts in the museum’s collection with known African American makers, ten were acquired from white vendors or donors—most of whom were makers’ employers or descendants of their employers. Compared to our collection of quilts with known white makers—most of which were donated by white family members—this disparity in acquisition method speaks to entrenched institutional legacies, rooted in the Jim Crow era, that have privileged curatorial collaboration with white North Carolinians over Blacks.

50 Annie Maude Johnson McCauley, “Pictorial Appliqué Quilt,” 1938, collection of the NCMOH, 1975.63.1.

51 Don Bolden, “Historical Quilt is Family Prize,” *Burlington Daily Times-News* (NC), September 26, 1956.



Annie Maude Johnson McCauley, Pictorial Appliqué Quilt, Alamance County, NC, 1938, 81½ x 83½ inches, cottons. Collection of the NCMOH, Raleigh, NC, 1975.63.1. Photograph by Eric Blevins and D. Kent Thompson. (Courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History)

contemporary viewer a rich and puzzling journey. Ideas of significantly different historical weight reside side by side; no chronology emerges. What does shine through is one woman’s unique perspective on the past and her tireless labor to present it in a medium that she mastered.

Piecing it Together

With the interpretive framework established, the exhibit team worked to build opportunities for visitors to connect with exhibit content. Dynamic, engaging writing proved critical. Story labels of approximately one-hundred words accompanied each quilt. When possible, these contained an image of the quilt’s maker along with easily identifiable “bare bones” facts such as maker, date, location, size, and material in a bar along the label’s base. Written conversationally, the text pulled together physical clues and documentary evidence into lively narratives. Labels



Artifact Story Labels, *QuiltSpeak: Uncovering Women's Voices Through Quilts*, NCMOH, Raleigh, NC, 2019–2020. Photograph by D. Kent Thompson. (Courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History)

posed questions like “how did she feel?” and “what were her motivations?” Such queries prompted visitors to consider the quiltmakers’ humanity more fully even when answers remained elusive. Beyond the labels, we sought tangible content connections that would be broadly accessible to diverse learning styles. We worked with an in-house script writer and videographer to create eighteen short (one-to-two minute) dramatic films based on select quiltmakers’ stories. These ran in random order on a series of five upright screens positioned at the gallery entrance. In addition to reading about Emily Maxwell’s (1867–1957) vision from God that inspired her celestial “Heavenly Vision” quilt, an actress portraying Maxwell—surrounded by a photograph of the quilt—gave a first-person account of the experience. Visitors might watch one film or five depending on their interest level and time constraints. The position of the screens—at the beginning of the exhibit—communicated the key message to visitors that even though this was an exhibit of quilts, at its core it was an exhibit about women.

Most of the forty quilts chosen for display could hang vertically on walls, but some particularly fragile ones required slanted or flat mounts. One such example—an extremely brittle LeMoyné Star pattern quilt top—was made by Bertha Bridges (1883–1959), a Cleveland County laundress. Bridges joined tiny strips of cloth together to form pattern shapes (string piecing), and she stitched the small pieces



Mary Sening portraying Emily Maxwell in “Quilt Stories” film, *QuiltSpeak: Uncovering Women’s Voices Through Quilts*, NCMOH, Raleigh, NC, 2019–2020. Photograph by D. Kent Thompson. (Courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History)

to paper forms—a “foundation”—to hold them together. For this purpose, Bridges used newspaper. Typically, a maker removes this foundation paper before finishing the bedcover. For unknown reasons, Bertha did not complete the quilt by stitching it together with batting and backing fabric, so the paper remained affixed to the unfinished quilt top.⁵² Our designer and conservator fashioned a curved Plexiglas mount that allowed most of the quilt to lay flat while a top portion curved over—fully supported—to reveal the paper foundation and the careful piecing it supported. The quilt received proper care, and visitors learned to distinguish string piecing, a technique that frequently communicated a quiltmaker’s frugality.

One related way team members sought to empower visitors to “listen” to the textiles themselves was through “QuiltSleuth” stations. Inspired by Barbara Brackman’s seminal publication on decoding the physical qualities of quilts, *Clues in the Calico*, we sought to turn our visitors into detectives.⁵³ Each of these tactile, interactive, slant-top tables highlighted clues in the exhibited quilts that could reveal

52 Bertha Bridges, “LeMoyné Star Quilt Top,” 1941–42, collection of the NCMOH, 2016.80.2; 1940 US Census, Population Schedule, Ancestry.com, Cleveland County, NC, Shelby, ED 23–20, Sheet 19A, Dwelling 342, Bertha E. Bridges.

53 Brackman, *Clues in the Calico*.



Bertha Bridges, LeMoyné Star Quilt Top, Cleveland County, NC, 1941–42, 63 x 81 inches, cottons, newsprint, string pieced. Collection of the NCMOH, Raleigh, NC, 2016.80.2. Photograph by D. Kent Thompson. (Courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History)

something about that quilt's maker and could also be applied more broadly to other bedcovers. In one example, the "QuiltSleuth" text invited visitors to touch both chintz and homespun cotton fabrics. Chintz is a printed glazed cotton woven fabric that American trendsetters imported from Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; use of chintz in quilts made prior to the Civil War indicated that the maker was likely a person of means (or had access to their scraps). Comparatively, middling-class landowning farmers, poorer families (of any race), and some enslaved weavers were more likely to create and use homespun cotton during the same period. Another station invited visitors to feel a three-dimensional printed image of a crazy quilt block. This style of quilting saw great popularity from 1880 to 1900 among middle- and upper-class women who made quilts for display rather than for use, from luxury fabrics embellished with fancy embroidery stitches. Identifying the style in other bedcovers, visitors would be able to make educated guesses about the maker's economic station and historical era. A visual and tactile glossary, "Do You Speak Quilt," demystified some of the terminology of quilting while keeping the interpretive focus on the makers. What are the differences between synthetic and natural fibers and what can their use in quilts tell us about their makers' intentions and resources? How are appliqué and whole-cloth quilts



“QuiltSleuth” Station, *QuiltSpeak: Uncovering Women’s Voices Through Quilts*, NCMOH, Raleigh, NC, 2019–20. Note the touchable fabric samples (left) and the three-dimensional printed panels (center and right) that allowed visitors to touch raised details. Photograph by D. Kent Thompson. (Courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History)

different, and why should we care? Visitors could feel raised examples of the different types of stitches frequently used in quiltmaking and understand their varying purposes. Lifiable fabric layers explained quilt anatomy in a tangible way. This interpretive station’s position near the exhibit entrance helped communicate these concepts at the outset of the visitor experience. Also, a copy of the exhibit catalog rested on a reading stand in the gallery to allow those with deeper interest to discover more about the quiltmakers whose work they viewed.

Other gallery experiences helped visitors make personal connections to the exhibit content. At an interactive pattern block table, visitors used vinyl shapes to replicate patterns from exhibited quilts and create their own designs. This low-tech hands-on station proved popular among visitors of all ages. An in-gallery social media experience—a new undertaking at the NCMOH—displayed an Instagram feed of #QuiltSpeak. A nearby prompt encouraged visitors to take a selfie with their favorite quilt and post it to Instagram with a sentence about why they preferred it. Scores of people participated. From associations with personal experiences, to aesthetic preferences, to emotional resonance with quiltmaker stories, respondents revealed how the quilts had spoken to them. At the gallery’s exit, a low-tech bulletin



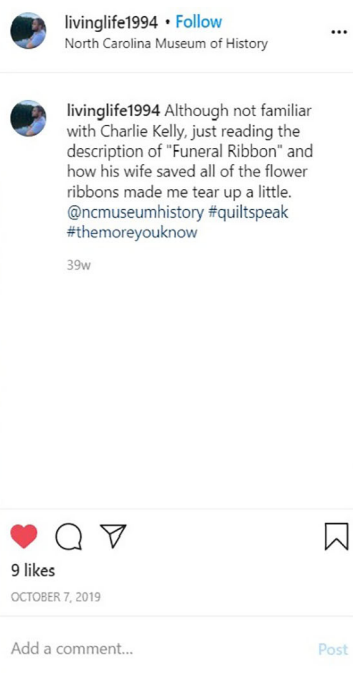
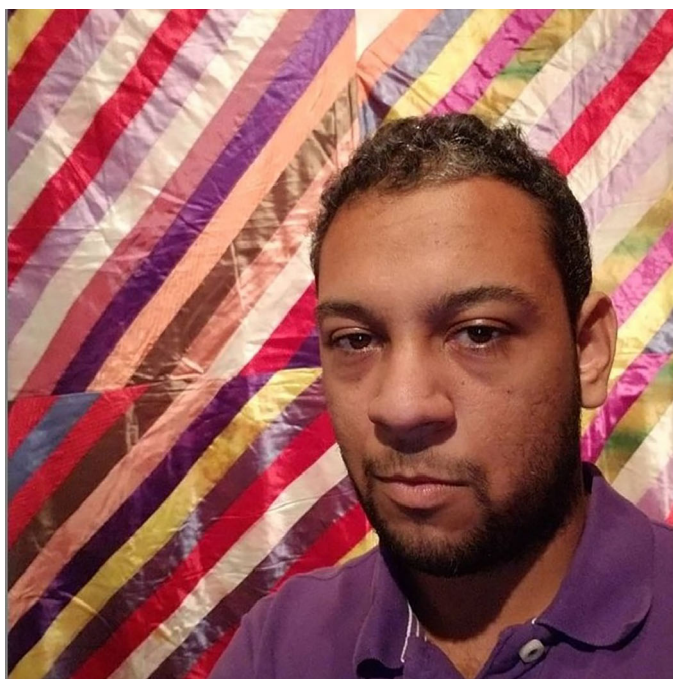
“What Does Your Pattern Say?” Station, *QuiltSpeak: Uncovering Women’s Voices Through Quilts*, NCMOH, Raleigh, NC, 2019–20. Photograph by D. Kent Thompson. (Courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History)

board with a writing surface and notecards displayed visitors’ own quilt stories. This “Tell Your Quilt Story” station prompted visitors to share memories of quilt-makers and quilts from their own lives for display. Approximately 1,500 respondents demonstrated how the exhibit facilitated personal connections among some visitors.

Increasing visitor accessibility is a NCMOH-wide objective that the *QuiltSpeak* team embraced. For blind and low-vision visitors, we provided audio descriptions of the objects on display via QR code (posted on exhibit labels and also available in pre-visit materials on the museum website) and booklets of large-print text to carry through the gallery as needed. Further, the abundant tactile features throughout the gallery benefited all visitors, but especially sight-impaired visitors and individuals with intellectual/sensory processing disabilities. Open captioning on audio components made comprehension possible for Deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers. Spanish text and audio of exhibit content was provided via both booklets and wall mounted QR codes.

Outcomes

Some 73,000 individuals visited *QuiltSpeak* during its ten-month run. Visitor responses to the exhibit came through a variety of channels—some solicited, like the



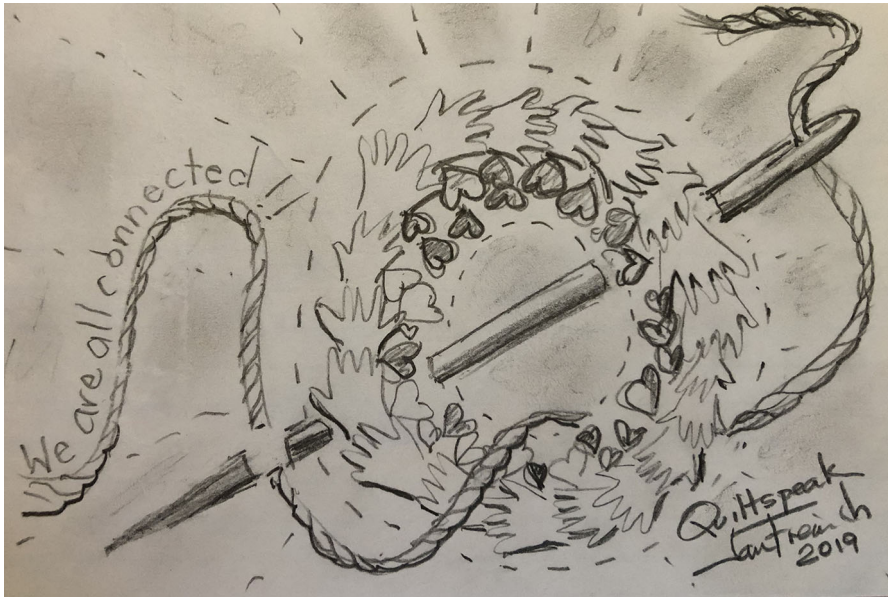
“@livinglife1994,” found emotional resonance in Omie Kelley’s quilt, which she crafted from the florist ribbons taken from the arrangements laid on her late husband’s grave in Lee County, NC, 1963. Instagram, October 7, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B3U6qRkHDHl/>.

gallery feedback stations—and others spontaneous, like blog and social media posts. Taken together, public commentary added another layer of contemporary relevance to the quilts exhibited. By discussing them, posing in front of them, and seeking inspiration from them, visitors engaged with the quilts’ stories and projected their own new layers of meaning onto these old objects. A father and daughter contrasted their artistic preferences as they viewed the quilts. “Dad and I like our quilts just the opposite. He likes them crazy and irregular and I prefer a regular, consistent pattern,” one woman wrote.⁵⁴ Several visitors experienced emotional reactions to the quilts and their stories. Instagram user @livinglife1994 remarked, “although not familiar with Charlie Kelly, just reading the description of ‘Funeral Ribbon’ and how his wife saved all of the flower ribbons made me tear up a little.”⁵⁵ Another viewer wrote of her experience after watching the dramatized film of Lee Jacobs, a Waccamaw-Siouan quilter. “We’re proud members of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina and your video as I walked in brought me to tears.”⁵⁶ Many visitors expressed feeling inspired by the quilts they viewed to try

⁵⁴ @jenkendricks, “Photo of man in front of quilt,” Instagram, September 22, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2ubq-pnBtS/>.

⁵⁵ @livinglife1994, “Photo of man in front of quilt,” Instagram, October 7, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B3U6qRkHDHl/>.

⁵⁶ Scotta F., notecard deposited in exhibit gallery, August 21, 2019.



Jan Reich, “We are all connected,” June 2019. Photograph by author. (Courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History)

making their own bedcovers. Bonita Nettles, who had sewn for fifty years but had just started making her first quilt, wrote that “this exhibit has given me so much inspiration.”⁵⁷ Instagram user @curlicuecreations noted, “I was inspired to try [a] tiny buttonhole stitch around my applique patches after visiting the . . . exhibit.”⁵⁸ Others felt compelled to create their own art right in the gallery. Instagram user @abeesnest composed a poem after viewing the stuffed quilt associated with Cool Spring Plantation: “to be kept warm by art and by small deliberate stitches / to make a thing that outlasts all of us / because it is functional / and because it is beautiful / o there is so much still to learn!”⁵⁹ Jan Reich drew a wreath of hands pierced by a needle and thread along with the words: “We are all connected!!”⁶⁰

Some visitors expressed surprise that they enjoyed the exhibit. Facebook user Christina Roloson wrote, “Honestly, we aren’t even into quilting and my whole family enjoyed it.”⁶¹ One caregiver commented, “I took me and the boys I babysit

57 Bonita Evans Nettles, notecard deposited in exhibit gallery, June 15, 2019.

58 @curlicuecreations, “Photo of appliquéd flower,” Instagram, June 28, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BzQcGNfHZv7/>.

59 @abeesnest, “Photo of backlight stuffed quilt,” Instagram, June 5, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ByWSUzHnude/>.

60 Jan Reich, notecard deposited in exhibit gallery, June 2019.

61 Christina Roloson, comment on North Carolina Museum of History, “Have You Experienced Our #exhibit ‘QuiltSpeak: Uncovering Women’s Voices Through Quilts,’” Facebook, January 30, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/NCMuseumofHistory>.

here and at first they were reluctant to come in but then, spent the most time in this exhibit!"⁶² According to P. Sahd, "my wonderful girlfriend made me check out the quilt exhibit when all I wanted to do was go see the Sports Hall of Fame." Sometime later, however, "she had to drag me out! I didn't want to leave!"⁶³

Above all, the exhibit prompted personal memories. Numerous stories of beloved grandmothers surfaced, as did childhood recollections of quilting parties and of cold winter nights spent under warm quilts. These reactions hardly proved surprising, as quilts have long associations with warmth, family, memory, and love. Their soft tactility and their frequent connections to known female makers have, as curator Jonathan Gregory writes, caused them to be "valued as heirlooms that provide an ongoing connection to previous generations."⁶⁴ Visitors also presented multiple stories of quilting as an emotionally healing practice. One respondent began quilting after her brother died of AIDS in 1990.⁶⁵ Another individual who grew up in foster care reflected, "quilting and sewing in general has helped me process pain and turn that energy into something physical, useful, and beautiful."⁶⁶ This sense of quilts as therapeutic extended to quilts made by others. One visitor wrote of her grandmother, "whenever I am sad, I wrap myself in one of her quilts she made for me. It feels like a hug from her."⁶⁷ As none of the stories presented in *QuiltSpeak* explicitly approached quilting as a healing phenomenon, the level of visitor engagement with this topic proved both surprising and enlightening.⁶⁸ Visitor submissions also introduced stories of male quiltmakers to the overwhelmingly female exhibit. One visitor's father took up quilting after suffering a massive heart attack and ultimately made a quilt for each of his seven children.⁶⁹ Another man made and sent his granddaughter Amia "quilts from Prison."⁷⁰ Though historically men have quilted at significantly lower rates than women, these comments provided a necessary reminder that quilters have never been monolithically female.⁷¹

Certainly, many viewers simply appreciated the quilts for their aesthetic qualities, commenting "what an amazingly intricate pattern," and this quilt "has my

62 Victoria A., notecard deposited in exhibit gallery, August 8, 2019.

63 P. Sahd, notecard deposited in exhibit gallery, July 2019.

64 Jonathan Gregory, "Wrapped in Meanings: Quilts for Families of Soldiers Killed in the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars," *Uncoverings* 31 (2010): 191.

65 Alexa MacFarlane Kulman, notecard deposited in exhibit gallery, July 2019.

66 Savvy, notecard deposited in exhibit gallery, November 2019.

67 Emily, notecard deposited in exhibit gallery, November 13, 2019.

68 Scholars have long noted the connections between quilts and comfort. Virginia Dickie explored the emotionally therapeutic experience of quilting, "Experiencing Therapy Through Doing: Making Quilts," *Occupational Therapy Journal of Research* 31 (4): 209–15; Gail Andrews Trechsel, "Mourning Quilts in America," *Uncoverings* 10 (1989): 139–58, looked at quilts' memorial functions—specifically those made as commemorative objects from the clothing of a deceased person; Carol Williams Gebel, "Quilts in the Final Rite of Passage: A Multicultural Study," *Uncoverings* 16 (1995): 199–227 showed how quilts have provided comfort to the bereaved across cultures.

69 Nancy W. Plante, notecard deposited in exhibit gallery, November 2019.

70 Amia, notecard deposited in exhibit gallery, December 11, 2019.

71 Jonathan Gregory, "Why Ernest Haight Made Quilts," *Uncoverings* 37 (2016): 75–100.

favorite colors.”⁷² Although not the primary reactions we hoped to elicit, we did expect such responses. One of the exhibit’s main anticipated—and demonstrated—limitations was that bright, colorful quilts can overshadow written story labels, however elegantly presented. The films and interactives did offer some balance. And certainly, we sought to celebrate, not diminish, the quilts’ visual “wow” factor. Rather, we hoped that along with being awed, visitors would take the time to grasp the exhibit’s core message. For the most part, those who recorded their reactions did. One visitor wrote, “I love the way this exhibit shares the voices—through their hours upon hours of work—of these women! Beautiful voices through beautiful art.”⁷³ Another commented, “thank you for presenting the complicated factors of race and wealth that are a part of these histories.”⁷⁴ The exhibit prompted one quiltmaker to consider her own life and legacy alongside the creations displayed. “Walking through the exhibit, I felt so connected to the women represented by their quilts. I couldn’t help but wonder if any of my quilts will still exist 200 years from now.”⁷⁵ The majority of the exhibit’s visitors did not leave behind written reactions, but extrapolating from the messages of those who did, many viewers found emotional resonance and personal meaning in the women’s stories the exhibit communicated through quilts.

Visitor comments also revealed some of the limitations of presenting an exhibit curated solely from NCMOH’s permanent collection. Noted absences included women’s voices from the recent past. Though the museum’s collection contains a few twenty-first-century quilts, none of them speak to the significant art quilting movement that has gained momentum in recent years. The newest quilt included in the exhibit dated to 1979. According to one visitor, “it would be great to see examples of modern-day quilts.”⁷⁶ In addition to omitting a contemporary aesthetic, this absence also led to the unintentional omission of identity groups that have gained increased recent visibility in the state. One viewer wrote, “I’d be interested to see a quilt celebrating the LGBT community with vibrant colors showcasing our individuality.”⁷⁷ Latinx North Carolinians—who formed a very small percentage of the state’s population prior to 1990 but have surged since—were also excluded by the limitations of the collection. Though exhibit publicity materials conveyed that the exhibit originated from the permanent collection, we could have done better to communicate a date range for the objects displayed. These omissions and critiques have informed our collecting goals moving forward. Due in part to visitor feedback to *QuiltSpeak*, we have prioritized collecting modern

72 @theheardarts, “Photo of woman in front of quilt,” Instagram, May 12, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BxYFWMRFtqe/>; Knollwendy, “Photo of girl in front of quilt,” Instagram, November 1, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B4U-pGMpOET/>.

73 Mindy, notecard deposited in exhibit gallery, July 2019.

74 Anonymous, notecard deposited in exhibit gallery, June 2019.

75 @andolsencreates, “Photo of woman and boy in front of quilt,” Instagram, February 26, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9CtZNbnROf/>.

76 Kerry Hurd, notecard deposited in exhibit gallery, September 2019.

77 K, notecard deposited in exhibit gallery, August 2019.

quilts and those associated with Latinx, LGBTQ, and Asian communities—groups not currently represented in the collection. We also continue to work toward collecting African American and Indigenous people’s quilts from all eras to address past disparities.

In addition to gathering these casual reactions from visitors, we conducted a formal exit survey of the exhibit. Museum staff members interviewed approximately thirty adult visitors as they left the gallery. We had initially planned to survey a much larger number of visitors, but unforeseen changes in project assignments limited staff time for completing this task. Surveyors asked a randomized sampling of visitors seven open-ended questions about their favorite and least favorite parts, the messages they took from the exhibit, how they learned about it, and their experiences with accessibility resources. A numerical ranking assessed various components such as videos, interactive stations, labels, and feedback stations. Results mirrored informal feedback collected from social media and written cards. Most respondents reported that quiltmakers’ stories were their favorite aspect of the exhibit. Other top answers included the variety of quilts and the videos. Least favorite aspects tended to address non-interpretive gallery conditions such as cold temperatures, lack of adequate seating, and the presence of a loud dehumidifier.⁷⁸ These comments offered an important reminder that gallery comfort is a key piece of any exhibit-going experience. Responses to the question about the main message visitors took from the exhibit proved more varied than anticipated. Top replies included “women were creative and resourceful,” “quilts are a part of our history,” and “women worked hard to make quilts.”⁷⁹ Although exhibit content certainly conveyed these messages, the core idea that quilts can provide a means of accessing the experiences of women who otherwise left few traces went largely unarticulated among respondents. Perhaps focusing on the individual quilt stories hid the forest for the trees, or maybe a larger survey sample would have produced differing results. In any case, many responses brushed the edges of our intended message. As this message was only fully articulated in the introductory label, we might have found opportunities for repeating it in text throughout the exhibit’s expansive (3500 square foot) layout, whether through wall statements or concluding messages. Further, while the metaphor of speech appeared repeatedly in exhibit interactives, labels, films, and feedback stations, a more concrete assertion of quilts as communicators could have facilitated visitor takeaways. Another useful evaluative measure would have been to re-survey the initial stakeholders we approached—quilt guilds. Capturing these “insider” reactions would have provided an informative bookend to the input they gave in the planning survey. These findings will inform communication and evaluation strategies for future exhibits and projects at NCMOH.

⁷⁸ “Your Visit,” NCMOH.

⁷⁹ Respondents 25, 18, and 14, “Your Visit,” NCMOH.

Takeaways and Conclusion

Quilts, with their widespread creation and use by women of all economic and racial backgrounds, lend themselves to the methodologies of material culture inquiry and exhibition described above. The same strategies, however, are applicable to many of the artifacts in our collections. Whether examining bayonets or bonnets, questioning objects creatively about the people who made and used them can lead to surprisingly informative results. The *QuiltSpeak* project revealed that the NCMOH's quilt collection had more to offer interpretively than was initially apparent, especially as related to marginalized historical actors. Surely this holds true for the contents of many museum collections. Although an object's primary association, as cataloged in our collections management software, may only infrequently list the name of a woman or person of color, a little digging often reveals their presence and involvement in the object's story. How could the object in question be viewed from their perspectives? What can the object reveal about their experiences? Further, our traditional focus on "best examples" in craft and decorative arts objects has excluded important stories from our exhibitions. If we had omitted Patience White's Log Cabin quilt because of its irregularly sized blocks and tied quilting, her story of overcoming immense obstacles to become literate late in life would have also been left out. Centering people rather than assessing workmanship freed us from the constraints that have limited our interpretive potential in the past. While hardly revelatory (decades of visitor studies scholarship has firmly established its importance), the power of visitor evaluation also emerged as an essential and broadly applicable facet of this project. The NCMOH committed to a more comprehensive evaluation plan for *QuiltSpeak* than for past projects. Still, we should have done more. One of many takeaways that evaluation revealed was the need for reinforcing key messages frequently and overtly to communicate them to the broadest possible range of visitors.

Voices can be heard in many ways if we know how to listen. In *QuiltSpeak*, NCMOH staff presented a model for unearthing and amplifying women's voices by mining the permanent collection. Visitors largely embraced the project, forging emotional connections with the individual stories presented, tying their own experiences to those articulated in the exhibit, and gaining tools for "listening" to the quilts in their own lives. As with any fruitful endeavor, the implementation team learned a great deal as well—about communicating intended messages to our audience, evaluating visitor expectations and experience, and identifying future collecting priorities. By interrogating objects thoughtfully, disseminating their messages creatively, and involving our visitors in the quest, we can activate our collections to reveal long-hidden voices from the past.

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Quilts (2019) and wrote its accompanying catalog. She has curated or co-curated multiple other exhibitions at NCMOH, including *Everyday Artistry* (2008), which spotlighted the hidden stories of utilitarian objects; *The Story of North Carolina* (2011), the museum's centerpiece chronological history exhibit; and *Made Especially for You by Willie Kay* (2016), which chronicled the extraordinary career of North Carolina's preeminent twentieth-century formalwear designer. Her research and publications address the experiences of southern women as revealed through material culture.

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