

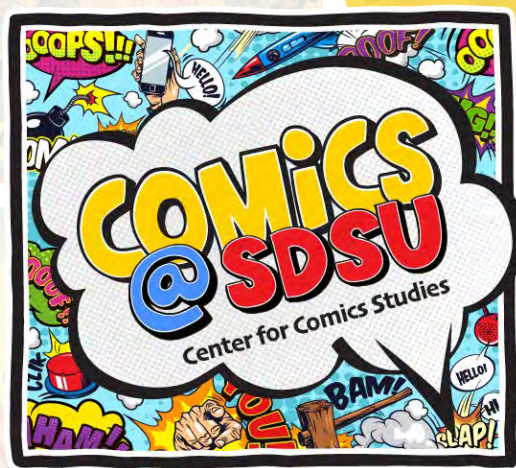
SDSU CENTER FOR COMICS STUDIES

The Sketchbook

for Teaching Comics and Social Justice

LESSON PLAN FOR:

The Bible Quilt, 1885 - 1886



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Why This Comic for Social Justice?



The Bible Quilt of Harriet Powers is rightfully recognized as a masterpiece of 19th-century American art. This quilt was created by a formerly enslaved Black woman living in Georgia. It has very well-documented attribution and provenance. Therefore, the Bible Quilt is a crucial primary source for understanding its moment in history. The quilt is currently part of the permanent collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, which can be visited online at: <http://tinyurl.com/Smithsonian-Harriet-Powers>

American quilts, which were traditionally and primarily created by women in a domestic context, were for generations relegated to a lesser place in the discussion of art as 'handicrafts' or 'folk art.' However, in the 1970s and early 1980s as part of feminist, Black studies, and womanist movements in academia, the fiber arts were recognized as having an important place in American life, culture and history.

The Bible Quilt fits squarely within Scott McCloud's "Understanding Comics" (1993). As explained on p. 9, McCloud defines comics as: "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."

Moreover, the quilt is a theological and homiletic artifact as well as an artistic one. The Bible Quilt is a unique and powerful example of Black women's Christian preaching and/or testifying in the late 19th century. Harriet Powers and her work stand at the nexus of so many who have traditionally been silenced in America -- women, the formerly enslaved, BIPOC community, women in the church, etc. Powers' Bible Quilt is therefore an indispensable object of sequential art, the study of which can shed light on a great many topics of social concern.

Harriet Powers and her work stand at the nexus of so many who have traditionally been silenced in America – Black people, women, the formerly enslaved, women in the church.



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About the Comic



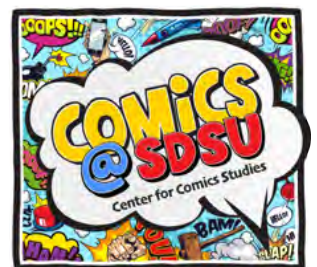
Summary of Material and Subject

The Bible Quilt was created by Harriet Powers in 1885-1886. The quilt is 75 inches by 89 inches in size. The squares, thread and batting (filling) are all made of cotton. The fabric of the squares was originally “watermelon-pink” in color, but has faded with time. Both machine-stitching and hand-stitching were used in the making of the quilt. Powers created the Bible Quilt with the appliqué method of quilting, which involves sewing small pieces of cloth (in this case, 299) onto the surface of the quilt.

The Bible Quilt recounts a number of stories from Jewish and Christian scripture. The episodes depicted on the quilt are at times presented in chronological sequence from left to right (for instance, the fourth panel, P4, depicts Cain’s murder of Abel, and P5 shows Cain’s subsequent journey to Nod -or- presented from right to left, P10-P9-P8, which depicts the Last Supper, Judas and the scattered thirty pieces of silver, and the Crucifixion). However, the juxtapositions primarily highlight theological lessons that Harriet Powers wishes to impart. For instance, P1 depicts the Garden of Eden. The last panel, P11, which is across the quilt diagonally from P1, depicts the birth of Jesus, which can be understood as God’s work to reconcile Godself and humans, and reforge Eden.

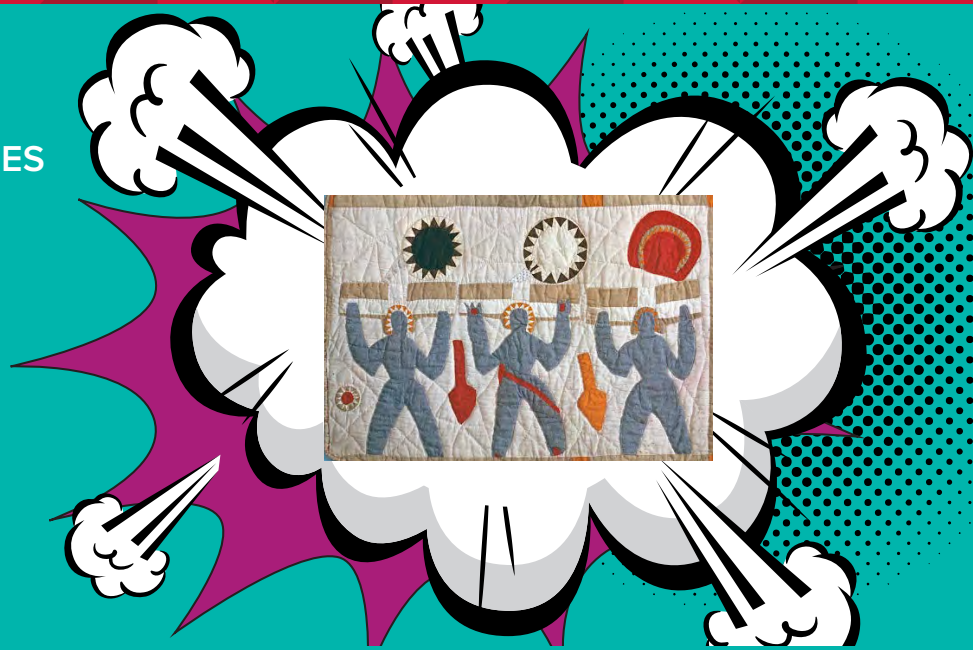
The main figures in the Bible Quilt resemble silhouettes. There are prominent animal and astral motifs on the quilt. A number of scholars trace African artistic elements in the quilt, in particular appliqué techniques from the Fon people of West Africa; Ejagham and Vai symbology; and Kongo cosmological renderings. There is much debate over these influences on Powers’ work, and how they might have been transmitted and transformed over time, space, and the realities of enslavement.

Harriet Powers was a formerly enslaved Black woman who created her quilts on a small family farm in Georgia. The main figures in her quilts resemble silhouettes, and prominent animal and astral motifs.



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About the Creator



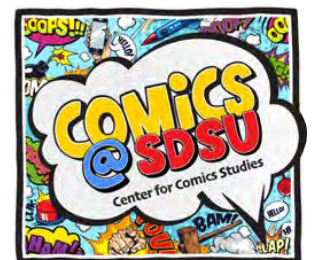
Harriet Powers was born into enslavement on October 29, 1837. She married Armistead Powers in 1855. After the Civil War, the couple worked a four-acre farm near Athens, GA and had at least nine children. Powers had a fascination with animals, particularly circus animals. Little else is known of Powers' life beyond her two surviving quilts.

Wahlman (2001) suggests, based on the symbols on the quilts and the apron Powers wears in her portrait, that "Harriet Powers may have been a conjure-woman, a Masonic elder, or a Mother of a church, or all three." McCray (2108) adds, "It is unclear whether Powers preached regularly in a church or whether she preferred quilting her sermons to transcend the confines pulpit ministry presented."

Powers displayed her Bible Quilt at the Athens Cotton Fair of 1886. It caught the attention of local art teacher Jennie Smith, who offered to buy it. At that point Powers would not sell the quilt at any price. However, the Powers family fell on hard financial times. In 1891, Powers sought out Smith to see if she would still be interested in the quilt. Powers wanted \$10 for the quilt, but Smith bargained her down to \$5 (\$158 in 2022 dollars). As Smith recounts, "[Powers] arrived one afternoon in front of my door in an oxcart with the precious burden in her lap encased in a clean flour sack, which was still enveloped in a crocus sack...After giving me a full description of each scene with great earnestness, she departed..."

After her purchase of the quilt, Smith displayed it at other venues. This led to a group of faculty wives at Atlanta University procuring another quilt from Powers: The Pictorial Quilt (1895-1898), which is currently held by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Powers separated from her husband Armistead around 1895, but she continued to run their farm. Sewing was another important contributor to her family income. Notwithstanding all of her efforts, Powers' financial situation continued to worsen towards the end of her life. She passed away in 1910.



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Discussion Questions



Discussion Questions:

1. A quilt is a tactile as well as visual art form. Imagine the uses of a quilt within a household. How does the experience of such an art object change when we lose the ability to interact with it via touch?
2. Scholars have a number of theories about the purpose of the Bible Quilt. (Below are two of these theories.) How might these academic perspectives inform your discussion of the previous question?
 - Robert Shaw (2009) notes that the Bible Quilt is constructed to be viewed with the long edge at the bottom. More commonly, quilts of the era would have assumed a viewer along one of the short edges (given the common placement of quilts on a bed), or with all four edges offering a similar viewing experience. Therefore, Shaw argues, the Bible Quilt is meant primarily for display and viewing.
 - Maude Southwell-Wahlman (2001) suggests that, due to the size, orientation, and biblical motifs of the quilt, Harriet Powers intended the quilt to be used in a Christian worship context as a baptismal robe.
3. In comics, the term 'graphic weight' refers to the use of size, color, line or shading to draw the reader's eye. How does Harriet Powers use contrasting colors and shades to shape the viewing experience within and across panels? Are there patterns in Powers's application of graphic weight to the elements of the Bible Quilt?
4. Where do we find female characters on the Bible Quilt? What role do they play in the narrative?
5. Donyell McCray (2018) notes, "'Telling the story' is a fundamental aspect of African American preaching, and Powers draws on elements of this tradition in her quilts. For example, when Powers gives Cain a pet peacock in her Bible Quilt, she engages in imaginative elaboration." Where else do we see moments of imaginative elaboration on the quilt? How are the animal characters part of the scenes and narratives in which they appear?

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Discussion Questions



Discussion Questions continued:

6. What is the role of stars and star motifs on the quilt? According to Jennie Smith, Powers told her that the large object in panel nine is “the star that appeared in 1886 for the first time in three hundred years.” Why might Powers have added this comet to her depiction of Judas? Comets and meteorological events are also very prominent in Powers’s other extant quilt, *The Pictorial Quilt* (ca. 1895-1898). What do we learn about Powers’s worldview from this juxtaposition of the celestial, the meteorological, and the biblical?
7. As the McCloud definition of comics in the introduction to this unit notes, juxtaposition of images is fundamental to the medium. Juxtaposition of texts and stories from various books of the Bible is also a crucial element of Christian preaching and pedagogy. Where do we see striking or instructive panel juxtapositions in the Bible Quilt? Can we discern Powers’s argument, thesis, or larger story from these juxtapositions?
 - ❖ [As an aid to the instructor, here are two possible juxtaposition readings: Panel four depicts Cain’s killing of his brother Abel. This is the first murder recorded in the Bible, and prime example of sin after the expulsion from Eden. The blood from the murder drips down toward panel eight, which depicts the crucifixion of Jesus. In many Christian theologies, the crucifixion is a self-sacrificial acceptance of violent death to resolve the problem of sin. In panel three, on the top edge (in the celestial realm), Satan is surrounded by the fellow lights that he is rejecting in his rebellion against God. In panel nine, on the bottom edge (earth), Judas is surrounded by the coins that symbolize the payment he received for betraying Jesus to the authorities.]
8. Mervyn Warren (1977) states, “Black preaching must determine a humility and a disruption, a peace and a war, an 'isness' and an 'oughtness,' a here and a yonder, a bondage and yet a freedom.” Where do we see these dyads (paired elements) in the Bible Quilt?
 - ❖ [As an aid to the instructor, here is an example: Powers places P6 (Jacob’s ladder) and P7 (the baptism of Jesus, with the Holy Spirit descending as a dove) side by side. Both of these episodes speak to the “here and yonder.” They are moments in which the spiritual world breaks through into the world of common experience in a dramatic way, providing a glimpse of the grand cosmic picture.]

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Activities and Assignments



Activity - #1

Art teacher Oneida Virginia “Jennie” Smith ca. 1891 recorded Powers’s description of the quilt, adding her own gloss. This text is an important part of the historical record concerning the quilt; however, Smith’s observations also raise questions about the role of relatively privileged white actors in preserving, promoting, popularizing, and interpreting Black American art. In groups, analyze the below text by Smith in relation to Powers’ quilt (Source: Robert Shaw, *American Quilts: The Democratic Art, 1780-2007*, New York: Sterling, 2009, p. 173.):

- Can you separate Smith’s recording of Powers’s explanations from Smith’s own opinions? What details in the quilt draw Smith’s attention? How does Smith record Powers’s speech? What range of attitudes does Smith hold towards Powers and her work?

“[Panel] No. 1 represents Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, naming the animals and listening to the subtle whisper of the “serpent which is defiling Eve.” It will be noticed that the only animal represented with feet is the only animal that has no feet. The elephant, camel, leviathan, and ostrich appear in this scene. No. 2 is a continuation of Paradise but this time Eve has “conceived and bared a son” though he seems to have made his appearance in pantaloons, and has made a pet of the fowl. The bird of Paradise in the right lower corner is resplendent in green and red calico. No. 3 is “Satan amidst the seven stars,” whatever that may mean, and is not as I first thought, a football player. I am sure I never seen a jauntier devil.

No. 4 is where Cain “is killing his brother Abel, and the stream of blood which flew over the earth” is plainly discernible. Cain being a shepherd is accompanied by sheep. No. 5 Cain here goes into the land of Nod to get him a wife. There are bears, leopards, elks, and a “kangaroo hog” but the gem of the scene is an orange colored calico lion in the center who has a white tooth sticking prominently from his lower lip. The leading characteristic of the animal is its large neck and fierce manner. This lion has a tiny neck and a very meek manner and coy expression. No. 6 is Jacob’s dream “when he lied on the ground” with the angel ascending or descending the ladder. She has rather a stylish appearance.

No. 7 is the baptism of Christ. The bat-like creature swooping down is “the Holy Spirit extending in the likeness of a dove.” No. 8 “Has reference to the crucifixion.” The globular objects attached to the crosses like balloons by a string represent the darkness of the earth and the moon turning into blood, and is stitched in red and black calico. No. 9 is Judas Iscariot and the thirty pieces of silver. The silver is done in green calico. The large disc at his feet is “the star that appeared in 1886 for the first time in three hundred years.” No. 10 is the Last Supper, but the number of disciples is curtailed by five. They are all robed in white spotted cloth, but Judas is clothed in drab, being a little off-color in character. No. 11: “The next history is the Holy Family; Joseph, the Virgin, and the infant Jesus with the star of Bethlehem over his head. These are the crosses which he had to bear through his undergoing. Anything for wise men. We can’t go back no further than the Bible.”

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Activities and Assignments



Activity - #2

Examine panel three of the quilt and the two Bible passages (below). Write a short response in which you evaluate Harriet Powers as a Biblical exegete (interpreter/expounder of text) using the medium of fabric. How does the introduction of Bible passages influence our understanding of Jennie Smith's interpretation of panel three as a primary source?

Note: Harriet probably received much of her knowledge of the Bible aurally rather than through reading. The 1611 King James Version of the Bible passages is provided. For clarity, students may wish additionally to consult more recent translations, such as the NRSVue (New Revised Standard Version, updated edition [Bible]).

-Isaiah 14:12-15 (Hebrew Bible), King James Version:

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.

-Amos 5:6-9 (Hebrew Bible), King James Version:

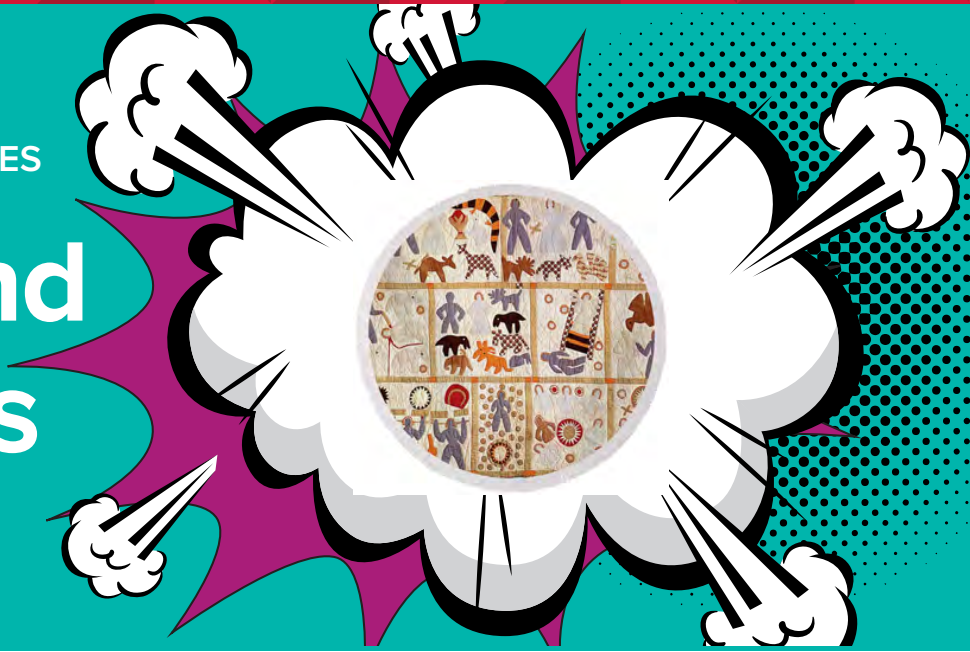
Seek the Lord, and ye shall live; lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, and there be none to quench it in Bethel. Ye who turn judgment to wormwood, and leave off righteousness in the earth, Seek him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night: that calleth for the waters of the sea, and poureth them out upon the face of the earth: The Lord is his name: That strengtheneth the spoiled against the strong, so that the spoiled shall come against the fortress.



Image: Panel 3 of Harriet Powers' Bible Quilt

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Activities and Assignments



Activity - #3

An important and controversial question concerning 19th-century Black American art is the extent to which specific influences from Africa can be detected. There is a delicate dance of historical interpretation between the Scylla of reductionism and flattening complex lived experiences and cultures into “Africanness,” and the Charybdis of delegitimizing an important conversation about continuities over time and the contribution of African peoples, often enslaved, to the American story.

Read the quotes below by scholars who have studied Harriet Powers and Black American quilts more generally. What differences and similarities do you see between their positions? Write a short proposal for a research project that would hopefully clarify African influences on Powers’ work. What would such a project entail? What materials, sources, places, and people groups would you need to study?

Marie Jeanne Adams (1983): “How African influences may have reached Harriet Powers who was born in Georgia is problematic. By the time her parents’ generation would have come to the South, most slaves were being imported from the Congo and Angola. Even if they came from West Africa and from Dahomey, they would not necessarily be knowledgeable in the applique techniques... It seems most likely that she could have acquired a knowledge of African style by hearsay only from other, older house slaves of her “old miss” or from her parents or other older persons.”

Maude Southwell Wahlman (2001): “In [the Bible Quilt], Harriet Powers illustrates scenes from the Bible as well as historic events and local myths, while using symbols with roots in West Africa, Central Africa, and Haiti. For a community in which most members could neither read nor write, quilts were used to transmit information and preserve culture, overt and hidden.”

Gladys-Marie Fry (2003): “The African element in the quilt can be seen in its design, its construction technique, and its use of narrative. The work in fact resembles the tapestries of the Fon people of West Africa, who also used the appliqué technique extensively...Perhaps because they are not portraits of real animals, these figures are pictured in unusual colors like green, blue, purple, and white and at times have an abstract quality. At the same time, the Fon tapestries illustrate well-known stories or proverbs in the Fon culture. Powers makes extensive use of uniquely realized animal figures and, like the Fon with their stories of the kings, presents in pictorial form Old Testament stories that had become part of the African American oral tradition. Finally, the astronomical bodies in her panels have, along with their connections to the folk history of African Americans, distinct African associations. The sun, which figures prominently in both her quilts, for instance, is an African symbol for the concept of circularity and the omniscience of God.”

Robert Shaw (2009): “No generalities can or should be made about the Africanness or African Americanness of post-Civil War quilts. Despite several theories to the contrary, many of which link asymmetrical improvised scrap quilting with similar rhythms found in woven African textiles, socioeconomic status and not ethnicity seems to be the prevailing influence on the diverse range of styles and materials in quilts produced by African-American quilt makers. Both poor blacks and poor whites made scrap quilts, and the improvised scrap quilts made by poor Southern African-American women and those made by their peers in the lower-class white community are often impossible to tell about without solid documentation.”

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Further Reading



Related Works:

Ferris, William, ed. "Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts." Boston G. K. Hall, 1983.

Fry, Gladys-Marie. 'A Sermon in Patchwork,' in Kristen Frederickson and Sarah Webb, eds. "Singular Women: Writing the Artist." Berkeley: UC Press, 2003.

McCray, Donyelle. 'Quilting the Sermon: Homiletical Insights from Harriet Powers,' in "Religions" (Basel, Switzerland), 2018, Vol. 9 (2), p. 46.

Shaw, Robert. "American Quilts: The Democratic Art, 1780-2007." New York: Sterling, 2009.

Wahlman, Maude Southwell. "Sign and Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts." Atlanta: Tinwood, 2001.

Warren, Mervyn. "Black Preaching: Truth and Soul." Washington, DC: University Press, 1977.



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About the Educator



Van Tarpley is a Lecturer in the History Department at San Diego State University.

He teaches Ancient and Modern World History, Early U.S. History, and Comics and History.

Van also trained in Russian History at Indiana University, and his interests include Imperial Russian exploration of “Asian Russia,” religion, and of course comics.



*Formatted and edited by Jenifer M. Glor, SDSU MA student (History)

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