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The Quiltmakers of Gee's Bend

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The Quiltmakers of Gee's Bend.

DVD. Alabama Public Television, 2004.

Reviewed by Christine Bagley, librarian and award-winning quilter, Salve Regina University, Newport, R.I.

Don't watch this DVD for the bold graphic squares of color that you can still see when you close your eyes. Don't watch it for the art museum directors who seem beside themselves with praise of the art and artists that they have (surprise!) discovered. Don't (especially) watch it to see Jane Fonda describe love and patriotism in quilts.

Instead, watch this DVD because you will fall in love with all the women. Watch this DVD because you will be haunted by the spirituals. Watch this DVD because it is a true story of faith and history.

And watch this DVD because you will have to redefine art afterwards. You will want to know the story behind any piece of art, and you will need to know the artist before you can open your heart to her creations.

The women from Gee's Bend who are interviewed in this documentary are all descendants of slaves living in a tightly closed community. The isolation of Gee's Bend, an island accessible only by ferry for generations, kept the design characteristics seen in these quilts pure and unchanged. The quilts were made when they were needed, with fabrics when they were available, in the way the women's mothers and aunts and neighbors had created them for years. The bold graphic shapes were often formed by strips of torn clothing that were no longer useable. The quilts were made out of necessity, but designed with an eye for simple beauty, reminiscent of the Amish quilt makers or the Shaker furniture makers. These quilts once sold for \$2.00-\$4.00 each. Since William Arnett, collector and co-founder of the Tinwood Alliance, started documenting and collecting them, the women have received \$2000.00 and upwards for each quilt.

The women are quietly joyous. As you watch their amazement when they see their quilts hanging in museums, you feel their pride. When you visit their homes and hear them praise God for miracles as they point to new appliances and electricity, you understand their renewed sense of justice. Their "discovery" was overdue but not undeserved.

This is not your grandmother's quilt story. This is an intimate picture of a community of women in Alabama with incredible survival skills. The quilts themselves are stunning visual threads that tie the past to the present, but the key elements are the fortitude and dignity of these women.