

GEE'S BEND QUILTS

TEXTILE ARTGRADES
6-12**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

In this guide, students will:

- Discuss the historical and social circumstances that contributed to the conditions in which unique quilting traditions developed in Gee's Bend
- Identify the quilts designs often used to create quilts in Gee's Bend
- Express their observations, knowledge, and responses through creative writing and poetry

1. ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource is designed as a post-visit guide for K-12 educators after a class viewing of the University of Iowa Stanley Museum of Art's Gee's Bend quilts collection. It is intended to spur further contemplation and discussion. Gee's Bend quilts are among the greatest examples of American artforms and are perfect representations of the nexus of art, history, and society. As such, they are wonderful additions to several curriculums, including history, social studies, and English. This resource captures the quilts' versatility for teaching, guiding teachers at all grade levels in using the objects for innovative learning.

This resource includes:

- Historical context: The history of Gee's Bend, Alabama
- Artistic context: A summary of the start of the quilting tradition in Gee's Bend and its current status
- A vocabulary list of quilt designs
- Images and descriptions of five Gee's Bend quilts in the Stanley's collection
- Discussion questions
- Connections to Iowa State Standards
- Additional resources
- Object-based writing activities: Creative writing – poetry
 - Observation & Analysis: Haiku
 - Social, Political, & Historical Moment: Narrative Poem
 - Poetry: Reflection & Connection: Rhythmic Poem

2. ABOUT THIS COLLECTION

The Stanley's collection of Gee's Bend quilts comprises a sizable number of these previously overlooked artworks and offers visitors an opportunity for detailed examination. The quilts, consisting of a combination of traditional forms and improvisation, are handcrafted by a multigenerational group of African American women from Gee's Bend, Alabama. Due to Gee's Bend's almost complete isolation on the banks of the Alabama River for the better part of the twentieth century, the hand-sewn quilts have a unique historic, geographical, and stylistic development.

3. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this guide, students will:

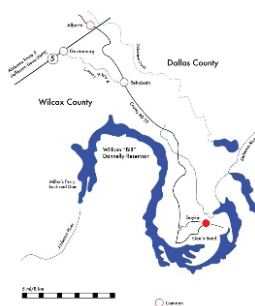
Discuss the historical and social circumstances that contributed to the conditions in which unique quilting traditions developed in Gee's Bend

Identify the quilts designs often used to create quilts in Gee's Bend

Express their observations, knowledge, and responses through creative writing and poetry

4. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: GEE'S BEND, ALABAMA

Source: John Beardsley, *Gee's Bend: The Women and Their Quilts* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2002) pp. 24–25.



Inhabitants of Alabama commonly formed communities along the state's many rivers. Gee's Bend, one such community, came into being when Joseph Gee, a landowner from Halifax County in North Carolina, arrived in 1816 with the intention to fertilize land and grow cotton. He brought eighteen enslaved people with him. By the point of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the original eighteen had grown into a large Black population. Now free, they remained on the cotton plantation started by Joseph Gee, working as sharecroppers and tenant farmers.



Arthur Rothstein, John Miller and family who live in the old Pettway Mansion, Gee's Bend, Alabama, April 1937. Source: Library of Congress



Arthur Rothstein, Going to school, Gee's Bend, Alabama, April 1937. Source: Library of Congress



Marion Post Wolcott, Bringing home meal from cooperative grist mill, Gee's Bend, Alabama, May 1939. Source: Library of Congress.



Marion Post Wolcott, First grade, showing extremes in ages of pupils, Gee's Bend, Alabama, May 1939. Source: Library of Congress

The 1930s marked an era of major changes in Gee's Bend. To repay debts to a merchant in the area, the families of Gee's Bend were forced to give up their food, animals, tools, and seed, which thrust them into a period of great economic difficulty. After the Van de Graaf family, who purchased the land from the Gee family, sold the land to the Federal Government, the Farm Security Administration intervened with initiatives such as the Gee's Bend Farms, Inc., a farming cooperative program that sustained the community. The government also built "Roosevelt" houses and eventually sold the land to the families, ultimately relinquishing ownership of Gee's Bend to its inhabitants. The period of the second half of the Great Depression resulted in several people fleeing the town. Those who remained in town, unwilling to give up the land that finally belonged to them, remained resilient and dedicated to keeping the town alive.

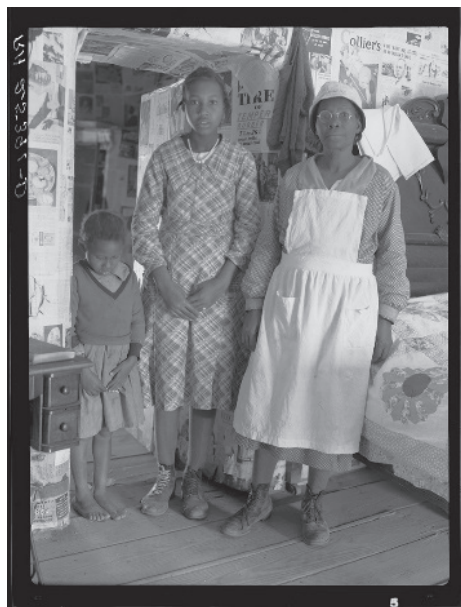
4. ARTISTIC CONTEXT: FROM A UTILITARIAN START TO ART

Arthur Rothstein,
Jennie Pettway and
another girl with
the quilter Jorena
Pettway, Gee's Bend,
Alabama, April 1937.
Source: Library of
Congress



Gee's Bend, officially known as the town of Boykin, is in Wilcox County in Alabama. As of 2018, it had a population of approximately 750 people, mostly descendants of enslaved African Americans. Despite the many challenges the community faces—including poverty and underdevelopment—Gee's Bend enjoys a reputation as a national hallmark through its quilts.

Arthur Rothstein,
Inhabitants of Gee's
Bend, Alabama, April
1937. Source: Library
of Congress



Gee's Bend quilts were first created out of necessity and used for warmth. Utilizing whatever material was available to them, the women worked together; quilting served both as an act of creation and of socializing. "At the start all they was making them out of was old clothes, pants, fertilizer sacks, dress tails, and mean and flour sacks, too," said Bettie Bendolph Seltzer, a Gee's Bend quiltmaker. The women taught their daughters, who taught their daughters. What started off as a practical necessity has today grown into a thriving tradition. The quilting community of Gee's Bend has become something of an informal art class, with the elders passing down unique forms of composition to new generations of quiltmakers. Behind each quilt form is a group effort; the mutually-agreed upon composition is traditional, yet improvisational, and any imperfections are incorporated into the work.

Carol M. Highsmith,
Gee's Bend, Alabama,
April 5, 2010. Source:
Library of Congress



The Gee's Bend quilts are an example of a common debate regarding the distinction between art and craft. After seeing a photograph by Roland Freeman of a quilt draped over a woodpile, Atlanta-based folk art dealer William Arnett visited Gee's Bend in the late '90s and purchased hundreds of quilts. The art world soon took notice. Today the pieces are celebrated as modern art—whether used every day or on exhibition—and the women of Gee's Bend have established production associations such as the Gee's Bend Quilt Collective. The Stanley's collection of quilts represents the celebration of these exquisite examples of American art—art that is celebrated in many more museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art and the American Craft Museum.

Carol M. Highsmith,
Gee's Bend, Alabama,
April 5, 2010. Source:
Library of Congress



6. VOCABULARY: DESIGN TYPES

Bricklayer

“Bricklayer” is the local name for a design pattern in which two rectangles are added to opposite sides of a central square before increasingly longer strips are sewn to each of the four sides. This results in a pattern of four pyramid-like structures around the center.

Courthouse Steps

Nationwide, the bricklayer design is known as “Courthouse Steps.”

Lazy Girl

“Lazy Girl” is one of the quilts that women first learn how to create in Gee’s Bend. These patterns are long strips of cloth sewn side-to-side and quilted. The name “lazy girl” refers to the fact that these quilts are easier to put together.

Housetop

“Housetop” is the local name for a design type in which strips are sewn around a central square to form a pattern of squares within squares. There are several variations of this design; most Gee’s Bend quilts are variations of housetop.

Log Cabin

In the rest of the United States, housetop designs are known as “Log Cabin.” In traditional log cabin designs, though, strips are sewn around a central square to form a square within rectangles pattern. The design resembles the stacked logs of a log cabin home. Designs usually have a bright red or warm color in the center, mimicking the hearth at the center of a home.

My Way

“My Way” is a Gee’s Bend term used to denote patterns originally intended to be a more traditional one like the housetop, but through inspiration, or available materials, or a variation of both, a unique design flourishes.

7. OBJECT DESCRIPTIONS



China Pettway (American, 1952 –)
Quilt (rooftop variation)
Cotton fabric, thread, 84 x 74 in. (213.36 x 187.96 cm)
Stanley Education Partners, 2020.51

This quilt is a four-block **housetop** pattern bordered with bar variations. The central bar is a dominant focal point that works with the solid prints in the **housetop** blocks to make for a more coherent composition. The quilt maker, China Pettway, was taught to quilt by her mother at a young age and is one of Gee's Bend's leading gospel singers—"we got a lot of singers around here," she says. She is one of the few Gee's Bend quilters who attended college and returned to live in the community.



Mary Ann Pettway (American, 1956 –)
May Day, 2012
Cotton fabric, thread, 51 x 27 in. (129.54 x 68.58 cm)
Stanley Education Partners, 2020.55

This quilt's name, *May Day*, refers to the Gee's Bend family reunion. On the first day of May, the extended families of current Gee's Bend residents return for a celebration. The composition of this work is a combination of the strip and stitch varieties, with bar variations throughout the pattern. This improvised design fits in the "**my way**" category. The scale of the quilt is smaller and intended for use as covering for an infant or small child. The quilt maker, Mary Ann Pettway, was the manager of the Gee's Bend Quilt Collective when she made it.



Mary Ann Pettway (American, 1956 –)
My Way, 2012
Cotton fabric, thread, 86 x 69 in. (218.44 x 175.26 cm)
Stanley Education Partners, 2020.52

My Way, another Mary Ann Pettway quilt, may be described as a true "**my way**" quilt. Pettway was initially inspired to create a **housetop** pattern. But, through a combination of the demands of available material and inspiration, she improvised, creating this striking quilt. The central **housetop** pattern may be considered a medallion because of the unified but asymmetrical composition. The solid primary colors are offset by the flower-patterned fabric.

7. OBJECT DESCRIPTIONS



Mary Leatha Pettway (American, 1961 –)

Coming Together

Cotton fabric, thread, 44 1/2 x 41 in. (113.03 x 104.14 cm)

Stanley Education Partners, 2020.53

This composition, *Coming Together*, is a **lazy girl** pattern with a twist. On the right side of the quilt, colorful bars of differing lengths and widths are vertically arranged. On the quilt's left half, though, the traditional vertical arrangement of the lazy girl pattern is flipped for a pattern of horizontal bars. This switch keeps with the tradition of inspired improvisation among Gee's Bend's quilters. Mary Leatha Pettway, the quilter, learned to make quilts by watching her mother and grandmother, who made quilts in the winter months to keep them warm.



Nancy Pettway (American, 1935 –)

Bricklayer, 2005

Cotton fabric, thread, 74 x 72 in. (187.96 x 182.88 cm)

Stanley Education Partners, 2020.54

When Nancy Pettway was assembling this bricklayer pattern, she carefully coordinated the color strips and arranged the symmetrical design. She then pieced all of the strips together and completed the work by hand-quilting the piece. Pettway has created and sold countless quilts since she started in 2002. "I have made way over one-hundred quilts," she says. "When I got one-hundred, I just stopped counting." According to her, "a quilt is like a house—when you design a house, you make in your mind how your house design to be. When you start on your sewing machine or using your hands, you bring in your mind just how you want your quilt to look, just like how you want your house to look. And when you get through, it come out in a design, whether it has squares in it or triangles or oblongs, or whatever design you have that you want it to be like. Like you want to put your rooms together in your house, you want to know just how many rooms, from your living room to your kitchen or your bathroom, and you put all your pieces together on your quilt. "

8. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OBSERVATION & ANALYSIS: What colors, lines, shapes, and patterns do you see? What kind of cloth do you see? What do you think the cloth used in the quilt was used for before it became part of the quilt? What clues lead you to these conclusions?

SOCIAL, POLITICAL, & HISTORICAL MOMENT: The history of Gee's Bend is unique. How do you think this history has shaped the development of the quilts, including the process of making, materials, and appearance?

REFLECTION & CONNECTION: Gee's Bend quilters often work together to make quilts. What are some advantages and disadvantages to working together to make a quilt? What are some advantages and disadvantages to working alone on a quilt? What are some projects that you worked on with other people to complete? What did you learn from those experiences?

10. STATE STANDARDS

Teachers can adapt the lesson to apply to a number of state standards.
We included a few standards that the lesson meets below.

VISUAL ARTS – CONNECTING

Anchor Standard 11

Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Enduring Understanding

People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.

Essential Question(s)

How does art help us understand the lives of people of different times, places, and cultures? How is art used to impact the views of a society? How does art preserve aspects of life?

8TH GRADE SOCIAL STUDIES – INQUIRY ANCHOR STANDARD: TAKING INFORMED ACTION

Analyze how a specific problem can manifest itself at the local, regional, and global levels over time, identifying its characteristics and causes, and challenges and opportunities faced by those trying to address the problem (SS.8.11).

Apply a range of deliberative and democratic procedures to make decisions and take action in classroom, schools, and communities (SS.8.12).

9. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Beardsley, John. *Gee's Bend: The Women and Their Quilts*. Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2002.

Gee's Bend Quiltmakers, Souls Ground Deep, <https://www.soulsgrounddeep.org/gees-bend-quiltmakers>.

Quiltmakers of Gee's Bend. Alabama Public Television Documentaries, 2004. <https://www.pbs.org/video/alabama-public-television-documentaries-quiltmakers-of-gees-bend/>

Wallach, Amel. "Fabric of their Lives." *Smithsonian Magazine* (October 2006), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/fabric-of-their-lives-132757004/>.

CREATIVE WRITING POETRY

Observation & Analysis: Haiku

A haiku is a type of Japanese poetry traditionally inspired by nature but can be about several topics. Haikus have three lines and are noted for their 5-7-5 syllabic style, where the first line has five syllables, the second has seven, and the last, like the first, has five.

Line 1: 5 syllables
Line 2: 7 syllables
Line 3: 5 syllables

Poets have used haiku to express their observations about artwork. Haiku might focus on works' shape and form, color, or texture. For inspiration, see The Getty's resource, 11 Haiku to Teach Kids about Art.

You have already observed and analyzed quilt colors, lines, shapes, patterns, and other features that lend each quilt its uniqueness. Choose a quilt that appeals to you and decide which element—shape and form, color, texture, etc.—you'd like to focus on in your haiku. Remember to follow the haiku structure outlined to the right:

Social, Political, & Historical Moment: Narrative Poem

A **narrative poem** is a poem which tells a story. Like traditional stories, narrative poems feature elements such as characters, plot, conflict, setting, and resolution.

Consider the example to the right:

I, Too

By Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47558/i-too>

In "I, Too" by Langston Hughes, an African American man who appears to be a domestic servant asserts that though he's been ostracized and made to feel inferior in America, he is as American as anyone. In this poem, the speaker has a "message" for the world. This message alludes to racial segregation during the early twentieth century, when African Americans faced widespread discrimination, including being forced to live, work, eat, and travel separately from white Americans as well as having to contend with economic hardships.

Gee's Bend's social, political, and historical identity—marked by longstanding isolation from the country as a whole—reflects this story of marginalization. You have already considered how these factors shaped the development of the quilts, including the process of making, materials, and appearance.

Choose a quilt you think best captures Gee's Bend's history. Borrowing from the structure of "I, Too"—the first person voice, especially—write a message poem from the point of view of one of Gee's Bend's quiltmakers, making sure to touch on at least one aspect of Gee's Bend's history.

Reflection & Connection: Rhythmic Poem

A **rhythmic poem** is identified through the stressed and unstressed patterns of words. Often, each line of the poem has one stressed syllable and one or two unstressed syllables. There may also be a rhyme scheme.

Consider the example to the right:

We Real Cool
THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

By Gwendolyn Brooks

We real cool. We
 Left school. We

Lurk late. We
 Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
 Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
 Die soon.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/28112/we-real-cool>

In “We Real Cool,” Brooks employs the communal voice of a group of rebellious teenagers she once spotted playing pool during school hours. Through stressed repetition of the word *we* and rhyming couplets—*cool* and *school*; *late* and *straight*, for example—Brooks creates something like a chant or song that might be recited by her subjects.

You have already considered the possible advantages and disadvantages of Gee’s Bend quilters’ communal work environment. Several Gee’s Bend quilters are also singers; often, they sing together while working on quilts.

Following the structure of “We Real Cool”—the repetition of “*we*” and rhyming couplets—write a rhythmic poem that explores the advantages/disadvantages of working together to make quilts; something that might be sung by a group of quilters.