

# **The Secret Codes:** African Nova Scotian Quilts

Oct 28 2023 - Apr 28 2024

Curated by  
David Woods

Organized by

The Black Artists Network of Nova Scotia (BANNS)  
and the Vale Quilters of New Glasgow

**textile  
museum**

OF CANADA

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We acknowledge that the land on which the Textile Museum of Canada operates is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabe, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat. It is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

Through our activities we seek to create a space for people to share, learn, and celebrate the textile practices of today and long ago in the spirit of peace, friendship and respect.

## About *the Secret Codes*

*The Secret Codes: African Nova Scotian Quilts* is a collaboration between the Black Artists Network of Nova Scotia (BANNS), and the Vale Quilters Association, a group comprised of mostly Black women from the Vale Road area of New Glasgow, and Nova Scotia's only incorporated guild of Black quilters.

*The Secret Codes* explores the unique tradition and evolution of quilt making in Nova Scotia's Black communities over the past century. Presenting works by more than twenty-five quiltmakers and painters, the exhibition highlights the ways that quilts have functioned as decorated blankets, as coded communication for people escaping slavery, as documentary records of community and family history, as a celebration of Black women and Black culture, and as a foundation for other art forms.

This multifaceted exhibition features traditional quilts and contemporary designs based on the motifs of the Underground Railroad “secret code” patterns. Quilts with these patterns were believed to have been draped in windows and over clotheslines to convey certain messages. Their simple geometry and recognizable forms veiled vital information and warnings about the refuges and dangers along the journey.

Expanding on quilt making’s narrative potential, and evoking the tradition of the itinerant storyteller, Curator David Woods travelled throughout the province to collect stories that reflect on the experiences of life in African Nova Scotian communities. He created a series of drawings inspired by his journeys, and has encouraged local quiltmakers to interpret these images in their own way. Each quilt conveys the maker’s individual sense of design and detail, collectively imbuing the scenes with the many voices of community.

Quilt making traditions evolve to reflect the changing needs, interests, and contexts of the makers and their communities, and can define how and why communities come together. Many quilts in the exhibition are examples of patterns that have been handed down for generations, and they share a space with contemporary picture quilts and paintings by artists inspired by the common language of quilt making: pattern, colour, shape, texture. Other quilts have been made by multi-generational families and collectives who have gathered together to create communal projects. All can be understood as codes that signify the stories and histories that weave through African Nova Scotian culture, the vital role of community and shared experiences, and the persistence—and evolution—of traditions.

# About the Curator

David Woods is a multi-disciplinary artist, writer and performer. He was the organizing founder of Black Artists Network of NS (BANNS) in 1992 and also founded or co-founded several other African Nova Scotian arts organizations including African Nova Scotian Quilters Association, Cultural Awareness Youth Group, New Brunswick Black Artists Alliance, North Preston Cultural Association, Preston Cultural Festival, Vale Quilters Association, Voices Black Theatre Ensemble and Voices Storytellers.

He has curated acclaimed exhibitions of African Nova Scotian art and quilts including *In This Place* and *The Secret Codes*. He was the first person of African descent to serve as a curator at a provincial art museum (Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2006-2007). His paintings have appeared in exhibitions across Canada and grace the covers of several award-winning CD’s and literary publications. He is the winner of major prizes for his art, poetry and drama and was awarded the prestigious Harry Jerome Award (2016) for his contributions to the arts in Canada.



David Woods,  
Photo by Gary Weekes

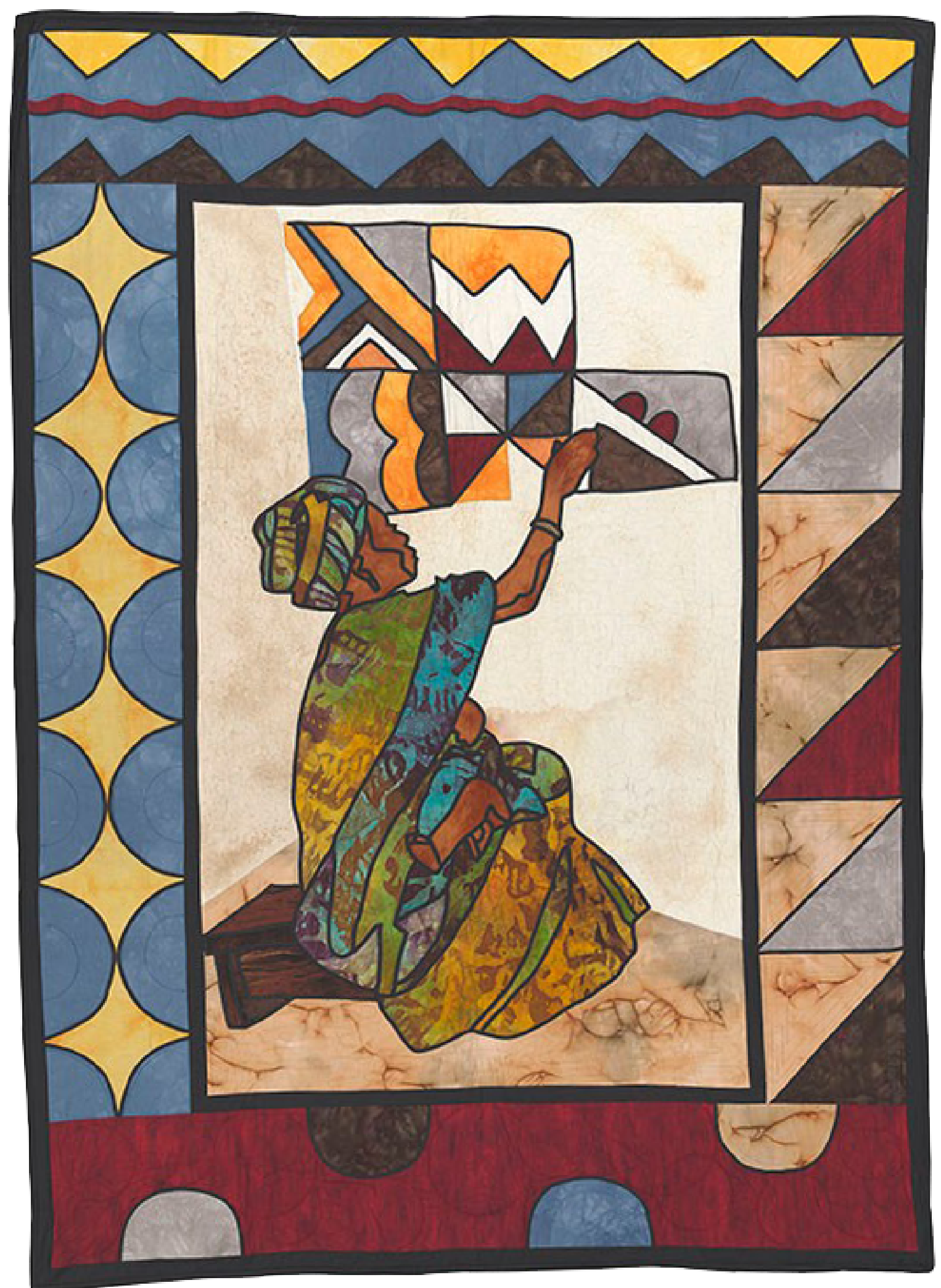
## Quiltmakers

Myla Borden (New Glasgow)  
Marilyn Brannan (New Glasgow)  
Robyn Cain (North Preston)  
Anja Clyke (Dartmouth)  
Edith Colley (East Preston)  
Heather Cromwell (New Glasgow)  
Sara Donovan (Ottawa, b. New Glasgow)  
Frances Dorrington (New Glasgow)  
Marlene Dorrington (New Glasgow)  
Laurel Francis (Pincher Creek, AB)  
Rosella Fraser (North Preston)  
Debra Jordan (New Glasgow)  
Susan Lawrence (Upper Big Tracadie)  
Shirley MacKenzie (New Glasgow)  
Frances 'Fanny' Miller (Digby)  
Melinda Patterson (Winnipeg, b. East Preston)  
Andrea Tsang Jackson (Halifax)  
Annie Whalen (New Glasgow)

## Painters

Ibe Ananaba (Halifax)  
Justin Augustine (Halifax)  
Letitia Fraser (Halifax)  
Shawn Skeir (Toronto, b. Halifax)  
David Woods (Dartmouth)

Next page:  
Laurel Francis  
(Pincher Creek, AB)  
*Silent Prayer*, 2005  
appliquéd; machine pieced  
and quilted





*The Secret Codes,*  
David Woods, 2000

Sela—  
There is a light in the tunnel,  
A path through the mountains ahead  
—A new route I found written in secret codes.  
And to those worn by endeavour—  
and those stopped by doubt.  
Tell them that this is indeed the bright Eden  
we dreamed of,  
Tell them we were only wrong  
to think it would be complete—  
....Unneeding our further diligence.  
Tell them also of success:  
That Sojourner lectures here in high places,  
That Araminta's scars have healed and  
she is heavy with a new child,  
And Mintus moves among the backroads—  
Clearing a space for our worship.  
Gather your possessions then—  
Move nearer to fulfillment,  
Head north to Kelly's Mountain,  
Move along the banks of the Bras D'Or Lake,  
Through the thick, Whycogomah forests,  
Under the moon's silver stare  
You will find the log cabin the map described,  
And an ancient man living there.  
When a candle is set in the window  
This will be your sign—  
Enter and tell him your true names  
and the places from which you came,  
Show him the carved root sticks from Preston,  
The coded quilts from Southville,  
Recite the horrors and the triumphs of your journey,  
Sing the hymns that winged your flight.

# What *exactly* are "the Secret Codes"?

The Underground Railroad Patterns were reputedly used during the period of Transatlantic Slavery. The codes, hidden in quilts, would help freedom seekers on their journey to escape enslavement through the Underground Railroad.

The patterns have become a major theme of quilts by Black quiltmakers and an idiom in Black creative thought and art practice.

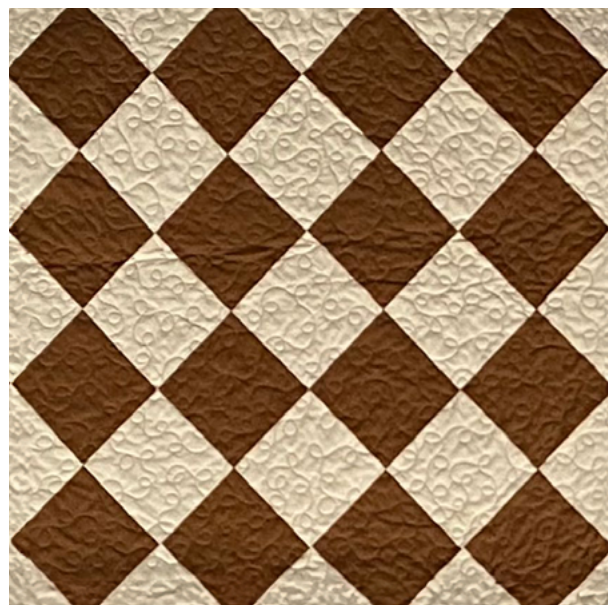
On pages 9-16, you will see images of quilts by **Anja Clyke**, and digital illustrations of quilt patterns, accompanied by an explanation of the "secret code" within:



## Monkey Wrench

Gather the tools you'll need  
to build shelters, navigate the  
journey, or defend yourself along  
the way.





### Crossroads

A symbol referring to Cleveland, Ohio, which was the main crossroads with several routes to freedom. On a less literal level, the term "crossroads" also means reaching a turning point in one's life, where a choice must be made.



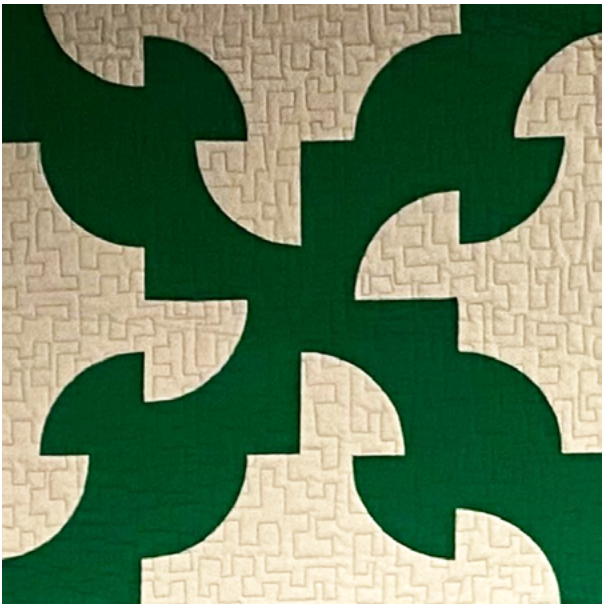
### Flying Geese

A signal to follow the direction of the flying geese as they migrate north in the spring.



### Log Cabin

A safe house along the Underground Railroad route.



### Drunkard's Path

Use a zig-zag route as you go along to confuse pursuing dogs, slave catchers.



### Bow Ties

Travel in disguise or change from the clothing of a slave to those of a person of higher status.



### Bear's Paw

Follow the path made by bear tracks - they lead to water and food.





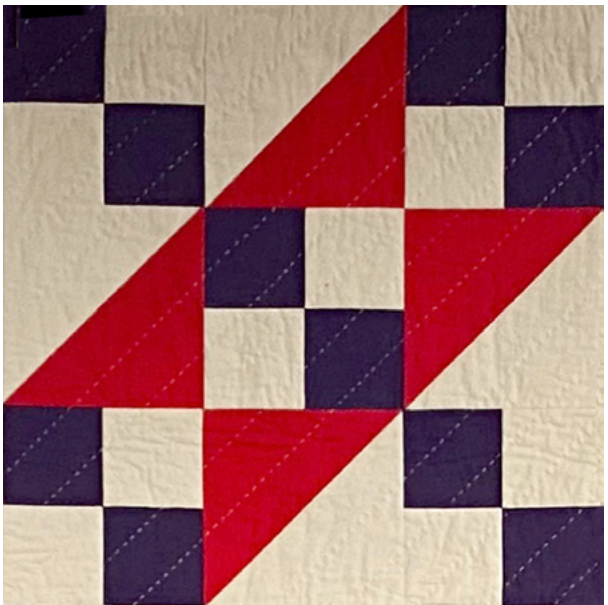
**North Star Underground**

Follow the North Star to Canada.



**Basket**

Pack provisions (supplies) necessary for survival.



**Jacob's Ladder**

The stepping stones to freedom.



**Shoo Fly**

Identifies a well trusted person who will assist escaping slaves with food, shelter or guidance as you make your way north.



**Sailing Boats**

Waterway nearby or boat available to help with your escape.



# The Vale Quilters Association

The Vale Quilters Association was organized after the visit by Mary Bedolph and Louisiana Pettway of the famed Gee's Bend Quiltmakers of Alabama to New Glasgow NS (2007).

The association sponsors talks and workshops on African Nova Scotian quilting traditions and has created popular exhibitions of their quilts including *Learning to Fly* (2008) and *The Secret Codes* (2011-).



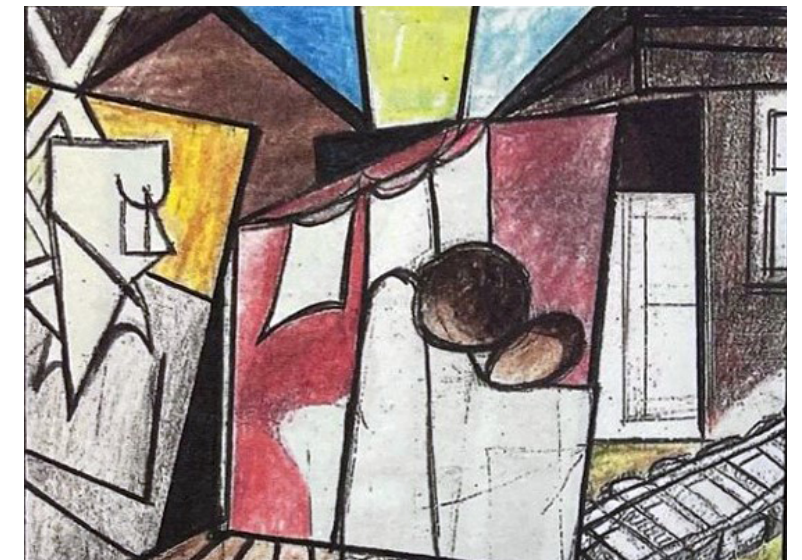
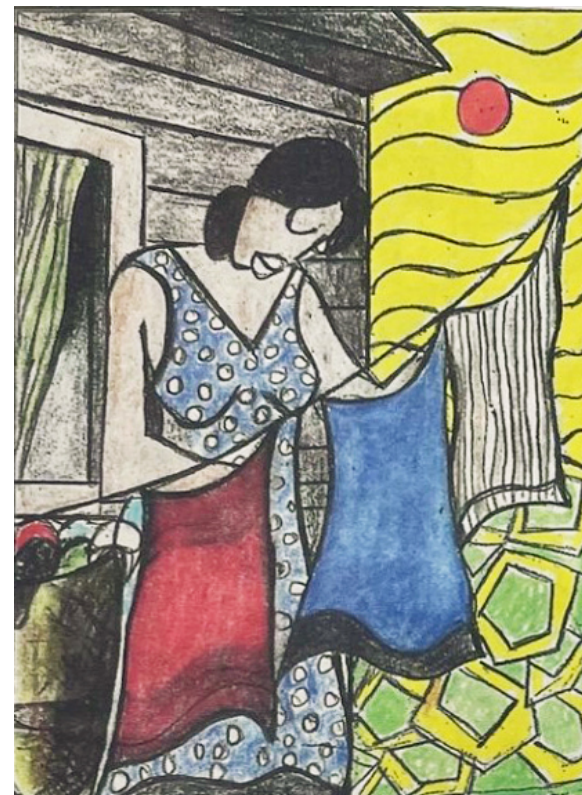
Left-Right, Top-Bottom:  
Myla Borden, Shirley MacKenzie,  
Heather Cromwell, Marlene Dorrington

# Picture Quilts

Many of the quilts in *The Secret Codes* were designed based on David Woods' drawings. Woods began visiting Nova Scotia Black communities in the 1970's, collecting stories and artwork, and creating 'unconscious' sketches to capture his feelings and thoughts while he traveled.

The sketches also become the basis of his paintings. In 2007, the Vale Quilters took on a new project to create quilts based on Woods's drawings, which culminated in the creation of initial showing of *The Secret Codes* exhibition in 2011.

Each quiltmaker chose from these designs a pattern that reflected their own lives and interpreted it through quilting. The results are a stunning feast for the eyes and an opportunity to explore African Nova Scotia culture.



David Woods  
(Dartmouth, NS)  
*Secret Codes Quilt Drawings*  
coloured pencils on paper





Heather Cromwell  
New Glasgow, Nova Scotia,  
Canada  
*Grandma's Baskets*, 2012  
Quilted by Mary MacLean,  
machine pieced; appliquéd;  
hand quilted  
Collection of the artist



Myla Borden  
New Glasgow, Nova Scotia,  
Canada  
*A Visit from Mamay (detail)*, 2012  
Design: David Woods  
machine pieced; appliquéd;  
hand quilted  
Collection of the artist



David Woods  
(Dartmouth, NS)  
*Secret Codes Quilt Drawing*  
coloured pencils on paper



David Woods  
(Dartmouth, NS)  
*Secret Codes Quilt Drawing*  
coloured pencils on paper



# Myla Borden

## New Glasgow, NS

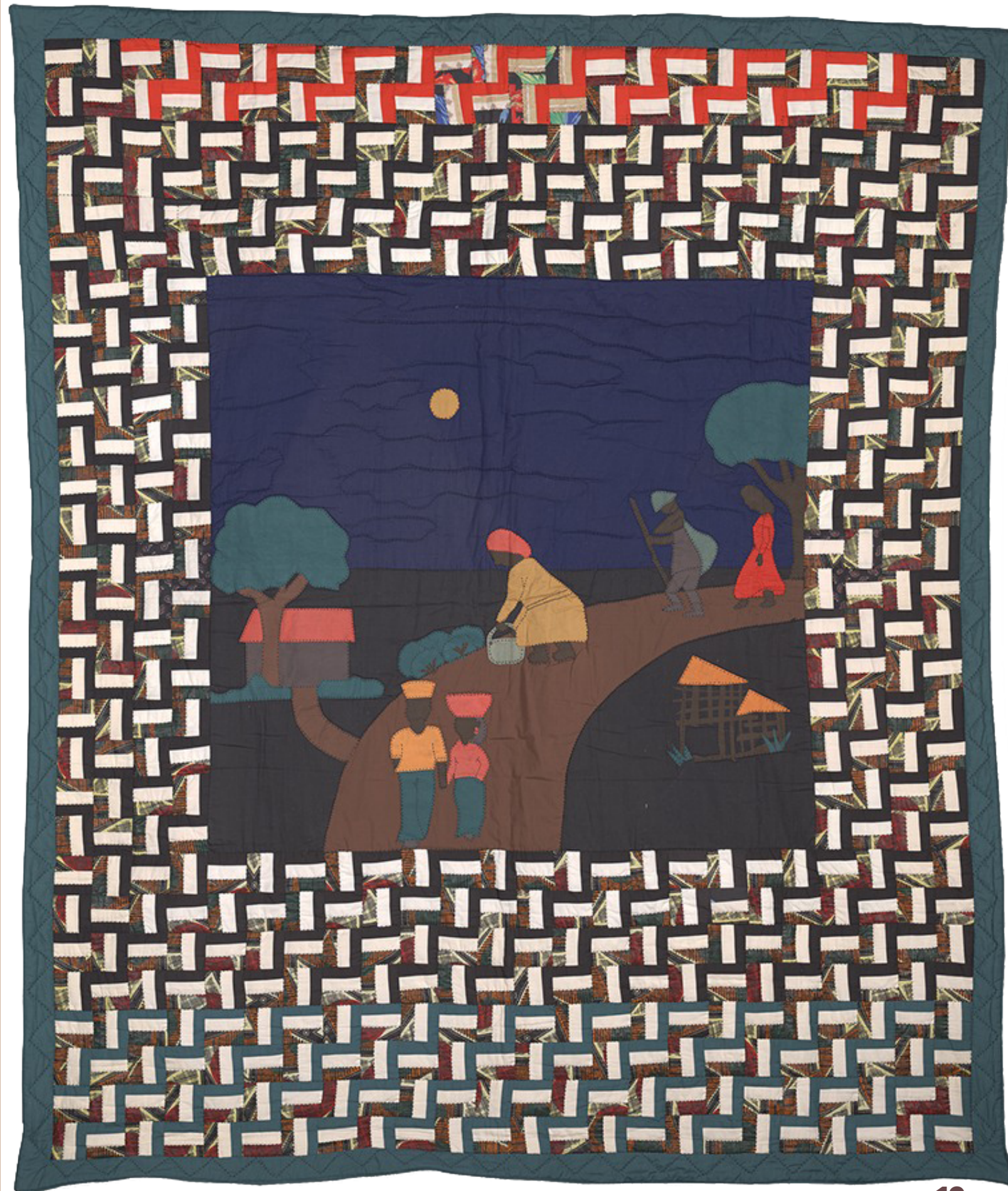
"Once you can make a connection with another quilter it's like you have a new sister"  
- Myla Borden, Canadian Quilters' Association

In 1993, tutored by her aunt Frances Dorrington, a long time quiltmaker, Borden initially made pattern quilts taken from popular quilting books and magazines. In 1994, she joined the Northumberland Quilting Guild and began attending workshops offered by the guild to improve her quiltmaking techniques.



Left:  
The artist, Myla Borden,  
with one of her many quilts.  
Photo by Steve Smith,  
Visionfire Studios

Next page:  
Myla Borden  
*Passages*, 1998  
Design: David Woods  
machine pieced; appliquéd;  
hand quilted.  
Collection of the artist





# Anja Clyde

## Dartmouth, NS

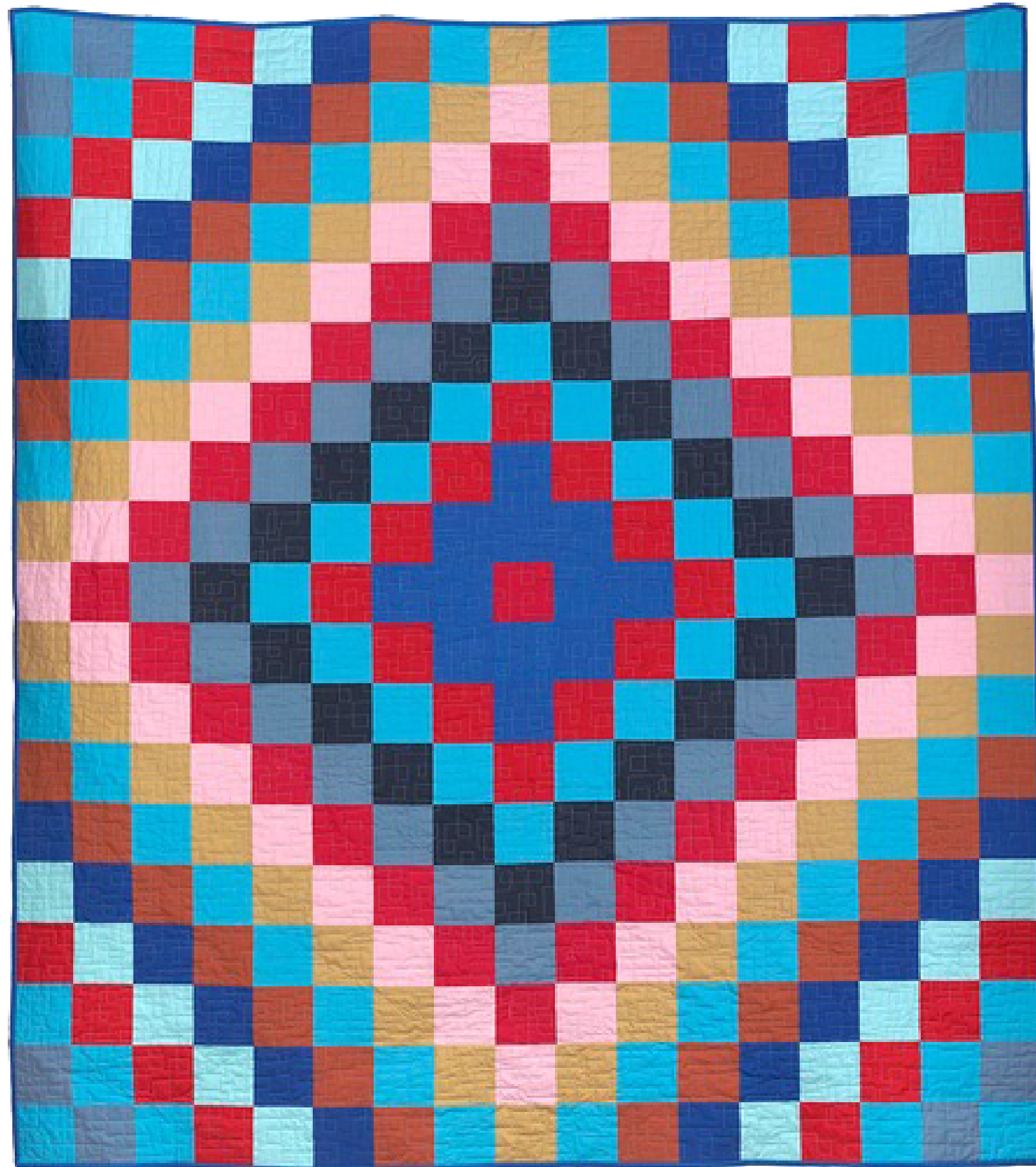
"A quilter by night, and a Girl Guide all the time"

Anja Clyde took up quilting in 2012 as a member of the Halifax based Modern Quilt Guild. Anja loves exploring abstract patterns in her quilting. Her work has been featured in BANNS exhibitions *New Notes In The Pattern* (2017) and *Journey Back To Birchtown* (2019).



Left:  
The artist, Anja Clyde, working  
on a colourful bow-tie  
patterned quilt.  
Bio and photo from BAANS.ca

Next page:  
Anja Clyde  
*Trip Around the World*, 2023  
machine pieced and quilted  
BANNS Secret Codes Collection





# Heather Cromwell New Glasgow, NS

"For Heather Cromwell, who joined the Vale Quilters in 2009, the codes inspired a multigenerational piece. She created an Underground Railroad quilt with the help of her granddaughter. Cromwell's mother did some hand quilting, and her son sewed the label. The piece is affectionately titled *It Takes Four*."

- Sherlyn Assam, *Broadview*



Left:  
Heather Cromwell –  
with Taylor Cromwell, Mary  
MacLean, and Robert Cromwell  
*It Takes Four* (Underground  
Railroad Pattern Sampler), 2004  
machine pieced; appliquéd;  
hand quilted.

Next Page:  
Heather Cromwell  
*Betty Hartley #1*, 2011  
Quilted by Mary MacLean,  
Design: David Woods  
machine pieced; appliquéd;  
hand quilted





# Shirley Mackenzie

## Pictou Landing First Nation, NS

Her passion for sewing started in her early childhood where she was taught how to hand sew from her grandmother before she was in grade school. It wasn't until she moved to Nova Scotia that she took her passion from hand sewing to quilt making. She can always be found with an active project or two on the go, which she describes as her own personal therapy. She was a member of the Northumberland Quilting Guild for several years before joining the Vale Quilters, based out of New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, where she is still an active member.



Left:  
Shirley MacKenzie  
(New Glasgow, NS)  
*Aunt Clara's Baskets*, 2009  
Design: David Woods  
machine pieced; appliquéd;  
hand quilted

Next page:  
Shirley MacKenzie  
(New Glasgow, NS)  
*Church Meeting*, 2021  
Design: David Woods  
machine pieced; appliquéd;  
hand quilted



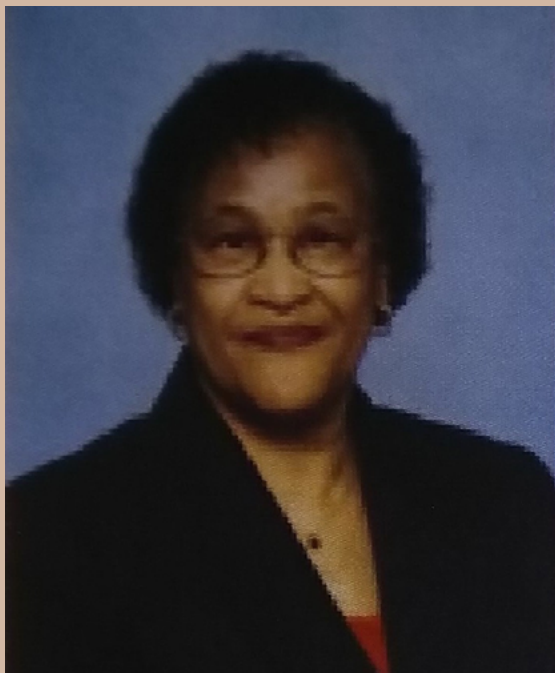


# Marlene Dorrington

## New Glasgow, NS

"*Flight* is a symbolic representation of transcendence that can be interpreted as both a representation of the Africans escaping slavery to Canada, or as a metaphor for women rising above personal hardships."

Like her daughter, Myla Borden, she was taught the basics of quilting by Frances Dorrington (her sister). In 1994, she joined the Northumberland Quilters Guild. Dorrington was a traditional quilter known for her precise cutting and sewing, her mastery of traditional quilt fabrics, and using vibrant colour compositions in her quilts.



Left:  
The artist, Marlene Dorrington

Right:  
Marlene Dorrington  
(New Glasgow, NS)  
*Flight*, 2008  
Design: David Woods  
machine pieced; appliquéd;  
hand quilted





Strip-quilting traditions in Black communities may have been inspired by Kente cloth: popular weaving patterns in West Africa that are worn on special occasions.



Kente cloth (detail), 1925  
Africa: West Africa, Nigeria  
Cotton; plain woven;  
supplementary weft; hand sewn  
Gift of William Bowers  
T2006.4.1a-b



Edith Colley, 1920 - 2014  
East Preston, Nova Scotia,  
Canada  
Strip Quilt top (detail), c. 1970s.  
hand pieced; hand quilted  
BANNS Secret Codes Collection

# The Quiltmakers of Gee's Bend

This documentary film was influential in inspiring and energizing Black quilters in Nova Scotia in the early 2000s. In 2006, while serving as Associate Curator at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, exhibition curator David Woods attempted to bring *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* - a popular American quilt exhibition by a group of quiltmakers in an isolated, impoverished community in Gee's Bend, Alabama, to Nova Scotia. Because of the unavailability of the large exhibition, Woods decided to bring *Marylee Bendolph: Gee's Bend Quilts and Beyond* to Nova Scotia instead. This exhibition featured works by Marylee Bendolph and Louisiana Pettway, two of the Gee's Bend quiltmakers (presented in 2007, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia). Woods would also organize a tour of these two quiltmakers to five African Nova Scotian communities in April and May of 2007.

Click or scan the QR code below to watch the video:

# Definitions & Important Terminology

## BAANS

The Black Artists Network of Nova Scotia is a non-profit, multi-disciplinary arts association that seeks to develop the African Nova Scotian arts community. BANNS works with African Nova Scotian communities around the province to document and present their art and culture stories and to initiate important community arts projects. BAANS was founded in 1991 and has helped to increase the representation of African Nova Scotian artistry within Nova Scotia and in Canada's mainstream public arts and cultural institutions. One of their major goals includes fostering programs and providing visibility for art collections.

## Gee's Bend Quilters

A group of Black quilters in the small community of Gee's Bend (Boykin), Alabama. Their quilting tradition dates back to the early 1800s, and continues today. Quilts from Gee's Bend have been displayed in more than 30 art museums including: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art* in New York City, *The Whitney Museum of American Art* in New York City, *The Museum of Fine Arts* in Houston, Texas, *the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco* in California, *the Philadelphia Museum of Art* in Pennsylvania, and many more.

# (continued)

## Hand-Quilting & Machine-Quilting

There are a few different ways to make a quilt! Some artists prefer to sew by hand, using a needle and thread, while others prefer the assistance of a sewing machine. There are even quilting machines that can sew complicated patterns, automatically!

## Quilting

An art-form where the artist stitches layers of fabric together to create a pattern. A quilt is usually made of a top layer of fabric (quilt top), soft batting, and a bottom piece of fabric (backing). When fabrics are joined by the edge, without layering, it is called "piecing" or "patchwork".

## The Underground Railroad

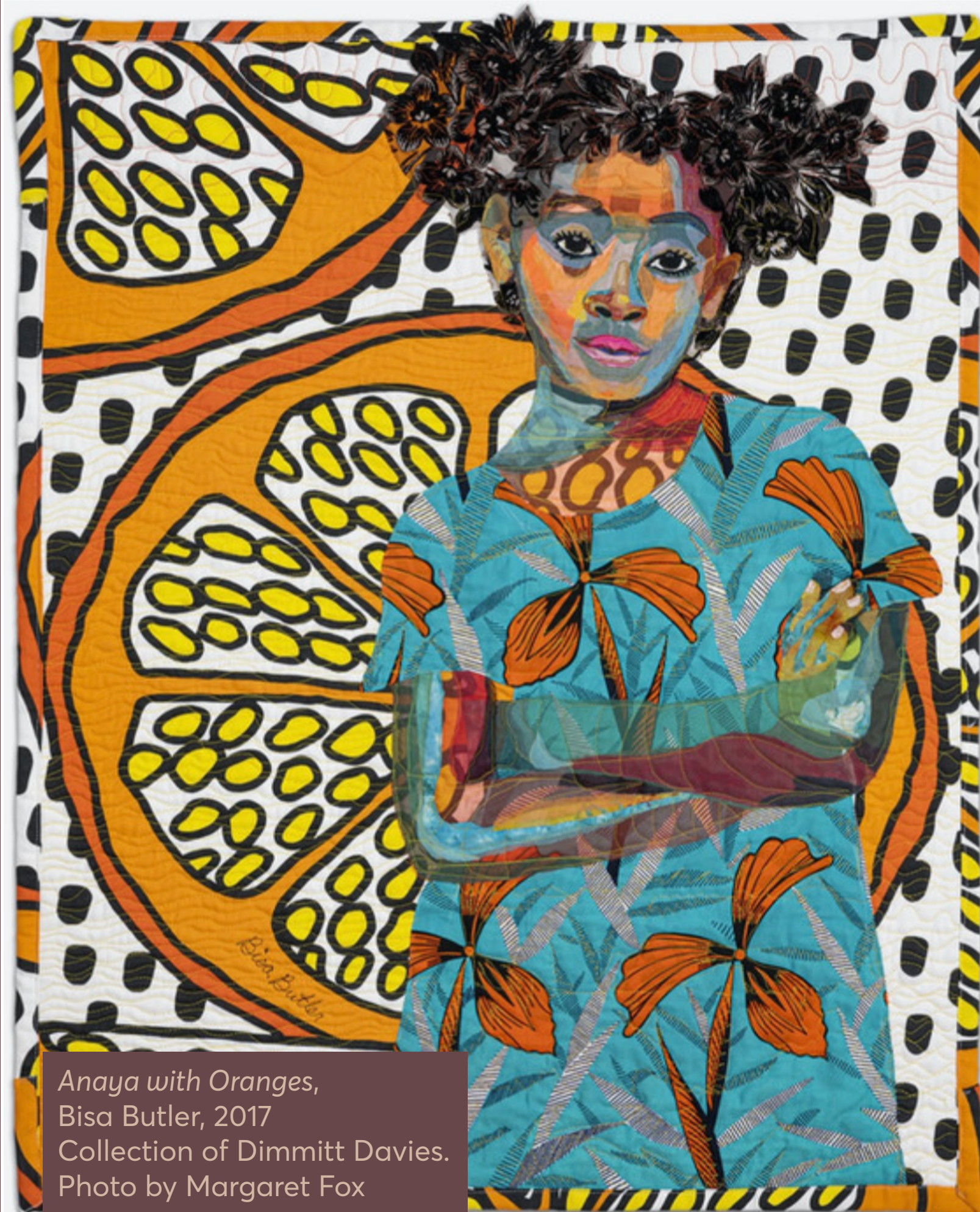
A secret network of abolitionists (people who wanted to abolish slavery). They helped African Americans escape from enslavement in the American South to free Northern states or to Canada. The Underground Railroad was the largest anti-slavery freedom movement in North America. It brought between 30,000 and 40,000 fugitives to British North America (now Canada). (The Canadian Encyclopedia)



# (Even More) Quiltmakers You Will Love!



**"Bisa Butler** is an award winning African American textile artist. She is known for her vibrantly stunning larger than life sized quilted portraits that captivate viewers around the world."  
- BisaButler.com



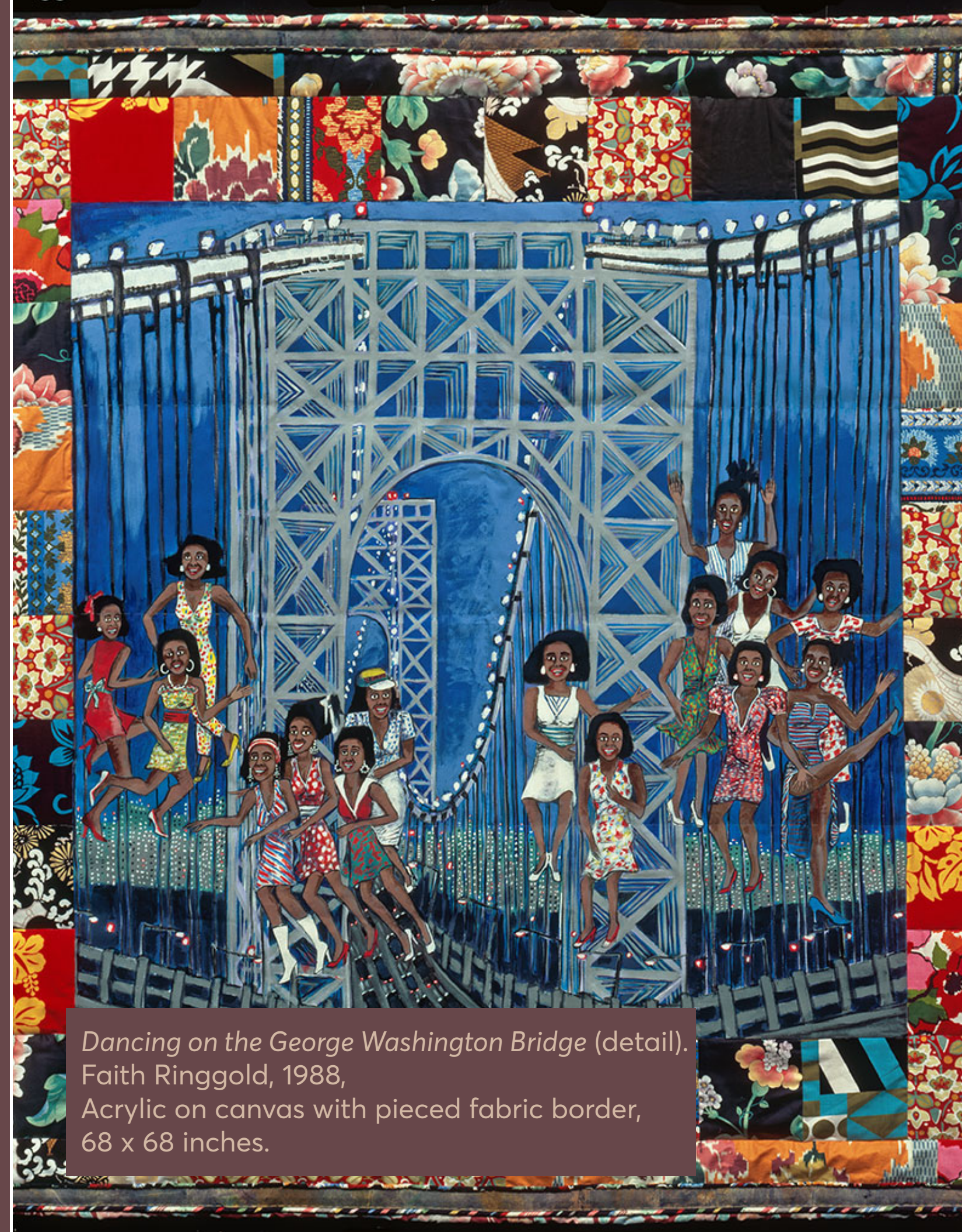
*Anaya with Oranges,*  
Bisa Butler, 2017  
Collection of Dimmitt Davies.  
Photo by Margaret Fox





Faith Ringgold, 1993

**Faith Ringgold** (born in 1930, Harlem, New York) is an artist, teacher, and author of 17 childrens books. She creates unique painted quilts that tell stories, called tankas, inspired by a Tibetan art form of paintings framed in richly brocaded fabrics.



*Dancing on the George Washington Bridge* (detail).  
Faith Ringgold, 1988,  
Acrylic on canvas with pieced fabric border,  
68 x 68 inches.

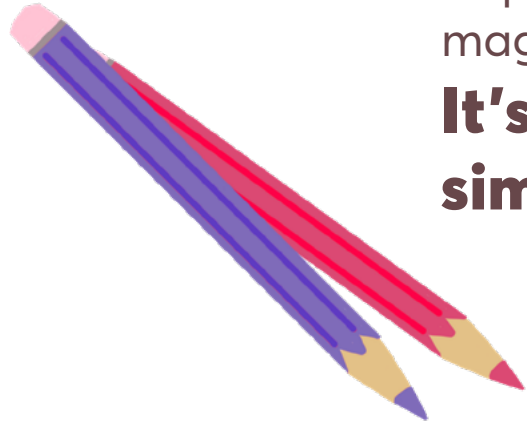


# Feeling Inspired?

## Design Your Own Quilt Block!

First, sketch a square design inspired by a quilt in the exhibition, a photograph, a magazine pattern, or your imagination!

**It's easiest to cut and sew simple, bold shapes**



Following your drawing (or free-styling!), cut and arrange fabric shapes, until you're happy with the design you've created. You can use pins or clips to hold pieces together.



Stitch or glue your pieces to a fabric square - Congratulations, you've created a quilt block! You can decorate your square with beads, buttons, or even embroidery!

# Further Research

# In Our Library