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A Modern Mother: Harriet Powers

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A Modern Mother: Harriet Powers (1837-1911)
[Catalogue Essay]

In her conclusion to the widely-known essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists” Linda Nochlin declared, “Disadvantage may indeed be an excuse; it is not, however, an intellectual position.”¹ This statement, while intended to be a charge for future contemporary artists and art historians alike, very well could have similarly been a salute to the artists of the past who worked from a place of disadvantage. The exhibition *A Modern Mother: Harriet Powers (1837-1911)* aims to identify one such woman, Harriet Powers, who lived nearly 150 years prior to the publication of Nochlin’s essay, in relationship with shift toward the avant-garde abstract art at the start of the modern era. The legacy left behind from the quilts of Harriet Powers, a freed slave from Georgia, is humble, but displays an example of great art coming from intersectional disadvantage. Considering this position, *A Modern Mother: Harriet Powers (1837-1911)* places Powers’s quilts in juxtaposition with the work of Henri Matisse, and argues for the influence on artists practicing in the twentieth century.

Very little is known about the life of Harriet Powers. Until 2009, what little information historians had concerning the personal life of Harriet Powers was gathered through a thorough investigation of tax and county records conducted by Gladys-Marie Fry. Additionally, Kyra Hicks, a passionate researcher of African American quilts recently uncovered several more details regarding the life of Harriet Powers. In total the research suggests Powers was born into slavery in Georgia in 1837.² Over the course of her life, Harriet was married to a man by the name of Armstead Powers, had nine children, though only three survived, and when freed from

¹Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in *Art and Sexual Politics: Women’s liberation, women artists, and art history*, ed. Thomas B. Hess and Elizabeth C. Baker (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 37.

² Marie Jeanne Adams, “The Harriet Powers Pictorial Quilts,” in *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*, ed. William Ferris (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983), 67.

slavery, lived on a small farm in Clarke County with her family.³ According to the tax records, the Powers family farm was prosperous for about a twenty year duration, and slowly began to decline in 1891. Fry made the assumption that Armstead left Harriet after the farm failed, as his name stopped appearing on the Tax Digest. Nearing the end of her life, as Fry recounted, “it would appear that Mrs. Powers lived her remaining years alone. She did not remarry. Her children were grown when their parents separated. There is a strong possibility that they may have left Clarke County since their names do not appear on the tax rolls.”⁴ The 1911 tax documents proclaim the death of Harriet Powers at age 74.⁵

Beyond the tax records, which hold no evidence of her art career, Harriet Powers may have been lost and forgotten through the course of history if not for her patron, Jennie Smith, who had the foresight to interview and take note of conversations held with Powers while she was alive. These notes reside in an 18-page handwritten document, on display as part of this exhibition, which typically resides in the University of Georgia’s Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library.⁶ A description of the document reads as follows: “[it] is written in an extemporaneous prose style characteristic of the nineteenth century. She uses firm, vivid English, enlivened with humor and wit. She writes a little self-consciously, as if instinctively aware that her comments would be read by outsiders.”⁷ Surely Smith knew the worth of the purchase she had made, as she narrated the experience of buying Powers’s first known work, *Biblical Quilt*,

³ Kyra E. Hicks, “This I Accomplish: Harriet Powers’ Bible Quilt and Other Pieces,” (Black Thread Press, 2009), Kindle.

⁴ Gladys-Marie Fry, “Harriet Powers: Portrait of an African-American Quilter” in *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, ed. Jacqueline Boo (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001), 306.

⁵ Ibid, 306.

⁶ Letter and photograph regarding Harriet Powers quilt, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The University of Georgia Libraries.

⁷ Fry, 303

and the conversations held between the two about the meaning of it.⁸ These conversations between the two are the only record of the artist's intent behind the *Biblical Quilt*; no artist statement exists. Until 2009, Powers was understood to be illiterate. Hicks' research, however, revealed a letter written by Powers to a woman by the name of Lorene Curtis Diver. The letter, presented as part of this exhibition, revealed a personal history and some brief details about her quilts.⁹

Perhaps the most striking fact about Harriet Powers' work is the measure of her influence though there is only two surviving quilts.¹⁰ There is evidence that points to the creation of one more quilt, however. In her letter, Powers wrote, "Then I composed a quilt of the Lord's Supper from the New Testament. 2 thousand and 500 hundred diamonds."¹¹ This quilt has yet to be uncovered, and this finding has lead to curiosity in the number of quilts Powers truly made. Regardless, it is typical, in the study of art, that those who are recognized are rather prolific, and it is from this bountiful collection of work that the artist finds their fame. For example, Van Gogh, one of the most well-known artists of the twentieth century, was known to have made somewhere near 1,600 works of art in the short time he was making art.¹² To have become a subject of study, one would surely assume these two known quilts demand quite a presence and a great deal of respect. According to Cuesta Benberry, a quilt historian, "Harriet Powers' Bible quilts have transcended mere popularity and are cherished to the extent that they have become virtual American icons. Analyzed extensively for continuities of West African design traditions,

⁸ Ibid, 303.

⁹ Hicks, Kindle.

¹⁰ Adams, 67.

¹¹ Hicks, Kindle.

¹² Thomson, Belinda. "Gogh, Vincent Willem van." *The Oxford Companion to Western Art*. Ed. Hugh Brigstocke. *Oxford Art Online*.

the quilts have been the subject of research studies, newspaper and magazine articles, scholarly essays, books and films.”¹³ The first of the quilts, recognized by the titles *Bible Quilt* and *Sermon in Patchwork*, was made in 1886, and was likely first displayed during the Cotton Fair in Athens.

¹⁴ A brief description written by Marie Jeanne Adams reads “It consisted of a large rectangular cotton cloth (88 x 73 ¾ inches) on which eleven scenes were arranged in three rows. By means of small applique figures, the scenes represented the tempting of Eve in the Garden, the killing of Abel, Jacob’s dream, Judas at the last supper, and the Crucifixion.”¹⁵ After Jennie Smith purchased the quilt, she displayed it at the Cotton States Exposition in 1895. It was here where the beginning of the second Bible quilt was made, as according to Adams, a group of women commissioned another quilt to be made as a gift to a trustee of Atlanta University. The second quilt, *Pictorial Quilt*, is considerably larger (69 x 105 inches) and was made with a higher degree of complexity than the first. The imagery is described as follows:

[the] quilt portrays fifteen scenes. Ten are drawn from familiar Bible stories which concern the threat of God’s judgement inextricably fused with His mercy and man’s redemption, among which are the Fall, Moses in the wilderness, Job’s trials, Jonah and the whale, the Baptism of Christ and the Crucifixion. One scene refers to local events she knew from hearsay about a rich couple and a runaway pig. Four others depict astronomical or meteorological events, only one of which occurred in Mrs. Power’s adult life, an extremely cold spell of 1895 in the eastern United States... she interpreted these events in the celestial atmosphere as messages from God to mankind about punishment, apocalypse, and salvation.¹⁶

Quilting with applique had become common in the southern United States from 1775-1875, as enslaved people brought with them the visual heritage of a number of African cultures.¹⁷ This

¹³ Cuesta Benberry, “African-American Quilts: Paradigms of Black Diversity” in *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, ed. Jacqueline Boo (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001), 296.

¹⁴ Adams, 67.

¹⁵ Ibid, 67.

¹⁶ Ibid, 68.

¹⁷ Fry, 301.

technique was characterized by important images being skillfully sewn into the background fabric of a quilt. Traditionally, specific colors were used to represent specific elements, for example, “Humans are depicted in red or black. Animals are represented in colors not necessarily true to life, including purple, blue, green, and white.”¹⁸ In her text, Gladys-Marie Fry made the comparison of the tapestries originating in ancient Dahomey, West Africa, and the quilts of Harriet Powers. She explained, “Mrs. Powers’s quilts can be compared with Dahomean tapestries in terms of design, construction technique, and the retention of stories associated with pictorial representations.”¹⁹ It is interesting that Fry would make such a comparison, considering how far removed from this culture Power’s would have been. Adams found this interesting as well, as the conclusion of her research on this topic ends in the question of how this influence would have met Powers. She speculated,

“How African influence 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 could not necessarily be knowledgeable in the applique techniques. The appliqued cloths were made only in the capital city of Abomey by family guilds of tailors, all retainers of the monarch, and the guilds included only men and young boys.”²⁰

To date, is still unclear how Powers may have come to this process and aesthetic, having been removed by generations, class distinction, and geographical location. The conversation of these commonalities between designs can be extended in the opposite direction as well. In the text “The Guerilla Girls’ Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art,” the authors make a brief and insuccint comparison between the African influenced imagery of Harriet Powers and the esteemed Henri Matisse in passing. Though their commentary was lacking, and delivered in

¹⁸ Fry, 301.

¹⁹ Ibid, 301.

²⁰Adams, 74.

an off-hand remark in criticism of the study of art history rather than a clear statement of the ways in which the works are similar, there is a validity in making this comparison.²¹ In fact, according to Hicks' research, Carl Zahn, the Publications Director at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, made the comparison as well. He said, "The quilt looked like it could have been done in the 1970's...It reminded me of the works of Paul Rant or Henri Matisse in his later years."²² Similar to the relationship between the aesthetic and process of the *Biblical Quilts* and the traditions of the makers from Dahomey, whose influence are so far removed from each other, the relationship between Powers and Matisse seems to cross geographical, generational, and class boundaries.

In 1906, five years before Powers's death, the mid-career artist Henri Matisse traveled to North Africa. His experience there, paired with the influence of his contemporaries employing a study of primitivism, Paul Gauguin and Pablo Picasso, lead to a development of an aesthetic similar to that of Harriet Powers's patchwork quilts.²³ The visual relationship can be specifically seen in the work created near the end of his career, which consisted of compositions of paper cut outs. In some cases the cut paper aided in composing paintings, as Matisse would pin figures and shapes to the canvas to determine where to place them with his paints. Over time, Matisse began to use the cut paper to create compositions for linocut prints, and eventually he chose to leave the paper compositions as the final product.²⁴ The process of creating these compositions is assumedly similar to that of composing one of Powers' quilts. One could imagine the process

²¹The Guerilla Girls, "The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art," (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 55.

²² Hicks, Kindle.

²³ Nicholas Watkins, "Matisse, Henri," Grove Art Online, 2003, 29 Oct. 2018.
<http://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart>

²⁴ Watkins.

looking something like this: gathering materials, proposing a narrative, selecting specific colors for specific details, cutting the shapes, and assembling them onto the background. Beyond process, there were similarities in the ethos of both artist's work. According to Matisse, in his statement *Notes of a Painter*, "[the] choice of colours does not rest in scientific theory; it is based on observation, on sensitivity, on felt experiences."²⁵ One could argue for the congruence of this ideal with that of Powers, who in being uneducated, could be assumed to have only her observations and felt experiences on which base her color decisions. Further, both artists use a vague figure to narrate the plot of their stories. In regard to Powers's work, the figure narrated the relationship between man and God. Returning to Matisse, "[the figure] is that which permits [him] to express [his] almost religious awe towards life."²⁶ With consideration of the similar process, an ethos steeped in religious reverence, and African cultural influence, it is interesting to note work such as Matisse's *Icarus* looks as if it could be a panel of one of Harriet Powers's patchwork quilts. Due to the extreme barriers that separated the two artists it would, however, be insensible to suggest an influential relationship between the two, despite the similarities in the work.

While far removed, and surely unbeknownst to each other, the timeline and lineage of Harriet Powers and Henri Matisse as well as the collective legacy ought not be disregarded. In an interview with Melody Graulich, Faith Ringgold, a modern quilter herself, offered an interesting comment on the relationship between Harriet Powers and the artists near the turn of the twentieth century. She explained, "Harriet Powers was a quilt maker, and the quilt makers were ahead of everybody. It is not until the 1900s, early 1900s, that abstract art became prevalent. The quilters

²⁵ Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter," in *Art in Theory*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 77.

²⁶ Matisse, 77.

were doing it before that, but nobody thought it was art so it didn't matter."²⁷ In short, the art form of quilting which was seen as inferior, as just a woman's craft, ultimately informed the avant-garde of the early twentieth century. This craft continued to influence the avant-garde beyond the fauvist artist, Henri Matisse. Celeste-Marie Bernier wrote about this influence stating, "By improvising out of necessity and as a result of preferred artistic design, works by early artisans such as Dave the Potter and Harriet Powers shed light on the experimental practices of later artists such as William Edmondson, Romare Bearden and Betye Saar."²⁸

Harriet Powers, though not as widely known as some of the male artists referenced in this essay, has in most cases earned herself a place among the "greats" in art history (in two pieces of art alone, no less). The curatorial goal of *A Modern Mother: Harriet Powers (1837-1911)* was to expose the ways in which Powers rose to this position. This ascension can be attributed to the mastery of the tools and materials she had as a newly freed woman, the embrace of a rich heritage of African influence and craft, and a reverence for story. It is action like this, which may have led Nochlin to claim "Disadvantage may indeed be an excuse; it is not, however, an intellectual position."²⁹ Harriet Powers came from practically the most disadvantaged position one could in America in the nineteenth century, and it would appear that she used her experience as fuel to create a lasting legacy.

²⁷Melody Graulich and Mara Witzling, "The Freedom to Say what She Pleases: A Conversation with Faith Ringgold" in *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, ed. Jacqueline Boo (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001), 199

²⁸ Celeste-Marie Bernier, "African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to the Present" (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 11.

²⁹Nochlin, 37.

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