

HANDSTITCHED WORLDS

THE CARTOGRAPHY OF QUILTS

TRAVELING EXHIBITION SERVICE



INTERNATIONAL
ARTS AND ARTISTS



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THE CARTOGRAPHY OF QUILTS

Handstitched Worlds: The Cartography of Quilts is an invitation to read quilts as maps, tracing the paths of individual stories and experiences that illuminate larger historic events and cultural trends. Spanning the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, the exhibition brings together quilts and maps from the collection of the American Folk Art Museum, representing a range of materials, motifs, and techniques—from traditional early-American quilts to more contemporary sculptural assemblage and collage.

Lifting one's gaze from quilt blocks to city blocks—seams to roadways—one can see a visible kinship between quilt-making and cartography. Both are built upon established systems that use color, pattern, and symbols to create whole compositions from a network of interlocked parts. Quilts and maps are also infused with history and memory—they are living records of traditions, experiences, relationships, beliefs, and aspirations. Quilts are tools for orienteering that seem to ask, “Where do I fit into this landscape? Where have I been? Where will I go?” Like a roadmap, quilts direct us to their site of origin. They provide comfort and a sense of safety; they make the unknown known, or the unknown home.

There is something alchemical about a quilt. Ordinary materials are transformed into something wholly extraordinary that, piece by piece, block by block, embodies profound creativity and vision. What can be gleaned from a bit of patchwork cut from a wedding dress, a castoff feed sack, or commemorative flag? How are personal, political, cultural, and spiritual ideals inscribed onto a quilt's surface? In the same way that a map is a pocket-sized abstraction of the world beyond what can be seen, a quilt-maker's choice of fabric and design reveals insights into the topography of their world and their place within it. By uniting diverse (and emblematic) materials, quilts allow us to reconstruct a deeply personal outlook on the world, balancing creativity and tradition, individuality and collective zeitgeist.

1. Artist unidentified, *Soldier's Quilt*, 1850–1875. Wool, probably from military uniforms, with embroidery thread, rickrack, and velvet binding; inlaid, layered-appliqué, hand-embroidered, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Altria Group. Photograph by Gavin Ashworth

RECLAIMING HISTORY

Quilts allow us to reclaim history for everyday individuals—particularly women, and notably women of color—about whom the historical record is largely silent. The first slaves arrived on this continent in the seventeenth century, and since that time have participated in the technical and aesthetic flowering of quilt-making as a creative practice.

Nora Ezell's *Star Quilt* (1977) is a continuation of this narrative, and features a traditional eight-pointed Star of Hope pattern drawn from the artist's own knowledge of the legacy of slavery, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction in the Jim Crow South. The star motif evokes the celestial navigation used by slaves on the Underground Railroad. The extraordinary quilts in this exhibition are living records of cultural histories, political and spiritual beliefs, and future ambitions.



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2. Nora McKeown Ezell, *Star Quilt* (detail), 1977, Cotton and synthetics, American Folk Art Museum, Purchase made possible in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, with matching funds from The Great American Quilt Festival, Photograph by Scott Bowron



Quilts, whether created by an individual or as a group collaboration, can also be a record of a community. *Cross River Album Quilt* (1861) exemplifies a community in collaboration—quilters coming together to commemorate an event or support a worthy cause. Politics and religion were frequent subjects of album and other appliqué quilts.

3. Mrs. Eldad Miller and others, *Cross River Album Quilt*, 1861, Cotton and silk with wool embroidery, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Dr. Stanley and Jacqueline Schneider, Photograph by Gavin Ashworth.

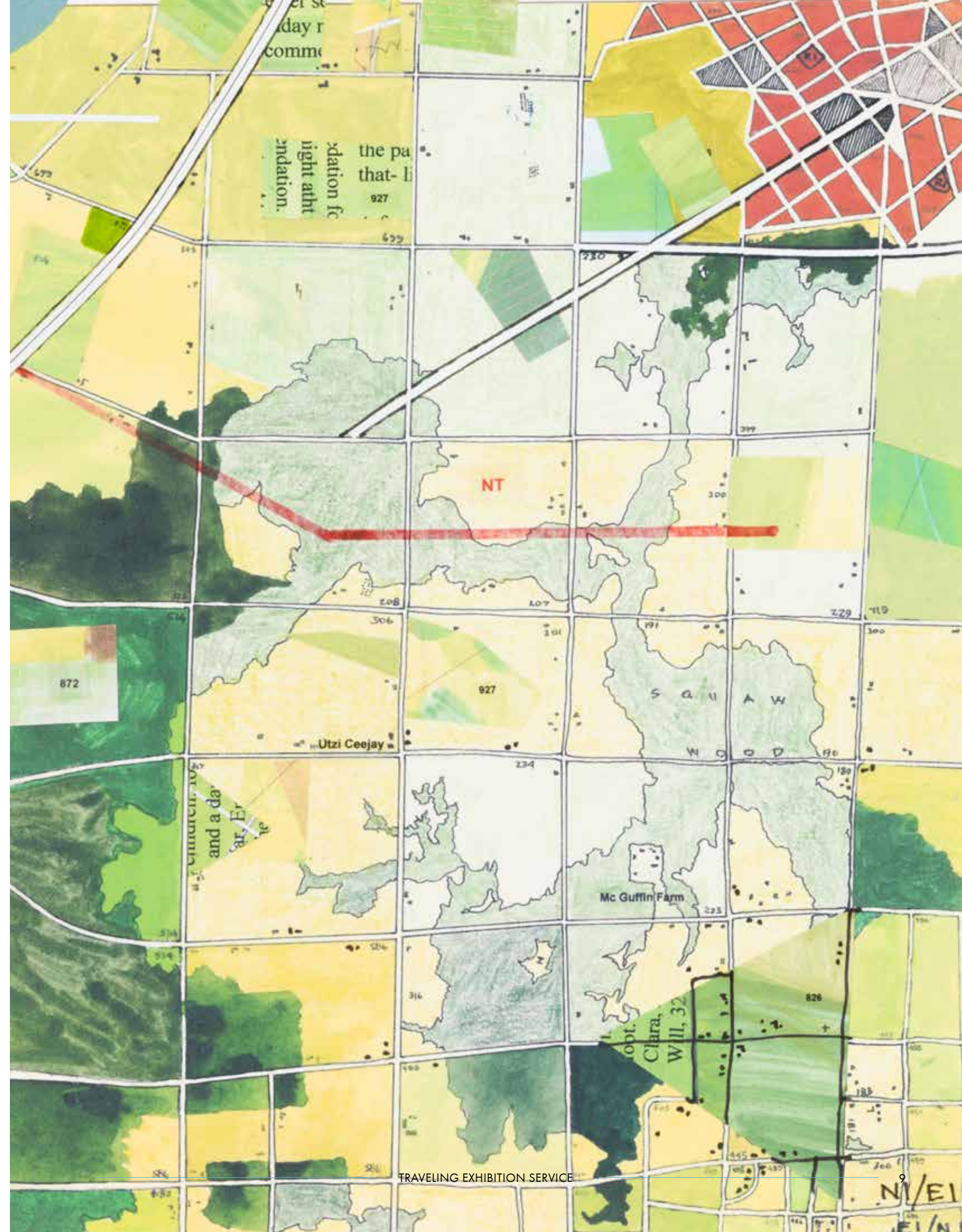
DESIGN AND CREATIVITY

Both maps and quilts speak a language of design: lines, shapes, patterns, and colors evoke both real and imaginary landscapes. Drawing from a range of materials and techniques, the eighteen quilts in this exhibition show us that quilts, like maps, encompass a world unto themselves. Notable among them is a late interpretation of the nineteenth-century crazy quilt—a subdued study in monochromatic shades of black and dark colors, punctuated by a “road map” of light-colored embroidery. The unknown artist, presumably named Ella (as signed on the quilt), has created an imaginative topography of spiraling labyrinthine lines that recall plots of land seen from above. Similarly, Jerry Gretzinger has let his imagination run wild with his innovative mapping project, started in 1963, which features over 36,000 8 x 10 inch panels of hand-drawn maps of an imaginary city.

4. Artist unidentified (signed “Ella”), “Ella” Crazy Quilt (detail), 1922, Suiting woolens with cotton embroidery, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Frances S. Martinson, Photograph by Gavin Ashworth
5. Jerry Gretzinger, *Jerry’s Map (E1/N1, Generation 11)* (detail), 2014–2016, Felt-tip pen, colored pencil, acrylic, tape, and plastic clippings on cardboard, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of the artist, Photograph by Adam Reich



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ABOUT THE AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM, NEW YORK

The American Folk Art Museum is the premier institution devoted to the creative expressions of self-taught artists, past and present. Since 1961, the American Folk Art Museum has been shaping the understanding of art by the self-taught through its exhibitions, publications, and educational programs. As a center of scholarship, and by showcasing the creativity of individuals whose singular talents have been refined through experience rather than formal artistic training, the museum considers the historical, social, and artistic context of American culture. Its collection includes more than eight thousand artworks dating from the eighteenth century to the present—from compelling portraits and dazzling quilts to powerful works by living self-taught artists in a variety of mediums.



6. Lucy Frost, *Abraham Lincoln Flag Quilt*, c. 1866, Cotton with cotton appliqué and embroidery, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Florence W. and Joe P. Rhinehart, Photograph by Gavin Ashworth

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FRONT Artist unidentified, *Map Quilt* (detail), 1886, Silk and cotton with silk embroidery, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. C. David McLaughlin, Photograph by Schecter Lee
BACK Artist unidentified, *Map Quilt*, 1886, Silk and cotton with silk embroidery, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. C. David McLaughlin, Photograph by Schecter Lee

EXHIBITION SPECIFICATIONS

Number of Works

18 quilts

Organized by

The American Folk Art Museum,
New York

Requirements

Moderate security;
175–200 linear feet

Shipping

IA&A makes all arrangements;
exhibitors pay outgoing shipping
costs within the contiguous US

Booking Period

12 weeks

Tour

September 2021–September 2024

Contact

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