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The Practical Art of Quilting

By Martha Schwendener – November 15, 2014



"Noah and the Ark, 1989," by Yvonne Wells.

Gift of Kempf Hogan/Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, Ala.

"From Heart to Hand: African-American Quilts from the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts," at the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair,... the exhibition is a tiny sampling of 29 quilts.

Among the most powerful quilts on view are those in the narrative tradition: illustrative or story quilts. Several quilts follow the precedent set by Harriet Powers,

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a slave born in 1837 in Georgia whose quilts told stories from the Bible. Yvonne Wells has adopted that tradition, telling the story of the African-American experience during the civil rights movement. Born in Tuscaloosa in 1940, Ms. Wells lived through or witnessed many of the events described in her work.

Ms. Wells's "Yesterday: Civil Rights in the South III" (1989) is an epic quilt that shows the Mayflower arriving in North America, with a black man rowing a white man ashore. There are little figures at the bottom picking cotton and a lynched man hanging from a tree, as well as an image of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, where four girls were killed by a bomb in 1963. George Wallace, the Alabama governor and presidential candidate, is depicted in front of a door, attempting to prevent the integration of the University of Alabama, and a circle of civil rights marchers surrounds an image of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. "Rosa Parks I" (2005) takes a different tack, with the civil rights pioneer dominating the quilt's composition.

What is most evident throughout "From Heart to Hand," however, is that practical boundaries — three layers of fabric stitched together and sized to cover a bed — create the conditions for great art, much the way paintings were born from canvas stretched over a frame, and sculpture from blocks of wood and stone waiting to be hewed.