

# FORT GANSEVOORT



## Yvonne Wells: Stitching Stories

By Stacy Morgan – State Arts Awards 2019



Wells at work. Photo: Courtesy of Stacy Morgan.

Yvonne Thomas Wells's route to her present stature as an acclaimed artist was far from typical. She did not enjoy an extensive formal education in the visual arts. Nor did she learn quilting at the knee of a relative during her childhood in the manner typical of folk traditions. Rather, Wells made her first quilt in 1979 for purely practical reasons: to help keep herself warm during the winter months. Because she enjoyed the creativity involved, Wells continued making quilts, many of which initially were variations on traditional quilt patterns such as the Dresden Plate, Log Cabin, and Eight-Pointed Star. Then, circa 1985, Wells made the creative leap to begin fashioning large-scale pictorial story quilts and that artwork has remained her trademark ever

# FORT GANSEVOORT

since. Wells's artwork also became distinguished by her innovative incorporation of all manner of materials—such as items of used clothing, discarded flags, and bottle caps—that are not part of conventional quilting traditions. As Wells explains, “anything I can stick a needle in” is fair game for inclusion in her quilts.

Nearly four decades before undertaking her first quilt, Wells was born to Reverend Peter Thomas, a Presbyterian minister, and Fannie Thomas, an elementary school teacher and a graduate of Alabama State. Tragically, Reverend Thomas passed away when Yvonne was just five years old, leaving Fannie to raise the couple's eight surviving children by herself. After graduating from Druid High School in 1957, Yvonne stayed at home and cared for her mother, who was in poor health. Yvonne graduated with a bachelor's degree in Health and Physical Education in 1964 from Stillman College, a school also attended by seven of her siblings. She later added a master's degree in Adult Basic Education from Alabama State in 1975.

Yvonne married her husband, Livingston Wells, a First Sergeant in the Marines and Vietnam War veteran, in 1960. Yvonne and Livingston are the parents of DeWillican Wells Middleton (a Small Business Program Manager for the U.S. Department of Energy) and Mahijus Wells (a six-year veteran of the National Guard, a Maintenance Planner for Hunt Refining, and the husband of Michelle Wells, who is a Hydrologic Technician for the U.S. Geological Survey), and the proud grandparents of four grandchildren.

Wells worked full-time as a physical education teacher in the Tuscaloosa city school system from 1965 to 2000, while also remaining an active member of Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church. Throughout her adult life, Wells has maintained an active record of community service with a special emphasis on projects for children, veterans, and citizens in need. As Michigan art collector Kempf Hogan observes, “What I think is so wonderful about Yvonne, is that not only does she have this premier sense of creativity, but she's a premier person in character.”

In the mid-1980s, Wells's quilts caught the eye of Robert Cargo, a University of Alabama professor who operated the Cargo Folk Art Gallery in Tuscaloosa from 1984-2003. Cargo encouraged Yvonne to share her work with a broader audience. Entering the Kentucky Festival of the Arts in neighboring Northport for the first time in 1985, Wells received “Best of Show”—an award that she has gone on to win five more times.

Wells's quilts soon captured the attention of art scholars, collectors, and curators and were included in national touring exhibitions that have spanned from *Stitching Memories: African-American Story Quilts* (1989-1991) to *From Heart to Hand: African American Quilts from the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts* (2014-2018). Her artwork has reached mass audiences through a series of collaborations with Hallmark Cards, while also gracing such prestigious venues as the American Museum of Folk Art in New York City and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. In addition, Yvonne has

# FORT GANSEVOORT

represented Alabama in international exhibitions in Tokyo, Japan, Venice, France, and Pietrasanta, Italy.

It is a testament to the range of Yvonne's artwork that her quilts have been included in group exhibitions organized around such diverse themes as African American art, folk art, religious art, patriotic art, baseball, and the Civil Rights Movement.

Wells places her story quilts into the categories of Religious, Sociopolitical, Children's Moment, and Potluck. They range in tone from reverent to whimsical, and they push the boundaries of quilting as a visual art into a dynamic relationship with the performance art of storytelling. Yvonne's religious quilts reflect her lifelong membership in the Presbyterian Church and include beautiful representations of familiar Bible stories such as her "Creation" series, "Noah's Ark," and "Crucifixion," as well as pithy parables in quilt form such as "Proverbs," "The Whole Armor of God," and her "Seven Deadly Sins" series.

Many of Wells' sociopolitical quilts address the Civil Rights Movement, with a preponderance of subjects derived from events in Alabama. With her tributes to Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and numerous other less celebrated heroes and heroines of the movement, Wells provides a bold, unflinching representation of the violence and hatred that characterized that troubled chapter of U.S. history, while also consistently holding up the possibility of redemption through the committed collective action of the nation's citizens. Among Wells' most ambitious sociopolitical projects is her "On the Move" series, which intertwines a broad sweep of black history from Africa through slavery to freedom with Biblical narratives.

Wells' "Children's Moment" quilts sometimes offer her own unique take on classic nursery rhymes such as "Humpty Dumpty" and "Little Miss Muffet," while others create entirely new scenarios from her own imagination. Wells has ensured that these quilts find their primary audience by exhibiting them at Tuscaloosa's Children's Hands-On Museum and various city schools, as well as attending "family day" events at more conventional exhibition settings like the Montgomery Museum of Art.

Wells reserves the potluck label for the vast number of her quilts that defy easy categorization. Some of these quilts stem from observations of everyday life, such as a barbershop tableau, portraits of animals, or scenes from nature. Others feature popular culture icons of yesteryear such as Elvis Presley, Hank Williams, Marilyn Monroe, and Jackie Robinson, or more recent figures such as Michael Jackson, Danica Patrick, and Tiger Woods. Still other potluck quilts imaginatively render subjects such as the planets of the solar system, autobiographical masks rich with symbolism that speak to Wells's multifaceted identity, or even a rebus puzzle formed through assorted buttons from the sizable archive of materials that Wells has accumulated over the years.

# FORT GANSEVOORT

Wells's other artistic legacy involves the many ways she has used her quilts as a means of giving back to her community. For instance, beginning in 1990, Wells' quilts served as backdrops for the first several years of the annual "Realizing the Dream" concerts co-sponsored by the local NAACP, Stillman College, and the University of Alabama. In this capacity, her civil rights-themed art featured prominently in local appearances by esteemed guest performers such as Sidney Poitier, James Earl Jones, Cicely Tyson, Harry Belafonte, and Della Reese.

Despite not having a direct connection to the AIDS epidemic herself, in 1993 Yvonne quilted a panel for the NAMES Project's AIDS Memorial quilt, which was incorporated into the larger tapestry as part of a local ceremony held at the University of Alabama's Ferguson Student Center.

Following a tornado's devastation of Tuscaloosa in 2011, Wells created a quilt that was part of a local group exhibition based around the theme of post-storm recovery. In addition, she created a quilt that was reproduced in banner form and displayed outdoors as part of an additional project that aimed to bring grace notes of beauty and hope for renewal to the community's storm-ravaged landscape.

Although she typically works alone on her story quilts, Wells also has employed her artistic talents to coordinate collaborative quilt projects in service to her community. In one such project from 2011, over thirty members of Brown Memorial Presbyterian contributed squares with embroidered texts, appliques, and photos of fellow members past and present that were joined into two large quilt panels to commemorate the church's 130<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.

Most recently, Wells guided four local artists in fashioning a quilt to celebrate the city of Tuscaloosa's 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Following in the vein of Wells' example, these local artists used applique techniques and non-traditional materials to craft a large map of Tuscaloosa and Northport that Yvonne then stitched together (along with several additional personal touches) into a finished work that encompasses a stunning array of local history sites and stories. This quilt was debuted to the public as part of a Tuscaloosa Bicentennial kick-off celebration in January 2019.

Never one to rest on her laurels, Wells continues to craft ambitious new work, extending a prolific career that now spans four decades and well over 500 quilts. Despite all of her accolades, Wells remains as appreciative as ever that her art continues to connect with audiences: "I still think what I'm doing is just 'plain old Yvonne.' And when somebody else sees my work, it touches my heart."