

# Quilts of Gee's Bend



Examining the Relationship between the Quilts, Quilters and the Fine Arts Industry

# What is Art?

Art = Communication

# What is “Art”

## Traditional Definition:

1. the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power.
2. the various branches of creative activity, such as painting, music, literature, and dance.

(Oxford Languages - online dictionary)

# Different Categories and Classifications in Art?

Visual Arts | Performance Arts | Literary Arts | Culinary Arts

Fine Art (purely aesthetic) | Decorative Arts | Commercial Arts | Applied Arts |  
Mass Media

# What is “Fine” Art?

art (such as painting, sculpture, or music) concerned primarily with the creation of beautiful objects (Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fine%20art>)

- Classically: paintings (oil), sculpture, and architecture (lesser)
- European centric
- Typically requires academic study
- sets hierarchies
- excludes anything functional

Wikipedia actually does a good job explaining ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fine\\_art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fine_art)).

# What is not Fine Art\*

- Folk Art - (Also Vernacular Art, Outsider Art, Naive Art, Primitive Art)
- Decorative Arts - European term used to describe high quality objects that are not Fine Art.
- Commercial Art
- Art made by anybody that has not been formally trained as an artist.
- “Women’s Work”
- Mass Media Artists (Too much popular appeal can end a Fine Artist’s career. Robert Indiana was never taken seriously by the Fine Art world after the public embraced his “Love” sculpture)

\*Many of these terms are problematic and show the bias of those curating and writing about the arts. They were common at the time of the first Gee’s Bend museum show. Many institutions have begun to review their policies.

# Who decides what is “art” and is shown in public galleries?

- Gallery Owners
- Museum Curators
- Academics
- Wealthy People
- Formally Trained Artists (Artists that are already accepted by the system have some influence)

# Philanthropy Capitalism & Art

“...the man of wealth thus becoming the mere agent and trustee for his poorer brethren, bringing to their service his superior wisdom, experience and ability to administer, doing for them better than they would or could do for themselves.”

— Andrew Carnegie

# Art Market Commissions

Fine Arts Agents: 50% or less

Galleries: 50% Commission

Pricing is not transparent.

# Art as Commodity

The Art Market exists to make money

Buyers have started “investing” in art - what use to be about enriching everyday life has become a commodity to be traded.

Public Art Institutions are funded by the wealthy.

Mass Media (i.e., popular-culture) places value on celebrity or brand-name recognition

# Intellectual Property

## Original Ideas vs. Derivative Works

What's the difference?

# Communication vs. Intellectual Property

How we look at ownership of work is framed by the dominant culture. Ideas are discussed as “property” and protected by laws that are based on protecting financial interests.

The Dominant Culture in the U.S. is Capitalist and treats ideas as property that can be:

- Borrowed
- Stolen
- Discovered
- Found
- Protected by the Law

# Copyright

- Copyright vs. Patent
- Functional products cannot be copyrighted (fashion, bedding, etc)
- Enforcement of copyright is difficult and typically cost prohibitive.

# Timeline

- 1966** The Freedom Quilting Bee cooperative was formed to raise funds for the Civil Rights movement. The Quilts were auctioned in NYC; Diana Vreeland promoted them in Vogue magazine; and Bloomingdales, Bonwit Teller, and Saks Fifth Avenue carried them in their stores.
- 1967** Lee Krasner (NYC artist) purchased quilts and brought them to the attention of curators at the Met.
- 1968** Effort to sell GB quilts in Boston and New England
- 1972** The Freedom Quilting Bee entered a long-term contract with Sears to produce corduroy pillow shams
- 1976** Roland Freeman visits and photographs quilts
- 1997** Bill Arnett's first visit to Gee's Bend

# Timeline (cont.)

**2002** Exhibition at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts  
  
Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York City)  
  
Tinwood Press publishes 2 books about Gee's Bend quilts

**2002 - 2008** Exhibition moves to additional 11 fine art museums

**2006** Tinwood Press publishes 2 more books about Gee's Bend quilts

**2007** Exhibit at Tacoma Art Museum – generated publicity about lawsuits filed by Gee's Bend Quilters

**2008** lawsuit settled out of court with confidential settlement agreement

**2010** Arnett established the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, transferred 1200 works to the foundation and provided gifts and gift-purchases to major museums. One of the first and most important gifts was to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2014 (57 objects)

**2018** Article reports that Bill Arnett has purchased about 530 GB quilts over time. Average payment of \$275 per quilt – quilters say average payment is \$100

**2020** Souls Grown Deep Foundation announces initiatives to benefit Gee's Bend community.

Gee's Bend Resource Center with paid staff and free internet

Partnership with NEST

# Reviews

“The results, not incidentally, turn out to be some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced. Imagine Matisse and Klee (if you think I'm wildly exaggerating, see the show) arising not from rarefied Europe, but from the caramel soil of the rural South in the form of women, descendants of slaves when Gee's Bend was a plantation.”

— NY Times, 2002 Art Review, Michael Kimmelman

# Gee's Bend Pricing

Article reports that Bill Arnett has purchased about 530 GB quilts over time. Average payment of \$275 per quilt – quilters say average payment is \$100 (New York Times article list a price that works out to around 2,400-this could include other fee's)

Arnett paid stipends of \$200-\$500 dollars a week to at least 20 quilters. Under this agreement he had first right of refusal for the quilts.

# Copyright

The quilts have become pop culture. Many people and companies are profiting off the popularity of the designs, yet the artists' behind them still live in poverty.

Artists Rights Society has been working to reclaim some copyright/royalty fees.

# Appreciation vs. Appropriation

Cultural appreciation is honoring and respecting another culture and its practices, as a way to gain knowledge and understanding.

Cultural Appropriation is the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society.

# “Inspiration”

What responsibility do we as quilters have?

Are you appropriating, stealing, or being inspired by other artists/makers work?

Legal vs. Ethical responsibilities

# Inspiration Laundering

- Pinterest
- Museums and Publishers
- Learning from, or being inspired by, well known white quilt teachers or makers that have been inspired by other cultures.
- Buying patterns or fabric that features appropriated content.
- Being inspired by commercial products that have been appropriated from other cultures. (e.g., Design Houses, Fashion Brands, Retail Chains)

**Thank you**