

## Presenting Fabric Griots

“This Woman’s Work, Unraveling the History of Quilts and Slavery”, is the quilting art of five extraordinary African American sisters, wives, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. They are Karen James, Roberta McClinton, Rachel Clark, Benita Jones, and Josephine Miles who collectively embody the spirit of African American quilters. They are “fabric griots” who pass their precious gifts and treasures imbued with history to a new generation.

A year ago, I along with Clarissa Moore, a community member, envisioned an exhibition that showcases women in our community whose craft flourished during the antebellum, and has been handed down, generation-to-generations. The women who quilt have compelling stories about how they came to the craft. For some, a family member gifted them the skills, while others learned quilting from a book or YouTube videos and embrace it as a retirement hobby.

Historically, in the African American community quilting and quilters has a long rich history in the United States. Although the reason for this is not part of the better part of U.S. history, the fact is that the spinning, weaving, sewing and quilting has been past down from generation to generation. These five women represent a very small but important part of the African American culture. In San Jose, where the African American community continues to decline, the culture continues among the population. These women are now our teachers. These women are now beholden of building the craft to the next generation. It is our hope that this exhibit inspires our communities to take hold of this important work.

For me, I inch toward the sunset of my second career and find myself circling back to what attracted me to this profession, community journalism, fifty years ago. This kind of journalism fascinates me, and I feel it’s been my calling to capture the stories of ordinary, unsung neighborhood folks, often the fabric of marginalized communities, in photographs and words.

I enjoy discovering the stories of people who make unheralded and unselfish contributions and who are rarely featured on the evening news or in daily papers. I am fortunate that the women welcomed my students and I into their circle, to hear their stories and to document their craft. I am thankful that the women agreed to displaying their craft.

The past two years of the Covid-19 pandemic has forced professors to reimagine their teaching practices. I teach visual communications. My challenges have been to reinvent student engagement that is uniquely, *visual*. In early 2021, these quilters spent a Saturday morning talking about the craft of quilting to me and the faces of my multimedia students. We were all captivated listening to the quilters weave their stories, tales, and lore behind a kaleidoscope of stitches, patches, and patterns.

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