

African-American Quilting and Ankara Fabric Traditions

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Intuit Design System

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*We stitch together quilts of meaning to keep us warm and safe,
with whatever patches of beauty and utility we have on hand.*

- Anne Lamott

A Little About Me:

- I've been quilting professionally for over ten years.
- I specialize in memory quilts that tell personal stories.
- I am an *overly enthusiastic* Atlanta United, Nottingham Forest, and Pittsburgh Steelers fan.

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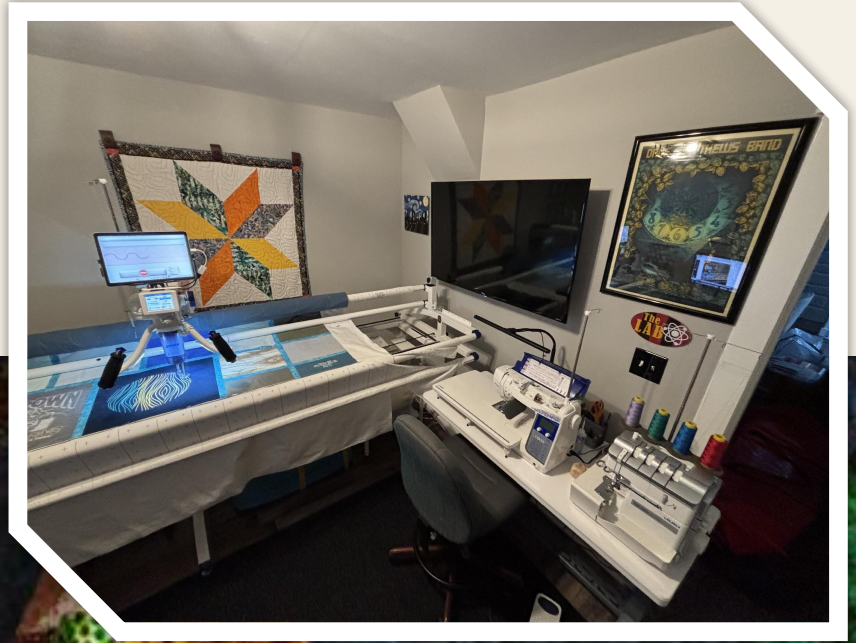
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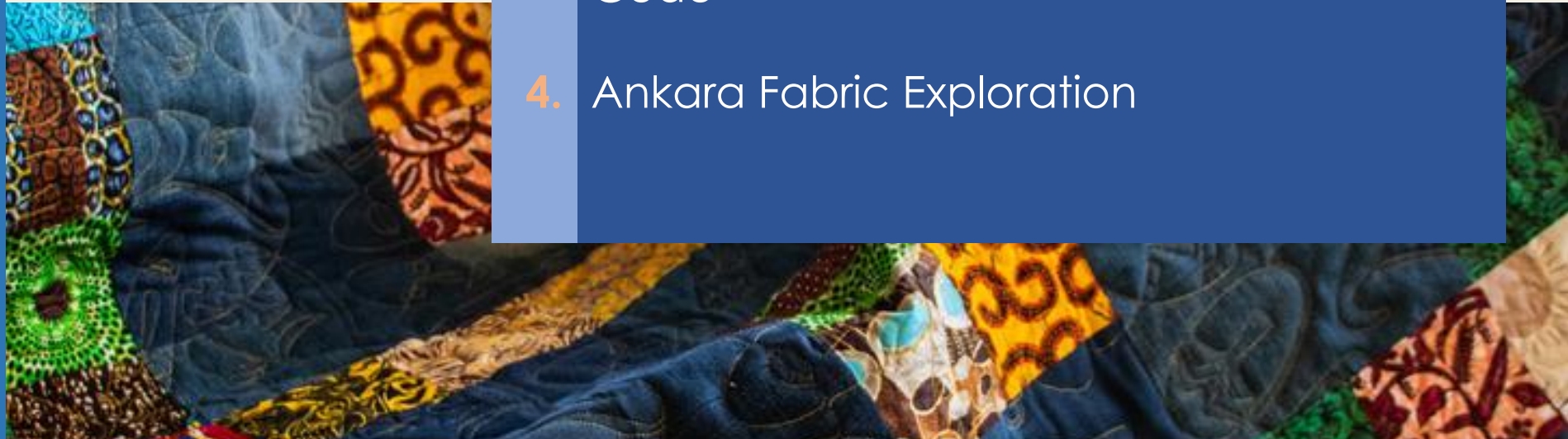


What is **your**
quilting
experience?



Our Agenda

1. African-American Quilt History and Traditions
2. African-American Quilt Pioneers
3. The Legend of the Underground Quilt Code
4. Ankara Fabric Exploration



African-American

Quilt History and Traditions

History

Enslaved women created quilts out of necessity using scraps of fabric, but they also infused their work with aesthetic sensibilities rooted in African design principles - bold colors, asymmetrical patterns, large shapes, and improvisational piecing that emphasized movement and rhythm over rigid geometric precision.

Traditions

The "strip quilting" method, where fabric is pieced in vertical strips rather than blocks, has direct parallels to textile traditions from West and Central Africa and became a distinctive hallmark of African American quilt design.

The Roots of a Tradition

A Heritage Born from Resilience

African American quilting is more than craft. It's a living archive of history, creativity, and resistance. Enslaved Africans brought textile traditions from their homelands, adapting them to new circumstances with remarkable ingenuity.

"Quilts are the stories we wrap ourselves in."

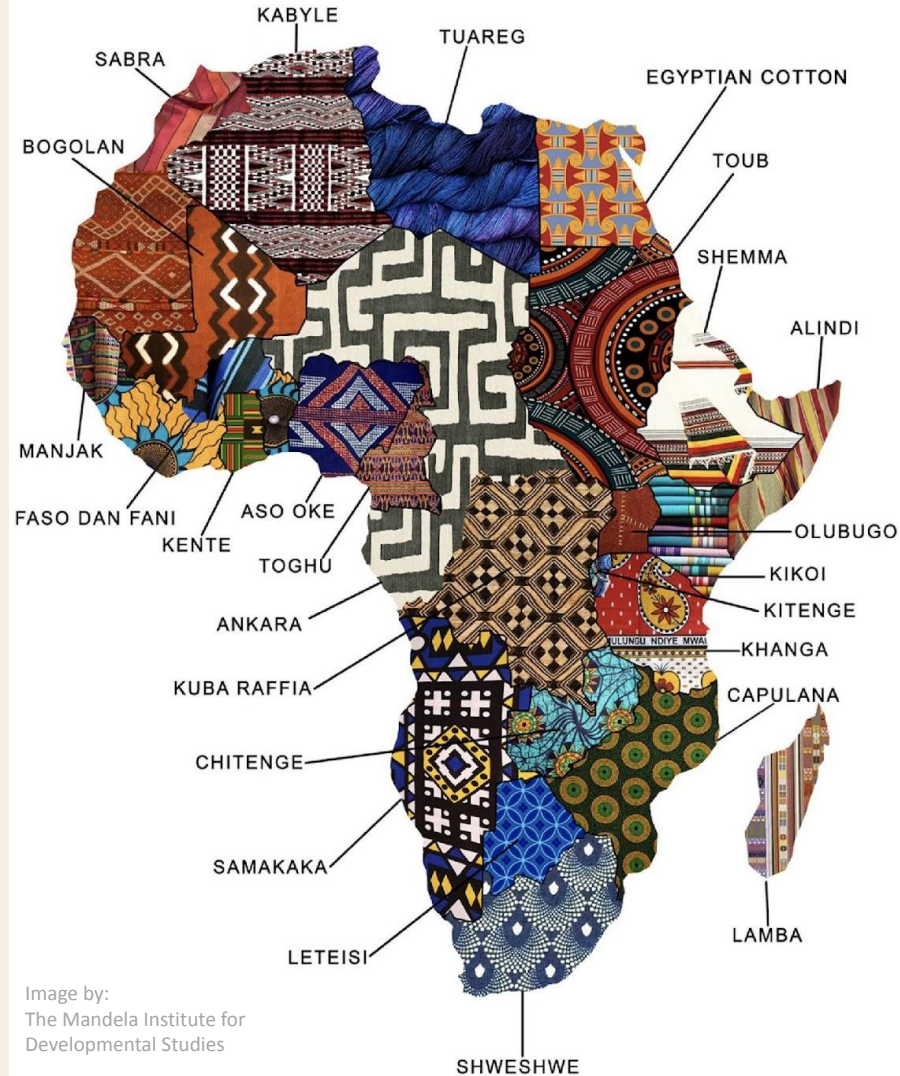


Image by:
The Mandela Institute for
Developmental Studies

West African Textile Heritage

Kente Cloth

Ghana's strip-woven fabric with symbolic colors and patterns representing proverbs, history, and social status.



Adinkra Symbols

Visual symbols from Ghana conveying concepts, proverbs, and wisdom - a language in pattern.



Appliqué Arts

The Fon people of Benin created elaborate appliqué banners telling stories of royalty and history.



These traditions traveled across the Atlantic, shaping the distinctive aesthetics of African American quilts.

African-American Quilt Pioneers

Early Pioneers

Rural communities across the South became incubators for quilting traditions, where geographic isolation allowed unique regional styles to flourish. Generations of quilters in these tight-knit communities developed signature approaches that were passed down through families, with techniques evolving organically over decades.

Modern Pioneers

When the broader art world eventually discovered these quilting traditions in the twentieth century, it sparked new appreciation for the artistic sophistication that had existed in these communities all along. Today's African American quilters build upon this foundation, honoring the pioneers who came before while continuing to push the art form in new directions- ensuring that this living tradition remains vibrant and evolving.



Harriet Powers

1837–1910 • *The Mother of Story Quilts*

americanhistory.si.edu



Born into slavery in Georgia, Harriet Powers created two surviving masterpiece quilts that are now in the Smithsonian and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Her Technique

- Appliqué figures on pieced backgrounds
- Biblical narratives and local legends
- Each panel tells a complete story
- Echoes West African appliqué tradition.

Her Legacy

Powers' Bible Quilt (1886) was the first quilt by an African American woman to be acquired by the Smithsonian.



Gee's Bend

Quilting Community • Boykin, Alabama

geesbend.org



In a remote bend of the Alabama River, generations of African American women created quilts unlike anything seen elsewhere.

The Gee's Bend Aesthetic

- "Wrong" becomes right - unexpected shifts in pattern
- Work clothes recycled into art
- Multiple generations quilting together
- No two quilts alike, even from same pattern

Recognition

- Quilts now in major art museums worldwide
- U.S. postage stamps (2006)

The Tradition Continues

Contemporary Black quilters carrying the legacy forward through narrative quilts.

[Faith Ringgold](#)

Story quilts that combine painting, quilted fabric, and narrative



[Bisa Butler](#)

Vibrant fabric portraits celebrating Black life and history

[Michael A. Cummings](#)

Narrative quilts exploring African American culture and history



[Gwen Magee](#)

Political and social commentary through quilted art



BISA BUTLER

Bisa Butler's "**I Go To Prepare A Place For You**" (2021) depicts Harriet Tubman and is one of her most powerful pieces. The quilt portrays Tubman in her iconic determined pose, rendered in Butler's signature style.

The Legend of the

Underground Railroad Quilt Code

The Story

According to this legend, quilts displayed on fence lines contained coded messages for freedom seekers. Specific quilt blocks indicated directions, warnings, and instructions for those escaping slavery via the Underground Railroad.

A Living Tradition

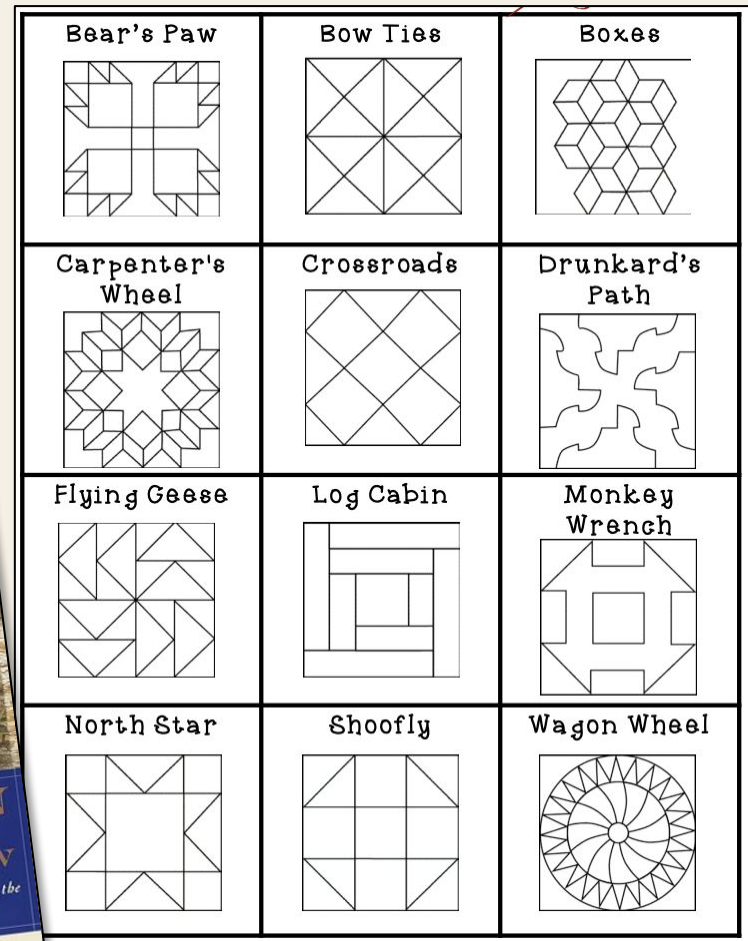
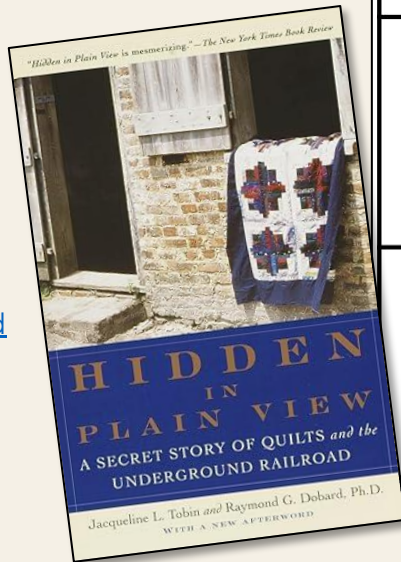
Whether historically documented or not, this legend celebrates the ingenuity of enslaved people and honors the quilting tradition as a potential vehicle for resistance and survival.

Freedom Blocks

Most of the quilt code legend comes from South Carolina quilter **Ozella McDaniel Williams** and the book *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*.

i For a more in-depth analysis:

- [Underground Railroad Quilt Patterns and Their Stories](#)
- [African American Quilt Traditions and the Legend of the Underground Railroad Quilts](#)



Exploration into African Print Fabric

The Story

African print fabric carries more than color. Every pattern in the Ankara and wax print tradition was developed inside a culture and shaped by a community's beliefs, by the names people gave their experiences, and by the values they wanted to pass forward.

Tradition vs Fact

Many interpretations have been passed down through oral tradition rather than any single written source. There are hundreds of African print styles we will cover a few styles today.

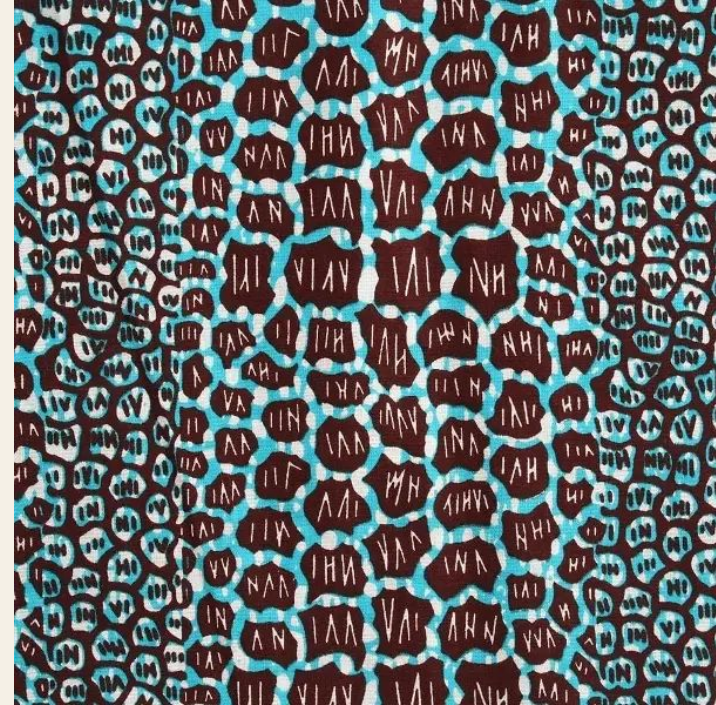
Kente

- Kente is not a printed fabric - it is woven, traditionally made on narrow strip looms by the Ashanti and Ewe peoples of Ghana.
- It is the textile most people think of first when they think of African fabric, and its symbolism is too important to leave out.
- Each color in Kente carries meaning.
 - Gold represents royalty and prosperity.
 - Blue stands for peace and love.
 - Green reflects growth and renewal.
 - Black signifies spiritual strength and maturity.
- The patterns themselves are named and connected to proverbs, historical events, or traditional beliefs.



Efie Mmosea

- Efie mmosea, which translates to "the gravel of the home" in Akan, speaks to the idea that when hurt comes from within the family, it cuts the deepest.
- Just like walking barefoot on stones, pain from a loved one can feel unexpected and sharp because it comes from a place where we expect comfort and safety.
- It is a visual reminder that home is not only a place of love, but also a space where deep emotional challenges can live.



Sugarcane

- Sugarcane represents sweetness after struggle, hard work, and the rewards of patience and perseverance.
- Sugarcane must be cultivated carefully and harvested with effort, but its natural sweetness is revealed only after the labor is done.
- This makes it a powerful symbol of hard work and meaningful reward.



For more information...

Check out the blog post:

bit.ly/print-fabrics

Get the presentation:

bit.ly/quilt-traditions





Appendix

What Is a Quilt?

A quilt is made of three parts.

The “quilt sandwich”:

1. Quilt Top
2. Batting
3. Backing

**** All Blankets are *not* quilts.**



Batting

The insulating middle layer.

- **Sandwiched between the quilt top and the backing.**
- **Provides warmth, thickness, and softness to the finished quilt.**



Batting Terms

How a quilt feels and performs.

- **Loft**
The puffiness of the quilt.
- **Drape**
The way the quilt lays.
- **Shrinkage**
How the quilt looks after washing.



Batting Types

Specialty types include wool, bamboo, and silk.

- **Cotton**
soft, low loft, good drape.
- **Polyester**
durable, non-shrinking,
low to high loft.
- **Cotton / Poly Blend**
combines softness and
durability.



Backing

The bottom layer typically made from a single piece of fabric.

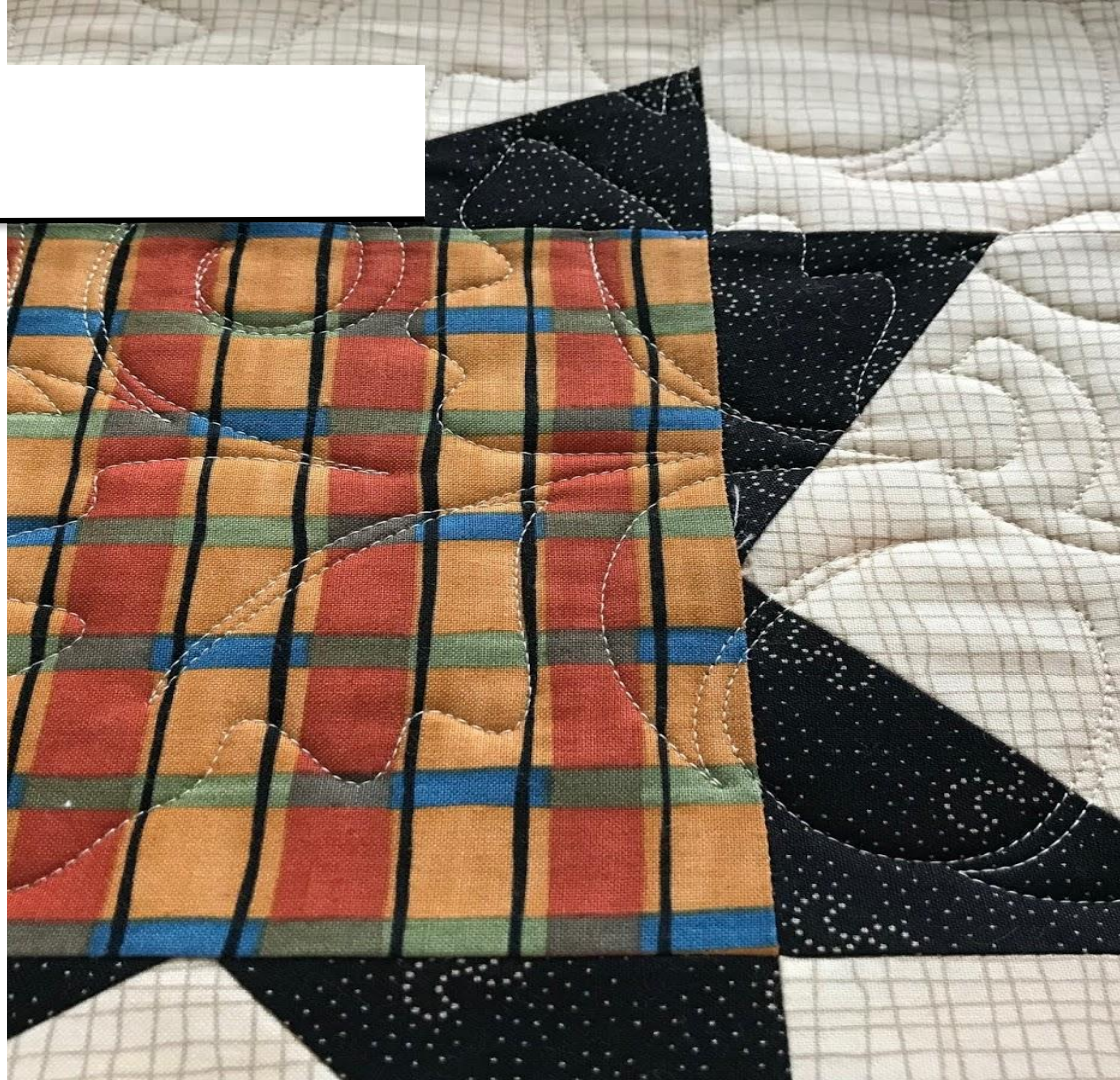
- **Standard fabric is 42 - 45 inches wide.**
- **Quilt backing is 90 - 108 inches wide.**



Quilting

Putting your quilt sandwich together.

- **Hand Quilting**
Very time consuming.
- **Machine Quilting**
Free motion or straight stitching.
- **Longarming**
Requires a specialized machine.



Longarming

Precise control for your pantographs.

- **Throat Space**
 - Domestic: 6"-9"
 - Longarm: 16" – 30"
- **No Basting**
- **Software Control**
Longarm machines can sew patterns from file downloads.



Binding

Binding covers the raw edges of your quilt.

- **Make your own binding from 2½ inch strips or buy ½ inch double fold bias tape.**
- **The are *lots* of binding techniques.**

