

Transcript of radio documentary: African- American Quilting by Ora Kirkland and Virginia Hall

Quilting is the ancient process of stitching two pieces of fabric together with an insulating material inside. The piecing of bed coverlets and quilting came to the United States with the colonists, and has always served two purposes—for warmth and for beauty. Africans brought to America were taught this skill to provide households with needed bedding, and for their own use they incorporated African design concepts into their making. For Voices of New York Traditions, Ginger Miles spoke with African-American quilters Ora Kirkland and Virginia Hall.

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Ginger Miles: Both quilters have had as many of their quilts exhibited on the walls of museums as they have in the private homes of family and friends. When we spoke, Virginia Hall had been asked to enter one of her quilts in a contest in Tokyo. Ora Kirkland showed me three of her exhibition quilts. *Courthouse Steps* was worked during the Clinton impeachment hearings. There is a quilt depicting the story of the American civil rights movement, and Ora's portrait quilt of African-American musicians.

Ora Kirkland: Well, the quilts across the room I call "Mus-Africa No. 2." It deals with music and all of the portraits on there are people that I think have Africa in their ancestors. That's the way I figured it out. During the Depression salesmen went around selling men's suits, and they would give away the sample cards which had a little square of fabric on it. And certain areas in South Carolina I know there were knitting mills and they gave away uh, scraps, or you could buy bags of scraps. You'd reach down in the bag, get a piece, cut it out, put it down. I guarantee you there was no color matching. That's why many of the African-American quilts come up with innovative designs. It just happens that something came out that matched. [laughs] And if it didn't match they had an explanation for it. And that is their right to be different. I followed all of the happenings that had to do with our last President, William Jefferson Clinton. Impeachment hearings. So I watched the television and I worked on my quilt. When it was all over I said, 'cause I had said in the beginning, you're not going to impeach him, and when this is all over I will have a quilt.

Virginia Hall: Quilts are visions of life. Quilts tell stories about our actual lives.

Miles: Virginia Hall teaches the art of quilting to others, as her mother did for her, fifty years ago.

Hall: And my mother, of course I was her shadow. Wherever she went I followed her. So my mother decided to put me to work and my mother was the one that taught me quilting and she started me out at 7 years of age. My mother made clothing for all of her children. And the pieces that were left over, she would always say, "Waste not, want not," so she would always figure out how to do something with the pieces. And you

would find in the quilts that my mother would make, silk, organdy, corduroy, denim would be all in the same quilt and it was called like a crazy quilt. And we could walk around the bed and say, "There's my dress, there's my shirt, there's my pants, there's my--." The children loved doing that. Seeing their clothing in the quilt. My mother would use cotton, and we would take like a bush type thing and just beat the cotton until the seeds come out. And we would, we didn't call it batting, we just called it stuffing. And my mother would have people to come over, there was, uh, like people in the community would come over, three or four ladies, and my mother would have the quilt on four chairs. And the women would sit and start from the center of the quilt. And that's how it was done. And the quilts that my mother would make would be like lead, they were so heavy [laughs]. It would take two men to get the water out of it when you washed it because it was so heavy. And then my mother would have my father and my brother to squeeze it out, and then they would put it on the fence. And sometimes it would stay on the fence two days getting dry [laughs]. And I always thought it was such a joy in the house, to have this quilting thing going on. I enjoyed it I think more than my mother and the people who were doing the quilting. I loved it. I just liked being around the quilt. I don't know what it was, was just probably meant to be that I was to be, there quilting.

Ginger Miles: For the New York Folklore Society, I'm Ginger Miles.