

Cozy and warm

While quilts are undoubtedly practical, a new exhibit shows that this emerging art form is also a unique form of social commentary

BY SHANNON SWEAT

AUGUSTA, GA - With winter right around the corner, doesn't it seem a good time to gain a new appreciation for quality bedclothes? No, I don't mean hitting up Wal-Mart for a new fleece blanket.

I'm talking about The Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History's African-American Quilt Exhibition. A quilt is a blanket, after all, right? Well, yes and no, according to the museum's executive director, Christine Miller-Betts.

She admits that, when people began making them, quilts were largely used as a means for keeping warm. Yet, she also calls attention to a growing number of people whose interest in quilts revolves around their aesthetic value. Included in this movement is Miller-Betts herself, who quite excitedly refers to the process of quilt-making as "an emerging art."

While there are practical reasons for making quilts (warmth), as well as not-so-practical ones (decoration), the significant social aspect of this activity should not be overlooked.

Miller-Betts herself recalls a time when many of the community's women would travel from house to house, working on quilts as a group. After the crops were in and the children's clothes were sewn, the women needed something to do.

"They couldn't work outside," she explains, "so they would work on these quilts together."

She adds though part of the story was creating something beautiful, there was another part that emphasized fellowship. Museum guide and professional historian Corey Rogers agrees, offering that many of the quilts on exhibit "represent family and community."

Some, Rogers says, are actually dedicated to the family members of the artists themselves. He adds that quilts are often seen as a way of "tying generations together." Rogers furthermore points to the "overriding themes and symbolism, [especially] of the Underground Railroad," of the quilts at this year's exhibit.

In fact, two of the quilts featured this year, nearly identical in pattern, are titled "The Underground Railroad." Each tells a story, through both symbols and words, of the legendary quest for freedom undertaken by a vast number of slaves. One of these was created and contributed by members of Beulah Grove Baptist Church.

Another featured quilt, titled "Black Heritage," serves as a tribute to several African-American leaders and revolutionists: Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr. and Sojourner Truth included.

Such historical and obviously heartfelt pieces account for another important aspect of quilt-making — the meaning that the maker sets out to convey, whether it be personal or speaks on behalf of an entire population.

Among the included quilts are ones by Barbara Golden (a retired educator interested in preservation) and Pollie Stevenson (Miller-Betts' sister). In addition to the identified quilters, several others remain anonymous, having donated their quilts to the museum for general use.

The African-American Quilt Exhibition, first conceived in 1991, is an excellent and unrivalled opportunity to polish up on history. And with the inclusion of local quilt-makers, it should be all that more interesting.

The African-American Quilt Exhibition

Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History

Oct. 1-Nov. 30

\$5 for adults; \$3 for seniors; \$2 for children

706-724-3576

lucycraftlaneymuseum.com