Written by Bruce Carter
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Leonardo da Vinci was famous for improvising poetry while playing the lute. Mozart and Beethoven were legendary for their spontaneous piano inventions. And blues and jazz musicians have always loved the ability to create new combinations of music or words while playing.

Accidentally on Purpose: Improvisation in African Textiles & African-American Quilts, a magnificent exhibition at the Figge Art Museum, demonstrates this gift of improvisation, of turning a traditional form into a fresh and unique creation. And like great musicians, these quilt artists sew a piece together with their own original and surprising harmonies.

Accept the Accidental

Quilts have long been held in low esteem in the art world. They contain few realistic images. They were made in the home, like a craft, and were created generally by women who had never gone to the art academies. At best their work was the result of a hobby, or a social function that allowed them to gather and make something warm and decorative for their families for the winter. How could they be making art?

If the log cabins or early wooden homes caught fire, the quilts were soaked in the water of the rain barrel and thrown over the flames. When they got old and out of fashion, they were

sometimes discarded or stuffed in a bureau. It wasn't until the 20th Century that we discovered that quilts were extraordinary creations, worth admiring, and most definitely "art."

Some collectors, among them Eli Leon, the curator of this exhibition, realized their unique beauty. Leon began collecting them more than 30 years ago from all across our country and has amassed 3,000 quilts and African textiles, gathered from African-American artists in southern Arkansas, California, east Texas, and northern Louisiana. He has interviewed more than 100 of these quilt-makers and has archived their spoken words at the University of Nebraska libraries in Lincoln.

Quilt-makers come from two traditions. The first is the European style with which we are all familiar: the standard quilt that was measured, cut, and assembled precisely according to traditional patterns, allowing little room for improvisation. Many people cook by adhering strictly to a recipe, and the results are often wonderful.

The second tradition, the patchwork style on display in this exhibit, has been passed down by African-American quilt-makers through aural and visual examples. Their work shows a strong link with African Bakuba textile designs and aesthetics, some examples of which are included in *Accidentally on Purpose*. These modern quilt artists rely on their instinct, accept the accidental, measure approximately, and delight in improvisation. We all know people who cook like *this*, and the results can be wonderful, too.

Singing Colors

This exhibition, presenting 100 pieces from 60 quilters, occupies the third and fourth floors of the Figge. When we first enter the huge gallery, we immediately notice the enormous size of many pieces displayed on the walls. They seem made for giants, but they were intended to hang over the edges of a big bed on all sides to the floor.

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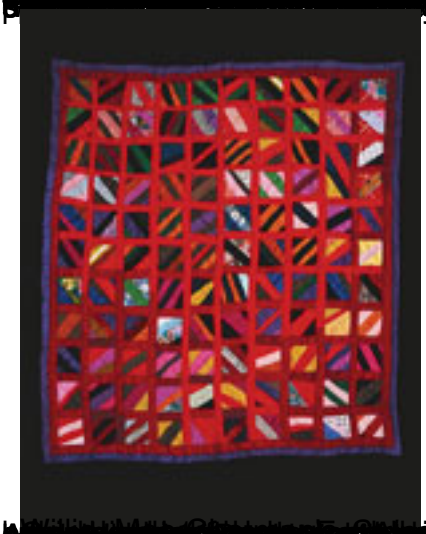

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