

Threads of Persistence
Pamela Weeks, New England Quilt Museum
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Summary by Briannah Plasse

Throughout history, textiles have been used in storytelling. Often the textile of choice was a tapestry. Used to decorate the walls of the wealthy, they symbolized status and power and related fables and historic accounts. It was not until the Middle Ages that the first story-telling quilt appeared. The Tristan Quilt tells the story of the warrior Tristan and his victory over the King of Ireland. In the US colonies, the first quilt did not appear until the 1600s. Quilts were originally luxury items invented for warmth or for gifts to loved ones and revered community members. It wasn't until after the Revolution that they became tools in politics and activism.

In the early 1800s, inscriptions and images on quilts helped spread messages and raise money for social movements. Common themes included patriotism, temperance, and women's rights. The Anti-Slavery Quilt, created by Lydia Maria Child in 1837, was inscribed with the poem "Remember the Slave". This quilt raised support for the abolitionist movement and was featured in *The Liberator*, Boston's abolitionist newspaper. That article showcased items for sale at anti-slavery fairs put on by the Boston Female Antislavery Society. Quilts such as these were known as "fundraising quilts" and helped raise money and awareness for the cause.

Fundraising quilts also played a key role in aiding women's right to vote. Like the "Suffrage Fundraising Quilt," they often contained hundreds of names of those who donated in support of women's suffrage. Although women could not yet vote, in the mid-1800s they used campaign ribbons in their quilts to display the political preferences of their husbands. Quilting continued to play an important role in the lives of women. In the mid 1900s, Jean Ray Laury recognized the potential in quilting and used it to visualize feminist causes. Her quilts addressed sexuality and women's right to choose, while her books helped teach an art to females struggling with their changing societal roles.

Recently, a group of fiber artists called The Artists Circle organized a quilt exhibit in response to the Trump Administration. They received over 500 submissions addressing topics such as gun violence, immigration, LGBT rights, racism, and sexual assault. The group felt as though they had to take a stand against oppression and take part in political activism. The quilts use strong visuals as well as language to challenge both the administration and society. "Dear Mr. Trump" depicts a full-frontal nude of a woman flipping the bird. The artist, Neroli Henderson, writes to Trump that she is "more than a collection of my parts" and addresses current issues with sexual assault and women's rights. Capitol Guns is a particularly strong piece by Ellen November which shows the capitol building constructed from an array of firearms. She pleads, "change the capital building from a house of guns to a house of reason". This piece is strongly related to the current movement against gun violence after a school shooting in the US earlier this year.

The Threads of Resistance exhibit and its 67 pieces originated at the New England Quilt Museum, and it will continue to travel the country throughout 2019. This exhibit is just one example of how women (and men) have used textile art to express their anger, fear, concern, and feelings for difficult topics. There has been a recent revival of quilting among younger generations that has helped create a nine-billion dollar business. These artists will continue to challenge society and the government while fighting for rights, safety, and change.