

Making the Argument: Remember our Foremothers

By Dr. Marcia Bost

In celebration of the USA's 250th birthday, commentary mostly highlights what historian and documentarian Ken Burns called "Great Men, capital G, capital M."ⁱ

In contrast, the East Cobb Quilters' Guild of the Atlanta, GA, metro area used their skill and passion for quilting to celebrate the nation's foremothers. In doing so, they built on the nineteenth-century rhetorical move: women using quilts to communicate what Hedges, Ferrero, and Silber call "public narratives." By doing so, both those foremothers and the current quilters in this exhibit become "active agents in important historical change."ⁱⁱ In this case, they are celebrating *Matrriotism Challenge*.

The result is 62 quilts celebrating women's achievements exhibited through July and early August 2026, at the Southeastern Quilt and Textile Museum in Carrollton, GA. Upcoming exhibits include Booth Western Art Museum, Cartersville, GA, Nov. 7-Feb. 7, 2027, Marietta Cobb Museum of Art, Marietta, GA, April 10-June 20, 2027; and Georgia Museum of Agriculture, Tifton, GA, Sept. 11—Dec. 10, 2027. All the quilts can also be viewed at the East Cobb Quilters' Guild web site: <https://ecqg.com/matrriotism/>

As a retired teacher of rhetoric, I appreciate the point that these quilters are making: women—both collectively and individually—deserve to be remembered as an important part of making our country great. Some quilters in this exhibit tried to encompass more than one woman's achievements. Twenty-four *First American Women* are celebrated by Joella Molway, with lace and thumbnail photos and other motifs in a square for each one. Steve Agnello also reached for an overall view by creating irregular spikes radiating from a central hub with names and contributions. His artist statement explains his concept of *matrriotism* as being the opposite of *patriotism*, which leads to militarism, quoting anti-war activist Cindy Sheehan. Bringing the historical story together, Mary Ellen Von Holt paired images of Rosie the Riveter from World War II with LeMoyne stars representing the 13 original colonies.

The technical brilliance of these quilts almost goes without saying. Techniques range from the white three-word phrase of "Yes, we can" in English and Spanish on a solid red background, (created by Robin Meyer in honor of activist Dolores Huerta) to pixilated squares for the Statue of Liberty that can only be clearly seen at a distance or on a cell phone photo, made by Robin Schick. Lady Liberty also received homage from Kathleen Ciarochi, who pieced the spikes in her crown, which I would find difficult to do.

The overwhelming impression is of the faces of individual women from the famous like Rosalynn Carter and Dolly Parton to the lessor known like Nancy Hart. Hart was the Georgia woman who helped burn her home rather than let the British soldiers use it during the fight for independence. Hart is remembered in black and white traditional blocks by Rose Haisty. Carter is depicted by Margaret Williams on a background of scrappy log cabins and surrounded by computer printed butterflies.

Dolly Parton is honored with four quilts. Her face and spiky hair are appliquéd on a quilt by Donna Stanley, along with a guitar and a quote about being brave enough to try. Other Parton quilts include a large patchwork guitar by Bobette Robinson and a large butterfly by Chris Price in honor of Parton's spread of literacy and love around the world. Perhaps Parton's best remembered song "A Coat of Many Colors" is celebrated in multi-colored patchwork by Alexa Morrison.

One of the more dominant faces is that of Rachel Carson who wrote *Silent Spring*. Machine pieced and quilted by Gail Scogin, the quilted contour lines of her face express her concern for the environment. Georgia environmentalist writer Janisse Ray is also celebrated with a nature scene composed of traditional blocks with appliquéd kayakers on an endangered river. The environment is also featured in *Whispering Coral*, a quilt by Janet Schwerzel in honor of Sarah Davies, a scientist and educator. The appliqué coral is featured on a pieced blue and turquoise background. The beautifying campaign of Lady Bird Johnson is remembered by Linda Bailey, who used squares in blue, green and flowers to represent *America the Beautiful*.

The techniques of depicting the faces range from fabric printed photos by Dorteia Lange to appliqué contouring for many of the faces. Made by Ann Banes, the quilt remembering Lange features nine photos scattered on a field of broken circles. Quilter Ruth Chow found an innovative way of representing a face, by using words and fonts and saturation that depict the face of Harriet Beecher Stowe, anti-slavery writer.

JoEllen Holmes included an appliqué cameo of Jane Addams, a photo printed on fabric, and motifs representing her work as a social activist. In her portrait of Lettie Pate Whitehead Evans, Joan Roeber-Jones used appliqué and ink shading for the face. Embroidery quote from this businesswoman and philanthropist gives the context of her contributions to society.

Dissent, or at least pushing against the traditional roles of women, emerged as a theme of this exhibit. Most obviously, *Dissent in Stitches—a quilted tribute to RBG* by Allison Mody, celebrates the Supreme Court tenure of Ruth Bader Ginsberg. Machine pieced and quilted, it shows Ginsburg's face and shoulders and her iconic lace collar. Reflecting the struggle for women's voting rights, *Thank you, Grandmother!* by Ginger Heusinkveld replicates a suffragette poster

urging the voter registration. Suffragettes were also honored by Susan Bertrand, who embroidered names and dates on a quilt featuring star blocks. In bold words, Beth Ann Andrews also tries to rewrite the definition of “woman” by demanding that biological men who identify as women be accepted.

Frances Perkins was celebrated by two quilters who noted that she was secretary of labor for President Franklin Roosevelt. Both Linda Agnello and Chris Ison included appliqué face, photos and motifs from Perkins’s life. In another political homage, a small photo of Eleanor Roosevelt centers a quilt with her favorite blocks depicting her garden at Val-Kill, made by Cherie Tatro.

African Americans were given their due in this exhibit. Harriet Tubman was strongly represented. Linda DeMaris included a silhouette surrounded by blocks associated with the underground railroad identified in a pattern by Eleanor Burns and Sue Bouchard, according to the artist’s statement. Holly Lightfoot-Sheehan depicted Tubman’s face and shoulders on a plain background. Georgia quilter Harriet Powers was honored with a scene reminiscent of her Bible Quilt which is in the Smithsonian American History Museum. Quilter Nancy Hutchison hand dyed the background and titled the quilt the same as a quote from Powers and a book title by Kyra Hicks: *This I Accomplish*.

Ode to Alice Walker features the silhouette of an African American seamstress at a pedal-operated sewing machine. Quilt patterns form the carpet, her skirt, and the art on the wall. This tribute to the author of *The Color Purple* was made by Melinda Rushing.

Lois Curtis, African American artist and disability rights activist, is portrayed in a quilt by Marion Curry with multiple images and the title *I dream all people is my family*.

A uniform and letters point to the achievements of Charity Adams Earley, who was the first African American Woman to serve as an officer in the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps in World War II. A companion quilt by Kim Beasley and Joyce Taylor honors the entire battalion that Major Adams led, with stars and a silhouette of three women in an envelope, noting their service in delivering the mail to military service members.

Artists and performers are another group that is celebrated. A quilt honoring artist Agnes Northrop, made by Vickie Lord, replicates stained glass like the designs that Northrop worked on at the Tiffany Studio. Artist Georgia O’Keeffe was also honored with iconic images from her work and the phrase “to see takes time,” made by Carla Gracen. African American artist Alma Woodsey Thomas was honored in a quilt showing concentric stones made by Andrea Barrett. Quilt artists Freddy Moran and Gwen Marston are celebrated by Linda Bailey with rows of bright traditional blocks with creative changes.

Three quilts pointed to the influence of Girl Scouts: *Sweet Indulgence* by Alik Strakes, *Badges for Daisy* by Laura Boyd (a wholecloth quilt in Scout green fabric) and *Juliette Gordon Low* by Margaret Williams, which featured a uniform and sash with badges.

Other quilts also used images and motifs pointing to the woman's achievements. Frances Fister's quilt remembering Julia Ward Howe features the words and music of the Civil War battle hymn that she wrote. *Julia's Kitchen* by Louise Clynes features a series of copper pots hung on the wall of celebrity Julia Child. The inventor of Toll House chocolate chip cookies, Ruth Wakefield, was honored with a scene including her and a pan of cookies, in a quilt made by Ellen Apte.

Women's achievements in math, science and medicine form a major part of the exhibit. Small squares in some pattern of light and dark, in a quilt made by Susan Eisen, represent the work of Grace Hopper, computer scientist, mathematician, and Navy Rear Admiral. She worked with early computer programs and perhaps the colors that look random actually represent that pattern of ones and zeros that underlie all of computer work. Another computer scientist, Margaret Hamilton, is represented by space motifs on a black background, commemorating her work on NASA software. This quilt was made by Kim Jenkins. In a quilt by Ben Hollingsworth, Christa McAuliffe, the teacher who died in the Challenger accident, is remembered with a newspaper clipping, a classroom watching the launch and a red brick school building on a field of sky blue. In another space related quilt, astronaut and physicist Sally Ride is honored by Devon Pfeif with an appliquéd face and shoulders, the planets, and picture of her books. A green board symbolizes Ride's outreach to students.

Lesser known women who also received their due included Union nurse Mary Anne Bickerdyke, by Merle Anderson, with words on scrappy blue background. The photo of Georgia nurse Emilu Fox was incorporated into a quilt by Emilu Bailes (her granddaughter); the reproduction of a newspaper article notes that she served in World War I. Atlanta pediatrician Leila Alice Denmark is honored with a silhouette and stethoscope layered over a North Georgia woodland cabin, made by Wendy Blanton. Another Georgia doctor, Luella Klein-Colquitt is honored with a pink toned photo surrounded by a wreath of flowers. Maker Pamela Cobb notes Klein-Colquitt was the first female department chair at Emory School of Medicine, as well as other accolades.

The native American women are not forgotten. Sally Joerger quilted circles patterned after trade beads to remember Sacagawea, who led explorers Clark and Lewis through the West. Maria Tallchief, celebrated ballerina who fought against discrimination, is remembered by her face and a dancing figure on a stage with velvet curtains. This quilt was made by Lisa Feinberg. Similarly, Georgia-born singer and civil rights activist Jessye Norman is remembered with an appliquéd profile by Mary Maynard.

The faces of many women are not remembered by history, but they are represented in this exhibit. Leigh Ann Kloefkorn used couched cotton thread over a collection of traditional patchwork to show the black outline of a wagon headed west. Lenée Sparks honored her mother Beverly Emerson with a quilt featuring appliquéd flowers with traditional pastel borders. Another tribute to mothers is Jan Cunningham's quilt using embroidery on a blue and white Irish chain quilt that is remnant of one made by her grandmother.

Thanks to our Foremothers by Carolyn Powers features motifs of sports and education and business as well as homemaking. Written history on a side panel points to women seizing the four freedoms of Norman Rockwell; a printed panel of Rockwell's illustrations is on the back.

While I appreciated the spotlighting of women's achievements, especially in the last 50 years, I found my most emotional response was to those quilts that reminded us of unsung women who kept the country going. For example, *Use it up, Wear it out, Make it do, or Do without*, made by Liz Laxson and the St. Michael the Archangel Quilters, features scrappy nine-patches that show the resilience of Depression era mothers who quilted beauty out of left over scraps. I am reminded of my grandmother who also pieced a scrappy Double Four Patch that I studied in the previous AQSG study challenge. I also loved *Nanmo's Legacy*, which had multicolored and patterned feathers embellished with lace, yo-yos, ribbon, beads, and buttons and which honors the mother of quilter Evelyn Kennedy. Yes, let's honor our mothers and mentors who taught us to express ourselves with fabric and thread.

Now retired, Dr. Marcia Bost taught college composition for 27 years. She recently presented a talk on how quilts communicate at the Southeastern Quilt and Textile Museum. Her master's thesis on "Quilts as Visual Texts" can be accessed on Google Scholar.



ⁱ Rachael Barrett. "Ken Burns has Collected More than 100 Antique Quilts" *Country Living* July 2026, MSN.com via Facebook. Accessed July 15, 2026

ⁱⁱ Elaine Hedges, Pat Ferrero, and Julie Silber. *Heart and Hand: The Influence of Women and Quilts in American Society*. San Francisco. The Quilt Digest press, 1987. 11