

***Quilts: Conscience of the Human Spirit: The Life of Nelson Mandela: Tributes by Quilt Artists from South Africa and the United States.* Marsha MacDowell and Carolyn L. Mazloomi. East Lansing: Michigan State University Museum, 2014. 107 pp. [Distributed by Indiana University Press.]\***

Reviewed by Teri Klassen

The eighty-one works in this exhibition catalogue commemorate Nelson Mandela (1918-2013), a Xhosa chief's son who attended a Methodist school, spent twenty seven years in prison for resisting South Africa's Dutch colonial apartheid system, was elected its first black head of state in 1994, and won the Nobel Peace Prize with his white predecessor, F. W. de Klerk. The exhibition's first showing was July 24-26, 2014, at International Quilt Convention Africa in Johannesburg. A smaller version traveled to the Kentucky Museum in Bowling Green and was at the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio, until early October 2016.

Members of the United States-based Women of Color Quilters Network (WCQN) made fifty-three of the works, one with a student group (64). The Michigan State University (MSU) Museum website shows most of them.<sup>1</sup> South African artists made twenty-eight of the works, in two cases with community development groups, and in one with a craft artists cooperative (24, 25, 46). Eight are in the traveling exhibition.<sup>2</sup>

Co-author-curator Carolyn L. Mazloomi, an independent scholar, founded the WCQN in 1986 and in 2016 entered the Quilters Hall of Fame. Among the forty-six honorees, named since 1979, she is the first African American. In expressing social justice values through quilting, this project extends a longstanding theme of co-author and curator Marsha MacDowell's research, which embraces Native American, African American, and women's traditional arts. She is an MSU professor, MSU Museum curator, folklorist, director of The Quilt Index online archive, and lead author of the 2016 book, *Quilts and Human Rights* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press).

Three short statements open the volume, one by the co-authors, one by Nelson Mandela Museum officials Pumeza Mandela and Noel Solani, and one by University of California-Los Angeles Vice Provost Patricia A. Turner, herself a quilt scholar. Two essays follow. In "Mandela: His Life and Legacy in Thread," MacDowell discusses several pre-exhibition quilts made in the US and South Africa to honor Mandela and the anti-apartheid movement (6-11). In "Women of Color Quilters Network: Our Tributes to Nelson Mandela," Mazloomi discusses the group's origin and mission ("We all shared the same sense of isolation from the mainstream quilt community" [14]), African American quilting historically, and the bond between the South African and US civil rights movements (14-21).

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The body of the book is the “Quilt Tributes” (22-105). This section devotes one page to each quilt, and on that page are a color photograph and comments. As a group they are visually stimulating, emotionally moving, and diverse in combinations of design elements such as color scheme, images, materials and techniques, symbolism, and verbal messages. On the one hand, they each express the artist’s vision and experiences. In “Letter to Mama Lochner,” Mari Claasé publicizes the plight of a Western Cape school that is “part of Nelson Mandela’s legacy—the uplifting of troubled youths,” that may close due to loss of funding; in which case “these boys will be sent back to jail” (40). Jill Krog’s “Inspirations” uses Mandela images, “some never before published,” that her newspaper photographer son took “in a personal capacity” (68). In “Mandela Comes to Motown,” Hilda Vest recalls his speech at Detroit’s Tiger Stadium, “and he capped it with a brief rendition of the Toyi-Toyi, a dance of revolution and celebration” (95). On the other hand, recurring images and construction techniques point to overlapping symbolic and art-quilt realms among South African and WCQN makers. Many works incorporate Mandela’s face or body; his prisoner number; his spoken or written words; people with different skin colors; raised fists; rainbow colors; wild-animal prints; the green, gold, and black of Mandela’s African National Congress (ANC) party; and the South African flag adopted in 1994, joining ANC colors to the red, blue, and white of Dutch and British flags. Recurring fabric-art techniques include photo-transfer; non-fabric materials such as beads, buttons, carved wooden figures, crystals, glue, paint, sequins, and tassels; free-motion machine-quilting; and raw-edge appliqué (cloth pieces sewn to a background without turning the edges under). Clearly, artists in both regions hold Mandela in high esteem and draw from contemporary fabric art, popular culture, and traditional art (piecing, appliqué, quilting, embroidering, beading).

Whereas Mazloomi’s essay gives historical background on the WCQN, the book provides none for the South African quilt artists’ organizations. Such an essay could have explained the apparent social-justice orientation of the South African Quilters’ Guild and Fibreworks artists’ group and perhaps given insight into why most South African works in this invited exhibition are by whites, in contrast to most of the US works being by blacks. Captions do not list racial identity, although it is obvious from some artist commentaries; as one who considers it relevant in interpreting these works, I found this information on many artists through Google. The book’s inside front cover cites *The Quilt Index*<sup>3</sup> as a source of expanded artist information, but as of this writing this information had not been entered.

The exhibition process also is not addressed, including the distinctive approach of inviting certain artists to create works on a given theme and the guidelines that artists apparently received. Janet Waring, for instance, writes, “so when quilters were invited to contribute a quilt I made a version that would fit into the specifications required” (99). Folklorist Roland L. Freeman used this invitational approach in his 2009 show, “Quilts for Obama.”<sup>4</sup> It featured many WCQN artists and two from South Africa.<sup>5</sup>

Referring to “the first known American quilts to celebrate heroes” in an introductory statement, Turner notes that “an integrated quilt guild commemorated the ex-slave abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman” in the 1950s. However, she does not discuss how nineteenth- and early twentieth-century makers honored presidents, military heroes, the leader of an 1894 march by the unemployed, and others (5).<sup>6</sup>

Several aspects of this project uphold true-to-Mandela principles of equality and collaboration across social groups: the racial and national mix of artists, white and black curators, quilt presentation order (alphabetical by artists' last names, emphasizing individual over national and racial identity), and the exception to the alphabetical order of putting two black-white collaborative works first. But social-group differences are implicit in its artist base: many works are by US blacks but few by US whites (I found four, including one Chicana [50, 71, 102, 104]); many are by South African whites but few by South African blacks (I counted one [78] aside from the three black-white collaborations); many are by women but few by men (34, 88); and many are by professional people but few by working-class makers. The existence of the WCQN is itself evidence of difference. Proactive projects such as this one promote opportunities for people with social-group differences to intersect on common ground, in this case, their admiration for a visionary charismatic leader and participation in an expressive textile genre.

## Notes

1. "Conscience of the Human Spirit: The Life of Nelson Mandela," accessed February 21, 2017, <http://museum.msu.edu/museum/tes/ConscienceMandela.htm>.
2. "Conscience Mandela-8," accessed February 21, 2017, <http://museum.msu.edu/museum/tes/ConscienceMandela/ConscienceMandela-8.htm>.
3. "The Quilt Index," accessed February 21, 2017, <http://www.quiltindex.org/index.php>.
4. "Quilts for Obama: An Exhibit Celebrating the Inauguration of Our 44th President," accessed February 21, 2017, <https://www.gwu.edu/~action/2008/chrninau08/quiltsforobama.html>.
5. "South African quilts in Washington DC for Obama inauguration," accessed February 21, 2017, <http://www.artthrob.co.za/09feb/news/obama.html>.
6. See, for instance, Sue Reich's 2016 book, *Quilts Presidential and Patriotic* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing).

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