

Quilts and Human Rights.* Marsha MacDowell, Mary Worrall, Lynne Swanson, and Beth Donaldson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. 210 pp.

Reviewed by Susan Roach

Quilts and Human Rights, an important addition to quilt scholarship, focuses on quilts made predominantly by women expressing their concerns about a wide range of human rights and more. With its inspiring foreword by the Reverend Desmond M. Tutu, its carefully documented and beautifully photographed quilts, its essays, and its meticulous documentation presented in the endnotes, the book provides excellence in scholarship and aesthetics and, as is stated in the book's dedication, "prick[s] the conscience."

The preface explains how the idea for the book originated with a 2008 Michigan State University Museum exhibition entitled *Quilts and Human Rights*. Drawing from the museum's collection and other quilts around the world, the curators used the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights to guide their selection of quilts for the exhibition. The exhibition's success and the need to share more widely these quilt statements led to this publication. The book is divided into two sections featuring a lavishly illustrated essay followed by "A Gallery of Quilts," which chronologically presents fifty-six quilt photographs and captions.

Written by all four authors, the essay, "A Quilted Conscience," has forty-seven captioned color plates of quilts and details discussed in the essay. While the majority of the essay is devoted to quilts and human rights, a brief sub-section on the history of quilting and quilt study is not actually necessary, given the long history and complexity of the craft and its scholarship. The strength of the book lies in the other essay subsections. These are presented in chronological order, opening with a historical section, then a most interesting late twentieth century quilt revival section, followed by quilts of note from this period, and concluding with quilts from the turn of the twenty-first century. Each quilt has a photograph with a caption, which includes the maker, location, date, size, media, and its human rights information. Some captions also include inscriptions made on a quilt. In a few cases, details from the essay are repeated in the quilt caption, presumably for readers who read the captions only.

The range of human rights concerns in the work is vast and focuses mainly on quilts made to commemorate, advocate, and educate. It also includes quilts made to raise funds and awareness for ladies aid societies' causes such as soldiers at war; to pass the time for prisoners, such as the 1841 *Rajah* quilt made by women prisoners in Australia; and to celebrate resources such as water, for instance *Precious Water* by Hollis Chatelain, whose dream inspired a quilt about world droughts. This and other quilts focus on the human need for sustainable resources and an untainted environment. For example, the *Gas Station Wrap*, containing over three thousand panels by the International Fiber Collaborative, was made to cover a former gas station in Syracuse, New York, as a protest about the "world's dependency on oil" and its damage to the environment. The numbers and variety of quilts expressing environmental concerns call for their own separate treatment. The authors also illustrate how marginalized groups and "economically challenged" (59) people, such as Denise Estava of Haiti, make and sell quilts through

* This editorially reviewed contribution was accepted for publication in *Museum Anthropology Review* on February 25, 2017. The work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

cooperatives and other venues. While these quilts differ from other human rights quilts, they provide economic empowerment. Separating these quilts could have made room for longer in-depth discussion and analysis of the variety of human rights quilts, the quiltmakers' inspirations and techniques, and the symbolism behind their creations.

The rich variety of quilts provide quilters with a means of voicing their beliefs, commemorating and educating the public on human rights violations, honoring human rights champions, and fundraising for human rights groups and oppressed peoples. The chronological ordering shows changes in quilt design, technique, and materials over time. Early geometric triangular quilts, such as the *Quaker Slavery Quilt* allow women to protest slavery, while the *Liberty Tree* quilt gives women an expressive outlet for their patriotism about the Civil War with embroidered names of generals and battles. A contemporary disturbing, but striking example of violation, the quilt *Her Name Was Laura Nelson*, by LaShawnda Crowe Storm made for her Lynch Quilts Project, commemorates a young woman's lynching with a large realistic photographic image of a hanged woman. Three quilts honor Rosa Parks: *Rosa Parks II*, 2006; *The Bus Ride Paved the Way*, 2011; and *Fearless*, 2011; in the first of these quilts Parks is a simplified appliquéd flat figure while the two latter quilts use realistic photographic or illustrated renderings of both Parks and President Barack Obama. Other commemorative efforts, such as the much-publicized *Aids Memorial Quilt* and the *Peace Ribbon Quilt*, provide examples of community efforts to support groups and causes. The seriousness and weight of these human rights issues may make reading the book continuously overwhelming, but ultimately, it is uplifting because the exquisite quilts demonstrate the triumph of the creative force of the human spirit.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.14434/mar.v11i1.23549>