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The Hicksbury Post.
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Yvonne Wells' works with fabric are truly pieces of art

By Terri Cowart Frazier – February 10, 2019



© Yvonne Wells. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.

For nearly four decades, Yvonne Wells has been making quilts. Her first was a utilitarian type quilt used to keep her warm, but the hundreds that have followed have been nothing less than pieces of art. Stitch by stitch Wells creates heartfelt and powerful messages through her handiwork — some of which are displayed at the Smithsonian Institute.

“It is the most gratifying and satisfying feeling that I can get,” Wells said, of her story quilts, adding, “I say they are the three H’s, what the head sees, your heart feels and your hands create.” The Tuscaloosa native said she began quilting in 1979 following a career in education, which included teaching physical education for 35 years and serving as a substitute teacher for 10. Wells said it had been a home renovation that prompted her to make that first quilt.

“We were adding a large addition to our home and the fire place was not throwing out enough heat, so I said, ‘Let me do something to put on my legs.’” Wells admitted she knew nothing about quilting. “Nobody had taught me anything,” she said.

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But after gathering up odds and ends from around her home, which, she said, included curtains, bed sheets, socks and old clothing that had belonged to her children, she made a “strip quilt.” “It was not big. It was like a coverlet to put on your legs as you sit by the fire.”

From there, Wells began making patched and pieced quilts that she would either give away or sell for a small price, she said, until ultimately crafting her now famous story quilts, which she claims represent her voice. “I never was a person of many words,” Wells said. “I have always wanted to say things, but I was just not getting it out the way I thought it should be presented. So I had this feeling in my heart that there was something that needed to come out and there were stories that needed to be told, as far as I was concerned, that hadn’t been told as of yet or in my way of expressing it,” she said.

And so the quilts, she said, became her way to express her thoughts and feelings. And because she had been a schoolteacher, Wells said, she also wanted her quilts to document as clearly as she could — history. “So the kids could see them and learn from them and move forward with them and learn from the past and take it to the future,” she said.

Many of Wells quilts have a socio political message as well as Biblical themes. While now, with an accolade of awards and achievements, Wells said, at first there were some who questioned her quilting style. “I was told to go to classes to learn how to quilt,” she said, and there were quilters, she said, that would “frown” on her work.

“I had to get an attitude, because people were criticizing my work and talking me down and trying to keep me from being in the different shows I was in, but that didn’t deter me from continuing. I was never in the business of showing anybody anything. I just wanted to do it. I love my stitching,” she said.

Wells said her first public debut was in 1985 at the Kentuck Festival of the Arts in Northport Alabama, where she has since won “Best of Show” three times. Wells has since had her quilts displayed in museums and exhibitions across the country and world, Hallmark has used images of her quilts on their cards and her Noah’s Ark applique quilt is displayed at the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture. Wells was also one of 13 Alabama artist who were chosen to show their work in France in 2000 and in 2008, she was chosen by the Alabama State Department to participate in an art show in Italy.

“I had over 20 pieces to hang in this huge cathedral — building and I even got a chance to meet the Crown Prince of Monaco,” Wells said. At 5:30 p.m. Friday, Feb. 15, Wells will have a showing in Vicksburg at the Attic Gallery, 1101 Washington St.

She will also be talking about the quilts she picked out for the show, gallery owner Lesley Silver said. Silver and her husband Daniel Boone have been attending the Kentuck Festival of the Arts for years, Boone said, and were familiar with Wells quilts, but it wasn’t until her grandson,

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Vicksburg Post photojournalist Courtland Wells, made them aware she was his grandmother, that the couple invited her to the River City for a showing.

Most of the quilts at the showing are of a social political nature, Boone said, one of which is entitled, "Being In Total Control of Herself," which Wells said represents her first impression of seeing the Statue of Liberty. "It is what I saw. It may have not been there, but it is what I saw in my mind," Wells said.

When making quilts, Wells said, she sometimes just uses what ever is on hand at her home, or if she has a story in mind she will go out and buy the materials she needs to tell it. "I am not a traditional quilter. I use anything I can stick a needle in, and it tells my story. I have been known to use dental floss, fishing line or anything I can use to tell my story, and it always has to be my story, not anybody else's," she said, "So therefore when I make my quilts they are all without error because I made it and that's me," she said. "It is all about my art," Wells said, "And every time I make a piece I make it to satisfy me and if you like it I'm so thrilled, but if you don't I still like it."