



Wandsworth Prison and Fine Cell Work

HMP Wandsworth Quilt

77 x 102 inches (195 x 260 cm), 2010

photo by Victoria & Albert Museum ©

Art quilts at the Victoria & Albert Museum

by Diane Howell

The Textile Collection at London's Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) preserves a centuries-old timeline rich in textiles, fashion, and art quilts. The V&A's commitment to commissions and acquisitions has brought its holdings into the 21st century.

One such modern-day commission is the *HMP Wandsworth Quilt*, made in 2010 through a collaboration of the all-male quilting group within Wandsworth Prison and Fine Cell Work. The latter is a charity that provides instruction in embroidery and quilt making to inmates. As is often the case with textiles, the work is both art and statement—in this case providing personal interpretations of prison life. Using Wandsworth's architectural layout as a starting point, inmates designed and paper-pieced individual hexagons. Further cementing the theme of creativity in confinement is the fact that cotton and wool fabrics used in the quilt are the same color and weave as the prison uniforms.



Natasha Kerr

At the End of the Day

30 x 43 inches (75 x 110 cm), 2007

photo by Andrew Woods

Victoria Bradley, curator of V&A's Textile Collection, says that this particular art quilt has proven to be immensely popular. "The story behind this quilt is appealing because it speaks of the restorative power of stitching and craft. Every detail has been considered, from the design to the thread and materials, to the individual hexagons. Each element contributes to the narrative, making it a very powerful piece."

With regard to contemporary quilt artists, Bradley explains, "We try to follow as wide a range of makers as possible, and often an acquisition will be the result of the availability of an exceptional work from a particular maker coinciding with the opportunity to acquire it. The *Quilts 1700–2010* exhibition in 2010 presented the opportunity to research and appraise the existing collection and also a rare opportunity to acquire further examples."

The *Quilts* exhibition was curated by Sue Pritchard, formerly a curator at the V&A and now head curator at Leeds Castle in Kent, England. Just one example from the exhibition is Natasha Kerr's *At the End of the Day*. "I acquired Natasha's work for the V&A at *Collect*, the international craft show organized by the Craft Council. I love Natasha's storytelling,

which combines photographs, antique fabrics, and text, exploring the hidden histories of heirlooms," Pritchard says.

Another piece selected for the exhibition was *A Chinese Dream* by Susan Stockwell (see p. 5). Pritchard tells us, "I was drawn to [her] because she is so committed to issues around sustainability and world politics, [and] she also has an amazing collection of threads, buttons and zips that belonged to her grandmother."

Artists in this exhibition continue to hold it in high regard. "The *Quilts* exhibition was a wonderful show and it was stunning to see so many quilts through the centuries included. My piece was very modest and small. I am delighted to be included in the collection at the V&A," Kerr says. Her piece was the cover image for the book that accompanied the exhibition.

For artist Jo Budd, the *Quilts* exhibition was a timely statement. "I was ready to make a large-scale decorative statement, so to be asked to make a piece for

show and given complete artistic freedom was a wonderful opportunity, knowing that it would be seen in the context of other contemporary makers and also within a historical perspective.” She made two pendant pieces that were included, *Male/Winter* and *Female/Summer* (not pictured); the first was purchased subsequent to the exhibition. “[The first quilt] references water, both in the surface ripple of stitch and in the rust-dyed watery marks. It is dark and mysterious, vertically oriented, and strongly structural in composition. Essentially abstract, there are faint echoes of Log Cabin with rectangular blocks that interlock in places, with a shining bright yellow center. The companion piece, *Female/Summer*, constructed during the summer months, is a horizontal composition with a lighter pallet of pinks and rusts and is looser and more flowing in feel,” Budd says.

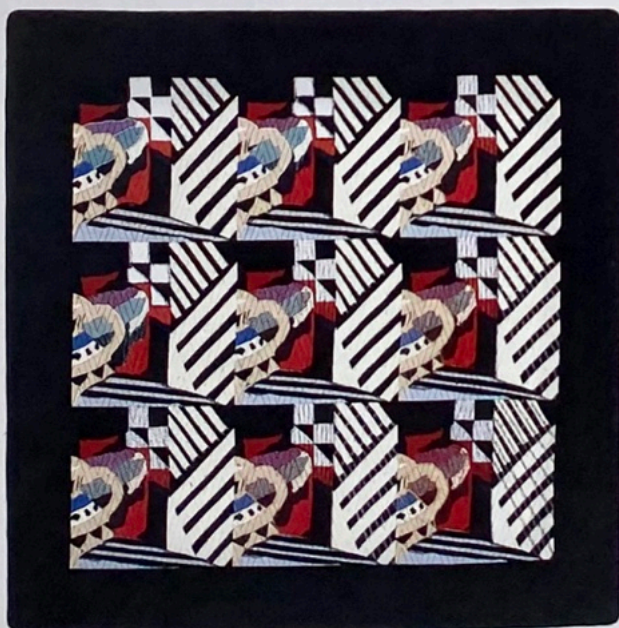
Among other quilt artists collected by the V&A are Pauline Burbidge, Lucy Goffin, and Lynn Setterington. Burbidge’s quilt, *Kate’s Vase*, is a colorful and graphic work that uses a repeat block arrangement incorporating a strong black-and-white element to

Pauline Burbidge

Kate’s Vase

35 x 35 inches (89 x 89 cm), 1987

photo by Keith Tidball



Jo Budd

Male/Winter

126 x 66 inches (320 x 170 cm), 2010

Photo courtesy Victoria & Albert Museum



Lucy Goffin

Apertures

72 x 60 inches (183 x 152 cm), 1992

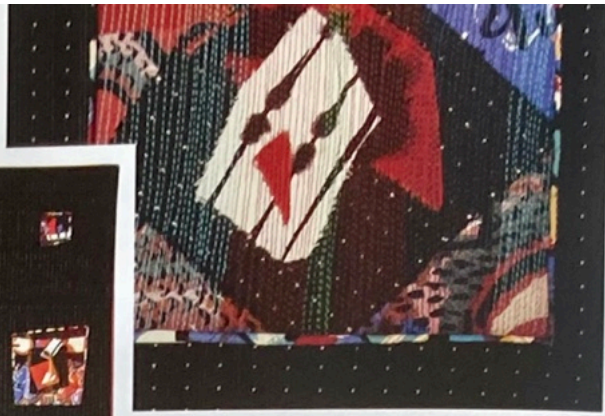
photo by Paul Seheult

Lynn Settingington

The Bathroom Shelf

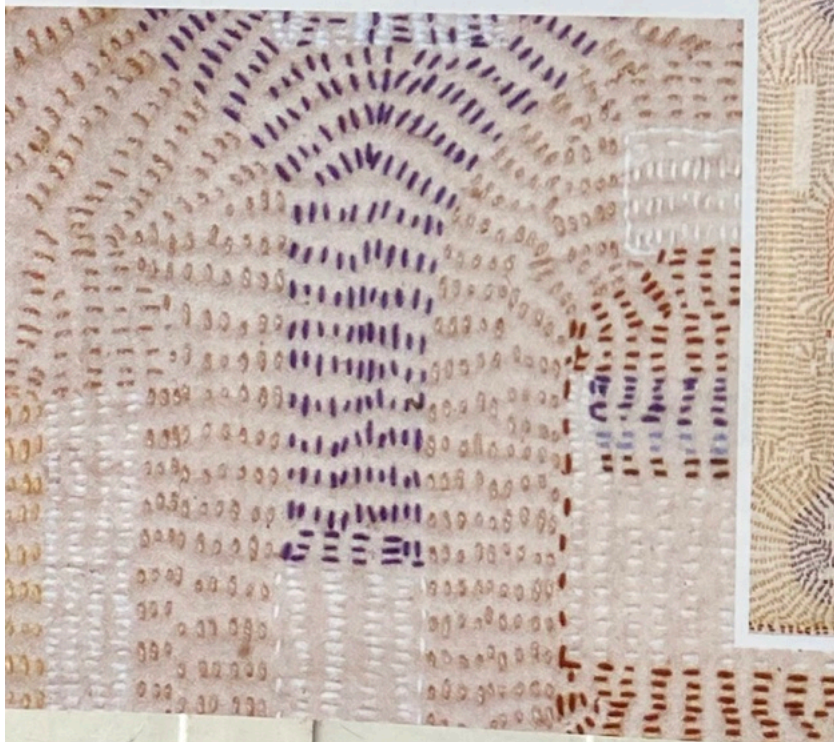
23 x 20 inches (58 x 51 cm), 1989

photo by Stephen White



dramatically set off the vase. *Apertures* by Goffin presents a series of abstracts, each viewed through an opening that seemingly captures different stages of a camera shutter's action. Settingington's piece, *The Bathroom Shelf*, comes to life through a series of colorful marks that create a fanciful depiction of the contents of a mundane medicine chest. Multiple rows of kantha stitching — as seen here — became a hallmark of her art quilts in the 1990s. Bradley says that textile highlights have continued with two other exhibitions: *The Fabric of India* in 2015 and *Africa Fashion*, which concluded in mid-April of 2023. Two new museum sites in East London — V&A Storehouse and V&A East Museum — will create new opportunities to showcase textiles.

"We were approached by numerous groups and individuals during the COVID pandemic bringing their textile works to our attention," Bradley says. "Quilts were particularly prevalent, which is perhaps



indicative of the way they can lend themselves to collaborative making by individuals working in the isolation of their own homes, contributing a segment of the overall composition. Of course, the quilt is also such a perfect vehicle for narrative designs, through the inclusion of text or image.”

For more information on current exhibitions, or to peruse the V&A's immense online catalog of fiber works, visit www.vam.ac.uk.

Diane Howell resides in Chandler, Arizona. She is editor of the SAQA Journal.

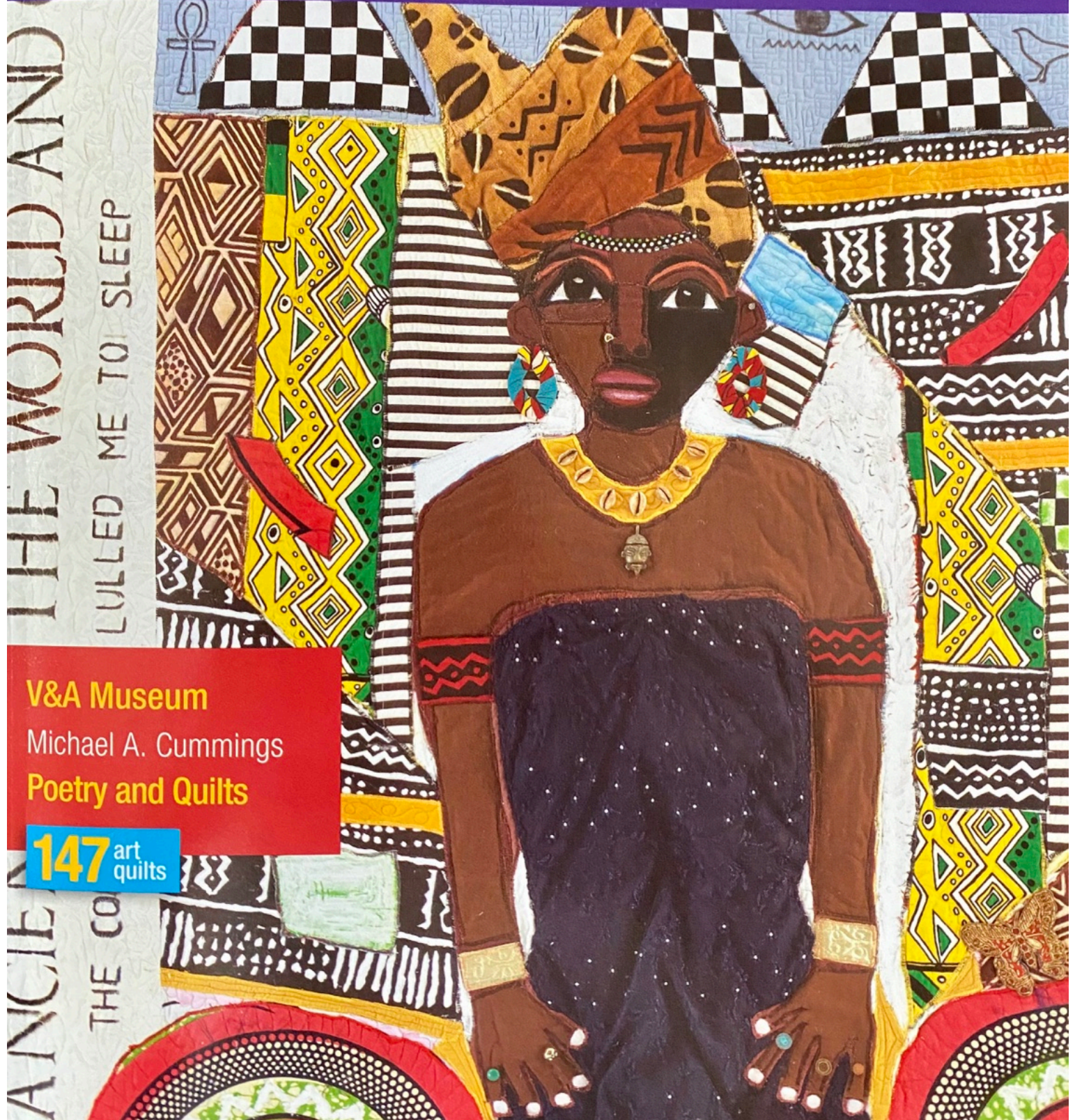


Susan Stockwell
A Chinese Dream
126 x 102 x 8 inches
(320 x 259 x 20 cm), 2010
photo by Peter Abrahams

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THE WORLD AND
LULLED ME TO SLEEP

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