

# TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

## ***Gwendolyn A. Magee***

*The following text is a written questionnaire completed by the artist on behalf of the curator.*

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**In general, why do you do what you do? What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?**

As an African-American, I will never know my true ancestral cultural heritage because slavery completely severed those ties. I have friends, neighbors, colleagues who speak with pride about being Irish, or Italian, or Greek, or German. But all I can say is that my ancestors came from some location somewhere on the continent of Africa. But did they come from Mozambique? Kenya? Uganda? Senegal? Tanzania?



*Gwendolyn A. Magee-God of Our Silent Tears*

*Photo by Rolan Freeman*

Where did my people come from? And from which tribe? Were they Himba? Zulu? Dinka? Wodaabe? Maasai? Kassena? Taneka? Ashanti? Mandinka? Or what? What, in reality, can any person of African American descent say? There are 54 countries in Africa and many, many unique cultures, languages and religions in each. But which culture, which language, which people were mine? For some, this may not be particularly important, but for me it's part of the larger question of "How do 'I' connect?"

The direction in which my art has evolved is directly related to my own personal search for connection, for roots, for a sense of belonging that also stems partially from the fact that I am adopted. On the one hand, the work is forming a bridge to the future because it is tangible, and therefore some part of it will be around long

after I as an individual have ceased to exist. And on the other hand, it forms a bridge to the past as it focuses more and more on the issues and cultural heritage of what has not been stripped from me – that of being African-American here in the United States.

**What influences your work? Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how? Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how?**

The degradation of slavery, along with its aftermath of oppression, segregation and discrimination has wreaked havoc on the mind, body and spirit of African-Americans – as individuals and as a people for well over 300 years. My work is a dramatic, visual representation of these experiences, depicting the associated violence and despair as well as the attendant hopes for the future.

Quilting has deep roots for many people – but for African-Americans in particular, they are roots honed from necessity during slavery. Plantation owners were not very concerned about the warmth and comfort of their slaves. Nor were these masters any more compassionate when a more insidious type of bondage forced former slaves into continued servitude as sharecroppers, both during and after Reconstruction. So the making of quilts became one of the primary methods used by our grandmothers and great-grandmothers to try and keep their families warm when "the hawk" came swooping through the cracks and crevices of the dilapidated shacks and shanties in which they were forced to live. Those quilts have today become some of the most revered, prized and cherished possessions that many families have, even though they no longer have to rely on them to keep warm through bitterly cold winter nights.

It is the tradition of quilts like those that our "Big Mamas" and "Aunt Effies" so painstakingly made that forms the basis of my work – this is the essence of the medium through which I try to speak for them and for the countless others that had no voices; through which I try to visually represent their trials and tribulations; through which I give testimony to the oppression that African-Americans individually and as a people have suffered, as well as to our seemingly unyielding capacity for hope eternal.

A lot of the inspiration for my work is drawn from music, although the extent to which I listen to it while creating varies and usually is tied closely to whatever it is that I am trying to communicate. For example, I listened to renditions of *Strange Fruit* over and over again during the process of creating *Blood of the Slaughtered* (about lynching.) Similarly, *Bid 'Em In* and *Lord, How Come Me Heah* served as a focus for *When Hope Unborn Had Died* (about the auctioning of slaves and ripping families apart.) Listening to *Work Song* helped to clarify my thoughts during the creation of *Five Years Hard Labor* (a piece about the chain gang.)

**Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?**

I work alone in my studio. When I am in the process of creating art I become very introspective and completely focused on the work. Continuous company would be extremely distracting.

I do, however, enjoy the interaction with and stimulation derived from associating with other artists and usually work in an “open studio” setting during sessions at the Tougaloo Art Colony.

**What does “mastery” mean to you?**

To me “mastery” is a combination of technical skill, artistry, and vision that coalesces to produce work that evokes a sense of wonder, depth of thought, and/or a deep emotional response in the viewer.

**Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there? How long have you lived in the South?**

I was born and reared in North Carolina and lived there until I graduated from college. During my lifetime I have lived in Ohio, Tennessee and Pennsylvania. I moved to Jackson, Mississippi in June or July of 1972.

**If born in the South, how do you think you’ve been influenced by it?**

I grew up in a Southern town and attended a segregated school system. Our parents and community had to work hard to shield us as much as possible from the degradations of Jim Crow laws, but they couldn’t shield us from everything: the separate waiting rooms in doctor’s offices and train and bus stations; the separate and nasty water fountains and rest rooms; the “colored day” set aside for attending the fair; the “crow’s nest” at the movie theater; the used and leftover textbooks. They couldn’t shield us from the insurance man knocking on the door and asking for “Annie”; from seeing our parents “tensed up” from having to “deal with the man” for one reason or another on their jobs; from not being allowed to try on hats at the department store or from being told that the only hosiery color made for us was “Red Fox.”

However, one thing they could do to combat the negativity was to make a concerted effort to instill in us pride in self, pride in heritage, pride in community and in the belief that we could overcome whatever racial prejudice or discrimination that was thrown our way. One of the primary ways they did this was through James Weldon Johnson’s monumental anthem, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. It was sung at every school assembly, and oftentimes in elementary school at the start of every school day, and it was sung at some point during almost every community program or event. This anthem has remained meaningful to me

throughout my life and became the basis for the scope of work that has become my own personal “journey of the spirit”, and a fulcrum for my true artistic awakening.

**If you moved to your current home from outside the South, what brought you to the South? Is your work influenced by the South in any way?**

My husband had to leave the state of Mississippi in order to attend medical school and complete a residency program because at that time the University of Mississippi Medical Center was segregated. His commitment to ensuring that Mississippi’s underserved population had access to quality eye medical care brought us back to the South, and for many years he was the only black ophthalmologist in the state.

**Do you see yourself as an innovator?**

I don’t see myself as an innovator – that’s not my focus. My primary interest is in making a connection with the viewer and I am open to using any combination of techniques or materials, traditional or otherwise, that helps that to happen.

**How is your work evolving?**

Both my work and I are simultaneously maturing in subtle as well as in overt ways, beginning with the level of confidence I have attained; confidence in myself as an artist; confidence to listen to my own inner voice and “break the rules”; and the confidence to address uncomfortable issues.

My vision also continues to evolve. Over the next few years I anticipate an increase in my use of perspective and three-dimensionality. My goal is to totally engage the viewer by creating a way for him/her to physically enter and/or to become a living part of the artwork. It’s a concept that will take time and focus to develop. It’s one that will require the acquisition of new skills and the expansion of my knowledge base. It’s a challenge that I welcome.

**Describe your relationship to community? Are there communities of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?**

My relationship to community is on many different levels. It is through the art that I seek to cross and eradicate many boundaries, to promote remembrance and learning, and to create a vehicle for dialogue. I make presentations about my work to a variety of audiences ranging from third graders to college level students; from Girl Scout troops to church groups to broader-based community-based organizations.

Communities of people with which I affiliate and have a common interest include: Craftsmen’s Guild of Mississippi; Women of Color Quilter’s Network;

Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters; Mississippi State Committee of the National Museum of Women in the Arts; and the Studio Art Quilt Associates, among others.

**Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you? What would like your legacy to be?**

I see myself as a culturally committed artist. All of my narrative work to date is a representation of some aspect of the African-American experience, either historically or present day. Far too many of today's African-American youth have little or no knowledge, understanding, or appreciation of their heritage. I've been profoundly touched by the response to the work not only by adults, but by students of all age ranges and cultural backgrounds.

I want my legacy to be a body of work that not only is meaningful, but is compelling through its use of color, design and/or subject matter so that the viewer is truly engaged, is drawn into it and, hopefully, back to it repeatedly.

**How did you learn your craft?**

I initially took a six-week course to learn how to make a traditional quilt. Over the years I also have taken several one-week workshops focusing on various aspects of the medium.

**Do you share your knowledge with others – the next generation of artists?**

I am called upon to make presentations about my work and do so several times a year. However I have not yet taught in a formal workshop or classroom setting.

**What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South? And, alternative places like Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, John C. Campbell Folk School?**

I think colleges and universities and places like Penland, Arrowmont and the John C. Campbell Folk School are now at the forefront in the promotion and development of interest in and respect for contemporary craft. Additionally, the alternative centers play a critical role in providing an opportunity for those who do not have the flexibility or desire to enroll full time in a college program to learn and hone their skills.