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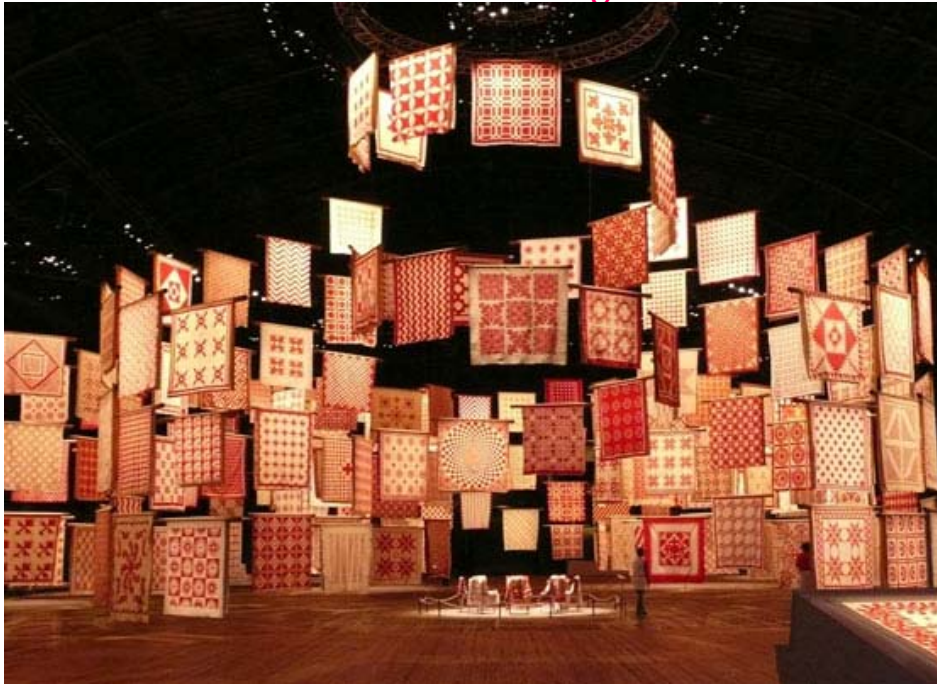
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Women's Work and the Latest Thing



by Sarah Macyshyn

**American Folk Art Museum presents
Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts
From the collection of Joanna Semel Rose
March 25 -30, 2011**

Infinite Variety, the American Folk Art Museum's spectacular installation of 651 red and white American quilts is just that. Presented in the cavernous space of the Park Avenue Armory, the exhibition is like the city itself, monumental, majestic and bold. The quilts are arrayed in gravity defying spirals which climb 60 feet in an overwhelming display, transforming works of intimate delicacy into a stunning architectural statement. *Infinite Variety* is very much of the moment and yet the quilts from which it has been assembled are timeless.

The gala opening last Thursday night was chaired by **Cornelia Guest** and catered by her company. The dinner menu, consisting of historic American cuisine, was a work of art in itself.

Taking her inspiration from recipes from **Thomas Jefferson's** Monticello and **Dolley Madison's** White House, Ms. Guest's menu included (among other things) a luscious Lobster Newburg, a



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salad of dandelion greens with roasted walnuts and a selection of Hudson Valley Cheeses, and my favorite, a desert of wine jelly with English cream. Ingredients were organic and grown or made locally, from the gardens of "Templeton" Ms Guest's Long Island residence (currently on the market for \$10 million) and local grocers from the Union Square Green Market. Wines were donated by **Gary Fradin, Quality House**, and **Kobrand Corporation**.



Cornelia Guest.

As artful as the dinner was, the real masterpiece was the exhibition, curated by **Elizabeth V. Warren**, a leading authority on quilts and trustee of the American Folk Art Museum, and **Stacy C. Hollander**, project director and the museum's senior curator. The award-winning exhibition design firm Thinc Design conceived and carried out the installation.



Dinner guests were seated at two long banquet tables. Red calla lilies, roses and poppies set in crystal were perfect complements to the simple but elegant white table settings.

The quilts are from the collection of **Joanna Semel Rose**, an art collector, intellectual, prominent philanthropist, and doyenne of a leading New York real estate family. Formerly the chairperson of the Partisan Review and rumored to be involved with the (top secret) selection process for the MacArthur Fellowships, she is a quintessential New Yorker.

When asked by her husband **Daniel Rose** what she wanted for her 80th birthday she suggested this gift for herself and the city, to have her quilts displayed where she (and everyone else) could see them all at the same moment. Due to the Roses' generosity, this "hottest ticket in town" is open to the public and free of charge.

Treasured for generations and amassed over the course of a lifetime, the quilts span 300 years from the 19th to the 21st century. For millennia the only artistic outlet afforded women was in textiles and needlework. This most American of art forms reaches a zenith here. They range in style from geometric pieced patterns to whimsical embroidery. Most of the quilts were created anonymously with loving hands at quilting bees or in solitude by candlelight. One thinks of Pilgrims and pioneers, grandmothers, neighbors, sisterhood and most of all of community.

Subjects were many and varied. In the words of Joanna Rose, "The quilter found her subjects in nature, in the setting Sun and Feathered Star, in the Wild Goose Chase, the Garden Maze, in Lightning and the Melon Patch. In her kitchen she found models in Flower Pots and Fruit Baskets. Delectable Mountains derives its name from the passage in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress which describes the Promised Land (in the settler's mind the United States). Friendship Baskets is covered with moral and religious maxims; Drunkard's path is an admonition. Tithing Reel was created to raise money for a Pennsylvania Church.



Until recently I did not appreciate the beauty or value of quilting. I've come a long way since attending an Armory Antiques show many years ago when I mortified a

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companion by exclaiming (too loudly) that a quilt with a \$50,000 price tag looked like something one could pick up at Macys.

That changed when I made the acquaintance of a master quilter. Her world travels are reflected in her exquisite

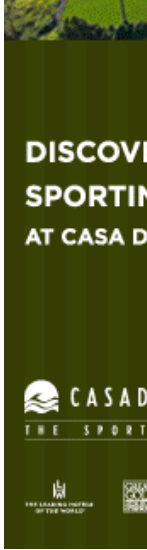
handiwork. For example, her quilt, Serengeti Swirl, made entirely with African fabrics resonates with that continent's rhythm and energy. But more than that, the soul of this quiet, unassuming woman sings out through the art that is her quilting.

As **Lee Kogan**, a curator at The American Folk Art Museum passionately explained, folk art comes from the American Spirit. It is the art of the common man, produced by those (mainly women) with no formal training. It is art from the heart and embodies American culture, fashion, history and society.

Whether our predecessors came on the Mayflower, through Ellis Island, or on the Concorde the quilts of Infinite Variety gloriously reflect our heritage and history.



A sampling of *Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts*.



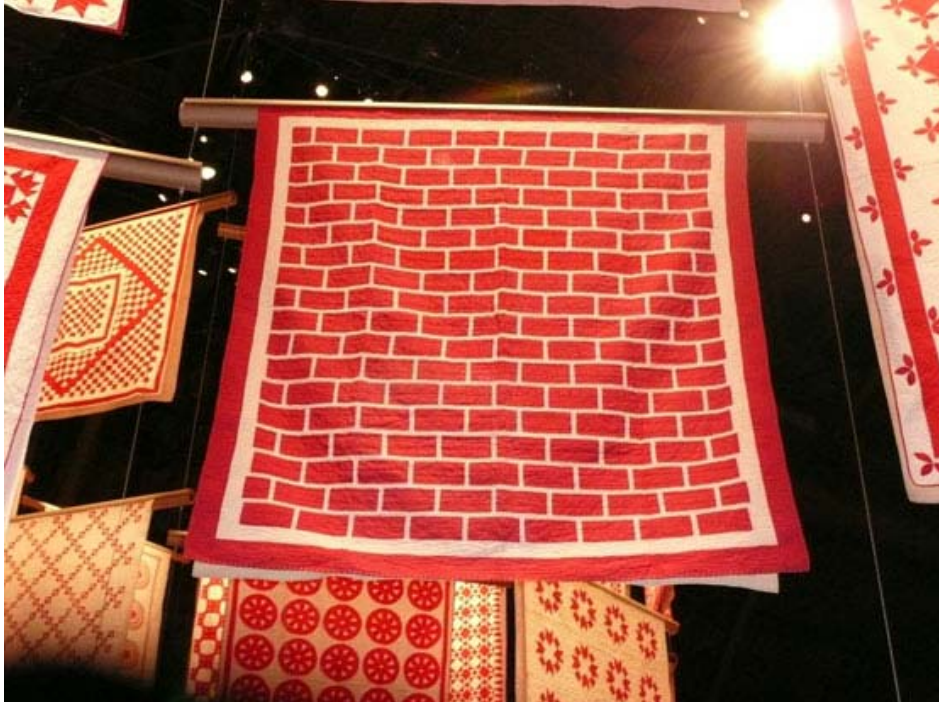
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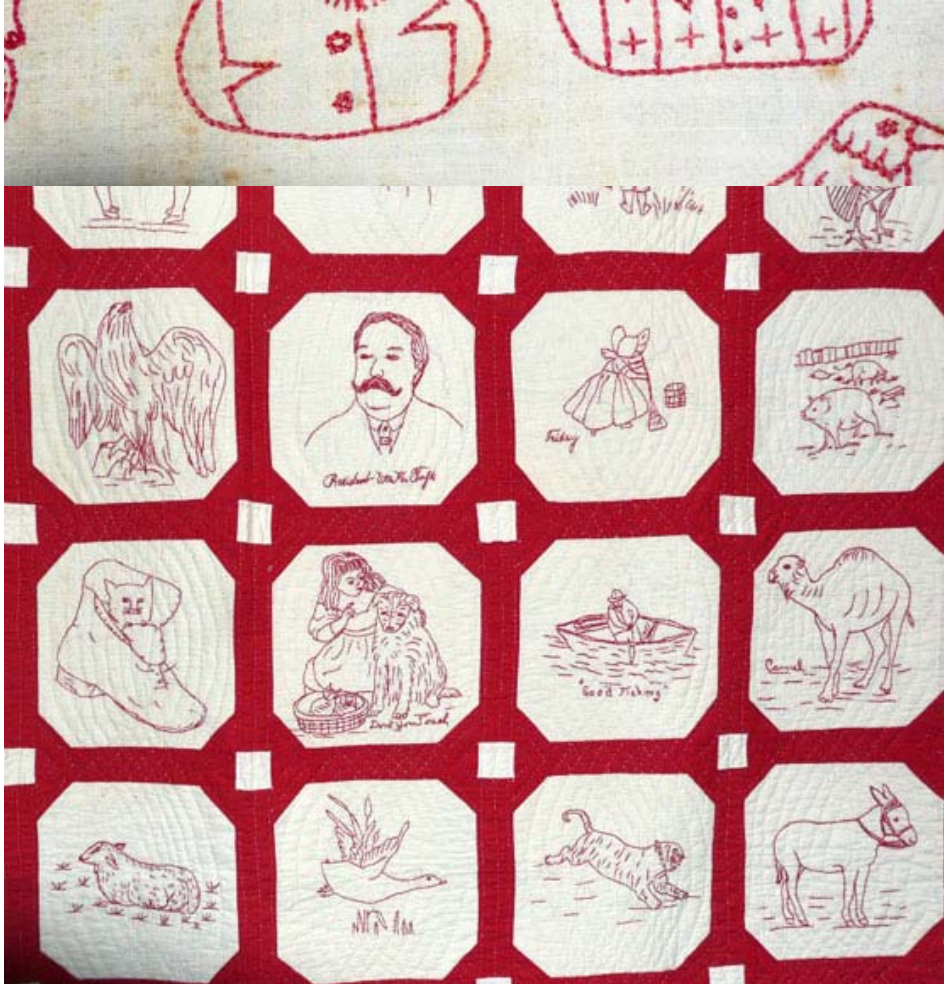
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Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts will cap the American Folk Art Museum's "Year of the Quilt." If you miss this stunning exhibition or after seeing it want more, you can visit the museum's two-part exhibition, *Quilts: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum*. The first installation can be seen through April 24, 2011 and the second from May 10 to October 16, 2011 at the American Folk Art Museum at 45 west 53rd Street.

To learn more, visit: www.folkartmuseum.org.