



PRESS RELEASE

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Art Librarians Honor Fabric of a Nation: American Quilt Stories with 2021 George Wittenborn Memorial Book Award

WESTFORD, Massachusetts – The Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) has awarded the 2021 George Wittenborn book award for excellence in art publishing to the exhibition catalogue *Fabric of a Nation: American Quilt Stories* published by the Museum of Fine Arts Boston to accompany their exhibition of the same name.

Established in 1980, the Wittenborn Award honors the memory of George Wittenborn, a premier New York art book dealer and publisher who was a prominent supporter of the Society in its formative years.

Fabric of a Nation: American Quilt Stories reveals a rich, complex and often overlooked history of North America as told from individual experiences manifested within the tradition of quilting. The book illustrates how quilts are more than material objects of comfort and aesthetic beauty. They are archives of social, political and cultural histories.

In her preface, noted American historian Laurel Thatcher writes, “*Fabric of a Nation*, invites viewers and readers to consider the contradictions stitched into the history of American quilting and into the material of American life.” The publication provides an overarching view of quilting that spans the past three centuries, while also highlighting individual quilt narratives. It brings to light the underrepresented cultural contributions made by historically marginalized populations including women, African Americans, and Indigenous peoples. In doing so, the publication asks us to reconsider the canons of art history in North America. The histories told within the quilts often testify to painful stories of injustice, and yet the quilts represent an object of comfort and domesticity, illustrating that lived experiences, however painful, are softened by love, community and family.

The 2021 Wittenborn Award Committee was especially impressed with the fine balance this publication achieves between critical writing and publication design. Through their scholarly texts, detailed entries and references, authors Pamela A. Parmal, Jennifer M. Swope, and Lauren D. Whitley bring new insights into historical and contemporary quilting practices. The

catalogue itself was designed by Rita Jules, Miko McGinty Inc.

As the reader holds the book in their hands, viewing its square format and feeling the textured covers, they experience an object reminiscent of the square patches that traditional quilts were made of. And yet, the image on the cover *To God and Truth* (2019) by Bisa Butler incorporates innovative techniques to traditional quilting in a powerful piece that speaks of race and of modernity. This artwork as well as the works of artists such as Faith Ringgold, Rowland Ricketts, and Sanford Biggers assert an important space for quilting within contemporary art practices.

Opening the book, even before starting to read, the reader is drawn into the subject – quilts of different cultures, race, and eras –, reproduced full page with high quality images. Each full view is followed by a detail, exquisitely photographed, brimming with feeling for the texture of the original fabric, taking the reader even deeper into an intimate examination of the object. With ample areas of white space and minimal and low key sans-serif font, the elegant design focuses the reader's gaze on the objects depicted, letting them generate the excitement, visual pleasure and curiosity which initiates the desire to learn more. The publication concludes with rich documentation including an index, bibliography as well as further reading allowing the reader to pursue their understanding and research into the topic.

The effectiveness of the book design combined with in-depth scholarly research makes this an important contribution to art historical research on textile practices. The authors and the artists clearly demonstrate how quilts are intertwined with history, politics and material culture in ways that speak to the past as well as the contemporary condition. In conclusion, the jury found that *Fabric of a Nation: American Quilt Stories* encapsulates all of the aspects of an outstanding art publication while laying the groundwork for further research into quilting as a historical practice and cultural artefact.

The members of the 2021 ARLIS/NA George Wittenborn Memorial Book Award Sub-Committee are: David Greene and John Latour (co-chairs), Susan Bissonnette, Philip Dombowsky, Nancy Duff, Jessica Hébert and Pierre Landry.

About the Art Libraries Society of North America

Founded in 1972, the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) is a dynamic, international organization of close to 1,000 individuals devoted to fostering excellence in art and design librarianship and image management in the United States, Canada and Mexico. The membership includes architecture and art librarians, visual resources professionals, artists, curators, educators, publishers, students, and other interested in visual arts



information. To serve this diverse constituency, the Society provides a wide range of programs and services within an organizational structure that encourages participation at every level.

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