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***The Quilts of Gee's Bend***  
**San Francisco is Final Venue of Acclaimed Exhibition's National Tour**  
**de Young, 15 July–26 November 2006**

San Francisco, 12 May 2006— *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* celebrates the artistic legacy of four generations of African-American women from a small, historically all-black community in rural southern Alabama. This exhibition of over 60 extraordinary quilts that were made between 1930 and 2000 showcases a body of work that is bold, spirited, and moving. Hailed by Michael Kimmelman, of *The New York Times*, as “some of the most miraculous works of art America has produced,” the San Francisco presentation of *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* is the final opportunity to view these objects that almost pulsate with energy and life. Organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, with the Tinwood Alliance, Atlanta, the exhibition has been on a three-year, coast-to-coast, twelve-venue tour since its premiere in Houston in fall of 2003.

The community of Gee' Bend is located in Wilcox County at the heart of a stretch of land extending from Texas to Virginia that is called the Black Belt for its thick, fertile soil. It is a region that has historically been characterized as home to “the richest soil and the poorest people” in the United States. Situated some 30 miles southwest of Selma at the tip of a thumb of land demarcated by a deep loop in the Alabama River, the community has been isolated for most of its existence by geography, poverty, and outside indifference. Of necessity, the women of Gee's Bend pieced quilts to keep their families warm. Using scraps of everyday fabrics like cotton sheeting, corduroy, and denim, which was often salvaged from well-worn work clothes, the women created quilts of astonishing beauty and originality. In design, the quilts are equally remarkable. Bold geometric shapes, dramatic shifts in scale and color, and an improvisational approach to the way the fabrics are assembled produce abstract compositions more akin to the rhythms of jazz and African art than to the order and

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repetitiousness of many traditional American quilts.

The quilters learned their craft from their mothers or grandmothers, but placed special emphasis on individuality and innovation with each new quilt. The stunning body of work on view—the product of 42 women, a number of whom are mother and daughter—allows viewers an opportunity to appreciate both the continuity and the individuality of their work. The quilts that they created will be on view in the de Young's textile galleries. In order to display the work of all the Gee's Bend artists involved, mid-way through the exhibition in September a number of the quilts in the opening installation will be replaced with other examples.

The exhibition also provides a look into the lives and thoughts of the quilt makers themselves, most of whom are descendants of slaves on the plantation that once occupied the site. In photographs, through their music, and most of all, through their own narratives in a video produced by the Tinwood Alliance that accompanies the exhibition, the women of Gee's Bend make their stories known. Their family histories, religious faith, and their views about their art and where it has taken them add a fascinating and human dimension to the dazzling display of their talents.

### **Gee's Bend and the Tinwood Alliance**

Gee's Bend today is a community of about 750 residents, less isolated than it once was, but still remote. Benders, as residents are called, are an hour's drive from the county seat of Camden, the closest source of supplies, schools, and medical services.

Geographically cut off and left to themselves for nearly 100 years after the end of the Civil War, many of the community's folkways and traditions survived well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Quilting is one of the most important of these traditions.

Gee's Bend was named after Joseph Gee, the first white man to stake a claim there in the early 1800s on land that had previously belonged to the Creek Indians. When Gee died in 1845, the plantation was sold to Mark Pettway, and most present-day residents are descendants of slaves on the former Pettway plantation. Their forebears continued to work the land as sharecroppers and tenant farmers after emancipation,

and many eventually bought the farms from the government in the 1940s.

Gee's Bend became briefly known for its quilts during the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s when people began losing their incomes and sometimes their homes as a result of registering to vote. Francis X. Walter, an Episcopal priest and civil rights organizer, recognized the economic potential of the area's boldly patterned quilts and helped the women of the community establish the Freedom Quilting Bee, a quilting cooperative. Their quilts soon began to appear in such department stores as Saks Fifth Avenue and Bloomingdales, bringing widespread recognition to their work. The need to produce standardized quilts, however did not work well with the quilters' individualistic styles. "Used to worry me to death trying to make every quilt just like this, just like that," recalls one of the women. Eventually work for the stores trailed off. While many of the women in the community are second, third, and even fourth-generation quilters within a family, only a few of the younger women in Gee's Bend are continuing its quilting tradition.

The quilts in the exhibition are drawn from the collection of the Tinwood Alliance of Atlanta, a non-profit foundation established by William Arnett for the support of African-American vernacular art. In 1997 Arnett rediscovered this unique legacy of southern Alabama's cultural heritage when he traveled to the area in search of Annie Mae Young, whose picture he had seen in a magazine, along with one of her quilts. Annie Mae Young directed him to Gee's Bend, where he subsequently uncovered the trove of quilts—many of which had been stored under mattresses and in closets and cupboards for years—that made possible *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*.

### **Prints by Gee's Bend Artists on View in Textile Education Gallery**

A series of prints made in the softground technique by two of the Gee's Bend artists, who worked directly from quilts pieced specifically for this purpose, will be on view in the textile department's Textile Education Gallery. The prints seamlessly translate the striking graphic nature of the Gee's Bend quilts in another medium. In addition, the Education Gallery will feature in its study drawers a variety of quilt-making materials, techniques, and styles drawn from a number of different cultures..

### **Credit and Organization**

*The Quilts of Gee's Bend* has been organized by the Museum of Fine Arts Houston and the Tinwood Alliance, Atlanta. The exhibition is sponsored by Kathy Hull and Bill Grisvold and the Ross Auxiliary of the Fine Arts Museums.

### **Catalogue**

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue published by Tinwood Books that provides historical context for the community and its quilt-making style and information about each of the artists. The publication is illustrated with full-page color plates of the quilts, photographs of the quilters, and documentary photographs of Gee's Bend in the 1930s as well as photographs of Gee's Bend today. 190 pages. Hardcover, \$45. Two additional books, *Gee's Bend: The Women and Their Quilts*, which includes first-person interviews with more than 100 quilters and illustrations of 350 quilts, and *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, will also be available in the Museum Stores.

### **Video**

The 20-minute video, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, which presents the place, its people, and its quilt-making, and is on view during the course of the exhibition, will also be for sale in the Museum Stores.

### **Programs and Guest Appearances by Gee's Bend Quilters**

There will be a series of demonstrations by quilters from Gee's Bend presented in conjunction with the exhibition. This special programming is produced under the auspices of the de Young's Artists Studio Program and Friday Nights at the de Young. For a schedule and complete information, visit the museum's website at [www.deyoung.org](http://www.deyoung.org), or call 750-7634 after July 2006.

### **Venues**

The Museum of fine Arts, Houston (September 8–November 10, 2002); the Whitney Museum, New York (November 21, 2002–March 9, 2003); the Mobile Museum of Art (June 16–August 31, 2003); the Milwaukee Art Museum (September 27, 2003–January

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4, 2004); The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (February 14– May 17, 2004); the Cleveland Museum of Art (June 27-September 12, 2004); the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk (October 15, 2004–January 2, 2005); the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art (February 13–May 8, 2005); the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (June 1–August 21, 2005); The Julie Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art at Auburn University (September 11–December 4, 2005); the High Museum of Art, Atlanta (March 25–June 18, 2006); and the de Young (July 15–November 26, 2006).

**About the new de Young**

Founded in 1895 in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, the de Young museum has been an integral part of the cultural fabric of the city and a cherished destination for millions of residents and visitors to the region for over 100 years. On 15 October 2005, the de Young museum re-opened in a new facility designed by the Swiss architecture firm Herzog & de Meuron and Fong & Chan Architects in San Francisco. The new de Young provides San Francisco with a landmark art museum to showcase the museum's significant collections of American art from the 17<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, modern and contemporary art, art from Central and South America, the Pacific and Africa, as well as an important and diverse collection of textiles.

Museum Hours: Tuesday–Sunday: 9:30 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. Friday: Open until 8:45 p.m. Admission Fees: Adults \$10, Seniors \$7, Youths 13-17 and college students with ID \$6, Children 12 and under FREE; First Tuesday of Each Month FREE; MUNI visitor discount with fast pass or transfer \$2.

