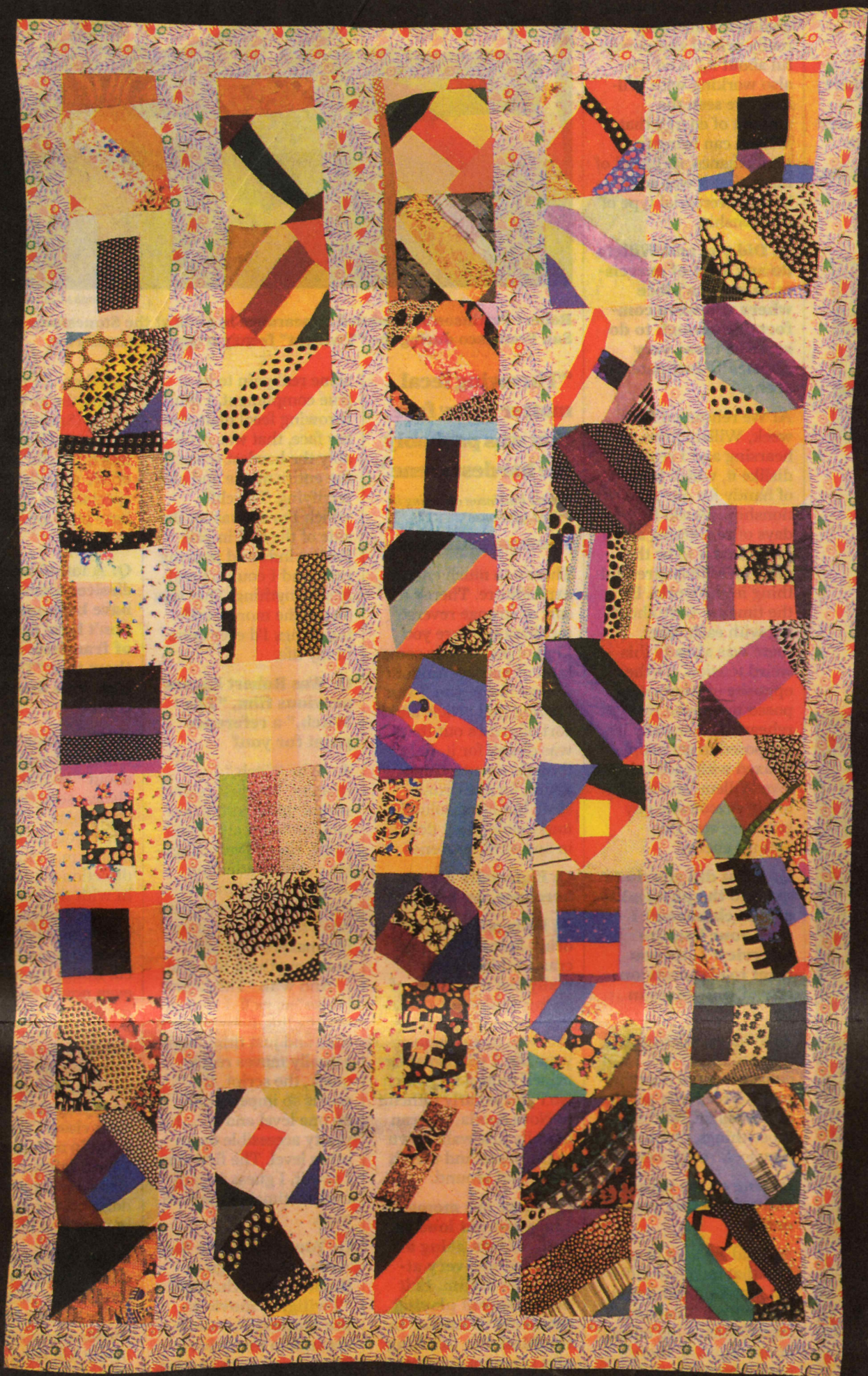




Sharon Risedorph / BAMPFA

Patchwork art? Quilts are more

UC museum bequeathed nearly
3,000 African American works

By Charles Desmarais

A bequest of nearly 3,000 quilts, all designed and produced by African American artists, was announced Wednesday, Oct. 16, by officials of the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. The extensive collection — the largest such trove assembled, the museum believes — was put together over more than three decades by Eli Leon, a white Oakland psychotherapist who became a respected expert on African American quilts. Leon died last year, leaving the quilts and a few other items to the regents of the University of California.

The unusual gift will, “in one fell swoop, add 15% to the museum’s permanent collection,” said BAMPFA director Lawrence Rinder, in an exclusive interview with *The Chronicle*.

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Born into slavery, Monin Brown and Hattie “Strawberry” Mitchell quilted “Improvisational Strip” in the 1930s.

UC art museum gets trove of quilts

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It also adds to the seemingly inexorable broadening of the horizons of art history, to include the culture and the stories of communities of color. In just the past few years, major exhibitions of works by artists of color have dramatically impacted the schedules of museums worldwide, and collectors and institutions have scrambled to diversify their collections.

In the Bay Area, the two largest visual arts organizations, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, made major commitments. This year, SFMOMA sold a key Mark Rothko painting to raise millions of dollars to enable it to broaden its collection through purchases of works by women, LGBTQ artists and artists of color. And in a single deal, the Fine Arts Museums acquired 62 works by 22 contemporary African American artists, heralded by an expansive exhibition at the de Young throughout much of 2017 and 2018.

Rinder knew Leon and worked with him on

an exhibition in 1997 of the quilts of Rosie Lee Tompkins, who is represented in the gift by more than 500 works. He will curate a larger Tompkins show, to open Feb. 19, as his final project before retiring from the museum in March. He said the quilts are decidedly not "folk art."

"Not to me," he was quick to say. "I think it's 'art art.' I don't make those distinctions. Labels like that, even when they are well-meaning, justify the exclusion of people who are less well off, people who are not white.

"Some people think if you slap a label on certain work, it can help us understand where it comes from. I don't care about any of that. At all. I see emotion, expression, technical skill. ... The rest doesn't matter to me in the least."

Among the rare works in the collection, which Rinder estimates comprises works by some 400 artists, are three quilts made by Monin Brown and Hattie "Strawberry" Mitchell, sisters from Macon, Ga., who had been born into slavery.

He said that though

Leon tended to collect adventurous designs, it was not because the works look modern. "He believed ardently in a connection to African traditions, and he conducted research on motifs, patterns and methods that he saw as rooted in Central Africa," Rinder said. He cited, as examples, Kuba textiles and Ituri rain forest bark cloths.

Rinder said gifts and grants are being sought to fund conservation of the fragile works now entering the collection, and he believes the university is committed to their care and display. In a statement, UC Berkeley Chancellor Carol Christ said, "BAMPFA is uniquely suited to ensure that these wonderful works of art receive the exposure and attention they deserve through the museum's outstanding exhibition program and the extensive scholarly resources of the university."

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Arbie Williams, "Medallion" (1987), quilted by Willia Ette Graham.

Geoffrey Johnson / BAMPFA