Leslie Umberger is curator of folk and self-taught art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Umberger's research interests include artists who navigated their own artistic path, often in oppressive surroundings. She also specializes in artists who transformed their personal realms into comprehensive art environments. Umberger is known for situating lesser-known artists within meaningful cultural contexts and establishing frameworks for their art within the larger fabric of art history.

The Road Less Traveled 50th anniversary program was conceived by Amy Horst, deputy director for programming. The exhibition series was organized and curated by Arts Center Curator Karen Patterson. Special thanks to Emily Schlemowitz, assistant curator, and Amy Chaloupka, guest curator.

David Butler remade the world around him through an array of hammered, cut, bent, painted, and assembled sculptural works that were simultaneously inventive, narrative, aesthetically surprising, and protective. His project was highly personal, yet common threads connect it to an expanse of African American art that pieces together fragments of the available world to meaningfully reshape the surrounding world. The circumstances that drove Butler's embellished space were both personal and cultural.

Butler was born in 1898 in Good Hope, Louisiana, along the Mississippi River just outside New Orleans. His father was a carpenter and his mother a Baptist missionary, and Butler carried forward both an ability to craft things with his hands and a strong belief in the spiritual world. This pairing of traits would bloom into a purposefully embellished yard and home beginning in the late 1960s. Butler's art is deeply attached to his identity as an African American born in the Deep South in the late nineteenth century. His childhood was mired in poverty, which truncated his education and made frugality a mandate. He learned to make the things he needed and look to the heavens when earthly challenges seemed insurmountable.

In the unpredictable and harsh world of Jim Crow segregation, African Americans had limited options for staying healthy and safe. In parts of the South, these oppressive realities dragged on well past the Civil Rights movement.

Beginning with the first slaves forced to leave African religions behind and adopt Christianity, the imposed religion has often been used as a framework on which to attach veiled beliefs and worldviews. In America, African folkways and religions flowed into the waters of that landscape; they commingled and flourished, even if largely under the surface. Butler's garden became a prime example of these amalgamated beliefs and practices, often depicting Biblical scenes even as the subtext of his installation revealed deeper beliefs about charmed and protective spaces. Butler's feeling of vulnerability became acute after he suffered a head injury at work and could no longer earn a living. When his wife died, his fragile circumstance became still more pronounced and his overt need to feel protected intensified. Between 1968 and 1985, Butler transformed his home and yard from something plain and untended into a scintillating, activated space that he believed repelled evil spirits.

The garden Butler made primarily from cut and pounded roofing tin was durable; it had to be to withstand the intense heat and moisture of the bayou region. His sculptures were planted in the ground throughout the yard and attached to the exterior of the house, particularly as window coverings that let the sunlight silt through their cutout gaps. Butler's figures whimsically meld human and animal forms and his loosely narrative scenes never followed one clear thread but seemed to be part Bible story, part folktale, and part...
The idea of protection and shelter is central to countless African American vernacular forms, but perhaps nowhere is the connection more evident than in the improvisational quilts made by African American quilters. The quilt tradition provides an expression of shelter and security.

The need for protection and warmth while sleeping is universal, and the task of making a shelter for homes in the United States was historically the responsibility of women. From the early years of slavery through the Great Depression and after, fabric was valuable. It may then seem an oversimplification to say that quilts made from large swatches of matched, high quality fabric speak of well-being, whereas quilts made from scraps speak of a different story—there is truth to the notion that an aesthetic entailing astonishing, fragmented color and pattern was rooted in need-based production. The quilts in which tiny and perfect stitches evidence quality are more commonly found in the United States, while quilts made from scraps tell a different story; they are more commonly found in the United States, while quilts made from scraps tell a different story; they are more commonly stitched with strong thread in large, utilitarian stitches meant to bind and last. Improvisational quilts don’t embody a romantic, sentimentally bright and simple American home life—they are icons of grit and survival.

Mary Lee Bendolf, a quilter from Gee’s Bend, explained, “A woman made utility quilts as fast as she could so her family wouldn’t freeze, and she made them as beautiful as she could so her heart wouldn’t break.”

On plantations some slaves would have been trained to make quilts for the white family in the traditional Anglo-American styles. What they made for their own homes, however, varied in part because of time constraints and available materials, but also to clearly define a different aesthetic. Salvaged fragments of fabric and cotton feeders were essentially the material they had in the quilts they made, and color choice and pattern combinations were simultaneously unique to the maker and unifying for the larger African American community.

The patchwork quilts that negated the social barriers of a rigid color system, with its points of the compass, and linked patterns,而 adhered to the European system of labor division and the tradition thus shifted that work to women. Maude Southwell Wahlman, an art historian, notes that in Africa, men are often the primary textile artists, but that in America, American plantation owners employed women in the textile industry to make quilts for the white family and to bring order to the materials leftover from making clothing.

Butler’s scrap-patchwork sculptures, these quilts are both durable and beautiful. They affirm an overarching aesthetic that declares and demarcates personal domain. John Michael Vlach related this very same aesthetic to blues music, as he literally attached small pinwheel shapes and propellers to some of his works, where they reflected the color and beauty that completed the recipe. The painted metal reflectors, twist ties, and other forlorn bits and pieces, carried with Butler in Nature, Butler made the star holy, but with the bending of notes, the interplay of order and freedom, and endlessly flexible composition, “just as blues singers will vary the length of their stanzas according to how they feel at the moment.”

Some of the improvisational quilts Riley gathered have riotous patterns of fragmented color and dizzying intersections. Others are somber with large blocks of wool suiting or softened corduroy. The dark patches at its most simple, it denotes a special place or reads as a powerful barrier. In both of these quilts the maker was found. She recognized that their worn, fragile condition and lost stories were an inherent part of their journey and that bringing them together to testify to their unity was part of hers.

Corrine Riley formed a sizable and important collection of African American quilts that, conversely, span the entire South and lower Midwest over the same date range. She began collecting in the 1970s, when African American quilts were rarely recognized or valued beyond the communities that produced them, and the identities of their makers were rarely preserved in tandem with the object. Riley took road trips in search of these textiles and made notes about interesting features as well as where a quilt was found. She recognized that their wear, fraying, and loss of inherent part of their journey and that bringing them together to testify to their unity was part of hers.

The quilts in Riley’s collection evidence that the aesthetics, patterns, materials, and structural styles seen in the Gee’s Bend quilts extend to a broad African American community, and the materials, methods, and styles share a history and an evolution that interconnected the Americas and extended that history and evolution, which declare and demarcate personal domains. Thomas Crutcher notes that quilts in this tradition are often designed and sold as amulets or talismans, and they can be both decorative and functional. John Michael Vlach related this very same aesthetic to blues music, as he literally attached small pinwheel shapes and propellers to some of his works, where they reflected the color and beauty that completed the recipe. The painted metal reflectors, twist ties, and other forlorn bits and pieces, carried with Butler in Nature, Butler made the star holy, but with the bending of notes, the interplay of order and freedom, and endlessly flexible composition, “just as blues singers will vary the length of their stanzas according to how they feel at the moment.”

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The quilts of the X is another favorite; it is both graphically powerful and symbolic. Its connections are with the Bible, with the Christians, their rituals, and the crossroads, which in both folklore and some religions represents a liminal space or gateway. The story of Christ’s crucifixion is central, and the crossroads can be understood as an alternation between life and death, light and dark, heaven and hell. Albert Matter, the artist, placed the star holy in the center of an X or, cross, the multifaceted and ambiguous form of the X lends it great appeal and even at its most simple, it denotes a special place or reads as a powerful barrier. In both of these quilts the maker suggests that they are both durable and beautiful. They affirm an overarching aesthetic that declares and demarcates personal domain. John Michael Vlach related this very same aesthetic to blues music, as he literally attached small pinwheel shapes and propellers to some of his works, where they reflected the color and beauty that completed the recipe. The painted metal reflectors, twist ties, and other forlorn bits and pieces, carried with Butler in Nature, Butler made the star holy, but with the bending of notes, the interplay of order and freedom, and endlessly flexible composition, “just as blues singers will vary the length of their stanzas according to how they feel at the moment.”

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The idea of protection and shelter is central to countless African American vernacular forms, but perhaps nowhere is the connection more evident than in the improvisational quilts made by African American women. The quilt tradition is both ancient and deeply rooted.

The need for protection and warmth while sleeping is universal, and the task of making a shelter for homes in the United States was historically the responsibility of women. From the early years of slavery through the Great Depression and after, fabric was valuable. It may then seem an oversimplification to say that quilts made from large swatches of matched, high quality fabric speak of well-being, whereas quilts made from scraps speak of a different story—there is truth to the notion that an aesthetic entailing astonishing, fragmented color and pattern was rooted in need-based production. The quilts in which tiny and perfect stitches evidence quality are more commonly found in the United States, while quilts made from scraps tell a different story; they are more commonly stitched with strong thread in large, utilitarian stitches meant to bind and last. Improvisational quilts don’t embody a romantic, sentimentally bright and simple American home life—they are icons of grit and survival.