Quilts of Gee’s Bend

Bachelor thesis

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Annotation
The present bachelor thesis deals with an extraordinary artistic phenomenon – the quilts of Gee’s Bend whose recent appearance in the spotlight of the American art community caused controversy. It briefly introduces the African American quilting tradition in general and history of the village of Gee’s Bend, Alabama. It describes origins of its specific aesthetic quality and the effect it exercised on the American art public. It concentrates on the theoretical disputes that accompanied the quilt exhibition tours and argued whether the quilts can be pronounced pieces of modern abstract art or not. Through the survey an opinion of the Czech public and its interest to see the Gee’s Bend quilt exhibition in the Czech Republic is inquired into. The significance of recognition of Gee’s Bend quilts as art for the self-awareness of the African American community is pointed out in the thesis.
Keywords
Gee’s Bend, quilt, patchwork, art, abstract art, exhibition

Declaration

I proclaim that this bachelor thesis was done by my own and I used only the materials that are stated in the literature sources.
I agree with the placing of this thesis in the Masaryk University Brno in the library of the Department of English Language and Literature and with the access for studying purposes.

Brno, 9 August 2007

Rudolf Dittrich

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CONTENT

1. Introduction 6

2. Origins of African American quilting 7
   2.1 Definition and prehistory of the quilts 7
   2.2 European Influence 8
   2.3 African influence 9

3. The Quilts of Gee’s Bend 11
   3.1 Brief history of Gee’s Bend 11

         Introduction
         Location and indigenous inhabitants of Gee’s Bend
         Cotton era
         Social experiment
         Civil Rights Movement and Freedom Quilting Bee (FQB)
         From the bottom to the Art

   3.2 Quilts of Gee’s Bend 14

         General information
         The Gee’s Bend aesthetics
         Exhibitions

   3.3 Gee’s Bend quilts – art or not? 18
Patchwork - the piecing of scraps of cloth together, a wide spread textile technique independently was developed a long time ago out of scarcity and resourcefulness in different cultures that were able to spin and weave. Patchwork has been often combined with quilting which is another ancient technique producing multi-layer padded textiles with a specific embroidered surface relief and better insulating properties (Develyn 8). Starting as a folk craft from necessity to keep warm and save clothes it consequently turned into a conscious elaboration of complex geometrical patterns. The significance of patchwork varied in different times and places; nonetheless we may say that lately it became a worldwide popular activity sometimes inclining towards art rather than mere leisure time hobby. There are some common features of the roles that patchwork and quilting played in the United States and Europe; however, there are also significant differences. Originally intended to serve practical and decorative purposes, it remains more or less present
in both American and European traditions. Nevertheless, while in Europe quilting evolved into a widespread hobby performed by interest groups, in America apart from hobby it also became an important socio-cultural phenomenon. Especially African American quilting tradition with its distinctive artistic dimension has remarkably influenced the relationships between African and European Americans.

The significance of African American quilting tradition is going to be our main point. We are going to introduce the roots and results of the creation of one of the most influential quilting communities: the Gee’s Bend quilters whose amazing abstract quilts recently caused controversy in the American art society. We are going to describe how painstakingly the Gee’s Bend quilts became recognized as modern abstract art and how it helped to strengthen African American awareness. We are also going to point out some of the main differences between the significance of patchwork in the USA and the Czech Republic and analyze the opinion of the Czech public on the aesthetical value of the Gee’s Bend quilts. Our intention is to show that the quilts of Gee’s Bend indeed present a powerful aesthetical phenomenon that can be appreciated by people of different cultures and make another step towards multicultural and respectful society.

2. Origins of African American Quilting

2.1 Definition and prehistory of quilts

*quilt (n.)* c.1300, “mattress with soft lining,” from Anglo-Fr. quilte, O.Fr. cuilte “quilt, mattress” (12c.), from L. culcita “mattress,” of unknown origin. Sense of “thick outer bed covering” is first recorded 1596. The verb is 1555, from the noun (Online Etymology Dictionary).

It is not rare that a word is much younger than the thing itself. And that is the case also with quilts. The word ‘quilt’ can be traced back to 13th century; however, the ‘mattress with soft lining’ is almost seven times older. It was an invention of spinning and weaving by early civilizations along the Ganges, Euphrates and the Nile that opened the door to crafts like sewing, embroidery and quilting. As soon as
the people had discovered that two or three pieces of cloth sewn together were much warmer than just one layer and at the same time provided a wider scale of possibilities for embroidering and decorating the quilts appeared. “The first evidences of quilting are from ancient relics of China, Egypt, India and Persia. They have been found in the tombs of kings, queens, and warlords” (Develyn 4). Among the preserved ancient quilts we can find examples of quilted mantles, canopies, banners and protective coverings.

Information on the prehistory of quilts is scarce, nonetheless, the situations dramatically changes after the Crusades in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The quilts appeared to be excellent armorial bearings for crusaders and quilting a perfect technique to decorate their cloaks and banners. More to it crusaders brought a lot of wonderful quilted pieces of cloth from the Middle East and Orient and soon this kind of art became more and more conspicuous needlecraft in nearly all countries of Western Europe. Cold European winters made people elaborate warm clothing and bed coverings with padding. “Moss, feathers, and even grass were used as well as lamb’s wool” (Develyn 4). Stitching developed into a sophisticated system of decoration and these were the roots of quilting as we know it nowadays and have sufficient amount of evidence about.

In Europe a quilting frame slowly became an inevitable piece of furniture for all social classes. Quilting turned into a widespread daily routine. After all chores had been done the families used to sit at the frame and quilt and talk. The lower classes quilted for warmth the higher ones to produce beautifully decorated pieces of cloth. The quilted items included clothing and different kinds of household articles (Develyn 6).

Cloth was not an easily accessible commodity in the Middle Ages and especially poorer people were forced to utilize all scraps they could find. The technique of patchwork – sewing small, usually worn out patches of cloth together – was
commonly used through centuries. Herbert Norris in *Costume and Fashion* indicates: “… it was apparently used by the Celts for clothing. There are also references in French and English literature to pieced coverings in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. However, it seems that pieced bed covers were not quilted until the 1700s in America” (qtd. in Develyn 8).

Connection of patchwork and quilting proved to be an outstanding opportunity for joining practical use with aesthetic expression and flourished predominantly in modern times in the United States. However, patchwork quilts had to go a long way before they could aesthetically compete with the worked out embroidery designs applied on decorative tapestries and festive clothing.

2.2 **European influence**

In the comparatively settled life of Middle Ages European society, quilting found its place and was firmly established as a craft, hobby and social activity producing predominantly household articles, clothing or various decorative items. Its position was stable and apparently unshakable. Nevertheless, a great change awaited Europeans moving to New England in colonial times. Life was far from settled and women being preoccupied with taking care of families, food preserving, cleaning and many other kinds of housework had very little time to sit and quilt. Challenging lifestyle together with hard nature conditions prevented quilting from becoming a widespread activity in colonial America.

“Some quilting was done by those who could afford household help thus leaving the woman of the house with time for decorative needlework” (Colonial Women ~ Quilters or Not?). Or, on the other hand, it was the household helpers like for example servants or slaves who did the quilting for their masters, which was even more frequented case. African women slaves on plantations and in wealthy households were needed to spin, weave, sew and quilt. The cloth and patterns they used were European but they soon acquired great skill in all fabric jobs and in the
little time that was left for them in the day they did their own sewing (Colonial Women – Quilters or Not?).

After the Civil War, when many freed woman slaves went to work in households as domestics or help on small farms, the textile industry was able to produce enough cloth that was more or less easily available. “Only then did quilting become a common way for American women to express their creativity” (Colonial Woman – Quilters or Not?). Quilting was slowly and naturally adopted by American society and acquired a position that in the future surpassed the one quilting had in Europe. The African Americans quilt patterns firstly draw from European tradition but later commenced to reflect signs of African cultural heritage thus generating a new distinctive aesthetical tradition combining European and African approaches to techniques and mainly patchwork patterns (African American Tradition).

### 2.3 African influence

It would be imprudent and far from true to state that African Americans knowingly distinguished between European and African patterns and used exclusively the African ones on purpose to show their identity, however, African influence cannot be overlooked and it is true that employing African motives in quilts played one of the important roles in a slow process of arising African American awareness. (African American Traditions). African American quilting developed slowly and naturally in hard conditions of dawn-to-dusk work and usually limited access to cloth and these conditions basically defined the aesthetical choices of quilt creators. In poorer regions the scraps of discarded clothes or food sacks were used so the utility value was above the aesthetical one. Nevertheless, where it was possible, the African American women involved the following typical African aesthetical features (African American Traditions).
**Large shapes and bright colours** – in Africa, the need to be able to recognize people from far distances was crucial for warning tribes and travelling hunting parties.

**Asymmetry** - traditional African weave was not regulated by specific pattern. The creator of the weave was free to change and alternate the pattern. The goal of the work was to create a large fabric of separate weaves sewn together rather than one repeating pattern.

**Improvisation** - the ability to recreate and change old patterns was especially important to many African tribes. A break in a pattern symbolized a rebirth in the ancestral power of the creator or wearer. And a break in a pattern also helped keep evil spirits away.

**Multiple patterning** - Often in African textiles, the number of patterns or changes in pattern of a specific cloth directly correlated to the owner’s status. This tradition was thus especially important for royalty and priests -- it conveyed prestige, power, status, and wealth. The traditions of improvisation and multiple patterning also protect the quilter from anyone copying their quilts.

**Religious symbols and protective charms** - Very prominent in African textile tradition is the use of the diamond pattern. The diamond is symbolic of the cycles of life. Each point represents a stage in life: birth, life, death, and rebirth. Charms are used in many African and African American religious societies. Charms can heal or ward off evil spirits.

As time went on the choices of African patterns were still more deliberate. Consciousness of singularity of African aesthetical traditions substantially contributed to promoting African American culture and subsequently to consolidation of African Americans’ self confidence.
Popularity of African American quilts went so far that in the United States nowadays there are great quantities of African American quilting movements and schools organizing regular exhibitions and meetings and there are even groups of quilters who carry on research of design tradition in specific African tribes (Facts vs. Myths About America's Quilting Past).

To investigate into the history of development of separate quilting movements is a very complex and laborious task as the approach of African American quilters to their work in the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century was predominantly based on their personal liking rather then following any distinctive style or movement. However, the second half of the twentieth century brought about more awareness about the connection between identity and aesthetical choices and gave rise to many specific quilting groups whose artistic achievements are highly impressing and remarkably comparable to modern art visual effects so they are definitely worth looking at a little closer.

3. The Quilts of Gee’s Bend

3.1 Brief history of Gee’s Bend

Introduction
At the end of the previous chapter we spoke about modern quilting groups or movements, however, taking into account the spontaneity with which African American quilters approach quilting, it is sometimes quite misleading to speak about organized movements in the first half of the twentieth century. African Americans usually did not tend to strictly follow any specific systemized or formulated quilting manifesto. While quilting they used their personal experience and quilted predominantly on purpose to keep their children warm, not thinking about any classification of style or purity of form. Nevertheless, art historians and theorists of the late twentieth century, having collected enough material and background knowledge, were able to discover and recognize high aesthetical value.
of some of the African American quilts and, what is more, they dared to bring the most impressive ones to museums and place them next to recognized pieces of art (Arnett 11).

Among others, especially one group of African American traditional quilters was able to draw attention of American Art community to itself and won fame and outstanding position in the sphere of contemporary American art – the Gee’s Bend quilters.

**Location and indigenous inhabitants of Gee’s Bend**

Gee’s Bend in many aspects, geographical as well as social, is a specific region. It is about a fifteen mile long detached area located in a bend of the Alabama River in Wilcox County, Alabama, completely enveloped by swamps and sloughs. “… soon after the Creek Indians were dispatched by war in 1814 … this quirky piece of geography became the property of Joseph Bee” (Arnett 15). He managed to give the village his name but due to the debts he was soon forced to sell the Gee’s Bend estate to his relative Mark H. Pettway. Gee’s and Pettway’s slaves communities merged surprisingly creating one of the longest-lasting and most firmly united African American communities in the American history (Arnett 15).

**Cotton era**

For about 100 years the Gee’s Bend community lived on cotton. First as slaves than as tenant farmers Gee’s Benders worked hard night and day to make their living on the cotton crop. When “between 1920 and 1931 cotton lost nearly 90 percent of its value” (Arnett 15) most of the families got into serious trouble resulting in repossession raid in 1932 in which about 60 Gee’s Bend indebted households had been deprived of most of their modest property. The consequences were disastrous, “had it not been for the Red Cross which provided flour, meat and meal during the winter of 1932-33, the people of Gee’s Bend would have starved to death” (History of Gee’s Bend). “Despite the outward poverty, ‘Benders’ have long sustained themselves with a rich private world that includes Baptist rituals, gospel singing, storytelling, and quilting” (Now they Call it Art).
Social experiment

The miserable conditions raised public interest in Gee’s Bend. During 1930s several social observations were performed finding Gee’s Benders “strong, healthy, sturdy, intelligent and resourceful” (qtd. in Arnett 17).

Reverend Kennedy in 1934 wrote for the Christian Century: “There is no more concentrated and racially exclusive Negro population in any rural community in the South than in the Gee’s Bend” (qtd. in Arnett 17).

As a result Gee’s Bend was commonly addressed as Alabama Africa. In 1937 in the New York Times appeared photographs showing Gee’s Benders “quintessentially poor but dignified” (qtd. in Arnett 17). State and other federal agencies decided to implement ambitious social programmes in the area including selling homesteads to the Gee’s Benders, renting farmland for low prices, building facilities like clinic, school, warehouse etc. In most cases these supportive programmes did not last longer than 1940s, however, change from tenants to homeowners reinforced the Gee’s Bend community and made it more resistible to difficulties that were still to come (Arnett 17).

Civil Rights Movement and Freedom Quilting Bee (FQB)

In 1960s as an outcome of the Civil Rights Movement many “local black women … lost work when they took a stand and registered to vote” (Now they call it art). In this period of protest marches and lynching the community experienced hard times again. Being dismissed from work on farms Gee’s Bend women had to find another way of earning family income. The founding of the Freedom Quilting Bee (FQB) in 1966, which was an organization helping local people to use their quilting skills to make money, offered new possibilities (Arnett 19). “The big thing was that the Quilting Bee provided jobs. You could go every day and work and that was a big change” (Now they Call it Art). This social project counted on quilting as on craft rather than as on art. It provided necessary social certainties but on the other hand it dictated the quilmakers which materials and patterns to use and it also preferred
machine stitching, which was not acceptable for those quilters who simply were not able to produce standardized products. That is why many, and often most talented woman, “recoiled from the assembly-line system ... and left” (Arnett 19). Nonetheless, the FQB worked quite successfully and offered its products like quilts, aprons, and potholders all around the country through catalogues of big department stores. Unfortunately, “when the brief late-1960s fashion for patchwork quilt passed and the retail chains lost interest” (Arnett 19) the existence of Gee’s Bend was endangered again.

Occasional contracts kept the Bee working and local residents alive, however, “the last two decades of the twentieth century shaped up as a period of predictable decline” (Arnett 20).

From the bottom to the Art
As many times in its history even in the time of the next periodic economical crisis culminating at the end of 1990s the Gee’s Bend community showed itself to be ‘strong, healthy and resourceful’ enough indeed to cope with existential troubles and make a step towards open future (Arnett 18). Of course, without help from outside it would not be possible but deeply and sincerely pious Gee’s Bend community seemed to have its ‘angel protectors’ always ready to take action at the right time. At the end of the twentieth century it was an Atlanta art historian and collector William Arnett who literally changed the fate of Gee’s Bend turning it into worldwide known village of significant importance in the world of art. In 1997 he “… and his son, Matt Arnett, an art historian, came to town and purchased six quilts by Annie Mae Young for $4,000” (Now they Call it Art), thus commencing a new chapter in the life of Gee’s Bend. Arnett was first to recognize outstanding aesthetical value of specific Gee’s Bend quilt patterning and managed to put together an impressive collection of Gee’s Bend quilts that finally travelled around many important art museums all over the USA (Quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend, DVD).

3.2 Quilts of Gee’s Bend
**General information**

The Gee’s Bend woman always quilted on purpose, in the first place they were hard workers and mothers and the most important task of theirs was to feed their children and keep them warm. In mud-mortared one window log cabins one could not get children warm without quilts. Sometimes, in exceptionally cold winters the children spent all day in beds covered with several quilts (Arnett 18). Understandingly the amount of quilts produced in Gee’s Bend was incredible, but unfortunately by far not all of them preserved until today, however, the majority of those that were preserved show a high artistic value. “What seems most true for Gee’s Bend is that a majority of women residents made quilts, and only a few quiltmakers have not made or left behind works worthy of attention” (Arnett 14). Nowadays thanks to the exhibitions we are able to take delight and appreciate the originality and beauty of Gee’s Bend quilts, although these woman were “never proud of things they made and never liked to show them to others” (Arnett 21).

**The Gee’s Bend’s aesthetics**

The power and singularity of Gee’s Bend quilting tradition does not lay in sophisticated elaboration of typical quilting geometrical patterns, on the contrary, the Gee’s Bend patterning is much more abstract and naturalistic in a sense that it is abstracted from and reflects real hard life of the community. In the APT documentary *Quiltmakers of Gee’s Band* William Arnett likens Gee’s Bend quilts to the Rosetta stone saying: “Quilt is like the Rosetta stone, there is language to it that needs to be decoded”. One can easily enjoy the impression of the Gee’s Bend quilts’ beauty but to be able to understand the language they speak one has to comprehend the long-time isolation and solidarity of the community, its strong connection to African slaves’ roots and miserable life conditions that all together influenced material and aesthetical choices of the Gee’s Bend quiltmakers.

The Gee’s Bend quilts that were produced during the last 80 years are often, although not always in one accord, compared to modern art. Modern art is a broad and definitely not unequivocal term; however, it is true that many quilts and some
of them date back even up to 1930s really remind of modern abstract art which reshapes real objects and involves great deal of artist’s feeling. If we approach abstractionism as a mixture of reshaped reality and human feelings than we come to the conclusion that Gee’s Benders had not many other artistic choices. Inspired predominantly by the aesthetic tradition of the community and the view of shabby roofs and walls of old barns and cabins, limited by the lack of available material (scraps of worn out clothes) and driven by their inner sensitivity and creativity the Gee’s Bend woman always reshaped what they really saw and lived through and embedded it in quilts.

Apparently, the peculiar Gee’s Bend quilting tradition have always inclined towards a kind of abstractionism, thus creating an aesthetic phenomenon that, when discovered by the established art community, would strongly aspire to be labelled as modern abstract art. However, the way up on the pedestal of modern art was another thorny one for the quilters.

Exhibitions
When William Arnett organized the first exhibition tour of Gee’s Bend quilts in 2002 the art public did not welcome his intention with much enthusiasm. Some of the journal headlines, quoted in Arnett’s book, speak for themselves: “Museums cozy up to Quilts,” “It’s High Season for Blankets but the Patrons Ask, ‘Is it Art?’” (10). Many culture lovers and arts officials nationwide begged: “No more quilts!” and an art reporter Brooks Barnes even attributed “the looming quilt craze to museums’ declining standard and the desire to cut costs” (qtd. in Arnett 10). But the world is not only black or white, there were people who were in rapture of Gee’s Bend quilts and especially after the exhibition in New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art the things were taking a turn for the better. Peter Plagens wrote for Newsweek: “The seventy quilts in the show are no less than the equals – in unconventional
colour, bold and surprising composition, and subtle visual invention - of just about any abstract painting made by any trained artist” (qtd. in Arnett 10). Most influential of all was the review of Michael Kimmelman, chief art critic of New York Times, in which he wrote:

These quilts constitute some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced. Imagine Matisse and Klee (if you think I am wildly exaggerating, see the show) arising not from rarefied Europe, but from the caramel soil of the rural South. (qtd. in Arnett 10)

The elite American art community slowly started to open and within a few months the Gee’s Bend quilts became a worldwide known remarkable aesthetical phenomenon comparable to renowned pieces of abstract art. The first journey around American art museums was unexpectedly graceful and successful. The final number of exhibitions within the tour grew up to twelve including such famous institutions: as the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington D.C., the Cleveland Museum of Art, The Chrysler Museum of Arts in Norfolk, Virginia and others (Arnett 11).

Uncontested success of the Gee’s Bend quilts and their international recognition became other milestones of the emancipation of African American community on the way towards multicultural, respectful and friendly society. If we realize the atrocity of slavery and irrationality of segregation, if we realize how difficult it was for African Americans to reach at least minor success in the fields of literature, science, politics etc. If we realize that all this was taking place not very long time ago, and there are places where it is still taking place, only than we can fully understand the importance of breakthrough of the Gee’s Bend aesthetic tradition into the guard range of modern abstract art. The curator of Houston exhibition Dr. Alvia Wardlaw fully acknowledges the strong significance of the success: “This is
important for me personally as an African American woman. People are moved, they cry, they want to know the (Gee’s Bend) woman…” (Quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend, DVD). Especially the contact between the quilters and the audience and their mutual interest in each other seem important. William Arnett in ATP documentary *Quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend* confirms this saying: “These women never realized that the world would respect them as human beings, would respect what they did as being important and respect them and respect their culture and respect their community.” In spite of accompanying disagreements the widespread general positive feeling that something has changed is obvious.

The exhibitions laid down the foundations for international fame and further successful development of the community; however, art historians and theorists were faced with new and not very easy questions.

### 3.3 Gee’s Bend quilts - art or not?

*art (n.)* c.1225, “skill as a result of learning or practice,” from O.Fr. art, from L. artem, (nom. ars) “art, skill, craft,” from PIE *ar-ṭi- (cf. Skt. rtiḥ “manner, mode;” Gk. arti “just,” artios “complete;” Armenian arnam “make,” Ger. art “manner, mode”), from base *ar- “fit together, join. Meaning “skill in creative arts” is first recorded 1620; esp. of painting, sculpture, etc., from 1668. (Online Etymology Dictionary)

**Definition of art**

The introduction of Gee’s Bend quilts into the society of modern artists caused a lot of controversy. The basic questions remained: Is it art? Is it appropriate to have it displayed in museums? Is it ‘politically correct’ to address the old uneducated Gee’s Bend grandmothers as modern artists? To find answers to these questions it is
necessary to follow Socrates’ premise and define the subject under discussion – art. However, even this task appears to be quite complicated as perception of art is not as rigid as Newton’s laws of motion and reflects many social and other changes taking place in human society in the course of time. Nevertheless, a look at several possible views of art that modern dictionaries and encyclopaedias procure can be helpful.

*Cambridge Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary* offers five conventional meanings of the word art. The first one reads: “art is the making of objects, images, music etc. that are beautiful or that express feeling.” The fifth one considers art as “a skill or ability.” *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* involves talent in its first definition of art: “the expression of human creative talent esp. in a visual form” and develops the Cambridge’s fifth one stating: “Art is any skill or ability that can be developed by practice.” More sophisticated definition is offered in *the American Heritage Dictionary* which views art as “the conscious production or arrangement of sounds, colours, forms, movements, or other elements in a manner that affects the sense of beauty.”

The mentioned above definitions apparently draw on the etymological definition shown at the beginning of the chapter and basically state that art is fundamentally based on skill and craft, requires a certain amount of talent and produces object affecting sense of beauty – taken as such the Gee’s Bend quilts entirely conform to the dictionary definitions of art.

The quilts are objects ‘that are beautiful and often express feelings’. To make a quilt one needs ‘talents, skills and abilities that can be developed by practice’. Quiltmakers ‘arrange colours and forms that affect sense of beauty’. So, why is there so much resistance on the side of art officials and reporters?

Evidently mere dictionary definitions are not sufficient to procure decisive answers. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* reveals more extensive and important information about what can be called as art and what cannot:

**ART** also called visual art
A visual object or experience consciously created through an expression of skill or imagination.

The term art encompasses diverse media such as painting, sculpture, printmaking, drawing, decorative arts, photography, and installation. The various visual arts exist within a continuum that ranges from purely aesthetic purposes at one end to purely utilitarian purposes at the other. This should by no means be taken as a rigid scheme, however, particularly in cultures in which everyday objects are painstakingly constructed and imbued with meaning. Particularly in the 20th century, debates arose over the definition of art. Figures such as Dada artist Marcel Duchamp implied that it is enough for an artist to deem something “art” and put it in a publicly accepted venue.

Lo, here we find three crucial points of argument. The first is the concept of a ‘visual object’. Did the quiltmakers produce ‘visual objects’? They repeatedly stated they quilted blankets to keep their children warm; while beauty was a kind of by-pass product. The second is ‘conscience’ – no doubt they produced blankets deliberately but were they conscious they produced beauty that can be appreciated and valued by artistic community? Apparently, not. And the third is absence of a ‘rigid scheme’ – during the 20th century the traditional understanding of art underwent a revolution that resulted in a great quantity of controversial views of art providing wide range of often contradictory theories and the world of art theory probably forever lost its former unity and cohesiveness. Thus one can more understand why some people tenaciously reject Gee’s Bend quilts as art while others do not hesitate come up with statements like: “Yes, the Gee’s Bend quilts are going to change art history!” This was what David Gordon the Director of Milwaukee Art Museum said in the APT documentary Quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend.

Very important in the case of Gee’s Bend quilts is also the part of the Britannica’s definition that speaks about the ‘cultures in which everyday objects are painstakingly constructed and imbued with meaning’. It is necessary to emphasize that contemporary art theories do not deny exceptional aesthetical value of some of everyday objects painstakingly produced in some, usually indigenous, cultures, they rather tend to invent specific labels for them like for example: vernacular art or folk art or indigenous art which in most cases seems logical and corresponds with
systematic approach to almost all aspects of human life that is common in modern society. However, in some cases, and Gee’s Bend may well be the case, this seems more to reflect a stereotyped and prejudiced attitude that keeps stuck to the former clear cut division between ‘we civilized’ and ‘they uncivilized’. Nevertheless, art theory being or endeavouring to be as objective scientific discipline as possible does not want to allow so much space for subjective appraisal of the subject.

Importance of point of view

The core of the problem really seems to dwell in the absence of objective and commonly accepted definition of art – “a definition in terms of essential, or fundamental, characteristics ...” as in her essay “Art and Cognition” says a famous American philosopher and aesthetician of Russian origin Ayn Rand. Further she adds that “… by the 1950s, many philosophers had been led to despair of the possibility of defining art” (qtd. in What is Art?).

The evident palavers that philosophy experienced in attempts to objectively define art, resulted in relativism which only brought further complications. For example New York Times art critic Roberta Smith encapsulates the matter into a dictum: “If an artist says it’s art, it’s art.” (qtd. in What is Art?). Grace Glueck, another Times critic, tries to be more specific stating “that something is a work of art if it is ‘intended as art, presented as such, and . . . judged to be art by those qualified in such matters’.” (qtd. in What is Art?). There are more similar definitions that at the first sight put a clear border between art and ‘non art’. Another one goes for example: “It is art if it is called art, written about in an art magazine, exhibited in a museum or bought by a private collector …” (qtd. in What is Art?).

At the second sight we find out that answer to the question “what is art” remains unclear and the responsibility for answering another basic question “who decides what art is” seems to be hanging out in the vacuum between an artist and qualified audience. Doc. PaedDr. Jiří Eliška from the faculty of Arts of Masaryk University in
an email to the author commented the present reign of subjective relativism with the following words: “In a post-modern ‘evaluation of quality’ anyone can proclaim themselves an artist and anything can be proclaimed art,” however, it is obvious that this “vast relativism leads to inaccuracy in classification and systematization,” adds Mr. Eliška.

We see that almost anything can be called art, however, we experience trouble to apply these relativists and de facto open-ended definitions to Gee’s Bend quilts unambiguously. The quilts are exhibited in museums, they are bought by private collectors, they are written about in art magazines, but, and that is probably the greatest obstacle, they were not intended as art and their creators until recently would have not called them art. Doc. Paedr. Jiří Eliška himself inclines to label quilts as decorative design rather than art and we have shown here that his statement is legitimate and theoretically well-founded.

Thus proclaiming quilts art is academically controversial; however, what we witness here is a historical upheaval that qualitatively changes a given aesthetical phenomenon, as Gee’s Bend quiltmakers now do consider themselves artists and they do consciously create pieces of art. Now they do realize that quilts can hang not only on washing lines but also in museums and that educated audience does appreciate their work. Although The Gee’s Bend quilts’ entrance into the world of high art caused a lot of ripples in the established art community, their recognition now is so enormous that the words of David Gordon, the director of Milwaukee Art Museum, may show to be true and the quilts can really change art history.

*The quilts meeting art*
In spite of that most art definitions seem to exclude amateur audience as a possible source of objective judgement the Gee’s Bend quilts are practically appreciated and treated as art by large amateur and professional audiences all over the world (Quiltmakers of Gees Bend, DVD). To try to form one’s own opinion without bias and prejudice is a responsibility of each separate viewer. The results of impartial comparison of quilts and modern abstract art may be in many ways surprising.

Among famous artists that are most often mentioned in connection with Gee’s Bend quilts are such illustrious names as Henri Matisse, Paul Klee, Barnett Newman, Piet Mondrian and several others. Their training, cultural background, social environment, and aesthetical education seem to open an unbridgeable abyss between them and the Gee’s Bend quiltmakers. Nevertheless, comparing their pieces of art with the Gee’s Bend quilts is far from being unthinkable. If we put their paintings next to the quilts we are faced with another philosophical question: “It asks all of us about genius, you know, and, where does it reside?” (Dr. Alvia Wardlaw in Quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend, DVD).

Henri Matisse, L’Escargot (1952)
(http://perso.numericable.fr/cricordeau41/quatuor/art_d23_0001_01.htm)

Paul Klee, Structural II (1934)
(http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/ARTklee.htm)

(http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/m/minimalism.html)

Piet Mondrian
*Composition with Colour Planes and Gray Lines* 1918

(http://www.suphawut.com/art/images/western/piet_mondrian/composition_color_plain.jpg)

Leaving the question “are quilts art?” unanswered as an unnecessary burden and concentrating just on how they affect our senses one is really able to get adsorbed by the aesthetical effect they produce and feel the same rapture as over the paintings of renowned abstract artists. This is highly subjective and fully in concordance with contemporary relativism. Dr. Peter Marzio, the director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, has been in museums since 1968 and he has never “seen phenomena like the Gee’s Bend quilts” (Quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend, DVD). He is a pragmatic man of experience but he is not mean with the words of praise: “What these quilts are is a level of sophistication that no art academy can teach. The whole community here is academy” (Quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend, DVD).

Louisiana P. Bendolph, *Mayday* 2005

(http://www.quiltsofgeesbend.com/quilts)
Modern artistic styles for example, cubism or abstract expressionism or minimalism, in a way unite artists in a pursue for a certain aesthetic expression but at the same time they exercise decentralizing tendencies that put strong emphasize on
individualism and distinction between individual artists. The Gee’s Bend community appeals in a different way. In a quilt the community’s tradition is usually more visible than the quilter’s individuality (Arnett 25). That is the reason why exhibitions of the Gee’s Bend quilts emanates alluring spirit of communality.

David Gordon, the director of Milwaukee Art Museum, on the course of Gee’s Bend exhibition in Milwaukee in 2002 noticed that “most art shows which are group shows don’t have the feeling of any unity between the different artists as this show has”, which is even more remarkable “given that some of the quilts are made as early as 1930s and some as late as recent times” (Quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend, DVD). The quilts seem to have something in common that stands over adversity and time. Jane Fonda, a member of Tinwood books publishers, who has participated in organizing the exhibitions and publishing books about Gee’s Bend has a very intimate and maybe a little pathetic relationship to the community. In the APT documentary she said that “their art is so full of love … and patriotism … and hope … it’s very moving … you know … the rest of us can get cynical and angry … but these people are as all people should be but they’re not.”

For making an individual opinion to get to know the history of Gee’s Bend and see the quilts is maybe more important than quotations. However, to close this chapter, let us use the words of Dr. Peter Marzio, which also express the opinion of the author:

“It’s inanimate material that has a life force. The quilts express a joy and wonderment that makes you glad to be part of the human race. And I think that’s the role of art – to be inspiring” (Quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend, DVD).
4. Gee’s Bend quilts meeting Czech audience

4.1 Significance of patchwork

If we wave aside omnipresent complaints and disagreements, in general the introduction of the Gee’s Bend community to the wider art audience brought about wonderment, respect, and inspiration. It procured new mutually beneficial and natural opportunities for cooperation between African and European Americans based on respect and partnership. Nowadays Gee’s Bend quilts present a highly liquid commodity and Gee’s Bend quilters regularly exhibit and organize workshops where they educate other quilters to compose abstract quilts. The social position the Gee’s Bend quilters maintained symbolizes another important step in emancipation of African American community. This is one of the main differences between African American and European quilting. In Europe it has never had such significant socio-cultural importance.

*Patchwork in Europe*

The role of patchwork in Europe has been far from that crucial and dramatic. In the Middle Ages patchwork and quilting also helped poor people to economize on cloth and keep warm in winter. Only later in the 18th century did patchwork became more widespread even in higher society and instead of scraps materials as silk, satin and velvet were used to produce elaborate and beautiful patchwork designs. Yet the first
half of the twentieth century threatened to put an end to the patchwork tradition in Europe. Fashions alternated too often for patchworkers to match with them and too many women were preoccupied replacing man at work in wartimes so there was not much time for handicraft (Hlostová). The patchwork returned back to Europe in the ‘hippie era’ in 1970s paradoxically from America when a great travelling exhibition of American patchwork visited Europe (Hlostová). This hobby gradually became more and more popular among European woman and by the end of the twentieth century patchwork maintained a firm position among their leisure time activities and also became a means of earning money for some.

**Patchwork in the Czech Republic**

The history of patchwork in the Czech Republic corresponds with the general evolution of this technique in Europe. After the fall of communism in 1989 the Czech Republic suffered a wave of patchwork fever which resulted in establishing a viable patchwork community divided into clubs such as Bohemia patchwork club or Moravia patchwork club that organize regular patchwork courses, meetings and exhibitions for amateurs as well as professionals. The popularity of patchwork in the Czech Republic also has international ambitions. In 2007 the International Patchwork Meeting was held in Prague and the overall success of the event’s first year provided the organizers with sensible grounds to project the second year for the 6-8th April 2008.

Aesthetically the Czech patchwork tradition predominantly draws on typical European regular geometrical patterning and does not seem to aspire for competing with modern abstract art. On the contrary it appears quite satisfied to be ‘just’ decorative folk art. The Czech patchwork community lives in peace with artistic community and also does not much interfere in the life of the wider general public. The apparent socio-cultural impact of patchwork on relationships between different social groups is lacking in the Czech Republic.
To document the relationship of the Czech public to patchwork in general and to find out to what extent the Czech audience appreciates specific aesthetical value of the Gee’s Bend quilts we decided to use a questionnaire and address both segments of the amateur and professional public.

4.2 The questionnaire

Introduction
The aim of the questionnaire is to show that although the Czech public has only a limited knowledge about patchwork and quilting, it is able to appreciate the exceptional aesthetic value of Gee’s Bend quilts. The questionnaire also analyzes the public interest in visiting or organizing the Gee’s Bend quilts exhibition in the Czech Republic.

The questionnaire had an electronic form of a three paged xls. file and comprised three sections. In the first section eight general questions about attitude and knowledge about patchwork were asked. In the second section opinions about four concrete pieces of art were collected. And in the final section general appreciation of the Gee’s Bend quilts and interest in visiting their exhibition were looked into.

The questionnaire was distributed in June and July of 2007 to 130 email addresses. Among addressed people there were 60 professionals involved in art such as university art teachers or gallery owners and 70 amateurs such as students or business partners of the author, 90% of which were university graduates. Twenty-five questionnaires were returned; 7 from professionals and 18 from amateurs, i.e. 19,2% of the overall number of distributed files. The surveyed people were allowed to tick more than just one answer so sometimes the total number of responses to one question exceeds 25, sometimes people did not tick any answer so the total number of responses to one question can be smaller than 25. The covered sample is not large in number; however we believe it can provide a basic image of general acceptance of
patchwork in the Czech Republic and also to indicate how the Gee’s Bend quilts exhibition could be possibly appreciated by the Czech audience.

The results

Section 1 - General knowledge of the Czech public about patchwork and quilting

The first two questions were to find out whether people know the words “patchwork and “quilt” at all. It is appropriate to notice here that both of these words do not have Czech translations and have been adopted into Czech in their original English form. As expected most people, 18 out of 25, were familiar with the word ‘patchwork’. The word ‘quilt’ seems to be less known to the Czech public. Only 11 people knew quilt.

The number of positive answers justifies the third question, which seems crucial as it inquires into how the Czech public perceive patchwork; as a craft, hobby or art?

Chart 1: Do you consider patchwork as:
Here we can see that almost half of the people view patchwork as folk handcraft. The numbers of people who consider it art and hobby equal so it is possible to say that Czech audience is predominantly conservative, yet it is also open to recognize patchwork as art.

It is curious that the majority of people view patchwork and quilting as techniques younger than 1000 years, 14 out of 19. Only five assumed it originated in the first millennium and no one appeared to have answered correctly that it is more than 2000 years old.

Seven out of 22 people claimed to have known something about the historical development of patchwork in specific countries. Four times they mentioned South America, twice Northern America and once Africa.

The sixth question inquired about which types of quilts they were familiar with: geometrical patterns, real motifs or abstract?

**Chart 2: Do you know quilts …?**
Apparently the Czech audience by and large knows the quilts with geometrical patterns. It corresponds to what we have said before that the Czech quilting tradition is based predominantly on the European regular geometrical patterning. Quilts with realistic motifs are by far least known for the Czech public. But surprisingly abstract quilts are not as unknown as expected.

Quilts exhibitions seem not to exist in the Czech public. Twenty-one out 23 surveyed people have never heard of nor visited any quilt or patchwork exhibition. As stated before the patchwork community is a comparatively closed group of people which does not participate much into public life. And although we know that there are regularly organized meetings and exhibitions and that there is even an international patchwork meeting in Prague only one person had heard about a quilting exhibition on the radio and another had read about a quilting competition in a woman’s journal.

The last question concentrated on public presumptions about the possibility of using patchwork to produce artistic pieces. The Czech public is quite open and 14 out 25 people allow for this possibility in certain circumstances. Seven people do not doubt about this possibility at all. Only two surveyed people are not sure whether through patchwork a piece of art can be created.

Section 2 – How do you appreciate the following pieces?

In this section the people were shown four pieces and asked the same questions about each. The questions focused on aesthetical value, origin and possible connection with other modern art movement or style. The participants were not told beforehand that all four pieces were in fact Gee’s Bend quilts. The pictures of quilts were taken from the section “quilts” on official web site of Gee’s Bend quilters www.quiltsofgeesbend.com.

Two people thought this piece to have an outstanding aesthetical value, eleven high and ten ordinary. Nine people labelled it as a
piece of abstract art and eleven as a quilt. Six people claimed it reminded them of something they have already seen, they pointed out cubism, geometrical abstraction, modernism and one mentioned Piet Mondrian.

One person considered this as a piece with outstanding aesthetic value, six people with high and fourteen with just ordinary. Majority, 17 out of 22, people took it as a product of an abstract artist, five as a quilt. Six people saw some similarity with unspecified known art movements. One person classified it as a decorative painting of the 50s.

One person saw poor value in this quilt, thirteen ordinary, seven high and two outstanding. Fourteen labelled it as a piece of abstract art, twelve as a quilt and one as a child’s collage. This quilt reminded ten people of cubism, orphism, folklorism, geometrical abstraction, modernism, and Brussels of the 50s and 60s. One mentioned František Kupka.

Two people considered this piece to have a poor aesthetic value, seventeen viewed it as an ordinary piece and only four labelled its value as high. Two though it to be a child’s collage, fifteen abstract art and eleven a quilt. Eight people saw in it signs of cubism, neoplasticism, decorativism of the 60s and avant-garde.

We see that the surveyed people predominantly considered the pieces as abstract art. They also mentioned many art movements they saw in the quilts. It shows that to differentiate between the Gee’s Bend quilts and modern abstract art is really difficult and without background knowledge and sufficient amount of information practically impossible. According to the results we may say that the Czech audience is quite familiar with abstract art, although it is not very much aware of combination of quilts and abstract art. Nonetheless the participants were able to appreciate the aesthetical value of the quilts as quite often they labelled their value as high and in some cases even as outstanding.
Section 3 – Gee’s Bend exhibition

The third questionnaire’s page presented fifteen quilts from Gee’s Bend and in a way simulated a small exhibition. It was intended to expose viewers to a powerful impact of concentrated beauty and evoke a strong immediate impression on them. The expected positive impression was hoped to stimulate the willingness in the viewers to want to see the exhibition in the Czech Republic and possibly to help with the organization of such event.

Although six people would not go to see the quilts in an exhibition at all other reactions were favourable. Twenty people would go to see the exhibition if it was organized in a regional centre as Brno or Prague. Six people answered that they would go to see the exhibition in Vienna. One woman would go to New York had she enough money.

The next question inquired what hypothetical success could the Gee’s Bend quilts exhibition have in the Czech Republic. The results displayed in the chart reveal that possibly a slightly bigger than average success could be expected in case the exhibition took place in the Czech Republic. One unnamed woman again thought that the exhibition would have even an extraordinary success. However, all these are mere speculations that can be neither ascertained nor rebutted unless the exhibition is really organized.

Chart 3:

What success do you think the exhibition of these quilts would have in the Czech Republic?
The third question asked about willingness to help this exhibition happen: *Would you be disposed to become an expert patron or a financial supporter or offer any other kind of help to organize an exhibition of the Gee’s Bend quilts in the Czech Republic?* Unfortunately most of the surveyed participants responded in the negative. Except for moral support or help with propagation and advertising there were no serious offers to help bring the Gee’s Bend quilts into the Czech Republic. Just one woman claimed that she would donate to the exhibition had she enough money. Yet it is still possible that an exhibition could be arranged. It is highly probable that robust determination and proper management would bring fruits and could result at least in a small exhibition of photocopies of the Gee’s Bend quilts in a small local gallery.

The questionnaire’s results show that the participants have so far a limited level of knowledge about patchwork and quilting, however they seem quite open to the phenomena and are able to appreciate the Gee’s Bend aesthetical tradition. Their attitude to Gee’s Bend quilts would most likely be even warmer had they had known more about the pitiful yet hopeful history of the people in the Gee’s Bend village.

4.3 Legacy of the Gee’s Bend story

Apparently, the legacy of the Gee’s Bend quilts is borderless and has obvious power to change people’s attitude towards art and break stereotypes about artistic creation.
The story of the Gee’s Bend quilters is very endearing with a deeply human vigour that often makes people reappraise the way they view African Americans.

Pronouncing their quilts modern art and having them exhibited in fine arts museums substantially contributed to strengthening positive awareness about the African American community and increased its self-appreciation. The Gee’s Bend quilts exhibitions became another important step on the way towards emancipation of the African American community. They show that the role of quilting within the community changed from satisfying the vital material need for warmth into providing a source of self-confidence. Thus quilts help African Americans to win a more dignified position in modern global society heading towards multiculturalism and respectfulness.

The story of Gee’s Bend has an appealing message that should be spread. Hence translating and publishing books about Gee’s Bend or a serious decision to organize an exhibition in the Czech Republic present possible future domains of interest of the author.

5. Conclusion
In the last three centuries patchwork and quilting have represented a very important element in the life of the African American community. The burdensome poverty of African American slaves forced them to utilize all discarded textiles such as work clothes or food sacks and turn them into quilts providing warmth for themselves and especially for their children in cold winter. African cultural heritage enabled the slave community to combine typically African aesthetics with the European style of patterning and produce astonishingly powerful quilts with outstanding aesthetic value reminiscent of pieces of modern abstract art. However, as the social status of the African American population in the last three centuries was predominantly quite low, these beautiful quilts had often remained utilized, discarded and forever forgotten, unnoticed and unvalued by the white community.

The recent appearance of Gee’s Bend quilts in the spotlight of the established artistic community was therefore considered insolent and inappropriate by many. Calling the quilts modern art gave rise to many open-ended theoretical disputes that most probably cannot be objectively and finally solved. Nevertheless, great and true things, as a rule, do not need much advocacy. Uncompetitive and humanly warm wonderment of these quilts slowly won hearts of a considerable audience all over the world. The surveyed sample of the Czech audience also expressed inclination to consider the Gee’s Bend quilts as abstract art. Although the survey participants predominantly labelled aesthetic value of the quilts as ordinary, no one in fact disliked them and quite often their value was thought high or even outstanding. Potential success of the quilt exhibition in the Czech Republic was generally deemed as bigger than average.

Discovery of Gee’s Bend quilts by the white artistic circles provided new fields for mutually beneficial cooperation between the African and European American communities and contributed to consolidation of the social status of African Americans. The story of the Gee’s Bend quilters and theirs quilts has the power to change stereotyped views of art. Hence its artistic and deeply human message
presents another important step in the development of art history and life of the African American community.

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7. Appendixes

Appendix 1 - The original Czech form of the questionnaire

Section 1 - General knowledge of the Czech public about patchwork and quilting

1. Znáte pojem patchwork?
   □ ano        □ ne

2. Znáte pojem quilt?
   □ ano        □ ne

3. Pokud ano, vnímáte patchwork jako
   □ těžová činnost   □ hobby        □ umění

4. Znáte patchwork jako techniku starou
   □ více než 2000 let □ z prvního tisíceletí □ z druhého tisíceletí □ moderní záležitost

5. Víte něco bližšího o historii techniky patchwork v nějaké konkrétní zemi či oblasti?
   □ ano        □ ne

   Pokud ano, naznačte prosím stručně o které země či oblasti jde:

6. Znáte quilty, nebo výrobky patchwork
   □ s geometrickými vzory □ s některými výjimky □ abstraktní □ jiné

7. Navštívil(a) jste někdy, nebo slyšel(a) jste někdy o výstavě výrobků patchwork nebo quiltů?
   □ ano        □ ne
Pokud ano, uveďte prosím kdy a kde:

8. Myslíc ste, že technikou patchwork lze vytvářet díla schopná svým uměleckým výrazem a estetickou hodnotou konkurovat uznávaným formám moderního umění?

☐ v žádném případě ☐ pravidelně ☐ za určitých okolností ☐ určitě ano

Section 2 – How do you appreciate the following pieces?

The participants were shown four different quilts and asked the same questions about each.

1. Podle Vašeho mínění má toto dílo esteticky-uměleckou hodnotu

☐ žádnou ☐ nevzhlednou ☐ průměrnou ☐ vysokou ☐ mimofybnou

2. Domníváte se, že se pravděpodobně jedná o

☐ dětskou kvalitu ☐ dílo abstraktního uměče ☐ černobílou sešivou příkryvku (quilč)

3. Vidíte v tomto díle podobnost s nějakým známým uměleckým stylem?

☐ ano ☐ ne

Section 3 – Gee’s Bend Exhibition

The participants were shown 15 selected quilts of Gee’s Bend.

1. Považujete tato díla za hodnotné abstraktní umění?

☐ ano ☐ ne ☐ s určitými výhradami

2. Na výstavu těchto děl byste byli(a) ochoten(a) jet:
   (označte maximální vzdálenost)

☐ nejednou bych ☐ do krajského města ☐ do Prahy ☐ do větší ☐ do Příbrami

3. Za jaké ceny si myslíte, že se výše uvedená díla na americkém trhu umění prodávají?

☐ do 10 $ ☐ 10-100 $ ☐ 100-1 000 $ ☐ 1 000-10 000 $ ☐ více

4. Jaký myslíte, že by výstava ukázaných děl měla v České Republice ohlas?
Byl(a) byste ochoten(a) odborně zaštitit nebo i jinak podpořit zorganizování výstavy fotografických reprodukcí těchto děl na území ČR (např. poskytnutím výstavních prostor či finanční pomoci)?

Appendix 2 – The results of the questionnaire in charts

Chart 1 - Do you know the technique of patchwork?

Chart 2 – Do you know what a quilt is?

Chart 3 – Do you consider patchwork as
**Chart 4** – Do you know how old patchwork is?

![Chart 4](chart4.png)

**Chart 5** – Do you anything about history of patchwork in other countries?

![Chart 5](chart5.png)
Chart 6 – Do you know patchwork ...?

Chart 7 – Have you ever visited or heard about any patchwork exhibition?

Chart 8 - Do you think that patchwork can be used to create an artistic piece?
Section 2 – How do you appreciate the following pieces?

As this section has been described in detail in the thesis there are no charts available for this section.

Section 3 – Gee's Bend Exhibition

Chart 9- Would you consider these pieces as valuable abstract art?

Chart 10 - What distance would you go to see these pieces in an exhibition?
Chart 11 - What money (in US dollars) do you think are paid for these pieces?

![Chart 11](chart11.png)

Chart 12
What success do you think this exhibition would have in the Czech Republic?

![Chart 12](chart12.png)
Chart 13
Would you be disposed to become an expert patron or a financial supporter or offer any other kind of help to organize an exhibition of the photocopies of Gee’s Bend quilts in the Czech Republic?