

vertical strip organization
bold color
design elements



5. Ambrotype of an unidentified slave woman. (The Valentine Museum, Richmond, Virginia)

African-Americans in America lacked sufficient artistic talent to create aesthetically satisfying artifacts. A second, and perhaps even more damaging, stereotype is the notion that the quilts made by slave women on antebellum plantations were crafted under the watchful eye of the mistress and were made according to nineteenth-century concepts of Euro-American design traditions. In other words, individual creativity and improvisation are thought to have been nonexistent.

In fact, slave quilters, who were forced by plantation rules to work within a Euro-American tradition, found inventive ways to disguise within the quilt improvisational forms and elements from African cosmology and mythology. A strong and continued belief in cosmology is evidenced by representations of the sun, the Congo cross, and the frequent use of red and white, which comes from the Shango cult of Nigeria.

The influence of African mythology survived in the snake motif, which is a symbol of Damballah, the West African god of fertility. Symbols of Erzulie, the Vodun goddess of love, appeared in slave-made textiles in the form of intricate flower patterns.

As evidence of these myths concerning slave-made quilts and other handcrafted artifacts, I offer the following excerpt from a letter I received from the president of a Southern historical society:

6. Whitewashed brick slave cabins from The Hermitage, Chatham County, Georgia. (Historic American Building Survey, Photographic Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)



Interior of the loom house at Melrose plantation showing the looms used by slaves



"Sewing women"-slaves that were specially trained to do quilting.



Unknown Alabama 1860

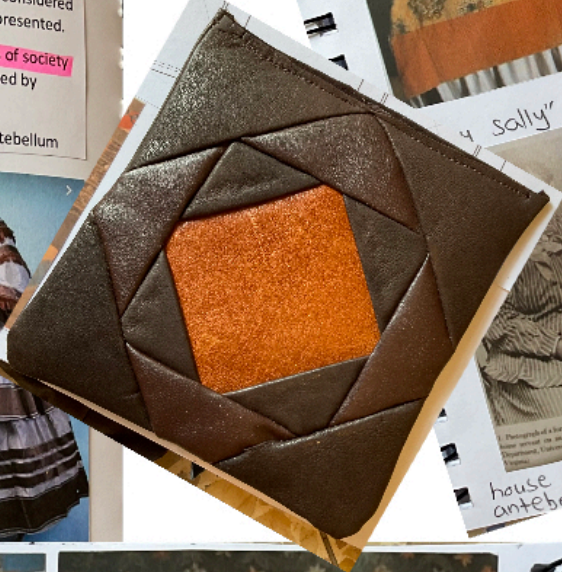


Southern belle

The image of a Southern belle is often characterized by fashion elements such as a hoop skirt, a corset, pantalettes, a wide-brimmed straw hat, and gloves. As signs of tanning were considered working-class and unfashionable during this era, parasols and fans are also often represented.

Southern belles were expected to marry respectable young men, and become ladies of society dedicated to the family and community. The Southern belle archetype is characterized by Southern hospitality, a cultivation of beauty, and a flirtatious yet chaste demeanor.

For example, Sallie Ward, who was born into the planter class of Kentucky in the Antebellum South, was called a Southern belle.



house servant on an antebellum plantation



house servant on an antebellum plantation



made around 1840 by a sixteen-year old slave Virginia



Frances M. Jolly 1839
Johanna Davis



"Yellow" Bill 1852



Mrs. Heekly

