

CASE STUDY: INFINITE VARIETY: THREE CENTURIES OF RED AND WHITE QUILTS

Case Study by *Thinc Design* October 4, 2012

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The exhibition threshold was designed to encompass a view of the entire collection. Some visitors burst into tears at the sight. (Photo: Tom Hennes, *Thinc Design*)



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[dɑ] f l American Folk Art Museum

h j g b] [l # a l d] Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts

\ m j Y l a g f August 1, 2010–March 30, 2011

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Collection and Writing: Mrs. Joanna S. Rose

Thinc Design

- Creative direction: Tom Hennes
- Lead designer: Steven Shaw
- Concept design and project director: Sherri Wasserman
- Graphic design: Aki Shigemori
- Concept design and design support: Bix Biederbeck
- Design detailing: Joe Ruster

American Folk Art Museum

- Acting director: Linda Dunne
- Curator: Stacy C. Hollander
- Guest curator: Elizabeth V. Warren
- Chief registrar/director of exhibition production: Ann-Marie Reilly
- Public relations director: Susan Flamm
- Publications: Tanya Heinrich
- Publications: Mareike Grover

Other

- Fabrication and installation: PRG
- Lighting: Palazzo Lighting Design

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Ed. note: This case study is a selection from the 2012 “[Justified](#)” competition, in which an esteemed [jury](#) identified submissions that demonstrate the value of design in a clear, compelling and accessible way. It serves as an example of how to explain design thinking to clients, students, peers and the public in general, based on specific metrics.

The American Folk Art Museum contacted Thinc Design in March 2010, inviting us to participate in a design competition amongst a small number of firms. The written brief was incredibly short—less than a page long. The museum asked for an installation design for 800 red and white quilts from a private collection. The exhibition would be held over the course of five days in March 2011, and it would be the largest quilt display devoted to a single color scheme ever presented. The location would be the 55,000-square-foot Drill Hall of the Park Avenue Armory, an 85-foot-high vaulted structure with distinct historic character. The brief included the necessity for an integrated museum shop and café area, and the entire exhibition needed to be able to be installable in less than three days.

Through conversations with the curator, we learned that this was the first large quilt event in New York City in nearly a decade, and, unlike previous events, it would be free to the public. We also discovered that the installation would have a minimal amount of didactic information. The collector wanted the quilts to appear as a united vision: a spectacular overall view that included nearly endless, explorable variation. The experience also needed to be true to quilters’ passions and fully engaging to a larger audience.

We were challenged to show the collection as a collection, in addition to successfully exhibiting the individual quilts, without overwhelming the public. The quantity of quilts was one of the show’s defining characteristics; the patterning array and the material volume were breathtaking. However, visitors also needed to experience the quilts without a feeling of relentless repetition—particularly those who were not already passionate about quilts.

We were informed that we would be responsible for all aspects of the display and installation, and the design needed to be “efficient and cost-effective.” We were initially told that we would work with a graphic designer of the museum’s choice; we instead proposed to provide that service ourselves.

Throughout the course of the design execution it was determined that 651 quilts would be exhibited. The installation time was reduced to less than 72 hours so that the exhibit could remain open for an additional day. Though the museum considered the primary target audience to be quilters, and the sold-out adjacent programming supported this notion, the collector, Joanna S. Rose, considered this installation a “gift to New York.” Due to the influence of a strong collaboration with the public relations firm Resnicow Schroeder and a growing audience attending arts programming at the Armory, the installation was highly anticipated by the design, architecture, arts and quilting communities.

Our graphic design scope expanded from the creation of street banners, a brochure and a single didactic platform to include advertisements for both antique shows and the *New York Times*. We also provided signage for the call-in cell phone tour (which included perspectives from both the curators

cylinders appeared to float in a serpentine trail throughout the room's enormous volume. Visitors could move among, inside and through the cylinders to view the quilts from both near and afar. A 45-foot-high spiral of quilts, embraced by two curved ascending walls, created a breathtaking centerpiece. Located beneath the suspended spiral was a circular arrangement of quilts draped on chairs, an evocation of the countless communities of quilters who crafted these intricate pieces of American folk art.

All of this was made possible by a simple system of suspension cables threaded through cardboard tubes mounted with binder clips that held the quilts. These were suspended from rented theatrical trusses, which enabled the entire assembly to be done from the floor in stages. Each pavilion was raised independently while several crews worked simultaneously from the top rows downward as the trusses were gradually raised toward the ceiling. A large plinth with printed statements by the curator and the collector formed the threshold of the exhibition, with the full array of quilts visible beyond it. It was the only interpretation in an otherwise unmediated exhibition experience. Together, these elements formed a breathtaking first impression and a multitude of viewing possibilities.

Visitors could download an iPhone app with high resolution photographs of each quilt, or borrow an iPad loaded with the app free of charge. The exhibition was characterized by long stay times and very social, open interactions—even among strangers.

In order to accomplish the rapid installation schedule, preparation was extensive—structures were studied through both architectural drawings and digital models, elevations detailed the placement of each quilt and individual quilts were labeled and boxed based on location. Lighting plots also determined the locations of over 350 light fixtures, all of which were focused individually during installation.

Effectiveness

Joanna S. Rose wanted "Infinite Variety" to be a "gift to New York City." Samuel Parker, in *The Last Magazine*, called the installation "an abundant gift that keeps on giving," and Martha Stewart described the experience as "...the most incredible display of quilts that I have ever seen." Many visitors wept at the entrance. Quilters traveled from around the world, describing the experience as once-in-a-lifetime and reporting that their art form had been acknowledged and revealed as never before. Many non-quilters returned daily. The six-day event broke the Park Avenue Armory's daily attendance records; press coverage ranged from quilt blogs to national media outlets as far away as Australia and China.

The quilter audience was ready-made; the American Folk Art Museum has a strong reputation and a substantial quilt network. What we didn't expect was the vast range of visitors—of all ages, races and socioeconomic types, from anecdotal and press-related evidence. The no-admission-fee policy insisted upon by Mrs. Rose reduced the barrier to entry for many, and the Armory's massive Drill Hall welcomed the resulting enormous audience.

The simplicity of our installation construction was also recognized as an achievement. Tom Freudenheim wrote in *Curator: The Museum Journal*, "In a Mary Poppins or Peter Pan magical manner, the fabrics appeared to float in the air, even while the designers made no attempt to disguise the simplicity of the cardboard tubes and rigging that held it all together. As with observing any great work of art, one was immediately struck by the notion that there was no other way this could have been done." He

that you hung the quilts made each one stand out, made the viewer go from section to section and really see the quilts, and best of all, provided an exhibit that was so much greater than the sum of its parts." As exhibit designers, we were sincerely moved by the outpouring of excitement and support. Quilters also sent us images of their own quilts, inspired by Mrs. Rose's collection. We continue to receive emails and images even today.

In regards to Mrs. Rose's goals, press outlets confirmed that New York City residents felt that they'd truly received a gift. The American Folk Art Museum has been in the process of investigating turning the installation into a traveling, revenue-generating show.

Additional information

The exhibit spanned the entire floor of the 55,000-square-foot Wade Thompson Drill Hall. Of the 651 quilts on view (more than 23,000 square feet of fabric), 160 were exhibited at eye level. The hanging structures included more than 338 cardboard tubes and more than 2,500 binder clips. The six cylinders each rose 30 feet high, and the central spiral reached a pinnacle 45 feet off the ground. As of 2010, the total number of quilters in the U.S. exceeded 21 million.

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When are you writing a book with the quilts photographed in it? Anne

• •



Mzdori •

Stunning! I think the limited color scheme just adds to the epic feeling.

• •



Stan Byers •

Amazing!

• •



John Rembilas •

Well done! Even though there is a limited color scheme, it seems to be thriving with excitement and sheer authenticity!

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