

Article

Quilting in West Africa: Liberian Women Stitching Political, Economic, and Social Networks in the Nineteenth Century

Stephanie Beck Cohen

Independent Scholar, Singapore; s.beckcohen@gmail.com

Abstract: Quilts occupy a liminal position in the histories of art and material culture. Centering analyses around specific artworks like Martha Ricks' 1892 *Coffee Tree quilt*, as well as investigating women's writing about their material production, illuminates ignored narratives about the ways black women participated in international social, political, and economic networks around the nineteenth-century Atlantic world. Quilters who emigrated from the United States to Liberia in the nineteenth century incorporated an aesthetic heritage from the American South with new visual vocabularies developing alongside the newly independent nation. Artists relied on networks with abolitionists in the United States and local textile knowledge to source materials for their work. Finished quilts circulated in local and international contexts, furthering social, political, and economic objectives. Like Harriet Powers' bible quilts, Ricks' quilts gained fame through exhibition and a whimsical artist's biography. Quilts' fragility as natural-fiber textiles in a tropical climate makes a finding a body of works difficult to examine as there are no extant Liberian quilts from the nineteenth century. However, it is possible to patch together a network of women artists, their patrons, and audiences from West Africa to North America and Europe through creative investigation of diverse historical records, including diary entries, letters, newspaper articles, and photographs. I argue that by examining Martha Ricks' artworks, self-presentation through portraiture, and published writing, it is possible to envision a new narrative of black women's participation in visualizing the newly-minted Republic of Liberia for Atlantic audiences.



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1. Introduction

Liberian quilter Martha Ann Ricks' visit to London in July 1892 sparked a flurry of interest on four continents. Newspapers in Africa, Europe, North America, and Asia published accounts of her life and travels. Journalists detailed her history, born enslaved in Tennessee in 1817 and freed by her preacher father to immigrate with her family to West Africa in 1830. She built a life in the newly-founded Liberian Republic and was fulfilling a lifelong wish to visit Queen Victoria in England in 1892. A large-scale quilt with a central medallion design of a coffee tree in various stages of growth and bloom featured the young Republic's most important cash crop at the end of the nineteenth century. Hundreds of tiny applique pieces in green and red on a white background testified to Martha Ricks' industriousness and skill. In an albumen cabinet card taken at 55 Baker Street on 18 July 1892, Ricks gazes directly into the camera, eyes crinkling at the corners, on the verge of a triumphant smile. (Figure 1). She is elegantly coiffed, her gloved hands resting folded in her lap, her beautiful floral lace and beaded sleeves shown off in exquisite detail. Ricks' vibrant energy and excitement is permanently committed to history. Upon disembarking from the *Calabar* in Liverpool, she gave an interview with the *Pall Mall Gazette* (which was reprinted in newspapers like the *African Times*) stating her purpose for traveling to England to see Queen Victoria and deliver a handmade quilt (whose whereabouts today are unknown, after the quilt traveled to the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893). Ricks

networked her way to London and into an audience with Queen Victoria, the Lord Mayor of London, and other prominent figures in her brief month in England.



Figure 1. Elliott & Fry albumen cabinet card, 18 July 1892 NPG x38887. Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, London.

Although there are no extant images of Ricks' quilt gift, the quilt was described extensively for the public: a silk and cotton quilt, featuring hundreds of tiny applique pieces composing a Liberian coffee tree in varied states of bloom and ripeness. A brown, green, and red design on a white background, its expert technique was noted, as well as the length of time the piece took to create (according to various articles, nearly a quarter-century). Like other female textile makers in the nineteenth century, Ricks is not described as an artist by the newspapers of her time. However, her well-documented journey and artistic production for the queen, and two world's fairs afterward, are an opportunity to engage with less-explored histories of women artists working in nineteenth-century Africa. Likewise, Ricks' archived writing enables an in-depth investigation of the complex way an African quilter and her works impacted her contemporaries and descendants. Such a study follows the groundbreaking work of feminist textile historians in the second half of the twentieth century, who created an academic space to reevaluate the place of women's textile work in the field of art history, dominated by painting and sculpture by male artists, such as Rozsika Parker's study of British embroidery histories (1984, 2010). Ricks' quilt is also a case study in the movement of materials and finished works in broader

nineteenth-century women's material culture networks from the unique perspective of artistic traditions moving from the United States to West Africa and back again.

This article focuses on the development of material networks between Liberia, the United States, and England, focusing on women's participation in growing those networks and culminating in Martha Ricks' quilts circulating the Atlantic from Monrovia to London (1892) and finally to Chicago (1893) and Atlanta (1895). As Keisha Blain and Tiffany Gill wrote, black women's travels allowed them to "engage and challenge intersecting discourses of race and gender . . . to recreate themselves socially and politically." (Blain and Gill 2019, pp. 1, 5). Ricks' story is a chance to rethink how racial blackness shaped her networks, patrons, and audiences for her work, the role of archival documents in revisiting these histories, and interpretations of the impact of black women artists around the Atlantic as their work was exhibited for large audiences. It is also an opportunity to reconsider how Liberia developed a recognizable and legible foreign presence, creating a visual program that communicated its internal diversity and readiness for international engagement throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.

2. Developing Ties, Stitching Together Networks in a Growing Republic

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a number of different peoples lived along the West African coast that is now the Republic of Liberia. Liberia's story begins with the founding of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States, more commonly known as the American Colonization Society, or ACS. The ACS was started in 1816 in Washington, DC with the goal of establishing an independent black settlement on the African continent. Its founders were motivated by several ideas: the humanitarian belief in abolition of slavery, fear-based desires to dispatch the United States' growing free black population, Christianizing missionary goals, and potential economic interests in raw materials and cheaper labor in Africa. Prominent Americans were among the founding members, including Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, Francis Scott Key, and General Andrew Jackson (Dunn et al. 2001, pp. 18–19). They based their idea on the British colony of Sierra Leone, where the British resettled several hundred African Americans freed during the Revolutionary War, as well as free black people from London, the West Indies, and Nova Scotia in 1787. In an era of burgeoning colonization of the continent, an independent black republic in Africa was more appealing as an idea rather than in practice, especially among black people in the United States, who loudly denounced the idea, as they desired to be treated as American citizens, with every privilege therein.

In February 1820, the *Elizabeth* departed New York City with a group of black freedmen and women determined to establish an independent, black-governed republic on the West African coast. Although several waves of emigrant groups left in hopelessness of achieving parity in citizenship and civil rights in the United States over the course of the nineteenth century, there was never a large movement to abandon the US for West Africa. Liberia officially declared independence from the ACS in 1847 and the United States formally recognized its sovereignty in 1862.¹ The ACS's mission changed as the colony grew into a nation; the society funded transportation for roughly 19,000 people (freeborn, manumitted, and recaptured on illegal slave ships) between 1822 and 1867, continuing to support emigration after the declaration of independence (Burin 2005, p. 144).² The small population of immigrants from the United States formed the initial government that took over political discourse in international relationships in the nineteenth century while negotiating local relationships with the sixteen indigenous peoples spread across the geographical area designated as Liberia by the bordering colonial powers in Sierra Leone, Côte-d'Ivoire, and Guinea. Liberia's diverse indigenous population includes the Vai, Dei, Krahn, Gola, Kpelle, Bassa, Loma, Dan/Wee/Guere, Gbandi, Grebo, Kissi, Mano, Mende, Kru, Mandingo, and Gio. Three major West African language groups were present (with four indigenous scripts: Vai, Kpelle, Loma, and Bassa) due to several waves of migration in the preceding centuries and English was imported by American settlers, today known as Liberian English (Dunn et al. 2001, p. 4).³ Coordinating cooperation between all of

these groups was no mean feat and nineteenth century saw tumultuous and continuous negotiation between the key stakeholders in national success.

Once the nation established a government, it sought international recognition and participation in the Atlantic economic and political worlds. Cultivating the land's natural resources like timber and extant goods like coffee provided a starting point for Liberia's entrée into the Atlantic market. Carving out a meaningful and prominent space for Liberian products was a longer process. One way the emerging national leaders in Liberia did this was through participation in world's fairs. Another was by creating networks of exchange, on both personal and state levels, to grow interest, recognition, and desire for Liberian products. State gifts to other world leaders afforded Liberians the chance to promote not only their material goods but also visual representations of themselves. Christine Mullen Kreamer describes in a similar way the woven cloth of the Malagasy in nineteenth-century Madagascar: "... the queen's [Ranavalona III] gift—stories of United States-Madagascar diplomacy; ... objects, particularly cloth and images, constructed power relations and conveyed multiple meanings to the Malagasy and outsiders ... " (Kreamer and Fee 2002, p. 15). Over the course of the nineteenth century, nations such as Liberia and Madagascar were actively participating in the international circulation of objects, ideas, and images. Newly-minted Liberians, particularly those who were immigrants from the United States, attempted to project an image of a centrally unified country that could access the same codes of dress, religion, and community conduct while also incorporating specifically African cultural media and resources as they found it convenient or necessary when developing international relationships. More scrupulously investigating how Liberians created and negotiated these networks provides a more nuanced narrative of Liberian history. Twentieth-century narratives of Liberia feature the 1920s takeover of large tracts of land by the Firestone Rubber and Tire Company, and the last quarter of the twentieth century dominated by the discourse about the civil wars that raged for decades into the twenty-first, including the roles played by Liberian women during the wars. Nineteenth-century histories of Liberian women's political and artistic agency informs the networks that women drew upon later in history. In 1991, Lisa Aronson discussed Africanist art historians being slow to consider theoretical issues of gender; despite extant studies of African woman artists, few Africanists "grapple with gender-related issues or attempt to interpret the data from a feminist theoretical perspective." (Aronson 1991, p. 550). She urged Africanist art historians to broaden their interpretations of art in order to more fully examine women's artistic production in Africa, including masquerade performance and, in the domestic arts, more fully investigate the power women artists wield through their art-making tied to domestic and culturally-specific concepts. Women in nineteenth-century Liberia indeed wielded power through their material culture networks by creating and reinforcing relationships of exchange with women around the Atlantic. They also framed national interests using needle and cloth, put to use by both women and men in strengthening international ties and promoting national economic projects using the visual arts.

Nineteenth-century Liberian women's strategies of engaging the Atlantic World are critical for understanding the artistic diplomacy that continued in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They provide particular insight into the artistic, social, political, and economic participation of Liberian women, whose narratives have been historically ignored within institutions and archives in favor of the outspokenness of male politicians and the interest of twentieth-century anthropologists in a strict definition of indigenous African art. However, Liberians—both prior to and since the Republic was formed—have never been in geographical isolation. When art historians and anthropologists in the twentieth century began formally studying African art, they described artworks in a hierarchy of categories, privileging wood and metal sculpture that ostensibly had spiritual value in African communities and that had an impact on modern artists in Europe and North America. These categorizations led to artificial divisions of arts produced on the African continent that remained until the end of the twentieth century.

Thus, unearthing Liberian women's participation in the Atlantic art world invites further broadening of the category of the black Atlantic artist, in terms of both gender and medium. Furthermore, it reminds us to explode categories that limit discussion of where an artist is "from," as Liberian quilters sourced the heritage of both African and North American continents. As Kreamer writes, "[making] of cloth is a time-consuming and creative process, so, too, is the making of the social world . . . a world that must be regularly created and recreated" (Kreamer and Fee 2002, p. 18). Quilt-making patches and stitches together the materials, the ideas and inspirations of the artist, and the networks that cause a quilt to be made and circulated and viewed. As has been addressed by quilt historians in other communities where colonization occurred, like in North America, quilting becomes an integral part of expressing multiple cultural and historical identities that women navigated (Hemming 1997, p. 103). Gift-giving and reciprocation bound the givers and receivers into an ongoing relationship whose nature is revealed by close-looking at the objects and imagery in the exchange.

Archival letters between Liberia and the United States reveal how material goods—for artmaking and otherwise—were circulated across the Atlantic. Writing to Sally [Cocke] Brent in 1837, Liberian immigrant Diana Skipwith laments the price of cloth (25 cents per yard) and acknowledges the packages she received with handkerchiefs, stockings, and other wearable goods. In return, Skipwith sent fruits, seeds, and indigenous handwork in the form of woven mats, bags, and other curiosities. She and other members of her family wrote to the Cocke family asking for lengths of broadcloth, ribbons, and kitchen goods and inquiring as to the health of various Cocke family members and neighbors, reinforcing their historical bonds even years after leaving the United States (Wiley 1980, pp. 87–95). In the 1850s, after Liberia declared independence, Baltimore abolitionist Ann Lettice Murdoch documented her exchanges with Amelia "Milly" G[r]oss in her diary. Milly had moved with her family to Liberia a number of years prior, and Murdoch writes of their ongoing trading of material and curiosities every six months sent by the *Liberia Packet*. In a diary entry from January 1850, Murdoch wrote: "Wrote to Liberia, to Amelia G[r]oss, and sent a box, containing calico, colored muslin, 2 pair stockings, 2 plates, soup ladle, knitting needles and knitting, bundle quilt pieces, tracts, books, paper, and 2 collars from Jane . . ." (Ann Lettice Murdoch Diary 1785–1865). Importantly, the package includes not only cloth intended for clothing, but specifically designated for the production of quilt works. In addition to the dialogues recording the development of cloth exchange networks, travelers to Liberia noted the finished quilts they saw on their journeys. African American evangelist and global traveler Amanda Smith also described the prevalence of quilts in her 1893 autobiography detailing her trip to Liberia: "They use a good deal of [cotton] for quilts. Everybody has quilts. They don't put as much in them as they do in quilts' at home; they do not need to be as heavy" (Smith [1893] 1988, p. 411). Smith encountered quilts playing a functional role in the domestic sphere, with women dedicating material for the objects and situating them so that they were visually available for visitors like Smith. Written records piece together the transatlantic relationships that endured through text and object. Furthermore, it is through black women's internationalisms—developed by both travel and the circulation of their writing and sending material goods—that these networks cultivated, continued, and strengthened relationships between people across the ocean.

3. Liberia's National Fairs: A Visual-Cultural Narrative

Like other emerging nations in the nineteenth century, Liberians wanted to demonstrate their readiness to engage the rest Atlantic world diplomatically and economically. They aspired to grow multiple networks through which they could attain and sell goods as an alternative to a purely North American market. Additionally, the consuming spread of colonialism on the continent made it essential that Liberia cement a national identity and visualize the strength to maintain their borders as the French presence increased in the Ivory Coast to the east and Guinea to the north, as well as the British presence supporting Sierra Leone to their west. The Liberians brought together American and local material

cultures in various ways to establish their new identity as independent citizens of a new nation, from the antebellum-styled architecture they built to the “curiosities” they circulated. Additionally, indigenous peoples along the Windward Coast had exposure to global cultures, especially European, long before the Americans began to settle. Mary Moran noted in *Civilized Women* that coastal peoples engaged the rest of the Atlantic world by the eighteenth century, trading in indigenous languages, Portuguese, and English. The Kru coastal boatmen worked aboard ships from Freetown (Sierra Leone) to Luanda (Angola). Coastal peoples of Liberia marketed and cultivated goods for foreign buyers and were well-versed in formal European visual culture and dress, as demonstrated in period portraiture and shipping records (Moran 1990, pp. 42–43).⁴ Historical records also lay out how different indigenous groups moved into and out of and controlled various industries of the region. The shifting demographic make-up of the region between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries helps explain how American settlers fit into a political context already in flux (Holsoe 1971, pp. 331–62; d’Azevedo 1995, pp. 58–64).⁵

European nations in the nineteenth century used the visual arts to convey newly established national identities domestically and internationally, especially drawing upon folk culture and architecture (Facos and Hirsh 2003, p. 1). Conscious of the “wild and uncivilized” stereotypes of Africa coupled with racial discrimination by their European and American counterparts, Liberians used architecture, print culture, photography, and textiles to counter those views. Additionally, they incorporated and used local materials and imagery in small amounts in order to differentiate themselves from other developing nations and the settlers’ American birthplace. As Facos and Hirsh wrote: “Indeed, artists concerned with national identity were equally committed to the expression of a complex iconography through distinctive and often newly devised visual vocabularies.” (Facos and Hirsh 2003, p. 2). Although their study considered European artists, the analysis applies to Liberian artists and politicians as well, as their cultural and historical heritages are drawn from multiple Atlantic spaces.

The global phenomenon of the fairs presented the opportunity to promote Liberian natural resources and culture in order to boost economic and political standing internationally. In particular, Liberian officials saw the power in interweaving national economic and cultural success with the products of women’s hands by lauding their domestic performance:

“The contributions of the ladies, with reference to domestic economy, formed a department in itself equally interesting. There were vests, collars, capes, caps, bonnets, quilts, skirts, and various minor articles of the toilet and paraphernalia of the ladies, skillfully embroidered, tastefully and elegantly wrought, evincing not only their ability and skill, but their patriotic and common interest in whatever pertains to the prosperity of the sterner sex, and the success and good fortune of our common country. Our hard-working mechanics and farmers have reason to thank the Government that it has induced the ladies to discover their latent powers and capacity, by which they will be able to produce by their own industry, in future, many costly articles which they formerly demanded from abroad.”

—A.P. Davis, Chairman of the Committee of Adjudication on the second National Fair, to President Stephen A. Benson, Republic of Liberia (Liberia 1858).

Liberian women were essential to the future self-sufficiency of the nation. Furthermore, they were also to be the backbone of patriotism, instilling a firm sense of it at home as well as in public.

The British Great Exhibition of 1851 is generally considered the beginning of the world’s fair phenomenon (Rydel 1984). Newly-independent Liberia did not participate in the fair, but Liberian politicians recognized the need to participate in public, international demonstrations of sovereignty and national unity. An entry in the *African Repository* reflected their awareness of how important the fairs could be in achieving recognition, as well as political, economic, and cultural power. On 20 June 1851, President Joseph Jenkins Roberts addressed the Great Exhibition in a letter, stating:

“I regret very much that Liberia could not be represented at the great industrial Exhibition in London. I exerted myself to convince the members of the Legislature at their last session of the importance of the measure, and of the good that might result to Africa, and to Liberia in particular. But they were afraid, in view of the embarrassed state of our finances, to incur the necessary expense. I am vexed to think that, to my knowledge, there will not be a Liberian present.” (Joseph Jenkins Roberts Letter 1851–1852)

These politicians knew how cultural, political, and economic power were expressed in the United States and Europe from their diverse backgrounds and international travel. Their knowledge was complemented by the visual literacies of coastal peoples from their experiences working aboard European trading vessels. (Scruggs 2010; Moran 1990). With this knowledge at hand, Liberian officials began planning a national fair.

Liberia held its first national fairs in 1857 and 1858. The fairs showcased natural resources and artistic acuity of the settlers and indigenous peoples. J.S. Payne, the first fair’s commissioner, wrote to President Stephen A. Benson that the first national fair:

“... was one of the most opportune ideas that could have occurred to the mind ... it has had a more elevating and stimulating effect upon the community than anything else could have had ... If anyone were before inclined to doubt the ability of the country to supply those productions that can sustain her, he became inspired with hope and confidence by the unexpected profusion displayed before him.” (Payne and Benson 1858, p. 150).

After decades of reliance on food and material shipments from ACS officials in the United States, the national fair aimed to demonstrate a unifying and uplifting spirit to the new nation, and a confidence in its own production.⁶ The realities of 1850s Liberians’ material and food stability and independence are rather more complicated.

The fair pamphlets also recorded the accomplishments of Liberia’s women. In immigration records from the 1830s and 40s, a number of women described their professions as “seamstress,” indicating a skillset they deemed important in their new life in West Africa. Thirty-four women won monetary prizes for products ranging from pickles to quilts. The judges wrote:

“The works of the lady contributors to the National Fair are also worthy of a more special notice and commendation. Of fancy articles of needle work, there was, as there should have been, a tasteful display of good execution and finish ... these fancy articles were interesting as the contribution of young girls to a good extent. They evinced a degree of taste and ability to work which it is hoped will keep pace with the increase of years.” (Liberia 1858).

The terms used to describe the women’s work were typical of Victorian-era women: “tasteful,” “good execution,” and “finish.” Women in the new nation were integral to establishing a cultural oeuvre of gentility and taste, an international manifestation of nineteenth-century civility. Liberian women, newly-minted citizens, adapted American textile forms to their new climate and available materials. In the National Fair catalogues, Monrovia officials celebrated Liberian women’s abilities to make their own collars, handkerchiefs, stockings, and socks from both imported and indigenous materials. They especially praised innovation when women modified stylistic components of dress and domestic accoutrements working with new materials, like fibers from the silk cotton tree.

The second National Fair opened on 21 December 1858 and ran for one week. The temporary building in Government Square was nicknamed the “Palm Palace,” as it featured a thatch roof in the “native mode.” (Davis 1859, p. 338). This indicates that by mid-century, Liberians were conscious of incorporating indigenous building techniques even as antebellum-styled buildings with columns and wide verandas populated the wide avenues of its growing towns and cities. Chairman A. P. Davis described products seen at the fair:

“... Not satisfied with merely arousing and indulging our curiosity with the surprising works of Liberian art and industry, but that the most fastidious might

be gratified, added to the charms of eloquence the stirring strains of music;—thus combining instruction with utility, mirth with harmony and good order, and rendering the exhibition an occasion for the interchange of sentiment and the mutual congratulations of our citizens from every section of our Republic . . . there has been a decided increase of interest in the present exhibition, and a growing and firm conviction in the minds of the people of the great importance and usefulness of such annual gatherings . . . [The people demonstrating] their honest purpose not to vie with each other for considerations of present gain, but to provoke each other to more active industry and better works, and to develop[sic] the wealth and natural resources of our common country, with a patriotic zeal and devotion only to promote her best interest and highest happiness.” (Davis 1859, pp. 338–39).

Davis reiterated the purpose of the national fair. It advertised the wares of the nation and, perhaps more importantly, their unifying and patriotic effects on the population. President Benson had, after all, been re-elected following the success of the first national fair and its popularity grew as Liberians had the chance to demonstrate technical prowess and land development. However, the fair was not only positioned as a boon for the nation and its citizens. Davis elaborates by placing the fair in a global context related to black nationalism:

“Probably on no other occasion in the history of our race has there been such abundant evidences at one time of the capacity of our people for self-support, self-government, and true independence. Not only animal and vegetable food and raiment, but many of the luxuries of civilized life, are now produced in profusion from our own soil. Truly a new era has dawned upon our nation, and the finger of Providence point us to a higher, happier, and brighter destiny.” (Davis 1859, p. 339).

Davis’ writings about race were of particular importance in 1859. Liberia had yet to be recognized diplomatically by the United States as a republic despite England and France accepting its sovereignty in 1847. Its leaders were aware of growing black nationalist movements around the Atlantic and hoped to attract black intellectuals to immigrate to Liberia. Davis reiterated Liberia’s mission: black self-governance and liberty, a specific, western form of civilization, and the Christian godliness of the new republic. The rest of the committee’s report discussed the variety and abundance of crops and their potential for capturing market share based on trade with hinterland producers. These included indigenous and American cotton varieties, sugar grown along the St. Paul River, coffee raised in Grand Bassa, tobacco, rice, and cassava. Additionally, domestically produced looms, furniture, and rope assuaged worries that in the event of a decline in international shipments, Liberians could not supply their own domestic needs. Davis’ note seems prescient as the onset of the American Civil War did cause a disruption in American shipments of goods to Liberia.

The Fair’s judges again celebrated women’s domestic production of textiles and foodstuffs. The women’s work was described as genteel and skillful. Notably, Martha Ann Ricks, whose *Coffee Tree quilt* inspires stories on four continents three decades later, won a prize for a pair of stockings she made from the fibers of the Liberian silk-cotton tree (Tyler-McGraw 2008). The women’s work and its praise married two nineteenth-century concepts about western society. One was civilization, which opposed stereotypical and racially-driven impressions of Africa preceding post-Berlin Conference colonization movements. Another was nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood embodied for women globally by Queen Victoria. Rozsika Parker writes that nineteenth-century British embroidery purposefully tied hand-work into a gendered, spiritual, class-crossing project concretizing a Victorian feminine ideal occupying a liminal space for women embodying a range of social ideas. As the industrialization of textile work progressed through the century, handmade work is more specially celebrated in the fine arts and tied to moral elevation, particularly through the Arts and Craft movement (Casteras 1987; Parker 2010,

pp. 147–88).⁷ In Liberian writings from the time, women's textile work is also clearly tied to both their domesticity and subservience to the national objectives. In Liberia, the public production of women makers incorporates classist and moral concepts from Britain and the American sense of patriotism. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich described similar tropes in nineteenth-century America after the War of 1812 as "images of industrious, self-sacrificing, and patriotic women domesticated and softened . . . harsh realities of political commentary, economic uncertainty, and war." (Thatcher Ulrich 2001, p. 413). Liberians confronted similar uncertainties when settling Monrovia and the frontier towns. Liberian women were framed in similar ways to American and European women, making the use of their domestic arts effective when put to use in international spheres, because they provided a familiar medium through which to access ideas and images relevant to the Liberian political and economic projects.

4. Martha Ricks, Quilter and Envoy

Martha Ricks created both material and textual archival records. Ricks (born Martha Ann Erskine) was enslaved on a farm in eastern Tennessee in the United States. Her father, George Erskine, was a Presbyterian minister. Erskine raised funds as an itinerant preacher to purchase freedom for Martha, her siblings, mother, and grandmother and moved the family to Liberia in 1830.⁸ When the Erskine family arrived in Liberia, each of his children was noted as literate in immigration records and Martha put her writing skills into practice, actively exchanging letters via the American Colonization Society publications (Schick 1971). The Erskine men went on to serve in government and religious institutions. Martha Ann's first husband, Scion Harris, was a member of the House of Representatives (ostensibly representing the town of Caldwell, where they lived, and which remains a quilting center with an active guild in present-day Liberia) when he died in 1854 (Wiley 1980, p. 229). Martha Ann later married Moses Ricks, and the couple lived in Clay-Ashland, Liberia. The politically connected family maintained correspondence with ACS officials and their letters were regularly published in the *African Repository*. Martha Ricks' writing stated her opinions on the development of the new country. In excerpts from Ricks' letters, she explains the development of local artistic and domestic production. In August 1858, Ricks wrote:

"I do not feel discouraged; in my judgment, Liberia is still improving, though it may seem slow to a great many, yet I think it is gaining in strength . . . There are several families preparing cotton to weave cloth-I among the rest, am spinning a piece. I think that in a few years there will be large quantities of cloth made in Liberia. There are some who order wheels from abroad, while others have them made here. I am a true Liberian, and stand up for it; for the Lord has given us this land, and He has blessed us, and who can curse it? Nobody." (Ricks 1858, pp. 829–30).

A clever Victorian woman, she tied national sentiment and state citizenship to her industriousness and that of her fellow women in both creating textiles and working the land to which they had far more dubious claim than heaven-sent. Ricks refers to the nation as an institution to which she belongs, as well as a national sentiment, ideology, and identity that is still being created. She showed that frontierswomen modified medium and form when necessary while retaining elements of American textiles needed in their homes. Ricks' personal industriousness makes her a "true Liberian," imparting that that is one of the core tenets of being of that place. She rooted herself in a community of similar-minded people living in an adopted homeland constructing a unified culture under a common law (Smith 2013, loc 382 of 4272). The mythology of Liberia also relied on the settlers' role in spreading Christianity on the continent and creating a space for black nationalism as the justification for settlement. In encouraging immigrants to move to Liberia from the United States and the Caribbean, the development of the land and producing material things with one's own hands were a critical part of establishing a sense of belonging. Further differentiating and distancing herself from her American roots, Ricks wrote in 1865:

“Liberia has and is still feeling the effects of your war, and it has caused her to arise up to help herself, and to call for wheels, cards, and looms. I have just got out of my loom. I have learned enough to weave cloth to help clothe my family. Coffee is being raised in large quantities . . . We are spinning and weaving, just what we ought to have done years ago, instead of waiting and depending on America.” (Ricks 1866, p. 24).

The strength of the nation and its people, according to Ricks, was tied to textile and coffee production, each critical to the self-sufficiency effort, for both local consumption and distribution in international markets. She reminded her reader of Liberia’s independence and growing differentiation for its citizens from their place of birth. The recognition of local and global interconnectedness and Liberia’s growing, distinct public culture, as well as the links between land, citizenship, and material production, is central to understanding Ricks’ celebrated work, the *Coffee Tree quilt* for Queen Victoria.

The international context for Ricks’ London trip is interesting, as Liberia and England were embroiled in negotiating the western boundary of Liberia, butting up against Sierra Leone, as well as unpaid loans from the English government. However, Ricks’ personal narrative detailed a more romantic view of the historical relationship between her nation and the Queen’s. As the *Calabar* docked in Liverpool, Ricks gave an interview stating her lifelong desire to meet the Queen, telling the papers that “We called her our mother . . . I want to go to London and see the Queen. I know I cannot speak to her, but I hope to see her passing . . . then I will return to my farm in Liberia and die contented.” (*The Queen’s Liberian Visitor* 1892). This narrative positions Ricks rather adeptly as a novelty, a traveler from a lesser-known continent, carrying with her the stitchwork that consumed a large portion of her life. Ricks was assisted in paying for her journey by the former First Lady of Liberia, Jane Roberts, and accompanied once in London by the statesman and envoy Edward Blyden (Hicks 2003).

Ricks then connected with Mr. Jones of Elder, Dempeter, and Co., who requested that Sir Francis de Winton seek an audience for Ricks with Queen Victoria. The audience was granted and on Saturday, 16 July 1892, Martha Ann Ricks was received at Windsor Castle (*The Queen’s African Visitor: Mrs. Ricks at Windsor* 1892). The Inspector of the Castle toured her through the castle apartments and library and she had luncheon in Lancaster Tower. The Queen shook hands with her and Ricks presented her quilt appliqued with a coffee tree in various stages of bloom. The *London Daily Graphic* printed a sketch of the meeting, centering the two women surrounded by an audience. In an interview with the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 19 July, Ricks said:

“How could I come to Queen Victoria, and bring her no present? I made it myself, every stitch of it. It was a quilt 9ft square, of white satin. And on it I had embroidered [appliqued] a coffee tree, in green satin, with branches and leaves and with the berries, some red and some green, and there was a man gathering the coffee, and a border of passion-flowers. Yes, I cut the tree out and made everything myself, to take as a present to Queen Victoria. I took it to Windsor last Saturday, and one of the Royal family, a gentleman, said he would deliver it. Was it much work? Not too much; and I was happy making it.” (*Aunt and Victoria* 1892, p. 2).

Ricks was feted by the Mayor of London and the Queen ordered her portrait taken by Elliott and Fry (now in the National Portrait Gallery, London). Pila Golab’s column for the *Times of India* reflected a global perspective of Liberia’s development and people as “child-like” and somehow separate from “this quick-living work-a-day world” that the visit and subsequent world’s fair exhibits were meant to combat:

“There is something very inspiring [sic] in the fact that there still exists, even in so old a woman as Mrs. Martha Anna [sic] Ricks, the old African negress, that child-like love and reverence for our beloved Queen, which is rarely seen in this quick-living work-a-day world of today . . . At the Queen’s special request

a photograph has been taken of Mrs. Ricks and forwarded to her Majesty, and she has also accepted the wonderful satin quilt made by Mrs. Ricks, on which is embroidered the history of the Liberian coffee plant in its various stages of development.” ([Chicago Daily Tribune 1892](#), p. 16; [Golab 1892](#), p. 4).

The published narratives do not describe Ricks as a prominent member of Liberian political society, but rather highlight her modest farmland home and birth as an enslaved person. However, many articles also describe her quilt with attention to detail. From the *Chicago Tribune*:

“Mrs. Ricks ... had the gratification of being conversed with by her Majesty, and also of having had the satin quilt made by her in the hope that she might be permitted to send it to the Queen, received in the kindest way. The quilt is a unique piece of needlework, showing the Liberian coffee-plant green, ripening, and in its mature state, and the Queen complimented Mrs. Ricks upon the patience and skill evinced by the work.” ([Realized the Ambition of Her Life 1892](#), p. 16).

It is possible to interpret the quilt as a natural feature that the artist saw every day on her farm at home, drawn from and inspired by her environment. Additionally, we may consider the quilt as part of a diplomatic strategy, deploying a medium that was carefully selected to appeal to Queen Victoria, whose affinity for textiles was widely known. The medium and format of quilting was visually legible for global audiences who could access these textiles in both domestic and public spaces. Furthermore, Ricks created a coffee tree in various stages of bloom and fruiting, just as Liberian producers and politicians geared up to present their coffee products (selling at above-market prices) in Chicago at the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893. Ricks’ description of her quilt is interesting in that she notes that in addition to her applique natural elements, she included a figural piece as well—the man, gathering coffee. Figural applique was not common in nineteenth-century quilting. However, notable quilts like black American quilter Harriet Powers’ Bible quilts incorporate figural imagery, inviting an interesting comparison between two famous nineteenth-century black quilters, as explored in the next section. In addition, while vegetal designs were popular in nineteenth-century quilting in both the United States and Europe, the coffee tree is specifically Liberian. Ricks capitalized on her royal audience to visually promote the Liberian economy and readiness to engage Europe using her own farm’s product as a microcosm of the top national export.

Ricks returned to Monrovia with a naval escort and gifts from the Queen, reinforcing the strategic bond between both the women and their respective countries. She also maintained other relationships forged on her trip, continuing the trans-Atlantic gift cycle. Upon her return to Monrovia, she sent the Mayoress of London, Lady Knill, a “shawl, or quilt, of native workmanship, as a souvenir of her visit to the Mansion-house.” ([Foreign 1892](#), p. 5). A definitive diplomatic success, Ricks’ trip reinforced strategic relationships and promoted a visual representation of Liberia with her person and her artwork. The artwork, as it circulated once more, takes on a role alongside but also separate from its artist as the Queen sent it to Chicago, offering it up for exhibition in 1893.⁹

5. A Life of Its Own: The Coffee Tree Quilt on American Soil

After exhibiting at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia (1876) and turning down an 1873 invitation to exhibit at Vienna’s International Exhibition, Liberia’s President Roberts urged the legislature to consider committing to the next World’s Fair opportunity ([Dunn 2011](#), p. 246). The prominent media exposure of Ricks’ 1892 visit to London coincided with an effort the same year to prepare a national exhibit for the World’s Columbian Exposition to be held in Chicago in 1893. Ricks’ trip had been heavily covered in the American press, and articles record that fairgoers purposefully went to see her quilt as part of the Liberian exhibit. Quilting was popular amongst nineteenth-century American women and the quilt appealed to female fair visitors, crossing national and racial borders through a familiar medium. Liberia’s fair exhibit showed off Liberia’s natural resources as well as indigenous

arts displayed alongside quilts, paintings, and a photograph album commissioned for the fair. Individual cabinet cards were deployed as souvenirs, dispersing representational images of Liberia during and after the fair.

African Methodist Episcopal Church Bishop Henry McNeal Turner was one of the *Coffee Tree Quilt's* admirers in Chicago. He traveled to Liberia after the fair, collecting Liberian objects and commissioning a copy of the quilt from Ricks. He used his collection in a Liberian exhibit at the 1895 Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition. Turner's exhibit was in the Negro Building at the Atlanta fair, meaning that Ricks' quilt was displayed alongside works by artists like Edmonia Lewis and Harriet Powers, whose *Bible Quilt* was on exhibit in the same building. Turner displayed the quilt framed by indigenous woven blue and white "country cloth," providing a focal point to the exhibit with its size, design, and placement. Hung atop indigenous prestige cloths, it is a stark visual reminder of how American immigrant culture draped and fitted over Liberia's indigenous cultures. A single stereoview image from the exhibit exists, published in 1896, showing how the quilt was displayed (Library of Congress, 2019647152) (Kilburn 1896). (Figure 2). However, the stereoview does not show the small figure Ricks described in her 1892 interview. The figure could be concealed behind the sign or might not have been included in Turner's copy quilt. The *Chicago Tribune* again covered Ricks' work on exhibit, with Clara Jemison writing for the paper:

"Some of these specimens of handicraft are really works of art, some are excellent examples of [Africans'] powers of invention ... That which first attracts the attention is a beautiful quilt, the work of Mme. Ricks, a civilized native African. This specimen of needle-work is made of red, white, and green silk, representing the coffee tree in bloom, and is the fac-simile of one made by the same person and presented to Queen Victoria" (Jemison 1895, p. 30).



Figure 2. Henry McNeal Turner Exhibit, 1895 Atlanta Cotton States Exposition. (B. W. Kilburn 1896). Courtesy Library of Congress.

Jemison completely ignores the artist's American heritage (prominently circulated in her own paper two years before), and at the same time roots quilting on the continent of Africa, exalting Ricks' "powers of invention," and follows by lauding the flax-weaving and prestige robes as well. Reviews such as this one, and Turner's sign indicating the exhibit was work by "Uncivilized Africans", reveal the disjuncture between how 1890s Liberians positioned their national identity and how they were displayed when not in control of their national exhibit. Martha Ann Ricks' work is recast merely three years after her audience with the Queen, which reinforces how exhibition contexts influenced the way that those artists were perceived, especially from the continent of Africa. Powers' quilts garnered her fame (although not fortune) in the wake of the fair; one wonders if Ricks' quilts had been portrayed differently, perhaps hung or laid on the front of the exhibit or on a bed frame, the reviewer's commentary might have taken another direction.

Briefly, consider more closely that Martha Ricks' and Harriet Powers' quilts were displayed in the same pavilion. Several differences between the quilts are important to their enduring presence in quilt history: exhibit placement, quilt content, and object preservation. Stereoview images from the exhibit (Library of Congress, 2019647151) show the Powers' quilt was placed at forefront of the exhibit space. Its colorful, dynamically positioned, visually exciting applique Biblical stories play across three rows of five blocks. Driven by narrative and utilizing an array of colorful and patterned cloths, Powers' work was collected by a white woman in Atlanta, Jennie Smith, and preserved today in the National Museum of American History collection. Conversely, Ricks' quilt was placed behind other objects of interest, resigned categorically to curiosities from Africa. Ricks strictly used solid colored cloth in white, red, and green, a popular combination in early nineteenth-century America, but which lost popularity after the Civil War. The original quilt purported to have a figural component, which would be exciting to be able compare with Ricks' innovative, compelling figures. Unfortunately, the original quilt was lost after its exhibit in Chicago and is not in the royal collection (as the original gift), the Field Collection (where many exhibits from the fair ended up), or even the Commercial Museum in Philadelphia, which collected part of the Liberian Exhibit after the fair (per the African Collections of the Commercial Museum catalog). A figural component would also have made Ricks' quilt diverge from more traditional floral quilt designs popular in the mid-nineteenth century (see the exhibit "Red, White, and Green All Over: Traditions and Variations of 19th Century Applique, curated by Holly Zemke at the International Quilt Museum, Lincoln, Nebraska, November 2015–February 2016). However, the second quilt in Atlanta does not appear to have a figural component, perhaps because it was produced in a limited time frame or due to Turner's request. It is notable, however, that both quilters received attention from journalist Jemison, and their works were visited by and appealed to the same wide audience.

6. Conclusions

In May 2014, quilter Gladys Cole sat on her porch and patted the front wall of her home in Sinkor, Liberia and said: "Quilts built this house." She meant it economically, in that quilting made up her income. However, she stated it in terms of community, that her artistic process gave her the space to process life experiences like the Liberian Civil War, a practice that she worked on with her family and neighbors, and an artistic practice that connected her to quilters in other towns in Montserrado County (the region in and around Monrovia). The enduring practice of community-made and -circulated art was set in the nineteenth century. Sarah Fee describes the same concepts permeating the making of Malagasy cloth in Madagascar. She invoked a Malagasy saying: "Fisikina ro maha-olo. *It is cloth that makes people.*" (Fee 2002, p. 33). This idea resonates in the work of contemporary Liberian quilters.

The stories of Martha Ann Ricks and her *Coffee Tree quilt* reveal an extensive social and political network with economic implications for both the artist and her country in the nineteenth century. The media coverage of her travels and artwork demonstrate different exhibition contexts for her work and reveals the ongoing discriminations she worked hard to dismiss in her writing and interviews, and through her stitched works. Ricks' race and homeland determined how mainstream media portrayed her and how Turner displayed her work, which obscured her agency and the complex set of ideas communicated through her quilts. Griselda Pollock wondered: "... how can we account for the counterintuitive fact that despite every form of evidence to the contrary ... the dominant vision of modern art created by the most influential American museum[s] systematically failed to register the intensely visible artistic participation of women in making modernism modern?" (Pollock 2010, pp. 33–34). The answer lies partially in re-reading women's narratives to broaden our understanding of how women used their visual creativity to build networks for economic, political, and social gain. Another method is to painstakingly reconstitute women's archives through a patchwork of description, extant photography, drawings, and the visual iconographies passed down to future generations. The rebuilding of Liberia's

quilters' histories echoes, in fact, the medium itself. Ricks' own writings, travel, and self-presentation through portraiture manifest another angle to black women's internationalism of the nineteenth century.

Ricks' *Coffee Tree* quilt also resonates with both Liberian and American audiences in the twenty-first century. Quilt historian Kyra Hicks wrote a children's book based on her story, with the illustrator imagining the quilt in color (*Martha Ann's Quilt for Queen Victoria*, 2011). Quilt guilds in Montserrado County have also recreated the quilt in the years after the Liberian Civil War, invoking their strong quilt histories as they rebuild their community. Contemporary *Coffee Tree* quilts are in the collections of the National Museum of Liberia, Union College (NY), and numerous private collections. By considering Ricks' story as part of a larger Atlantic world networked by black women creating and recreating intellectual and material bonds, the archive can illuminate the ties that bound an artist, her work, and her audiences around the Atlantic.

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Data Availability Statement: An archive of Liberian quilts and quilt materials will be available through the Michigan State University's Quilt Index (quiltindex.org), beginning in September 2023.

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Notes

- ¹ The length of time between when Liberia declared independence and when the United States recognized its sovereignty was a sore point in diplomatic relations between the two countries. England and France recognized Liberia's statehood earlier, as they were obligated to negotiate with Liberia along its borders and those of their colonial interests. ("Liberia." *Office of the Historian, Milestones 1830–1860*), U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1830-1860/liberia>, accessed on 1 January 2016.
- ² Life in the new nation was difficult; promised land and goods to help families become involved in farming or business either did not materialize or were severely lacking in quantity and diseases like malaria and yellow fever claimed many emigrant lives. Three of eight freed persons who emigrated to Liberia lived less than one year in Liberia after resettlement. Some insisted that the ACS pay for passage back to the United States. Others, lacking funds, moved to Sierra Leone and still others to Cape Palmas in what was then under the purview of the Maryland State Colonization Society until 1857, when it was absorbed into the Liberian republic.
- ³ The three African language groups present are West Atlantic or Mel, Kruan, and Mande. English is the official language of Liberia, but has a creolized vernacular, Liberian English, that modifies syntax and has loanwords from indigenous languages. Local scripts are archived from the middle of the nineteenth century on as editions of the Bible and psalms were produced in local languages for indigenous use.
- ⁴ Moran noted that European traders wrote that the peoples of southeastern Liberia were trilingual (speaking indigenous languages, Portuguese, and English). Shipping records from the Sinoe River region list basins, weaponry, jewelry, and beads being traded for pepper and ivory. Seamen who served on ships traveling to and from Europe brought foreign dress and material culture back home. Even before American settlers moved to the western coast, Glebo formal attire in the easternmost point of Liberia, Cape Palmas, consisted of long-sleeved white shirts, bowler hats, a dark suit coat and tie over a wraparound *lappa*.
- ⁵ For example, the western coast to Cape Mesurado was home to the Vai, Dei, Gola, and Condo Federation (a loosely governed group with multiple ethnicities). The Dei chiefs were autonomous, although they selected a member of the group to speak for them when negotiating with neighboring chiefs. Moving in from the northwest, Mandingo traders moved and set up communities within Vai and Gola towns. The largest industry in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century was slave trading and slaves from the interior of the region were moved steadily through Dei, Vai, and Gola lands to the coast.
- ⁶ Letters from Liberians throughout the nineteenth century include requests for supplies from both ACS officials and, in the case of manumitted persons, former plantation owners in order to have better financial footing as they began to work land granted to them or start businesses in the new cities and towns. Beyond the daily life food staples of meats, oil, and flour, settlers often requested books, paper, and clothing items as well. In return, they sent samples of produce, seeds, and "curiosities" obtained from indigenous peoples along with stories from settler life. Published letter collections often paint the settlers as continuously and overwhelmingly asking for handouts. If scholars had a more representative sample of letters sent to Liberia, that perception may be changed. For example, in Ann Lettice Murdoch's diary, she documented that her exchanges with Milly G[r]oss were just that—exchanges. She described packages that Milly sent with lemons and other tropical fruits as well as seed samples. By the time of the first National Fair, however, it is clear that Liberians were interested in production on their own soil, desiring to become less dependent on supplies shipped in from overseas.

- 7 Literature and visual art provided models for Victorian womanhood. Queen Victoria was a globally respected role model positioned as both the girl-queen and grandmother of the empire, strong in her ability to lead but also proficient in domestic endeavors. The ideal Victorian woman was both empowered and properly educated in strict codes of social behavior/production, full of complicated spaces to occupy and move between. They elevated the working woman's image as a contributor to society next to embattled suffragettes. The powerful and dutiful nature embedded in Victorian womanhood was a pervasive image.
- 8 Erskine was one of the first black men to graduate from the institute now known as Maryville College in Tennessee. He was not only literate, but educated his children (born into slavery) as well. See Tennessee State Archives and Records for more on George Erskine's education and life before Liberia.
- 9 Different newspaper sources include the quilt in the British Needlework exhibit or the Liberian exhibit. The quilt is included in the official catalog from the Liberian exhibit although it is not visible in any of the five photographs of the exhibit's interior archived in the US Library of Congress. Unfortunately, it appears that the quilt never made it back to England or is not presently identified in the royal collection.

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