

Interview with Mary Lee Bendolph and Lucy Mingo

By: Josephine Reed; edited by Holly Neugass and Liz Auclair

Adapted by Fishtank Staff



The photo "[Mary Lee Bendolph, Lucy Mingo and Loretta Pettway 2015](#)" by Tom Pich is in the public domain.

[Paragraphs 1–25 of the interview have been omitted. Access the interview in full [here](#).]

Recognition as an Art Form

- 1 **NEA:** Quilts are so practical. You make them because you want to keep your family warm. You give them as gifts to family but they're for use. And then somebody comes along and says these are art. What did you think when you were told that?
- 2 **MINGO:** Well, I'll tell you, with the work I had put in mine, I knew it had to be something because we made rows by a finger. And we quilted the stitches so you could hardly see them. We would do that from about ten in the morning until about 2:30 in the afternoon. See, when the children went to school, then you started quilting. And by the time you had to get their dinner ready for them, you had to stop. And so we'd do that [everyday] because we didn't have anything else to do. Later on down through the years I got a job.
- 3 **NEA:** In the late 1990s, William Arnett came to Gee's Bend and suddenly your quilts were exhibited in museums in Boston, New York, Houston, Philadelphia . . . and I'm only naming a few cities.

- 4 **BENDOLPH:** Yes, I sold four. And they were all I really had. And then I started making better quilts because people started bringing things home. It was 2001 then, and that's when I made so many quilts. I enjoyed it.
- 5 **NEA:** Well, did you go to any of the museums where the quilts were? What did that feel like to walk in and see your quilt?
- 6 **MINGO:** I don't know how I felt. I just felt like I was somebody. I had made quilts, you know, and then museums had them. I really enjoyed that.
- 7 **NEA:** Did it make you think about your quilts differently?
- 8 **MINGO:** Yes, I did. What made me think about mine so differently was that I made them, and I was just making them for the kids to sleep on them. When I began to sell quilts, someone always wanted one. I really enjoyed that. And going off on trips, I just enjoyed it to death because I had met so many people and so many people had gotten my quilts. I have quilts all over the world.
- 9 **NEA:** And you do too, Ms. Bendolph.
- 10 **BENDOLPH:** Yes. Yes. I thank the Lord for that. I said that I could do my best, and then when the people came to talk to me about it, I did the best I could. And I thank the Lord that my quilts could be out there in the world where people could enjoy them. And they would tell me how much they love the quilts that I had made.
- 11 **NEA:** Now, do you still make quilts to keep you warm?
- 12 **BENDOLPH:** Yeah, that's what the quilt is for—to keep you warm. When you lay down, you have the quilt to cover up.