

Ariel Rudy: Research Award Entry Essay

When I first realized that I desperately wanted to write my senior Art History paper the work of a 19th African American quilter who created only two surviving quilts, I knew that I had my work cut out for me in terms of research. With only two surviving works that many scholars chalked up to works of craft rather than art, I was frequently dismayed as I saw Harriet Powers' work cast off by academics or relegated to "folk art" as a code word for "unimportant" when I saw that these works of art were indeed a vital part of the fabric of our nation's visual culture. I found my first glimmer of hope in a throwaway sentence in Celeste-Marie Bernier's *African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to the Present* where the author describes Powers' quilts as "unprecedented," From this single sentence, I knew that I could develop a body of research to support my argument that Harriet Powers' quilts displayed the cultural and collective memory of the varying social locations Powers occupied as a black woman, an emancipated slave, and a Christian. My research began by locating every source I could that discussed Harriet Powers' quilts. With such a narrow topic, I knew that I would need to find everything I could before deciding what would be worthwhile to my topic and what wouldn't. One of the most incredible sources I found came to me through interlibrary loan, and was instrumental in developing a coherent argument in my paper. Kyra Hicks' book *This I Accomplish: Harriet Powers' Bible Quilt and Other Pieces* was essentially a book of primary sources that Hicks had compiled along with her emotional response to discovering more and more about this quilter she felt so connected to. These primary sources, handily put together into one book, allowed me to discover not only that Harriet Powers was literate, a fact that many of my other sources disagreed with, but that a letter written by the woman herself about how she learned to read by studying the Bible and described herself as a woman of great faith. The content of her quilts, numerous Bible stories and natural phenomena, paired with her own statement of faith solidified my argument that Powers was drawing on collective memory that belonged to both her and those who came before her. Hicks' *This I Accomplish* also included descriptions of the stories in Powers' quilts recorded by the woman who bought one of them, and tracked the location of the quilts from their creation by Powers' to their current homes in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. This paper could not have happened had I not received this book through interlibrary loan. Between *This I Accomplish*, numerous books I found that were miraculously available online through the library, and the various databases Hollins subscribes to, I was able to find a wealth of information about a woman and her work whose legacy I feared was lost to history. The library gave me a body of research to work with and develop a paper out of, when I feared I would have to pick through odds and ends of books to find what I need to tell Powers' story and the stories of those who came before her as black women, slaves, and Christians.