Cal Poly Staff Member Quilt on Display in New York City Exhibition; Piece Created to Dispel Negative Stereotypes of Black Women

SAN LUIS OBISPO – Denise Campbell, Cal Poly’s special assistant to the provost for university initiatives, has turned her scholarly pursuit of African American quilt history into a means of conveying spiritual messages of inspiration and healing. Her latest creation, titled “Would the Real Jemima Please Stand Up and Claim Her Inheritance?” is part of an exhibit that recently opened at the Gallery of the American Bible Society in New York City.

The show, “Threads of Faith: Recent Works from the Women of Color Quilters Network,” examines contemporary African American quilts produced by a community inspired by faith, the Bible and American Christian traditions, according to Campbell. The exhibition has earned very favorable reviews in both The New York Times and New York Newsday online.

“The 53 quilts on display testify to the continuing responsive nature of this traditional art form,” Campbell said. “The quilts record personal histories, make political statements, celebrate family values, and reflect the role of faith and Christian tradition in shared history, regardless of personal religious belief. Faith connects these African American artists both to their individual pasts and their collective legacy.”

Campbell’s quilt, the first in her Jemima series, is intended to dispel negative stereotypes about black women. The quilt was inspired by sacred scripture from the Bible’s “Book of Job.”

“Jemima, whose name means ‘beautiful as the day,’ was the eldest daughter of Job’s restored life,” Campbell said. “God intended Jemima to be remembered as a symbol of beauty and restoration.”
“Popular man-made images of Jemima evolved from a grotesque caricature of a black woman slave on a pancake box,” Campbell said. “Scholars suggest that by interrogating and deconstructing such negative representations, we begin the process of rendering them ineffectual.

“My quilt is intended to reclaim God’s truth about the name, image and inheritance of Jemima and reveals the uncelebrated significance of one of the most widely told biblical stories of patience, faith, healing and restoration,” Campbell said.

Campbell, who just returned from the exhibit’s New York City opening, said it was the largest opening in the history of the American Bible Society Museum. After the New York installation ends April 17, the quilt exhibition is expected to travel to various locations throughout the United States.

Her quilt, which took approximately 500 hours to complete, appears as one of the catalog cover images and is also featured on the Web site in the last catalog section, “We Have Come This Far By Faith.” To see it, go online to www.americanbible.org, click on “Threads of Faith,” and on “We Have Come This Far by Faith.” The quilt features detailed hand embroidery, appliqué techniques and close-hand quilting.


Now pursuing a Ph.D. in cultural studies at Claremont Graduate University, Campbell serves as a research assistant to Carolyn Mazloomi, the exhibit curator and author of the exhibit’s accompanying book, which can be purchased online from the American Bible Society Bookstore.

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