

# Pictorial Representation of Quilts From The Underground Railroad

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The Underground Railroad was a network of people who helped fugitive slaves escape to the North and Canada during the U.S. Civil War period, beginning in about 1831. Quilting was used as a form of information representation (Breneman 2001). This simple classification was designed to relate the symbolic transmission of escape routes and locations of sanctuary. Because it was for use in a children's library, symbolic representations were used to anchor the classes. Symbols are based in the African graphic arts, the Adinkra symbols of Ghana (West African wisdom. 2001), and also from actual quilt practice (*Threads of Freedom* 2001 and Breneman 2001).

## 1. Two Classes, Twelve Symbols

Icons are utilized for two distinct classes: Arts (Textiles), and History (Underground Railroad). For example, the symbols for textile fabric is the following:



The concept of woven fabric is indicated without ambiguity. The idea of history is portrayed by the Adinkra symbol for "importance of learning from the past:"



The combination of these two symbols



conveys the idea of Textiles & Knowledge Preservation.

Divisions and subdivisions are represented using the following symbols:



"child of the heavens" – guardianship: used for Computers, Information, & General Reference



"wisdom's knot" - wisdom, ingenuity, intelligence and patience: used for Philosophy



"except for God" - supremacy of God: used for Religion



"the leg of a hen" - mercy, nurturing: used for Social Sciences



"linked hearts" - understanding and agreement: used for Languages



"measuring stick" - examination, quality control: used for Science



“the crossed divisions made on Adinkra cloth before printing” - skillfulness, precision: used for Technology



“wooden comb” - beauty and cleanliness: used for Arts



“board game” - intelligence and ingenuity: used for Recreation



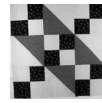
“spider’s web” - wisdom and creativity: used for Literature



“return and get it” - learn from the past: used for History



“the earth has weight” - providence and the divinity of Mother Earth: used for Geography



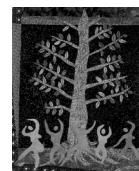
Underground Railroad



Message maps (Payne 1998)



Escape – Ontario, Canada (Amherstburg Public School 1998)



Liberation (Brown Green 2001)

## 2. Quilting and The Underground Railroad

Specifically, the subject matter of Underground Railroad Quilting falls into both the Arts – Textiles and History – Underground Railroad classes. The breakdown is as follows:



Textiles



Quilting tradition (The heart: Patience and tolerance + Return and get it: Learning from the past)

## References

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