

## The Mozell Benson Quilt Documentation Project

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Biography: Mozell Benson, 2001 National Heritage Fellow, National Endowment for the Arts. Growing up the daughter of a sharecropper in rural Alabama with nine brothers and sisters, Mozell Benson learned early on from her mother that quilting was a craft of both beauty and necessity. While the layered quilt can provide needed warmth for a family member, its surface has the potential to become a brilliant statement, combining practical design and personal expressive freedom in the hands of a master. Maude Wahlman, a quilt scholar, says of Benson's work: "Her quilts are the visual equivalent of jazz or blues. She will take a basic pattern and then do variations on it just like a musician will do with a jazz piece." For most of her life Mozell Benson, who lives in Opelika, Alabama, has driven a school bus, but when she is not driving or tending to her large garden she has been quilting, on average twenty quilts a year. Increasingly her quilts have gained attention from museum curators and cultural specialists. Her quilts have appeared in three traveling exhibitions curated by Maude Wahlman. African American Quiltmakers started in 1982, and is still traveling. The exhibit, Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts from the Rural South, traveled from 1993 to 1996. A third exhibit, still traveling, features Mozell Benson and 20 of her quilts. In 1985 Mozell Benson demonstrated her art in four African countries, as a featured quilter in the African American Quiltmakers exhibit sent to Africa by The US State Department. In response to her numerous accolades, Benson still refers to herself as a "country quilter," who is merely doing what many others have done to keep their children and grandchildren warm. However, with her innate curiosity and her propensity for artistic experimentation, she says that the hardest part about quilting is the necessity to sit still while she's doing it. [http://www.nea.gov/honors/heritage/fellows/fellow.php?id=2001\\_02](http://www.nea.gov/honors/heritage/fellows/fellow.php?id=2001_02)

