

Visitors are encouraged to walk underneath the door hangings, giving them the opportunity to view the objects from different angles.





PLACEMAKING: QUILTS AND THE CREATION OF SPECIAL SPACES

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ONLINE www.internationalquiltmuseum.org/exhibition/placemaking-quilts-and-creation-special-spaces

New Perspectives: Connecting and Reflecting with Quilts

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In April 2023 the International Quilt Museum (IQM) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln launched *Placemaking: Quilts and the Creation of Special Spaces*, a new temporary exhibition featuring Asian, North African, and Middle Eastern textiles from the museum's permanent collection. Established in 1997, IQM's mission is "to build a global collection and audience that celebrate the cultural and artistic significance of quilts." The museum moved into its current facility in 2009, and a major expansion in 2015 doubled its gallery and storage space. IQM now houses more than 8,000 objects from 65 countries, and connects with audiences through its exhibitions, searchable collections database, YouTube talks, and other programming.

Placemaking: Quilts and the Creation of Special Spaces showcases textiles that create and define spaces used for community meetings, religious services, places of honor, and more. Museum visitors are treated to 20 vibrant textiles that served as canopies, wallcoverings, rugs, and door decorations. Interpretive labels share textile and cultural history, and encourage visitors to make connections between these textiles and their own experiences with special spaces.

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The critique is a writer's assessment shaped by their professional expertise and their own visitor experience, and formed without (or with only minimal) consultation with the exhibit's creators. Its audience is the profession.



ENTERING THE GALLERY

Placemaking: Quilts and the Creation of Special Spaces was curated by Marin Hanson and designed by Hanson and Camilo Sanchez. It is housed in a gallery that is approximately 1,200 square feet, which might seem like a small space for exhibiting large textiles that need to communicate their purpose in defining distinct, special spaces. Upon entering, one can see the entire exhibition by quickly scanning the rectangular room. The design and variety of textures and colors, however, makes the gallery feel grand, vibrant, and dynamic. Hanson and Sanchez's design takes full advantage of the high ceilings, and the grouping and layering of textiles creates striking drama and beauty.

When entering the gallery (fig. 1), I was immediately struck by the aesthetics of the space as a whole. Scanning the room, I was drawn deep into the space, where Indian and Egyptian door hangings (intro image), are hung one in front of the other. The layering of these colorful archways draws the eye through imagined doorways to the far end of the gallery, where two 18-foot Egyptian *khayamiya* (tent panels) fill the back gallery wall. The layering of color, pattern, and texture is a feast for the eyes and invites the visitor to explore.

EXPLORING THE EXHIBITION

Most visitors will likely first explore a large installation of eight *ralli* quilts near the

Fig. 1. View from the entrance of the exhibition gallery.





Fig. 2. Visitors can walk underneath the Pakistani *ralli* quilts to gain new perspectives.

entrance (fig. 2).¹ These Pakistani quilts are hung to form walls and a canopy. Visitors can walk underneath, feel like they are within a structure, and view the quilts from different angles. Interpretive labels for each display include photographs of similar textiles in the communities that make and use them. Here, we are shown a tent that was constructed with quilts for a community meeting (fig. 3). Labels also include history, details about textile techniques, and names for the textiles in their native languages. Reflection is encouraged through a variety of questions posed to visitors.

Moving past the Indian and Egyptian door hangings further into the gallery, visitors encounter a display of *khayamiya* and Islamic prayer rugs that date from the mid-19th century to 2000. The rugs are displayed parallel to the floor on a platform as they would be oriented when in use. Visitors can compare the *khayamiya* here to the larger Egyptian *khayamiya* filling the adjoining wall.

The final grouping is smaller, as the wall it occupies also contains two doorways to the



Fig. 3. The interpretive labels include a photograph, history, descriptive information, and questions for visitors to ponder.



adjoining gallery. Two quilts are displayed flat on the wall as they would have been traditionally oriented in homes: a *kuroma* (camel trapping or covering) from Turkmenistan, traditionally displayed on the walls of a tent or yurt (fig. 4); and a *tush ki'iz* (tent hanging) from Kyrgyzstan. This display feels a bit less dynamic due to the flatness. Although lovely photographs on the labels show families with similar textiles, some additional photos, illustrations, or moving-image content showing wider views of the structures would have helped to connect these textiles to the larger theme of placemaking. Although creating a physical tent or yurt would have been impossible due to the space constraints of the gallery, additional content about these homes would have provided more impact.

INNOVATIONS

We often see large textiles in museums displayed flat on walls or angled on slant boards. Conservation concerns often create limitations, but one thing I really liked about this exhibition is how it challenges traditional display methods by exhibiting textiles in their intended orientations. This choice invites the visitor to move beyond experiencing textiles as static, flat objects that are disassociated from their original place. Labels encourage visitors to walk underneath some of the textiles for a new perspective. For textile enthusiasts, being able to walk under and see the back of some of the textiles provides new inspiration and is informative from a technical perspective.

Fig. 4. A *kuroma* (camel trapping or covering) from Turkmenistan and its interpretive label showing a similar textile in use in a yurt.



Fig. 5. Photo Spot vinyl graphics are placed on the floor throughout the exhibition.

For those who have experienced similar textiles in their homes, communities, or places of worship, I imagine it's even more impactful.

The label near the *ralli* quilt installation asks, “Do you enjoy being surrounded by quilts in this way? Do they look different when they are grouped closely together or when you gaze at them from below?” For me, experiencing the quilts in this way helped me to see past their beauty and build new connections. Standing underneath the quilts I could see how they affect light and shadow and appreciate how they might provide protection from sun or wind. The display helped me understand their multifaceted purposes, including how they define a place and make it feel protected and inviting.

As more museums work to bring their collections to life for visitors through placemaking, they should consider adopting similar strategies to those used at IQM. Displaying objects in ways that approximate their original uses and that allow visitors to get closer and to experience objects from different perspectives is essential to building understanding that transcends the museum space. For objects that are too fragile to hang in their original orientation or display outside of barriers, options could include using reproductions or collecting extra examples for an education collection that could be touched and experienced in more interactive ways.

IQM places vinyl graphics on the floor identifying prime photo spots. While encouraging visitors to take photographs, the graphics gently remind them not to touch the textiles. I liked that the graphics in this exhibition also connected photo



sharing to the overall theme of placemaking: “Placemaking only occurs through human interaction with the built or natural environment” (fig. 5).

CONNECTING VISITORS TO FAR AWAY PLACES

Creating carefully crafted cloth environments is a global practice that results in special spaces filled variously with sanctity, intimacy, mystery, hospitality, and grandeur.

—Intro Panel, *Placemaking: Quilts and the Creation of Special Spaces*

The galleries at the IQM typically feel light, tranquil, and inspiring. The places the textiles were originally used, however, were very different from a museum space. The opening panel for the exhibition acknowledges the complexity of place. A neighborhood, for example, is composed of “Sounds...smells...activities...climate...and history.” I wish the exhibition could have

pushed a little further to introduce visitors to these and other components of place. I loved that the interpretive labels each included one photograph, but it sometimes wasn't enough to provide me with deeper context about the places the textiles originated or were used. Gallery space is limited, so creating additional digital content on small screens could have been one way to do this. Additional photos, illustrations, maps, sounds, or video content would have helped to enrich the experience and provide basic context about places that many of IQM's visitors may be unfamiliar with.

PLACEMAKING AND THE EXHIBITION VISITOR

Visitors to this show will learn about placemaking with quilts, but there is another placemaking opportunity within this exhibition. IQM is a place in and of itself, and it has the opportunity to create connections among people and between people and the museum. To this end, IQM has created innovative programs to build connections both within the museum and outside its walls. Its active outreach program was accessed by 65,000 teachers from more than 35,000 schools who utilized the museum's quilt-themed lesson plans during 2021–2022.² During the pandemic, IQM began collaborating with five other museums and organizations for weekly Textile Talks, which are archived to its YouTube channel. The July 5, 2023 talk featured *Placemaking: Quilts and the Creation of Special Spaces*, and Hanson and Sanchez discussed the paradoxes and challenges of recreating spaces within museums.³ The museum also planned to create specific programming and activities geared toward younger visitors after onboarding a new education coordinator.

For in-person visits to the exhibition, IQM successfully created an environment that felt inspiring and supportive of exploration, reflection, and interaction. Many of the labels include questions prompting visitors to reflect on their own experiences and connect to the people who made and used these textiles. Questions are simple enough for visitors of all ages and encourage intergenerational conversations in family groups. For example, the label for a Kyrgyz textile used for guests of honor asks, "How do you welcome guests into your home?" I wish exhibition organizers had gone a few steps further and diversified the interactive and reflective tools to help engage people with different learning styles. The Project for Public Spaces uses the concept The Power of 10+ when thinking about what makes places great: "The idea behind this concept is that places thrive when users have a range of reasons (10+) to be there."⁴ It is a useful idea to explore in exhibition design, and it makes spaces feel more exciting and engaging. This exhibition could have benefited from having a few more things for visitors to do in the space, beyond the questions and photo spots. Additional ideas include QR codes or other methods to connect visitors to digital content like previous Textile Talks. Placemaking with quilts is a global phenomenon, so additional digital content about other examples around the globe or within the museum's collection would have been meaningful. The gallery space wasn't big enough for a yurt, but using digital content or video featuring a yurt's interior would have helped deepen connections. A space for story-sharing or a spot for touchable textiles would have provided a much-needed hands-on element, and way for visitors to connect with one another.

Placemaking in museums should be a collaborative effort. This exhibition had some inherent challenges because the makers of all the exhibited textiles are unknown. For other exhibitions, the IQM often collaborates with specific makers. At the time of my visit, they had an exhibition featuring textiles by Indian artist Geeta Khandelwal.⁵ Although specific maker collaborations were not possible for *Quilts and the Creation of Special Spaces*, it would have been powerful to share the voices of users or makers of similar textiles. IQM collaborated with researchers who have worked with communities where these textiles originated, and photos of people with similar textiles and names in original languages helped to provide some connections to communities. It would have been powerful to include some additional voices, such as quotes from contemporary makers or users, video content showing makers or users speaking about these spaces, and graphics with language in native alphabets. To help strengthen placemaking within the local community, perhaps collaboration with and inclusion of voices of people in Nebraska who use similar textiles today would have been a great way build connections and enrich the exhibition for all. For example, collaboration with local Islamic communities who use prayer rugs could have been a great opportunity. The museum has already created some inventive collaborative community projects. For example, in 2020 and 2021 IQM collaborated with the Lincoln NAACP Youth Council to create virtual pop-ups. Students were paired with the work of African American quiltmakers and created “reaction statements that explore ideas of design, color and emotion, as well as connections to their own life experiences.”⁶ I’ll look forward to hearing more about what they create for this exhibition and future

projects to help strengthen collaborative placemaking at the museum. ■

- 1 According to the label, *ralli* quilts are made in Pakistan and western India. They are commonly used as bedcovers, but can also be folded into cushions, draped over doorways, or used as canopies like the one in the exhibition. Preferred colors are typically reds, yellows, oranges, browns, and blacks.
- 2 “2021–2022 Annual Report,” International Quilt Museum, accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.internationalquiltmuseum.org/about/2021-2022-annual-report>.
- 3 “Textile Talks – Placemaking: Quilts and the Creation of Special Spaces,” International Quilt Museum, YouTube, July 5, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/@InternationalQuiltMuseum>.
- 4 “The Power of Ten+,” The Project for Public Spaces, January 1, 2009, <https://www.pps.org/article/the-power-of-10>.
- 5 *Miniature Costumes and Quilts: Geeta Khandelwal’s Labor of Love*, International Quilt Museum, March 31–October 14, 2023, <https://www.internationalquiltmuseum.org/exhibition/miniature-costumes-and-quilts-geeta-khandelwals-labor-love-0>.
- 6 “Bold Statements,” International Quilt Museum, accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.internationalquiltmuseum.org/exhibition/bold-statements>.