

# The great American cover-up

Human experience captured in 650 quilts; arena rockers with their feet firmly on the ground

## EXHIBITION

### Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts

Park Avenue Armory, New York

#### Simon Schama

Unless you've got something substantial galloping in the frisky bull market these days, you know it's a bitch of a world out there. In New York, even the weather has gone fiscal: pinched and recalcitrant, snow showers landing on the daffodils, wiping the spring smiles off our sappy faces.

So what do we hard-done-by people need? A freebie of pure, runaway, skipping-through-the-puddles joy, and this week we got it, courtesy of Joanna Rose and her 650 red and white quilts. For just four days (ending today), the Folk Art Museum of New York has installed every one of her collection, amassed since 1957, whole towers of them, rising exuberantly in the lofty space of the Park Avenue Armory, turning it into one vast temple of colour. The show is called *Infinite Variety*, which is the kind of feebly demure title curators come up with when they're panicked by what they've done, which in this case is to unleash a monster of happiness that will have no competition anywhere this season for sheer sensory riot or ecstatic retinal shock. And you pay not a penny to see it.

Quilts, you say, with their wholesome air of baking, jams and church choirs? So not art. But you would be so very wrong. Once upon a time, the very word "art", in whichever language you chose – *Kunst*, *arte*, *les arts*, *konst* – meant craft as much as painting or sculpture, and the word itself made the divide between high and low moot. Then along came the Renaissance and the word was hijacked by neo-Platonist intellectuals such as Alberti and Vasari to mean something philosophically Exalted. Art became something immeasurably above craft rather than indistinguishable from it.

Recently, the needle and the stitch have made their bid for serious appreciation in a number of shows, especially the spectacular exhibition last year at the V&A. But "arting up"



The Rose Collection of quilts in 'Infinite Variety' at the Park Avenue Armory. Below, Elbow lead singer Guy Garvey

Guvin Ashworth, Angela Lubrano.

carries with it the risk of Statement-Making at odds with the innocence of the women's sewing circles that produced, from one end of the country to the other, and across the centuries, some of the most dazzling masterpieces of American vernacular.

The Rose Collection escapes that kind of lofty self-consciousness. The product of an obsessive enthusiasm, it is not, in fact, "infinite variety" for its quilts are limited to those coloured with the "Turkey Red" dye known for its long-lived brilliance. But within that range are patterns of red with barely a white ground and just the reverse, and everything in between. Its visual music is all the more intense for being contained within scarlets and vermillions and occasionally bled-out crimson. Turning the vaulted space of the Armory into a vast tent of hangings, the show delivers more mind-blowing, optically smashing, time-space-altering exhilaration than anything offered by conventional museum shows right now.

The way the show came about is as innocently festive as the result. Daniel Rose, one of the nicest and smartest millionaires around, asked his wife what she would like for her 80th birthday. "Something I've never seen before," she said, and "a gift for New York". Out came the 650, some dating

back to the early 19th century, from their various places of storage. Designers were hired; lighting (which makes the quilts ripple and dance in the space) calculated; special cylindrical rods customised, from which to hang the works, one each side, doubling up our pleasure.

Then there is the installation itself, a great nautilus-spiral tower at the centre, rising above a sweetly eloquent circle of modest chairs over which are thrown a few of the quilts to suggest the quilting circles that made them, and somehow by inference an entire world that conjures sublime beauty out of innocently homely materials. Back and front and around the central soaring spiral rise satellite, circular pavilions. They shake imperceptibly in the fanned air, light moving delicately across them, and they are present in every conceivable tone and pattern – populist (aircraft, schoolhouses), op art mindbenders, modernist giant stars or simple bands, exploding galaxies of "feathered stars", the meanders of the "Drunkard's Path", the most grandiose flying alongside the most modest. Nothing stops visitors from getting stitch-close to the objects, wandering through the hangings as if they were clothes-lines, the better to

marvel at the intoxicating freedom of the needle, the way line and colour bound and surge across the surface of the fabric.

There is so much jumping, floating, chattering colour for the eye to respond to that it's hard to avoid overdosing, and the intense saturation of the red reinforces the giddiness. So banks of seating have been provided for the groggy from where you can control the pace of visual reception and take in happy adjacencies: a chevron-pattern blazing beside a turning pinwheel; a field of stars soaring over a bed of scarlet flowers.

And it occurs to you as you register both the detail and the whole of this playground of visual and tactile delight, that within its compass pretty much the whole of human experience is stitched: nature and culture; the road and the bed; old age and infancy (the cot quilts are immensely touching); bandbox oompah and chapel spiritual; love and loss; patience and perseverance. And that, in an age when all our fingers seem to do is race across a keyboard, a different kind of digital handiwork done with steadfast grace and exquisite vision can afford us a glimpse of heaven on earth.

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