

Rosie Lee Tompkins

A RETROSPECTIVE

Family Guide

This guide invites you to look closely at the art of Rosie Lee Tompkins, with prompts for observation and opportunities to describe what you see. Plus, we've included some related hands-on art activities! You'll find these "activity connections" at the end of the guide. We recommend that children use this family guide with a grown-up or older sibling.

These materials were created in conjunction with **Rosie Lee Tompkins: A Retrospective**, an exhibition organized by the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in 2020. For more information and resources, including a virtual tour of the exhibition, visit bampfa.org/program/rosie-lee-tompkins-retrospective.



Rosie Lee Tompkins: A Retrospective



Rosie Lee Tompkins standing with one of her quilts, 1985. Photo: Eli Leon.

First of all, a retrospective is an exhibition that *looks back* on a range of artworks made by a single artist, usually throughout their entire career. So, you already know from the title of the exhibition that this guide accompanies—**Rosie Lee Tompkins: A Retrospective**—that it shows us the work of an artist named Rosie Lee Tompkins. But who was she?

Rosie Lee Tompkins was born in 1936 in a small farming community in southeast Arkansas, where she grew up in a large African American family. She learned to make quilts from her mother when she was a young girl but did not start making them professionally until the 1970s, when she was living in Richmond, California. Today, she is known as an artist who made an extraordinary range and number of quilts with inventive designs all her own. Tompkins died in 2006, after a rich and full life that included almost forty years of quilting. The retrospective exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) displays almost seventy of Tompkins's artworks, and celebrates the recent gift of more than 500 of her quilts to BAMPFA—part of an even larger gift of quilts by African American artists given to the museum by a collector named Eli Leon, who lived in Oakland.

❖ **Do you have any quilts at your house that were made by someone you know? Or maybe even by someone in your family? How do you use quilts in your home?**

Often, quilts are made as bedcovers to keep us warm, like blankets. But Tompkins did not make her quilts for household use. In fact, many of her quilts are not the right size for beds at all! Some are quite small—she called them “put-togethers” instead of quilts—and others are much larger than any bed you’ve ever seen! For Tompkins, making quilts was a way to experiment with colors, shapes, and textures, and to express personal ideas like her spirituality and family connections. They were her art.

Building a Visual Vocabulary

Let's start with an introduction to some of Rosie Lee Tompkins's quilts. Take a good look at the quilts pictured here and on the next page.

When you look at these five quilts, you'll notice many different designs and visual ideas. Why not make a list? You can write your list or you can say it out loud with someone in your family.



1



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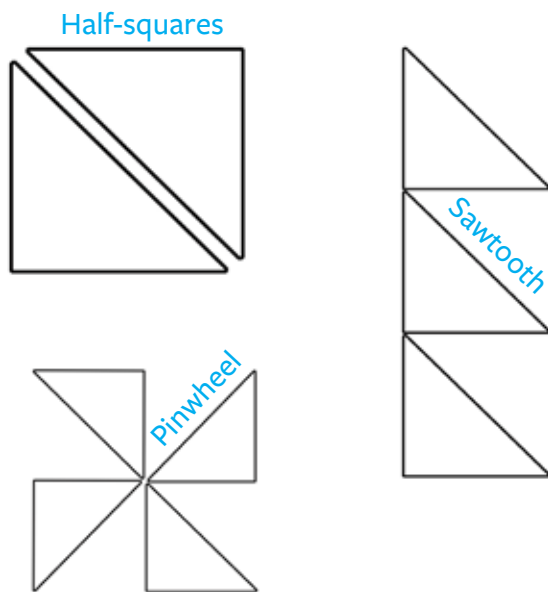
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4



One of these quilts is made from denim, including pockets from jeans. Did you find it? Do you notice how Tompkins used the shape of a pocket to make a repeating pattern of shapes throughout this quilt?

Now, let's think about how Tompkins used triangles, squares, and oblong bars in her art. These three shapes make up a basic “shapes vocabulary” for her quilts, and she used them in so many different ways!



Look back at pages 3 and 4 and find a quilt where you can see:

► triangles combined into squares
(In fact, many quilters call triangles “half-squares”—can you see why?)

▼ triangles combined into “pinwheels”

▲ triangles combined into “sawtooth” patterns

■ oblong bars combined to make square and rectangular patterns, or used as outlines, like a box around other shapes (Hint: you can see this in the quilt that shows many star-like shapes made from yellow yarn all across the design. You can also spot some pinwheels in that quilt, and if you look carefully, a horizontal gold sawtooth design!)

Quilts are typically made of several layers. Normally, Tompkins just did the **piecing**, meaning that she made the top layer of her quilts—the part with the design—and she let someone else add the other layers. In the quilt at the center of page 4, she added the other layers herself, and she used **tying** to attach the top layer to the ones below. You can get a better view of Tompkins’s technique of using yarn to tie together the layers of the quilt in the enlarged detail on this page.



Notice that Rosie Lee Tompkins did not use perfect shapes that are all the same. She mixed up sizes and shapes and didn’t worry about straight edges. What effect does this have for your eyes? For your emotions? (How many words can you think of that are the opposite of “boring”?)

In addition to shapes, there are lots of **visual rhythms** in Rosie Lee Tompkins’s quilts. Find the quilt made of many green and black squares. Did you find it? This visual rhythm is an all-over checkerboard design. Look for checkerboards in other quilts you’ll see in this guide, too. (Hint: They might be in just part of a quilt instead of the whole design.)

Did you find the quilt that’s made entirely of curving oblong bars? How do you feel when you look at this quilt? (Keep in mind that it is very large—over eight feet tall and seven feet wide!) Imagine it’s up on a wall and you’re standing in front of it. Does it make you want to lean sideways?! Make up your own word or phrase to describe the visual rhythm of this quilt.

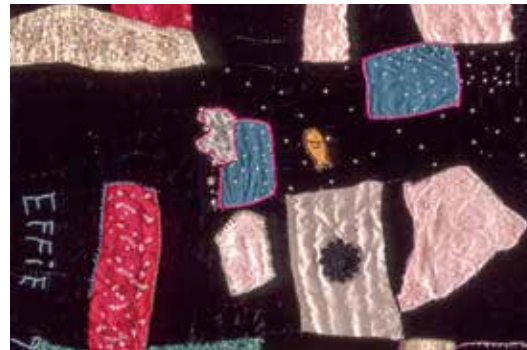
Connecting Shapes and Stories

Next, let's look at some very different artworks by Rosie Lee Tompkins and learn more about her story.

The two artworks on this page have a very different kind of **composition**, which means *the way they are visually arranged* is unlike the quilts we've seen so far. Instead of pattern-based designs, they're more like abstract pictures, with various shapes and objects placed against a solid-color background. They're also not made by piecing, so it's hard to call them quilts. Instead, they're made by **appliqué**, a process in which cutout pieces of fabric in different shapes and patterns are stitched onto a larger piece of fabric. It's very much like **collage**.

How would you describe the piece with the black background? What kind of space, or place, does it seem to show us? Could it be the night sky, or outer space? Or maybe a scene from deep under the sea? Make up your own story about what's going on in this artwork.

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^ Now look at the enlarged detail.

Here, you can really see how Tompkins added shapes and other pieces to her black velvet background. Can you see the little yellow fish near the center? She found this piece of fabric that was printed like a fish and added it to her quilt, just like you might do if you were making a collage.

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Can you see the embroidered letters along the edge? They spell "Effie," which was part of Tompkins's real name, Effie Mae Howard. The name Rosie Lee Tompkins was a **pseudonym** (something like an *alias*, or a *pen name* used by an author). When her work was exhibited in shows and museums, she used this pseudonym to protect her privacy. So it is her artist's name, Rosie Lee Tompkins, that we use to talk about her art, and that everyone knows. (Now you know something new about her!)



Now, take a look at the artwork with the bright red background. This is a piece that Tompkins started making in 1968 and finished years later. (You might be able to see, on the left side of the quilt, embroidery that says “Effie 1983.”) By 1968, she had been in California for about ten years and married for about five years. She was one of many people, including many African Americans, who moved from the rural South to pursue jobs and opportunities for a better life in the North and West. When Tompkins arrived in Richmond, California, she was twenty-two years old. She enrolled in classes to become a nurse, a career she loved and continued for many years. After she got married, she began making quilts, too.

Now, take a closer look. This artwork shows us Tompkins’s interest in collecting things to use in her art. She loved shopping at flea markets, thrift stores, and fabric stores to find just what she wanted to make her quilts. What kinds of found objects do you see in this artwork? Can you see jewelry, embroidery, pictures, beads, and found scenes that refer to popular ideas about California? (For example, there’s a sun, a mountain range, a pair of maracas, and a touristy image of a Native American couple.)





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Rosie Lee Tompkins also made some sculptural artworks in a similar way, by covering surfaces like soda bottles with found materials she collected. These kinds of artworks are sometimes called **assemblage**, which is like 3-D collage.

Can you identify some of the objects used in the two artworks on this page?

Discovering Visual Rhythms



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Now, let's explore more **visual rhythms** in Rosie Lee Tompkins's work.

Take a look at the square-shaped quilt above, made up of orange, brown, blue, and black pieces of velvet. Which colors are the dominant ones? Could you group all the colors into two main groups—the warm colors and the cool ones? When you do this, you begin to see a rhythm of colors—the way they play off each other. Does this suggest movement? How would you describe the visual rhythm of the colors in this quilt?



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What shape is used, again and again, to make this quilt? There's kind of an all-over rhythm of triangles (or half-squares) across the entire quilt, isn't there? But, what's different? What interrupts this all-over rhythm to introduce a new idea? Do you like how this part interacts with the rest of the quilt?



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Another kind of visual rhythm happens in the two quilts above in the center and on the right, also made mostly from velvet, a material that Tompkins loved to use.

Even though the patterns are not the same in these two quilts, and the shapes and colors are very different, they have something in common. Can you see how they share a similar visual composition? How would you describe it?

In each of these quilts, there's a central rectangular shape that dominates the design. There's a word for this in quilting. It's called a **medallion** design. In a medallion quilt, your eye focuses on this central part, which is distinct from the area around it. This creates a kind of rhythm as you look at it.





In the quilt with a lot of green, gold, and black, you'll see some of the shape combinations we've talked about before inside the medallion. (How many pinwheels can you find?) And you can't help but notice that Tompkins did something unpredictable. What did she do? It almost looks like an accident!

Artistically, Rosie Lee Tompkins was more interested in following the organic rhythm of what she was making than she was in making things precise. So she chose to let the frame break apart. Would you say this quilt feels more **static** (like it's standing still) or more **dynamic** (like it's in motion) as a result of her choice? Why?



What about the other medallion quilt? How does the big blue area in the center make you feel? Does it remind you of anything? How is the frame around the edges different from the center? What adjectives would you use to describe these borders?

Where did Tompkins combine oblong bars to make rectangular-shaped designs? Where did she combine half-squares made from solid and printed fabrics? Can you see some sawtooth designs? Some pinwheels? (Remember to look in the blue medallion area, as well as the border areas.) In this quilt, it's almost as if she made lots of mini-quilts around a larger blue one!

In a way, this quilt reverses the rhythm of the medallion quilt we saw before. In the green, gold, and black quilt, the borders are quiet while the center is active with shapes that seem to be in motion. In this one, the borders are very active around a calm center.

Multiplying Colors and Patterns

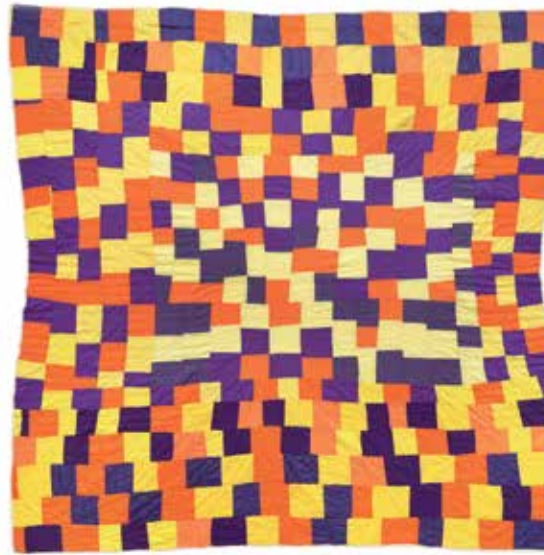
Next, we'll see quilts made with colors that had a very special meaning for Rosie Lee Tompkins.

The two quilts have very different patterns and visual rhythms, but they also have something very noticeable in common—what is it?

Tompkins named this color combination—orange, yellow, and purple—“three sixes.” She called it “three sixes” because, in a very personal way that we can't completely know, she decided that these colors were **symbolic** of three family members whose birthdays all included the number 6. In other words, this color combination *represented* them. This group included herself. (Her own birthday was September 6, 1936, or 9-6-36.)

One of these quilts shows a pattern and visual rhythm we've seen before. Remember the green-and-black quilt in the first set of quilts we looked at, on page 4? This one is also a checkerboard pattern in an all-over rhythm, but it uses the “three sixes” color scheme.

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The other quilt shows a very different pattern and rhythm. Inside many blocks using these colors, you'll see variations on a pattern made of nine almost-square pieces. This is actually Tompkins's own version of a classic quilt pattern called the **nine-patch**. Nine-patch patterns are squares made of nine smaller squares, arranged three across and three up-and-down, like this:

The Spruce/Janet Wickell



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You'll notice that Rosie Lee Tompkins's nine-patch patterns don't look much like that very neat and regular one, do they? What makes hers different? Can you describe the difference? Try drawing a “Rosie-style” nine-patch, next to a typical nine-patch pattern (with nine equal-sized squares in a three-by-three pattern), to demonstrate the difference.



Piecing It All Together

Finally, let's add to our visual vocabulary for Rosie Lee Tompkins's art by looking at some of the quilts and textiles she made in the 1990s and 2000s.

By now, you've already learned a lot about Rosie Lee Tompkins's art. In the quilts on this and the following page, just a few of the many she made in the last two decades of her life, you'll see some familiar ideas from her earlier work, and you'll also see some new elements.

What details do you notice that we've seen before? What things do you see that are new?



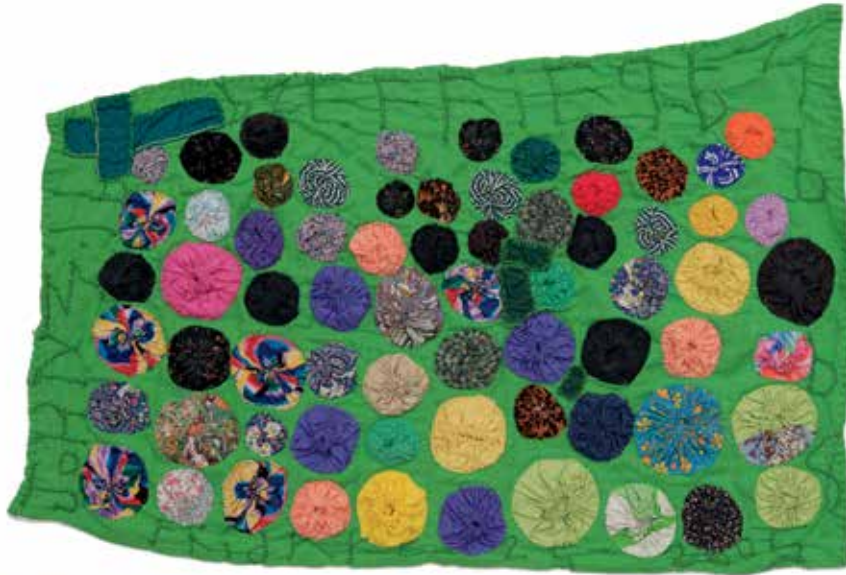
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CAN YOU FIND:

❖ a found-fabric image of a couple dancing? A tapestry of Christ? What elements in this quilt remind you of the United States? Of Mexico? What other things do you see in this quilt? (There are so many things to see! You might want to make a list, or say it out loud while you look with someone else.)

❖ a textile piece made of black and white half-squares? What other shape is repeated in this piece? (Hint: this shape is also a religious symbol.)

Notice the lettering stitched all around the borders of the black-and-white quilt. What personal detail about Tompkins can you see in the embroidery? The other lettering refers to Scripture—numbered chapters and verses in the Bible. She often included such references in her quilts, along with numbers that had personal meanings for her.

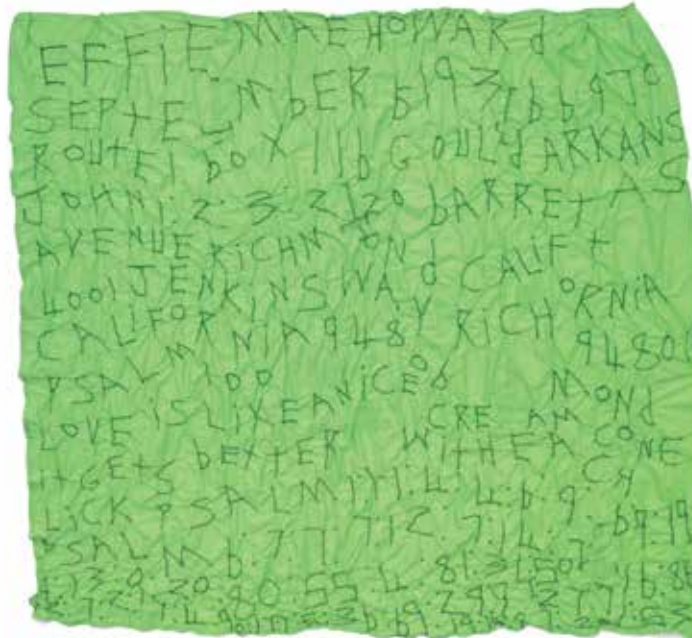
Another eye-catching piece filled with crosses sets up a strong, contrasting rhythm between the black elements in the **foreground** and the orange, green, blue, and black half-squares in the **background**. What words would you use to describe the energy and rhythm of this piece? If you look closely, you might see where Tompkins used beads, sequins, and rhinestones in her design.

In which piece do you see a completely new shape that we haven't seen before in Tompkins's art? (Hint: this shape is repeated in many colors and fabrics against a solid-color background.) Do you also see something familiar in the embroidered lettering? In addition to her name (Effie) and birthday (9-6-36) at the top, you'll see the number 68 at the lower right. Tompkins was sixty-eight years old when she made this piece.





As you take a closer look at these round elements (shown in detail above), you can see they are not just flat circles. In fact, they're 3-D! Each one is made of fabric that's gathered and pinched together, then appliquéd onto the green background. Here's something new for your Rosie Lee Tompkins visual vocabulary: in quilting, the name for this technique and for these shapes is **yo-yo**. (How many yo-yos do you think are in this piece?)



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Finally, above is an artwork that uses *only* embroidery—no piecing or appliqué or other fabric shapes at all!—just green embroidery on a lighter green background. It's a very personal piece. You've already noticed that it includes Tompkins's real name (Effie Mae Howard) and her birth date near the top. It also lists addresses of places she lived in her life, starting with Gould, Arkansas, and then Richmond, California. Other lettering refers to Scripture (passages in the Bible). As a bonus, there's an extra-fun sentence stitched across the middle. Can you find it? (If not, see the upside-down text in the next column to read what it says!)

Love is like an ice cream cone, it gets better with each lick.

The quilts, assemblages, and “put-togethers” in this exhibition are all about Rosie Lee Tompkins—her inventive artistic ideas, her spirituality, her family, her favorite colors, materials, and rhythms.

Activity Connections

Congratulations! You are now an expert on the art of Rosie Lee Tompkins! Now, try out these hands-on projects inspired by Tompkins's work.

1. Experiment with assemblage!

Materials: empty bottle; fabric or felt; buttons, beads, yarn scraps, or other small objects; glue

Do you have a collection of small objects—for example: buttons, beads, bottle caps, cutout pictures, bits of colored yarn—that you could use to make an assemblage? You can use your materials to cover a soda bottle (like Rosie Lee Tompkins did), or you could cover anything! Try wrapping the object you want to cover with felt or other fabric first, to use as a background. Grab some basic glue, like Elmer's, and experiment with attaching your small items all over!

2. Make a medallion-quilt collage!

Materials: assorted colored paper, magazines, scrap paper; colored pencils, markers, or crayons; glue; scissors

Would you like to make your own medallion-quilt design? Let's do it! First, you'll need to decide what color your central rectangular area is going to be. Pick a colored paper or color a blank piece of paper with a color of your choice. This central shape establishes the mood of your medallion-quilt collage.

Now let's plan your border. Tompkins's medallion-quilt borders are like a colorful frame of mini-quilts surrounding the center. To make your own colorful borders, you will need to cut lots of shapes like the half-squares and oblongs found in Tompkins's quilts. Revisit your shape vocabulary and start cutting. Cut a variety of sizes and colors so you'll have a lot of options for composing your mini-quilt borders.

Now, it's time to collage your shapes together. Mix and match colors with patterns, or piece shapes together to make pinwheels and sawtooths.



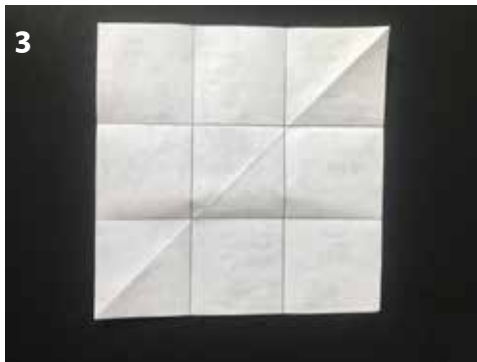
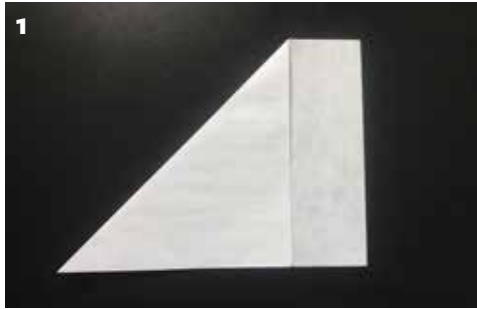
^ This medallion-quilt design was made by a third-grade class that visited the gallery.

Once you feel your medallion-quilt collage is complete, take a step back and look at its beautiful colors and rhythms. What are your favorite shape and color combinations? How does it feel as a whole? It's up to you whether to keep this design or reuse the materials for another activity. If you want to save your medallion-quilt collage, add some glue and stick the pieces to a larger paper backing.

3. Make your own nine-patch design!

Materials: blank paper; colored pencils, markers, or crayons; scissors

It's your turn to put together your own symbolic nine-patch design to represent you and your family! First, find a blank piece of paper for your background. Follow the steps at right to turn your rectangular paper into a square with a 3×3 pattern.



Step 1: Turn your paper horizontally, which means the long side of the paper is the top of your page. Pinch the top left corner of the paper and bring the whole vertical (short) side to the bottom edge. Crease the fold gently.

Step 2: Can you see the triangle created by the fold? Do you see the remaining rectangle on the right side of the paper? Take your scissors and cut along the right edge of the folded triangle until the rectangle is removed. Then, open up your folded paper to reveal your square background.

Step 3: Now, make a 3×3 pattern by drawing two lines evenly spaced from left to right and two lines from top to bottom to make nine separate squares.

Now that you have your nine squares, you can invent your design! Using markers, crayons, and colored pencils (or cut-out squares of colored paper), fill each square with a color that represents whatever you like. It could be school colors, the favorite color of each member of your family, or just your own favorites! Use markers to make stronger-colored squares and colored pencils for lighter-colored squares. Experiment with the rhythm this makes!

4. Make a quilt that's all about you!

Materials: blank paper; assorted colored paper, magazines, wrapping paper; colored pencils, markers, or crayons; glue stick; string; scissors; hole punch

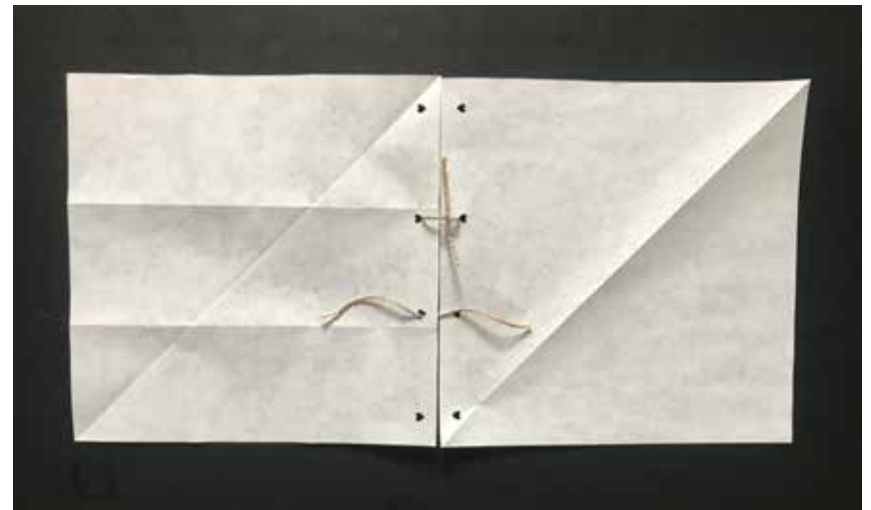
Try making some paper mini-quilt patches and tie them together to make your very own quilt! First, you'll need some squares for your backing layer. Use the same method for making squares from a sheet of paper as you did for the nine-patch activity. Make as many paper squares as you would like for your quilt. The more squares, the bigger the quilt, and the more you can show the world about you! You can invite a family member to make squares to add to the quilt, too.

Once you have your square backings made, start piecing individual “put-togethers” on top of each square. Gather your found paper, such as newspapers, magazines, or leftover wrapping paper, and make shapes to collage together. Try cutting or ripping the paper into repetitive shapes like half-squares and bars. This quilt is all about you, so go ahead and add 3-D objects, paint, pictures, and anything else you feel represents you. You can write your name or nickname within a square, like Tompkins did with embroidery. You can use different shades of your favorite color to make another square.

After you have finished designing your squares, lay all of them out and try out different arrangements to decide which squares you would like to place next to each other. Create a combination of patterns and a rhythm that feels just right.

Are you happy with your design? Perfect! Now, attach your squares to each other. Using your hole punch, add four holes along the edge of each square where it will touch another square. Be sure the holes are in roughly the same spots in neighboring squares. Cut a piece of string about three inches long, loop it through the matching holes on the edges of two of your squares, and tie the string. Keep going until all your squares are tied together. Voila! It's your very own paper quilt, all about you!

Show us what you made!
Share images of your Rosie Lee Tompkins-inspired art on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook and tag your photos #BAMPFA.



All artworks by Rosie Lee Tompkins, from the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Bequest of the Eli Leon Living Trust.

1
String, 1985; quilted and restructured by Willia Ette Graham; velvet, velveteen, and chenille backing; 101 × 86 in.

2
Untitled, 1986; quilted by Irene Bankhead, 1986; velvet, velveteen, printed knit velour, faux fur, cotton upholstery fabric, novelty knit fabrics, and cotton flannel backing; 92 ½ × 86 in.

3
Untitled, 1986; quilted by Willia Ette Graham and Johnnie Wade, 1996; found and repurposed denim with pockets and manufacturing labels, and cotton muslin backing; 86 × 66 in.

4
Untitled, 1986; velvet, velveteen, velour, crushed velvet, embroidered velveteen, printed cotton, rayon print, acrylic yarn, and pieced printed cotton backing; 85 × 63 ½ in.

5
Untitled, 1986; quilted by Irene Bankhead, 1990; velvet and velveteen; 75 × 49 in.

6
Untitled, 1995; quilted by Irene Bankhead, 1997; velvet, velvet with rhinestones, beaded silk satin, beaded angora sweater scraps, beaded crepe, beaded silk twill, wool felt with nailhead studs, gabardine with soutache and beads, knit mesh with metal links, bead and rhinestone trim, portion of a beaded handbag, lace appliqué, beaded and embroidered wool double knit, fish appliqué, lamé brocade, and cotton muslin backing; 90 ½ × 77 in.

7
Untitled, 1968, 1982–83, 1996; cotton, felt, wool, velvet, velveteen, found and repurposed embroidered fragments (variously decorated with chenille, wool thread, needlepoint, shisha mirrors, and other materials), crocheted doilies, silk crepe, decorative trim (with beading, sequins, faux pearls, leather, rhinestones, and other materials), hand-painted velvet, cotton thread embroidery, and printed drapery backing; 57 × 75 in.

8
Christmas Tree, 1997; glass jar, metal cap, glass knob, fabric, costume jewelry, seashell necklace, decorative trim (with rhinestones, beads, and metallic yarn), fabric cord, metallic cord, “Hell on Wheels” patch, individual beads and faux pearls, glue, and other media; 11 × 6 × 5 in.

9
Untitled, 1987; glass bottle, Elmer’s glue cap, decorative trim (various types, consisting of metallic thread, rhinestones, faux pearls, and crocheted and embroidered flowers), patterned rayon fabric with cording, velveteen, wood beads, metal bracelet, glue, and other media; 13 ½ × 4 ½ × 4 ½ in.

10
Untitled, 1991; quilted by Irene Bankhead, 1991; velvet, velveteen, velour, and cotton backing; 73 × 67 in.

11
Untitled, 1986; quilted by Irene Bankhead, 1986; velvet, velveteen, velour, crushed velvet, and cotton backing; 81 × 62 in.

12
Untitled, 1986; quilted by Willia Ette Graham, 1986; velvet, velveteen, faux fur, panné velvet, and velvet backing; 86 × 74 in.

13
Three Sixes, 1996; quilted by Irene Bankhead, 1996; polyester double knit, linen-weave cotton or polyester, cotton, rayon, and cotton muslin backing; 96 × 96 in.

14
Thirty-Six Nine-Patch [*Three Sixes* combination], 1999; quilted by Irene Bankhead, 2007; cotton, polyester double knit, polyester knit, linen blend, wool gabardine, rayon, cotton, cotton sateen, acrylic yarn, cotton embroidery, and ribbed cotton backing; 107 × 82 in.

15
Untitled, 1996; quilted by Irene Bankhead, 1997; cotton, cotton flannel, cotton feed sack, linen, rayon, flocked satin, velvet, cotton-synthetic blend, cotton-acrylic jersey, acrylic double weave, cotton-polyester, polyester double knit, acrylic and cotton tapestry, silk batik, polyester velour, rayon or acrylic embroidery on cotton, wool, needlepoint, and shisha mirror embroidery; 88 × 146 in.

16
Untitled, 1999; quilted by Irene Bankhead, 2007; cotton, polyester, acrylic yarn, cotton embroidery, and other fabrics; 51 × 81 ½ in.

17
Untitled, 2005; quilted by Irene Bankhead, 2008; cotton, corduroy, rayon linen, polyester print, cotton terry, cotton embroidery, cotton bedding, and other fabrics with cotton muslin backing; 26 × 39 in.

18
Untitled, 2002; quilted by Irene Bankhead, 2007; brocade, cotton flannel, cotton, silk crepe with beading and sequins, decorative trim (with rhinestones and sequins), washed silk, rayon and polyester twill, cotton embroidery, and cotton muslin backing; 30 ½ × 40 ½ in.

19
Untitled, c. 2002; cotton polyester bedsheet, cotton embroidery, and drapery hooks; 68 × 71 in.

1, 2, 5, 6, 11, 12, 15:
Photography by Sharon Risedorph
3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19:
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