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Stitching the Unfinished Revolution

BY DAVID M. FRANK



A quilt made by female members of the Oneida Community in 1873, showing objects and activities that reflected their lives.

ONEIDA COMMUNITY MANSION HOUSE

In the spring of 2025, I found myself standing very still in a gallery on Pennsylvania Avenue, within sight of the White House.

The Renwick Gallery, part of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, had given over its rooms to an exhibition called *We Gather at the Edge: Contemporary Quilts by Black Women Artists*. I had come expecting beauty. I did not expect to be transformed by it. In front of me hung *In My Akuabaa Form*, a quilt

by the Brooklyn artist Myrah Brown Green, made in honor of the four young people who sat at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960 and refused to move. The cloth was warm and bright and patient, and it carried the weight of a movement. I stood there and understood, in a way no textbook had ever taught me, that a quilt can also be an argument.

Inspired by quilts, *Tapestry of New York*, a new online platform developed by the New York State Education Department and WNET, invites students from every corner of the state, in honor of the nation's 250th anniversary, to submit artwork defining their idea of what "We the People" means.

There is no fabric. Each "square" is a piece of original art or media, a collage, a drawing, a painting, a photograph, or a short film, paired with the student's own written statement about what it means. Together, thousands of these squares form a single digital quilt. Submissions may be made through the end of the year.

The project takes its theme from the opening words of the US Constitution: "We the People." Over the past 250 years, who counts as "the people" has been debated, expanded, and contested, and the tapestry invites young New Yorkers straight into that argument, asking: Who is included in your idea of "We the People"? What makes you feel that you belong? Which New Yorkers, past or present, have worked to make that phrase larger? Who is still left out? They are the very questions the founders left unfinished, handed now to a fifth grader in Buffalo and a high school senior in Washington Heights, Manhattan, among others. Using a teacher toolkit and following a multidisciplinary path through art, social



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studies, and English, the students are invited to answer these questions. No single square is the last word.

New York's quilting heritage is remarkably deep, and much of it has been preserved. In 1988 and 1989, the American Folk Art Museum in Manhattan sent volunteers to "Quilt Days" in churches, museums, and community centers across the state, photographing and documenting family quilts before they could be lost. This initiative, called the New York Quilt Project, recorded more than 6,000 quilts made between 1753 and 1940, and a selection was published in the 1994 catalog *New York Beauties: Quilts from the Empire State*. The records read like a social history of the state: who made each quilt, where the maker learned the craft, why they made it, and where the fabric came from.

A quilt can function like an archive, representing a society's memory. A quilt keeps memory differently, in fabric rather than files, but it asks many of the same questions: Who made this? What did they value? Whose story might disappear if no one chose to keep it? When students look for the New Yorkers who fought to broaden "We the People" from 1776 to the present day, the answers are waiting in the record.

The *Tapestry of New York* grows from the same conviction that drives the State Education Department's broader work. In 2025, building upon work she had started a decade earlier, Commissioner Betty A. Rosa announced NY Inspires, a plan to transform education in the state and carry forward the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon

Commission on Graduation Measures. At its center is the New York State Portrait of a Graduate, adopted that year, which names six competencies, rooted in culturally responsive and sustaining education and pictured as a single growing tree, that we hope to nurture in every student. The tapestry turns that vision into practice: students examine real evidence, connect history to their own identity and community, communicate through the media that move them, and make something of value for a public audience.

What I find most moving is how closely the project mirrors democracy. It does not ask thirty students to agree on one square; it asks each of them to answer honestly, then sets their answers side by side: a child on a dairy farm in the Southern Tier next to a teenager in a cabin in the Adirondacks next to a student in a small apartment in New York City. The disagreement stays visible, which is the point. Democracy is not the absence of disagreement but the discipline of turning disagreement into something we can share. From June through December 2026, schools, libraries, museums, and after-school programs across New York are invited to take part, and every contribution joins a single searchable showcase that anyone can explore.

More information about the *Tapestry of New York*, including how to participate, can be found at tapestryofny.org/. ■

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To view the Tapestry of New York, click or scan here:



To learn more about NY Inspires, click or scan here:

