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Quilting Unites Sister Artists in Mali and the US



Sister Artists in Mali

In a unique example of North-South cooperation between craftswomen, forty-one quilters from the Global North have produced art quilts from embroidery made by survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) in the African country of Mali. The project was launched in 2019 as [Sister Artists](#).

The quilts were shown recently for the first time at the Textile Museum in Washington and will be exhibited again in early April in New England. They will then be auctioned, with profits going to a cooperative run by the women in Bamako, Mali.



Sister Artists in the US: Ten quilters attended the January 25 exhibition in Washington.

is reflected in their work, which is both artistic and inventive. Rhonda O'Keefe, who made *Cooking* (top photo), directs environmental research at an institute in Cambridge. Ellen Fisher used her experience in landscape architecture to design *Study of a Camel*.



Bobbi Fitzsimmons, from the AP Board, with Alimata Diarra at the Washington exhibition.

[Sini Sanuman](#), an AP partner, oversaw production of the embroidery in Mali. The blocks describe life in Northern Mali before the women were assaulted and displaced after a violent rebellion in 2012.

The blocks were turned into vibrant quilts by fiber artists from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Kenya at the invitation of [Quilt for Change](#), a US-based advocacy group with a large network in the quilting world.

The quilters come from diverse backgrounds and this

Dawn Piasta drew on her husband's work as a fishing guide in Canada to produce *Fish in Still Water*. Nancy Hershberger quilted on to an old silk wedding dress which she left on rusting farm equipment to produce the russet tones of *In the Fields*.

Several quilters said the project has helped them better understand the impact of violence against women in Africa. Diane Clapes, from Georgia, felt a sense of solidarity with her Malian sister after spotting her in the group photo (above). "It helps to see the person who

inspired you," she said. "I thought of her experience while making my quilt and wanted to honor her."

Ten quilters were among the 127 visitors to the Textile Museum exhibition and they heard a riveting address from Alimata Diarra, an official at the Malian embassy in Washington. Before coming to the US Ms. Diarra worked with GBV survivors in Timbuktu for the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUSMA). She recalled counseling scores of survivors including Zahara, who was drugged and raped by 8 jihadists after refusing to wear a burka. Zahara still suffers blackouts at school.

Ms Diarra praised *Sister Artists* for offering a lifeline to survivors like Zahara, many of whom live on a pittance and are rejected by society. "It will empower them morally and economically to face life," she said.



Idelette, 6 months, and Yael, 4, like camels.

The quilts now head to the New England Quilt Museum in Lowell Massachusetts, where they will be judged by Hollis Chatelain, an internationally-known art quilter, before being auctioned. Profits will be invested in a cooperative run by women in Bamako.

Sister Artists is one of three projects which will expand AP's program of advocacy quilting to income generation in 2020. Helped by a generous grant from Humanity United, AP will support the production and sale of embroidered bags by women and girls under pressure in Nepal, Kenya and Zimbabwe.

- [Read about the shocking impact of GBV on women in Mali](#)
- Meet the [Sister Artists in the US and Mali](#)
- See [photos of the finished quilts](#)
- Visit the [January 25 exhibition at the Textile Museum](#).



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