

## **'Threads of Strength and Fortitude' exhibition**

**Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds**

**15 December 2007 – 9<sup>th</sup> March 2008**

As a culmination of a year of Yorkshire and Humber events to commemorate the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade, the Royal Armouries hosted an exhibition commissioned by the Carnegie Center for Art and History in Indiana – 'Threads of Strength and Fortitude' from 15<sup>th</sup> December 2007 to 9<sup>th</sup> March 2008. Eight quilts by textile artist Penny Sisto explored the theme of slavery through depictions of servitude, emancipation and the flight to freedom, accompanied by an award-winning interactive DVD, 'Ordinary People , Extraordinary Courage' focusing on the history heritage and personal stories of the men and women of the underground railroad in the USA. The exhibition was accompanied by a series of events, including guest lectures and workshops on the subject of the abolition of slavery aimed at school and community groups. Organisations from the arts & heritage sector as well as community groups were invited to a special event to celebrate the success of commemorative projects in 2007 and their legacy.

Community engagement workshops were developed in partnership with Leeds Extended Services, and partly funded through a specific Heritage Lottery Fund application. The main aims of these workshops were to commemorate the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade, engage new community groups with the museum, provide a new educational offer outside the national curriculum, and introduce a new art form into the museum which highlighted the historic art of quilting. Five events were held in January to March 2008 which saw 70 adults and 90 children from the North West Inner Leeds Extended Services Cluster of primary and secondary schools attend 4 hour art-based workshops led by the education team at the Royal Armouries. These workshops explored the themes of peaceful resistance and how individuals such as Harriet Tubman and her underground railroad subverted the use of slavery.

## **Copy for Threads of Strength and Fortitude exhibition: intro panels and quilt labels**

### **TITLE PANEL:**

#### **THREADS OF STRENGTH AND FORTITUDE: PENNY SISTO'S SLAVERY QUILT SERIES**

The Royal Armouries is delighted to exhibit the quilts of Penny Sisto. She is a textile artist who was born in the Orkney Islands, Scotland, worked as a midwife in East Africa and learned to quilt from those around her.

We are pleased to show these quilts about the slave trade and abolition in 2007, the bi-centenary of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire

#### **Additional info/credits:**

The exhibition has transferred from the Carnegie Center for Art and History, New Albany, Indiana who commissioned the project for display in 2007.

The exhibition is accompanied by an interactive DVD entitled:  
*Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage: Men and Women of the Underground Railroad in the Indiana and Kentucky Borderland*

## **INTRO PANEL:**

### **ARTIST STATEMENT**

Two years ago I decided that if I were indeed a member of what is classified as the most privileged group in America, i.e. White Women, I must search my heart and conscience as to what responsibilities this classification brings. Compound that with the fact that I live in a place that borders South and North, in a land that is wealthy because it was built on stolen ground and by the sweat and blood of stolen people and you will begin to feel the stirrings that prompted this group of quilts.

I made the 'Slave Ship One' quilt and 'Tunnel' quilt in 2004 in my first sortie into the topic of Slavery in America and then found the whole topic too unbearable to continue. The Carnegie Center invited me to make this grouping, and I re-entered that stream. I have sewn all of these quilts except for 'Slave Ship One' and 'Tunnel' between December 2005 and today.

This is OUR History... All of us... and if I am to glean the fruits of this history, then I must also bear the burden of it. Black and White, we are bound together. There is rank Radicalism in every aspect of American lives. I catch myself in the act... sometimes subtle, often oblique it hides in the shadows of my psyche.

As an artist I explore the quilt of history that binds us together, this is OUR story, from the dank bowels of the ships to the brave souls who worked for Freedom and Equality. It is easy to rejoice in the birth of Jazz on the cobblestones of Congo Square, but harder to place ourselves below or above deck on those crowded ships... I have tried to look at our history, the landscape of my Land, our Land, with a quilter's eye. I am proud of the role that women played. Women led, women followed, Heroines such as Harriet Tubman, and countless nameless women who toiled anonymously behind the scenes.

For my inadequacies in scope and vision I apologise... in areas where I succeed in bringing some of this history to life, I add my wee stitch to the great multifaceted quilt that is America.

Penny Sisto

Indiana, U.S.A

March 2006

**LABEL ONE:**

***Slave Ship I***

**On loan from the artist, Ms. Penny Sisto**

Chained by their necks head to toe to save cargo space, lie the men who will found the future of America, the men whose labor will bring wealth and richness of culture to this New World.

A diagram of a slave ship cargo-hold is seen on the background. After this quilt was finished I saw the 'ghost' faces appear one by one in the body of the quilt, and marked them off with oil pastels.

**LABEL TWO:**

***Collared***

**On loan from the artist, Ms. Penny Sisto**

The strong determination in this man's face shows us that in the end he will make good his escape despite the fact that the runaway collar is welded around his neck. The collar has bells on it to alert his pursuers, and spikes to prevent him from running through the undergrowth.

The memory of the Maasai collar burns within his robe. The beaded collar reminds him of his former life. He will carve out a future despite the fences in front of him.

**LABEL THREE:**

***Courage***

**On loan from Ms. Carol Tobe**

An eagle in her breast shows the spirit that carried her on her long journey from South to North—from Slavery to Freedom.

**LABEL FOUR:**

***Ran Away***

**On loan from Dr. Curtis and Mrs. Pamela Peters**

The old farmer leads the way by lantern light. Some of the Underground Railroad travellers carry their tired companions. The tattered lace and linen which frames the bottom of the quilt shows us that this story is not that old, and that this rich and tattered history belongs to each one of us.

**LABEL FIVE:**

***Light a Candle in Heaven Harriet Tubman,***

**On loan from Mr. Vernon Broyles, III**

The jewelled gates of heaven are held wide open by two young angels for Harriet Tubman, the woman who ushered so many to freedom. She is an icon, a beacon of hope and a light in our dark world.

*Harriet Tubman (about 1820-1913) helped liberate many slaves, inspired others to free themselves and worked for the abolition of slavery in the U.S.A.*

## **LABEL SIX:**

### ***Worth It***

**On loan from Ms. Lavenna Constant**

The young are our future and are worth every sacrifice that we make for them. A young lassie holds her brother securely as he gazes ahead.

## **LABEL SEVEN:**

### ***Raising the Hood***

**On loan from Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church, Louisville, Kentucky**

The transparent lines of the Underground Railroad criss-cross this quilt. Behind and in front of it we see the legacy of the hood in the power of the African shaman's mask.

The worst of it is seen in the dreadful hood of the Ku-klux-klan. On the left a man holds up the clenched fist of black power. We see the shame-filled hood of Abu Ghraib prison, the dog-leashed young Iraqi captive held by the female American G.I. A stark reminder that unless we all work for change, our past will meet our future.

## **LABEL EIGHT:**

### ***A World on His Back***

**On loan from the artist, Ms. Penny Sisto**

The back of a slave showing in *Trapunto* quilting the scars of beatings. Within the frame of his back we see the memory of his former life and the outline of Africa.

*Trapunto quilting is a method of whole cloth quilting with stuffing inserted to form raised shapes. It originated in Italy and was used in the United States about 1770 – 1860.*