

**2001 National Heritage Fellow  
National Endowment for the Arts  
Alabama State Council on the Arts Master Artist**



Photo by Tom Pich

**Mozell Benson  
Waverly, AL**

**African-American  
Quilter**



*Mozell Benson's "Cross" Quilt*

Photo by Sylvia G. Stephens

Growing up the daughter of a sharecropper in rural Alabama with nine brothers and sisters, Mozell Benson learned early on from her mother that quilting was a craft of both beauty and necessity. While the layered quilt can provide needed warmth for a family member, its surface has the potential to become a brilliant statement, combining practical design and personal expressive freedom in the hands of a master. Maude Wahlman, a quilt scholar, says of Benson's work: "Her quilts are the visual equivalent of jazz or blues. She will take a basic pattern and then do variations on it just like a musician will do with a jazz piece."

For most of her life Mozell Benson, who lives in Waverly, Alabama, drove a school bus, but when she is not driving or tending to her large garden she has been quilting, on average twenty quilts a year. Increasingly her quilts have gained attention from museum curators and cultural specialists. She has appeared in a traveling exhibition entitled Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts from the Rural South, and in 1985 she went to Africa to demonstrate her craft for the Nigerian Council of Women's Studies as part of a State Department program. In response to her numerous accolades, Benson still refers to herself as a "country quilter," who is merely doing what many others have done to keep their children and grandchildren warm. However, with her innate curiosity and her propensity for artistic experimentation, she says that the hardest part about quilting is the necessity to sit still while she's doing it.