

# ARKANSAS BLACK HISTORY



Image courtesy of Encyclopedia of Arkansas

Rosie Lee Tompkins (birth name Effie Mae Martin) is an African American textile artist whose art is focused on quilt making. Tompkins was born into poverty in rural Arkansas where she and her family picked cotton as sharecroppers and used clothing scraps to quilt. They lived in the Gould area (Lincoln County), and she moved to California in 1958. Despite not having a high school degree, Tompkins took nursing classes and worked as a medical attendant in the San Francisco Bay Area. By the 1970s, Tompkins realized that she had missed working with fabrics and that the process of doing patchwork brought her peace, joy and a feeling of connection with her family who still lived in Arkansas. Tompkins' work was displayed in the 1980s and beyond. Much of her art is now part of the University of California, Berkeley, and can be seen in exhibits through the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA). She also was included in the 2002 biennial exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, an important show of contemporary art in the US. Roberta Smith, critic for The New York Times, said of the artist's work, "Tompkins' textile art [works]...demolish the category."

