The key to lasting FRIENDSHIP
...and why Gayle and I have it for sure! PG. 128

Come on in—the shopping’s fine!
OUR FALL FASHION LOOK BOOK, PAGE 41

LOVE LESSONS
When your past keeps messing with your future

VACCINE CONVERTS
What changed their minds?
BISA BUTLER is a quilting virtuoso—just don’t ask her to measure triangles for a starflower block. “I admire what old-school quilters do,” says Butler, 46. “But if someone busts out a ruler, I feel deeply uncomfortable.”

Instead of geometric patterns, Butler creates kaleidoscopic portraits of African Americans, from historical giants (like Jean-Michel Basquiat or Josephine Baker) to the captivating unknown. Many of her latest collages—a group of Harlem girls, each standing a little over four feet tall; an 1899 college baseball team—are based on archival black-and-white photos. “Some have a generic title like Negro Boys on Easter Morning,” says Butler, who lives in West Orange, New Jersey, and may spend 20 hours layering hundreds of silk pieces to create one hyperrealistic face. “I bring them back to life—in color.” Every bit of fabric has symbolic impact: A swatch covered in euros signifies the cost of slavery; a ribbon printed with women standing face-to-face indicates sisterhood.

The portraits are painterly because Butler herself was a painter. “Most quilters tend to see things in chunks of color,” she says. “I still think in terms of layers and shadows.” While she was studying fine art at Howard University, a professor noticed a disconnect between her muted paintings and her splashy wardrobe (picture lime green honeycombs and red and blue swirls—in one dress) and urged her to start incorporating fabric into her pieces. Now Butler, who has sewn since childhood (“My mom and grandmother taught me so I could create Barbie outfits”), works only with textiles.

Butler’s fabric collection swallows her dining room, fills 22 bins in her basement, and contains material both donated (like her mother’s hijabs) and purchased. “If I see something I like, I buy it,” she says. “I found a print called ‘Michelle Obama’s shoes’ that commemorated a trip to Africa by President Obama and the first lady, and I went HAM. I was like, Michelle Obama? I’ll take it in all five colors.” —M.G.