

A Personal View of Quilting

Pam Carvalho is a quilter. She has been making original quilts for six years and is an associate in The Hand & I (eye), a cooperative crafts gallery in Lawrence, Kansas. She originally gave the following as a speech at the Kansas Symposium in 1978 and then published this slightly edited version in the BALDWIN LEDGER on August 16, 1978. The BALDWIN LEDGER runs a weekly quilting column by Enola Gish, Betty Hagerman, and others.

All of us who make quilts are very much bound together by "pins and needles - fabrics and threads" and by the way we use them to create quilts for ourselves and for others. The process of making a quilt is one of making a fabric "sandwich" a combination of fabrics and stitches - the medium through which we exercise our creativity. As a contemporary quilter, I derive some of my inspiration from the traditional quilts and from those who execute beautiful traditional quilts today. But it is my approach to quilt-making today and the excitement I feel about creating new and original quilts that I'd like to share with you.

I began designing and making quilts in February, 1972 after my quilting partner Carol Hurst and I saw an exhibit of some of the quilts from the Kansas University collection. For years, both of us had wanted to make quilts together. Applique appealed to both of us and we decided to experience the total work of creating a quilt from design to finished piece. At the time it seemed easier to work out our own design than to execute some of the intricate pieced patterns that appealed to us.

We began with a small quilt. Its design was based upon an Egyptian lotus flower. Each step in making a quilt is a learning process, with decisions required at each new stage. And so we experimented with stuffed portions and with stuffed bias borders - all adding a third dimension to the quilt.

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And since one doesn't usually make only one quilt, ideas for the second, third, fourth, ad infinitum, took shape. We worked on a large piece for our second quilt in reverse applique. We quilted "free-handedly" and worked out a large "web" design. When this quilt was completed, the Kansas Designer-Craftsman show, a juried crafts competition, was about to take place at Kansas University. Carol and I entered our second quilt and were pleased when it was one of the pieces chosen.

While we were creating these original quilts, we were given moral support by family, friends and acquaintances, but we were also given a great deal of opposition by quilters. In fact, there were some instances of outright condemnation and some insistence that what we were making were not quilts!! And could that have been because they were not of a readily identifiable pattern?

Many contemporary quilters face similar treatment. Perhaps women have lost confidence in their ability to design. After all - all quilt patterns that you are making today, were at one time, original -with many revitalizing changes essential in any "lively" art form. Modern designers of quilts are not concerned with reiterating statements made years ago. We have our own statements to make - statements which are relevant to our own times.

The colors in all of my quilts are crucial to the design and I must find the exact color I have chosen in my design worked out first on paper. This is not an easy task and is one that consumes great amounts of time and energy. The backs of the quilts have always held great interest for both Carol and me - they reflect the quilt's design and they become a complete entity in themselves.

We have done a commission quilt-that has taught us that a quilt does not have to be made by one's grandmother to become an heirloom in a family. Because it was a commission, it was not like a pattern that grandma made - in that instance, the fact that grandma made it, is important. But as a commission, you have to make the design meaningful to the person you are designing the quilt for.

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Our latest quilt, Maize (two years in the making) is the first in a series of quilts that will reflect the flora and fauna and perhaps the many moods of Kansas. Although Kansas is not my home state, I am from Boston, I have come to consider Kansas my home and am very happy on our small farm in Vinland. Recently, much time has been spent away from our farm while I was helping to coordinate a contemporary quilt show at the Lawrence Arts Center that attempted to pull together the three or four directions that today's quiltmakers are moving. There were medallion style quilts, appliqued quilts of abstract design, a weaver's vision of the piecing technique, a photo-silkscreened piece, batiked pieces, several quilted and stuffed sculptural pieces, embroidered taffeta quilts, freestanding quilted pieces... the show was exciting and stimulating to those who recognized that they were seeing new approaches to a very old craft.

In the past, many things which were relegated to women never received a great deal of attention. But the process of quilt making has been, is, and can be as creative as any other endeavor which distinguishes American culture for its vitality. This creativity is to take what is here, a step forward, sideways, or even backwards to find new approaches to things. Some quiltmakers today are recapturing the spirit and essence of early American quilts. As products of our technology become totally pervasive and we become committed to a throw-away culture -the hand-based skills of an earlier, more stable and static time become less significant in economic terms, but perhaps more meaningful spiritually as embodiments of a simpler time and of self reliance.

The personal excitement I feel while doing my designs is difficult to explain to those who are more timid and to those whose security is threatened by something different. It is and always has been in my nature to attempt to change the things around me to suit my vision of what I want my life to be. And so quilting has not been an exception. I, like many of you, have so

many quilts that I must make in the years ahead, but they will be my own designs. I feel that I will then be helping to keep alive a tradition that has created absolutely beautiful quilts. And if I honestly please myself and make designs which genuinely give me pleasure, I hope to find myself recognized as having an ability to design and execute beautiful quilts. Those who make quilts accept all that is involved in the process - the time, it will always be found, and one can accept that the quilt will not be completed tomorrow ... it grows...often along with oneself in the process.

Many of today's contemporary quiltmakers are concerned with the total, visual effect of their designs... and their quilts often become pieces of sculpture and many who view their work will not understand what they are seeing in relation to what they know as quilts. BUT, it behooves us all to be open to new quilts which are a legitimate extension of the tradition which you are so fond of. I feel that although I perceive things somewhat differently from many traditional quiltmakers and quilt connoisseurs, I feel a closeness with the community of quiltmakers throughout the country and particularly with the readers of this weekly quilt column. I have tried to share my excitement with quilting today with you all. Thank you.

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