

## DOING RESEARCH- PART!

What does it mean? Why do it?

"Research" is a potentially frightening word for many people. It seems to suggest that a person needs a college degree to even think of doing what a scientist or historian does. But that may be only because we allow ourselves to be overly impressed by scientists and historians. After all, they put on their shoes one at a time the same as you and I. You are a scientist doing research each time you try a new recipe; you are a historian doing research each time you ask about the background of a quilt pattern.

Research is nothing more than looking for an answer to a question. The dictionary defines it as "diligent investigation" or "studious inquiry." To answer a question with guesses -- even reasonable guesses -- is only speculation. To answer a question through the means of diligent investigation is to do research. Speculation is easy and enjoyable, but the answers cannot be depended upon. Research is not difficult, and is also enjoyable -and the answers CAN be depended upon.

One of the most important aspects of research or "studious inquiry" is finding the right question to ask. A question such as "What is the history of quilts?" is too large and too vague. It would require many lifetimes to answer, and can only be discouraging. A good research question needs to be specific and limited, so that it has some possibility of being answered. One way of limiting a question is to limit the time and the area in which one does studious inquiry.

There are an infinite number of questions which can be asked about quilts -- and which are worthy of diligent inquiry. Here is a short list of examples:

1. Who made this quilt?  
When did she/he make it? Where?  
Did she/he make other quilts?  
What are they like? Did she! he have a certain style? Did she write anything about them?

Are they still around? Where? Are there photos of them?

2. Is this quilt a known pattern?  
What other quilts of the same pattern are known?  
Where are they?  
Did they all come from the same area?
3. What is the history of this pattern?  
When was it first made? Where?
4. What kind of quilts did the women of my area make? 100 years ago? 150 years ago? 50 years ago?
5. What quilts are in my local historical society collection?  
Historical house? Art museum?  
Are they catalogued?
6. Did women in my family make quilts?  
Have they been asked about their quilting? Is their experience written down?
7. What records of quilts can be found in X county between 1840 and 1860?

There are many reasons for doing research, such as:

Because I like quilts and want to know more about them;

Because I'm proud of what women have created -- and want to know more about them;

Because this portion of our national heritage hasn't been thoroughly examined;

Because I'm interested in American art, or Folk Art;

Because I'm interested in what the women of my family did;

Just "because."

Even though "research" can seem like a formidable word, we should not allow ourselves to be frightened by it. "Curiosity may have killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back to life" is an old saying, but still true. The activity of research -- the searching itself -- is very enjoyable and the findings produced by the research are often exciting and

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## *THE "DINNER PARTY"*

Judy Chicago, renowned contemporary artist, spent five years preparing for her dinner party. With the help of hundreds of friends -old and new -- Ms. Chicago presented her long-awaited exhibition in the summer of '79 at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco. Best known as a painter on traditional canvas, the artist decided to create a work of art using two media which women have more frequently worked in the past, namely china painting and needlework. She chose to cast her work in the format of a dinner party, which has also been traditionally a woman's area of artistic expression.

In structure, the work consists of a long table arranged in a triangle and set with individual place settings for 39 women of historical importance. Each place setting consists of a painted china plate, a china goblet and a long place mat which hangs over the table, front and back. The place mats are on top of a white tablecloth which is quite plain except at the corners of the triangle where it is beautifully worked in white stitchery. The table itself rests on a floor made of tiles with a pale iridescent glaze and inscribed in gold with the names of 900 more illustrious women.

Each of the 39 place settings is designed for a specific woman, and represents aspects of her life which were particularly meaningful to the artists. The plates were all designed and painted by Judy Chicago (and therefore are featured in the current book about the Dinner Party). The place mats, however, were done by other people who helped with the project -- some of whom had not previously done needlework and had to learn a lot to take part. For the most part, they succeeded; the needlework is beautifully done -even when the techniques are unusual and sometimes startling. There is a fair amount of applique work on the different place mats, and two of them -- representing Sojourner Truth and Susan B. Anthony -- incorporate small amounts of familiar patchwork designs.

The experience of visiting this exhibition was quite extraordinary. We waited in line in a crowded corridor for more than an hour. Many people ahead of us had waited more than three hours. Yet no one left and no one complained. When we finally arrived in the large room where the Dinner Party was on display it was as though we were entering a holy place. The room was rather dark except for lighting directly on the table. Light glanced off the iridescent floor, making soft rainbows on the cloth. The viewers moved slowly around the table, speaking softly to each other with rare good humor and respect for the work, pointing out particular interesting techniques. Joyce asked the hostess at the door if she had seen too much of it -- if she got bored. "Oh no," she said, "I wait until everyone is gone and then I go around all by myself." I hope two things: that other cities will have an opportunity to see this show (which seems questionable, as no other art museum anywhere has made any effort to arrange for its display) and that the needlework can go on display by itself sometime. It is beautiful.

Sally Garoutte

### *JINNY VERY OFFERS REWARD*

REWARD for return of "Cats I Have Known," applique quilt top of different cats -- "Mom cat, sad cat, Celia's cat, Claire's cat, etc." -- applique on random blocks. Dark gray cotton borders with cats. Quilt top disappeared at West Coast Quilter's Conference in Oregon in July. Virginia Avery, 731 King St., Port Chester, N.Y. 10573.

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always satisfying. When the results are published, the information becomes available to other people, and becomes also a part of the large subject of Quilt History.

In Part II of "Doing Research," I will present some how-to-do-it suggestions.

Sally Garoutte