

The Dinner Party

Judy Mathieson, prize winning quilt-maker, teacher, and lecturer was actively involved in the "Dinner Party" project, an outstanding work of art shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in the summer of 1979. For a description and review see the Fall 1979 issue QUILTERS' JOURNAL.

How did I get involved in something like the "Dinner Party"? I was invited by a friend who was invited by a friend who was invited by a friend.

Why did I get involved? I was interested in the Project because (a) I had never worked in a large studio environment, (b) I was impressed with the quality of the needlework, and (c) because so many people seemed committed to it. I have also found that when one offers to help, one usually ends up learning something new.

Judy Chicago conceived the idea and was the driving force behind it. She and her staff were interested in getting volunteer workers who were knowledgeable in the areas of textiles, needlecrafts, and especially quilting and patchwork. They were just beginning the design work on three runners that used these techniques.

I worked on the Project at Judy Chicago's studio in Santa Monica once a week for eight months. The runner, or placement that I was most involved with was for Trotula, an eleventh century physician from Sicily. A Tree of Life had been selected for her symbol as she was renowned for her work as a gynecologist. We outlined the tree with embroidery, corded the leaves, stuffed the flowers and birds, and then quilted the background with a tiny diamond grid.

The techniques on all the runners that I observed was of the highest quality. Some of the workers were trained in ecclesiastical embroidery and all of us aspired to those standards. If the quality of the work on the runners was not up to the standard, out it came to be done over correctly. The range of needlework was an education in itself -- handmade felt, beading reverse and shadow applique, stumpwork, bargello, ribbon flowers, tapestry and strip weaving and thousands of miles of embroidery.

The materials were also of fine quality silk fabric and floss, linen, gold thread and for Queen Elizabeth's runner, real pearls. One woman prepared raw wool, spun and wove it

into coarse homespun for a runner and another woman prepared a specially tanned hide for the Sacajawea runner.

An ancient symbol of the female, the equilateral triangle was featured in many of the designs, i.e., the shape of the table was an equilateral triangle and there were triangles on the border of Sojourner Truth's runner. (I got my first experience with Seminole patchwork when piecing the tiny 1/2" strips of black and white fabric on the ends of the runner.)

I attended the opening in San Francisco last March and it was a thrill to see the entire work for the first time. My only regret is that everyone could not see the detail on the part of the runner over the back of the table. Since it is a closed triangle, no one could see the tears in the eyes of Mary Wollstonecroft's husband as he held the baby in his arms and watched the mother die in childbirth, or the tiny single thread french knots that formed the wooly coat of a sheep on Anna Van Schurman's runner.

So far only one other showing of the Dinner Party is scheduled for March 1980 in Houston, TX. There does seem to be a lot of "grass-roots" support, but the art critics were mixed in their reviews and museums seem resistant to presenting this exhibit. It is very large and expensive to mount, but if you are interested call or write your museum and ask them to arrange a showing. *cont on pg 20...*



Detail "Trotula Runner". Photo courtesy of The Dinner Party.

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cont. from p. 8

A second book on the Dinner Party will
be published by Anchor Press/Doubleday in March
1980, featuring the needlework. If you can't
see the real thing at least read the book!

Judy Mathieson
Woodland Hills, CA

PROVIDENCE BEDDING

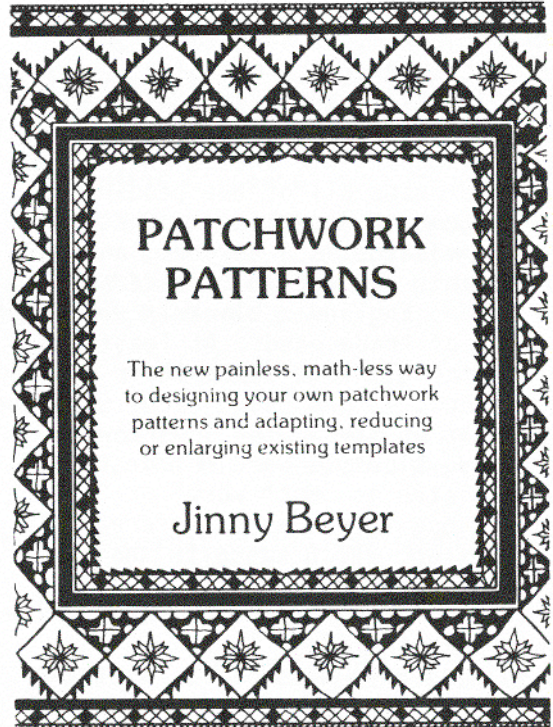
cont. from p. 19

The Providence records provide no dependable
information about American economy quilts. The
five quilts mentioned are expensive, probably
imported, and probably in the English style of
whole cloth quilts. The records do tell us that
blankets were plentiful, relatively inexpen-
sive, and readily available at home. Therefore,
before 1729, quilts were neither a necessity
nor an economy. Other motives must have been
involved in their development.

Sally Garoutte

(1) THE EARLY RECORDS OF THE TOWN OF PRO-
VIDENCE, Vols. 6, 7, 16, the City Council of
Providence, publishers, Providence, 1894.

(2) Evarts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harr-
ington, AMERICAN POPULATION BEFORE THE FEDERAL
CENSUS OF 1790, Peter Smith, Gloucester, 1966,
pp. 61-67.



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