

The Manly Art of Quilting

By Sive Sur

Sive (pronounced She-v-ag) Sur is a quiltmaker who got hooked on quilts after taking a few classes in Los Angeles in 1974. She is currently living in Sacramento where she is editor of the quilt guild's newsletter. She is planning to return to Los Angeles in September.

Quilting is a viable career practiced by men in Turkey today. Compulsory education ends at the fifth grade so boys start their apprenticeship at the age of twelve. The craft is taught in a master-apprentice relationship of medieval traditions even though the artisans may be dressed in blue jeans. (Fig. #1) Traditional designs and techniques are used even though the quiltmakers know what "polyester batting" and patchwork mean.

The quilts are almost always ordered to celebrate an occasion such as a wedding or confinement after the birth of a child. Every bride, no matter how poor tries to get as fancy a bridal quilt as possible; rich brides may order a dozen quilts at once. The quilts are always whole cloth, with an elaborate hand quilted "medallion and borders" design. Fabrics are shiny, silky satins and moirees in bright colors. The backing is usually a broadcloth in a shade lighter than the top.

The quilt is made at the quiltmaker's shop/studio, which consists of a lower entry area for the customers and a much larger area, an elevated clean wooden platform for the stockinged feet of the quiltmaker only.

Once the fabric and design are chosen by the customer, work begins by adding loft to the unprocessed cotton, using an ancient wood and string instrument. Handfuls of cotton are rubbed against the string stretched tautly between two ends of bow-like piece of wood. The quilter sits on the floor supporting the bow on his shoulder and hooks his foot at the other end. (See the padded loops on the instrument in #2) The quiltmaker twangs the string for hours creating a certain rhythm as the matted cotton flies away, light and airy like snow flurries. Piles of billowy cotton cover everything.

The top and backing fabrics are sewn on three sides like a pillowcase and turned inside out to form a bag. The freshly processed lofty cotton is evenly distributed inside the bag and the fourth side is whip-stitched shut. Then the quilting, which is done free-hand can begin.

The designs are recorded on dog-eared photos probably passed on from master to apprentice.

A very long, large needle is used to go through the very lofty cotton filling. American style quilting needles would not be long enough to penetrate the thickness. Working directly from the spool at the center of the quilt, a long length is threaded and worked in one direction, then more is unrolled from the spool, thread broken and threaded to quilt in the opposite direction.

Standard bed sizes have not yet arrived in Turkey so each quilt is more or less custom made.

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Photos by Sive Sur.

On The Book Shelf

THREADS OF HISTORY, Herbert Ridgeway Collins, Smithsonian Press, 1979, Washington D.C. \$60.

If the title suggests that Collins has written a history of fabrics, look again carefully. Not a history of threads, but something quite different: THREADS OF HISTORY is subtitled "Americana recorded on cloth... 1775 to the present". It is a pictorial record of our nation's political, social and cultural history as fabricated on banners, bandanas, quilts, samplers, broadsides and various other textile items.

America's separation from England and subsequent emergence as a separate nation were celebrated in textiles manufactured abroad. Our own textile industry burgeoned forth just at the time of George Washington's death, which was duly recorded on memorial banners. Since that time every presidential and Vice-Presidential candidate has had his likeness recorded on fabrics, usually on campaign banners and kerchieves. Meanwhile, national events, political slogans, instructional stories and games for children, advances in science, technology and art have all become grist for the fabric mill, textile productions depicting 200 years of American life.

Most of the 1500 items illustrated are political in nature, not less interesting for this slant. But quilt-lovers may feel somewhat slighted that only 30 quilts are included, of which a mere 13 found their way into the index. One wishes Mrs. Collins had searched a little harder for graphic, significant quilts that represent women's political commentary throughout our nation's development. Apart from these flaws this huge volume is peculiarly absorbing, so that intended browsing slips easily into attentive study. THREADS OF HISTORY would be an especially suitable addition to a textile reference collection.

W. Reddall

NOTE: Evie Landes is organizing a group of women and men who will study at the Univ. of London under the sponsorship of the American Institute of Foreign Studies during the summer of 1981. The four week course will emphasize color, design and textiles. One of the four weeks will include a course on the History of London complete with guided tours. The fifth week is reserved for foreign travels. For info: write Evie Landes, 25 Road Place, Woodside, CA 94062.

Project Quiltarian

From the PORTLAND OBSERVER May 1, 1980

Mrs. Osly J. Gates has initiated Project Quiltarian, a library reference to assist in providing documentary information about quilts of traditional designs, contemporary designs, original creations hand-made by Afro-Americans (particularly in Portland).

Photographic and biographical materials are needed on existing quilts by Blacks. Contact the Art Department of Central Library to complete a documentation form and other data for the following categories (ownership, construction, authorship):

1) ownership of an existing handmade quilt by an Afro-American

2) construction of a hand-made quilt currently existing by an Afro-American (the maker)

3) authorship of published or unpublished work on Afro-American quilts

The above information will remain on the premises of the library for reference.

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The price is virtually free! In 1978 this quiltmaker would make a quilt for \$40 including fabric or \$25 if the customer supplied the fabric. He was in a very poor neighborhood where many of his customers probably earn less than \$100 a month. Someone downtown would probably charge more... maybe \$50 for the labor alone. The average quilt would take two to four days depending on the intricacy of the design, which would also determine the price.

There is little or no interest in patchwork because these people live in rags. Their quilt is their luxury possession -the only "rich" item they buy. They want silks and moirees or at least rayon and acetate.

Such quilts are totally unwashable because the cotton filling would lump and the cotton seeds would turn yellow in soapy water. They are handbasted to top sheets before use and unbasted to launder the sheet.

Making quilts this way involves a lot of heavy work and very calloused hands. It is considered "man's work and women do not become apprentices or make the quilts. By tradition only the skilled craftsman makes quilts. It is his profession.

A woman quilter would cause more surprize and comments than men quilt artists in the United States presently do.