

AMERICAN QUILTS SHOW: A TAPESTRY OF LIVES

by Victoria Sears

Victoria Sears is a quiltmaker, a quilt teacher and President of the Santa Rosa Quilt Guild. She and her husband live in Sebastopol with two small children.

The Santa Rosa Quilt Guild's field trip to the "American Quilts, A Handmade Legacy", at the Oakland Museum (California) in January, 1981 was a very moving experience for all of us. It felt good to see the quilts reconnected to the personal lives of the quiltmakers, and presented as parts of the cycle of life.

Over 100 quilts hung in settings based on the purposes they served in the lives of the makers. Evoking mementos, from rag dolls to a child's gravestone, are presented with the quilts, as well as photographs of the quiltmakers enlarged to life-like proportions. The thoughts and feelings of the quilters are taken from their diaries and letters and painted on the museum walls. The result is an assemblage that comes to life, connecting the quilts to their creators.

The show begins with baby quilts. From a simple frontier four-patch to the elaborate Victorian stuffed quilts, we see quilts used to wrap precious infants with love, warmth, beauty, and the hope of humanity.

Next, we see quiltmaking serving as a form of education. Besides perfecting the practical skills necessary to create warm bedding, young girls were taught to be frugal, industrious, patient and artistic through their quilting lessons.

In adolescence the quilting parties served as rites of passage. Friends gathered together to socialize and quilt their tops, so patiently stitched by the girls in their younger years. As each girl became engaged, her friends helped her quilt the tops. This provided the necessary bedding for her new household, and a last bit of school chum comradeship.

Later the quilting bees united the women, over and over again, letting them share fabric, friendship, gossip, labor and competition.

Some of the quilts were made as anthologies of family history. Others, like the Baltimore Album Quilts, were made and exchanged within a community and served as important social ties that united people's lives.

The War Quilts were stitched with protective urges by wives, mothers, sweethearts and groups of patriotic women, wishing to do "their part". Men were serving as soldiers. Placing the good of their

country above their own well-being, they faced the horror of battle. These quilts were given to provide psychological comfort, feelings of closeness, warmth and safe passage.

One section of the show presented quilts that were made to convey the makers' spiritual convictions. An Mush Floating Diamond anonymously speaks of patience, simplicity, and "humbleness" as religious values. In another quilt by an unknown maker, the text of the Lord's Prayer is painstakingly reproduced in letters composed of hexagons, showing the maker's Christian devotion and belief in the importance of the words of Jesus.

Finally, the show stretches past the usual taboos and deals with quilting as a comfort when facing death. Many of the quotes from the diaries of the quiltmakers indicate a hope that their quilts will "live after them" and project their essence after they die. An Album Quilt, made by six women in Eli Lily's family, was worked on by each relative as she cared for Eli's needs as he lay sick and dying. A quote by Radka Donnell, one of the women in the film "Quilts in Women's Lives" speaks of making a quilt from the scraps of a dead girl's clothes. She speaks of tying the fragments of the child's life together as she sewed the child's clothes into a quilt. The making of the quilt served as a catharsis for the mother of the child, allowing her to complete her grieving, as well as providing her with a memorial to touch and remember her daughter.

I wish everyone could spend several hours immersed in one of the most moving quilt shows ever put together.

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