



MARY BARTON'S STUDY CENTER

by Kris Kable

Kris Kable is a free lance writer with a passion for quilts. All photos by author

Tucked away down the corridor and around the corner of one of the many quilt conferences of last summer was a veritable wonderland for quilt researchers, quietly and understatedly named "Study Area." The material - printed and fabric - was displayed in TWO rooms at the Heirloom to Heirloom Quilters Conference '83 held in Ames, Iowa in July.

The entire conference focused on three realms of quilting - contemporary, traditional and antique. The study area WAS the antique section in the opinion of many researchers and quilters whose main interest was in textiles and antiques. Several lectures and workshops zeroed in on fabric dating, preservation of textiles in general (quilts in particular) and research techniques, but the Study Area was the highlight of the conference.

At first, because its location was away from the mainstream of events, many overlooked this mecca. Then word got around

and more and more visitors arrived. This is what they found:

The first room was the "paper" room. It contained rows and rows of three ring binders which housed periodicals, patterns, research material and many, many personal notes. A few fabric samples hung on the walls, but the binders beckoned the researchers and it wouldn't have been unreasonable to spend a whole day studying the patterns and books. Many of the periodicals dated in the 20s and 30s, some much earlier. Pattern references, names, alternate names and further research information sources were a few of the bits of information that could be gleaned from the books.

Scrapbooks lined one whole wall, containing newspaper clipping and articles from such familiar sources as Kansas City Star, Godeys' and Peterson's. Countless newspapers and periodicals were represented in the collection. Hundreds of patterns were available for study.

The second room was the "textile" room, putting many current quilt shops to shame in the total amount of textiles displayed.

Several tables had been arranged so that 25-50 antique quilts could be stacked up neatly with assistants close by to turn each quilt as the researcher photographed or took notes. Identical tables stood nearby with "tops " laid out on them. The variety of patterns and ages was magnificent; the condition and quality was remarkable.

Screens were positioned along one side of the room with panels of muslin or sheeting with antique blocks attached. If they were of the same pattern and had been intended for a quilt, they were arranged on the sheet to simulate a quilt. Sometimes the blocks were arranged by color and had a garment made of the same material hanging close by. This section was so full that some of the screens spilled out into the hallway where they served as a tiny preview to what was inside the whole room.

Quilts and panels were hung around the room as exquisite samples of antique art. Tables held "swatch books", bits of textiles - color coded and dated - for researchers to use as comparisons and examples of quilt fabric of years ago. In addition to the swatch books were plastic shoe boxes which displayed more textile samples arranged for easy study and use. Thirty boxes like these held thousands of fabric swatches, each attached to 3 x 5 cards with pertinent information noted.

Work tables were set up in both rooms so that all materials could be studied with plenty of room to spread out and take notes.

Additional textile examples and related material were displayed. These included clothing, political panels and trims, single printed blocks, commemorative scarves, and even some foreign textiles. All the textiles were cotton, most pertained specifically to quilts or were intended for utilitarian purposes. The samples of clothing and related textiles, as well as the swatches themselves, were invaluable in dating quilts.

Nearly everyone who came into the rooms, whether for an hour or all three days, had one complaint. The amount of time the study area was open was too limited to fully utilize the marvelous collection. One textile researcher commented, "This is so mind boggling, you need time to get over your shock before you can settle down to work. I need weeks rather than days to look at everything."

What that researcher (and perhaps many others) did not know is that the whole area is mainly the work of one woman. Most of the quilts and tops, the collection of samples, books, periodicals, blocks, fabric swatches et al belong to Mary Barton of Ames. This shy, quiet woman has collected and catalogued for years, adding blocks, quilts and swatches which she systematically and meticulously studies, dates, and catalogues.

Author's note: The scope of this collection and lack of time for "at conference" study brings up a serious problem which researchers nation-wide need to address. Many private collections are unavailable to the general public. Others might be available if researchers can find out who collectors are and where their materials may be studied. Museums are, at best, a second choice when compared to archives that focus on quilt textiles and related documents. What quilt researchers and historians must do is to share their sources through the JOURNAL, the Quilters' Research Network, or the American Quilt Study Group. Through cooperation historians can find the missing pieces to their own puzzles and help other researchers discover their missing pieces.

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researcher. I think she is researcher's researcher ... not for name or recognition but just for the love of researching goes in and digs to come up with the greatest information.

Shirley Conlon is another one. She has done wonderful work with her quilt bibliography. She told me the last time I talked to her that she had over 600 periodical and book listings now. That doesn't include newspapers or peripheral type of things like films. I certainly hope that her bibliography gets published because it would be such a great reference to quilts.

I foresee that in another ten years quilts will be looked at differently and with the kind of respect and recognition that is due them.