

THE FINE ART OF QUILTING

as told by Lucy Hilty to
Joyce Gross

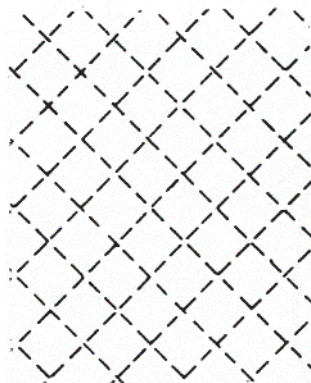
When the so-called quilt revival came along, I began to look at the quilts people were making, wondering "Why don't they look right?" "Why don't they look like the beautiful old quilts?"

I was used to looking at my mother's quilts and in many cases the quilts I was seeing made today were much finer than anything my mother had done ... the patterns on the quilt, the way the pattern was executed, the colors (used), the wonderful piecing were all much finer ... but I couldn't understand why the quilts didn't look right. Slowly I began to realize that the quilting didn't match up with the rest of the quilt.

I began to analyze the difference and discovered that old quilts had a texture which I felt was lacking in the quilts I was seeing. The new quiltmakers believed the manufacturers' claim that polyester batts didn't require as much quilting as the old cotton batts, so they did not quilt background fill-in. What they didn't realize was that it is the background fill-in which makes the background recede, allowing the quilting design to become puffy and stand out in three-dimensional bas-relief. This is called "negative space" and the technique requires quiltmakers to turn their minds around. The background, or negative space, requires more quilting so be further away.

I remember my mother spending a lot of time putting the markings on a quilt before she quilted them. Most of her background fill-in was cross-hatch. She did it almost automatically ...if she didn't have a quilting motif or pattern to quilt around, she just filled in with cross-hatch. Probably 95% of the old quilts have cross-hatch

as the fill-in. A fill-in pattern also stabilizes the layers and really makes the quilt a new textile. Mother always brought the cross hatch right up to the quilting pattern. Lots of present day quilt-makers don't see any need to do that... they think they can do the quilting motif in the



cross-hatch quilting

center, quilt cross-hatch on the borders, and that is enough. They just don't think of bringing the cross-hatch through the middle of the quilt and making it continuous as if it were underlying the whole quilt.

To quilt cross-hatch, one quilts diagonally up and down. One can do 2 or 3 lines at a time, then quilt up 4 or 5 squares and come back down. It is all done on the diagonal and can literally fill in a space in a very efficient manner. One thread going across the (whole) quilt is likely to break under stress whereas with this technique, one is quilting on the bias so the stretch of the fabric will protect the thread.

Many of today's quiltmakers have grown up in this polyester-doesn't-need-much-quilting era and have not had the opportunity to handle or see lots of old quilts. Nor have they helped in the marking of a quilt. This was all part of my childhood and I learned a lot of quilting techniques without really knowing I learned them. My mother's quilts were always well quilted with lots of quilting on them - even the everyday ones - so I knew what beautiful quilts should look and feel like. That all helped when I began to teach.

In the early '70s I did a little teaching, but it wasn't until 1979 (the year after I retired from public school teaching) that I really took it up. There were a lot of very good teachers teaching applique and very accurate patchwork, while quilting was an area that was neglected. Having gotten into it, I guess it has become my speciality.

Until recently it was unusual to find a heavily quilted quilt in a show of newly made quilts. It seems to me that in the current quilt shows and exhibits I am noticing that many quiltmakers today are willing to do the quilting necessary to produce the texture and quilting patterns.

Take the Santa Rosa FESTIVAL OF QUILTS last year. Five years ago, there was considerable talk about how little quilting there was on most of quilts. Last year there were many, many beautifully quilted quilts.

I must say I am pleased to see all the fine quilting ... see how much more beautiful the quilts are because of it and to hear the quiltmakers tell about their pleasure and satisfaction they get from the quilting process.