Uncoverings
1993

Volume 14 of
the Research Papers of
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Laurel Horton

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Art and Quilts: 1950-1970

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Prior to major exhibitions of non-traditional quilts, between 1950 and 1970 certain artists began to adopt and incorporate various quilting techniques in their work, coinciding with a new awareness of the value of women's work and an acceptance of fiber as an art medium. This paper notes the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement and the Bauhaus philosophy and recognizes several fiber artists of the twentieth century. I single out seven significant artists who are pioneers in creating quilts as art pieces and whose teaching, exhibiting, and writing have affected and stimulated a wide audience: Charles and Rubynelle Counts, Jean Ray Laury, Alma Lesch, Joan Lintault, Therese May, and Katherine Westphal. My sources include published literature, letters, lectures by and interviews with the subjects, personal acquaintance, craft organization affiliation, and my own experience as a critic/reviewer of art and craft exhibitions. While it may seem daring and new, the art quilt of the 1990s has a history which is directly related to the artist quilters of the 1950s and 1960s and to even earlier decades.

Quilts: Out of the Mainstream was an invitational exhibition prepared in the fall of 1992 as a component of the Red River Revels in Shreveport, Louisiana. Careful planning far in advance of the event and judicious selection resulted in a spectacular display of non-traditional quilts.[1] Gertrude Embree summarized the experience for the December 1992 Newsletter of the Studio Art Quilt Associates, twenty-one of its members comprising nearly half of the selected artists.[2] The show's coordinator described the diverse audience which came to view the exhibition, people who came because of the universal appeal of quilts. They were unprepared for a display of "modern art."

Nevertheless, they were captivated by the artists' daring innovations in color and design, yet the form remained that of the familiar quilt and was not identified as "art."

In addition to the general public, members of the art community also came and marveled at the quality of artistic accomplishment in a medium largely unfamiliar to them. They looked, they saw, they learned, and they encouraged their students and associates to share their delight. Embree stated the problem of acceptance. "The art world and especially the art critic has been slow to recognize and understand first that quilts can be art, second that the art quilt is not a painting, and finally that it has its own unique aesthetic qualities."[3]

Penny McMorris, a guest lecturer during the exhibition, rated it as the country's most significant showing for 1992. She found a vitality that was too often lacking in other shows. She was impressed with the quality and depth of the work and its spacious installation.[4]

Placing a collection of art quilts in a location that is, in itself, removed from the mainstream of cultural activities may seem daring, even risky. The instigators were aware that their audience might not be ready to accept work that was contrary to the familiar quilts of their ancestors. Yet, they believed in their mission to acquaint a wider audience with the exciting departures in quiltmaking they had come to admire.

Actually the way was being prepared for the quilt exhibiton in Shreveport for quite some time with the showing of other major gatherings of contemporary quilts. There were international, national, and regional competitive and invitational shows such as the ongoing *Quilt National* exhibitions originating in Athens, Ohio, in 1979, and *Quilt San Diego* in 1987, each traveling to several locations. Under the direction of Paul J. Smith, New York's Museum of Contemporary Crafts[5] mounted a number of innovative fiber shows including *Fabric Collage* in 1965, *Stitching* in 1967, *Sewn, Stitched and Stuffed* in 1973, and *The New American Quilt* in 1976. The *New California Quilt* exhibition was shown in 1984. The *Art Quilt* exhibition curated by Michael Kile and Penny McMorris in 1986 was another traveling show, and *Southern Quilts: A New View* toured the South from 1990 to 1992. Publications relating to these events have reached even greater numbers of people who admire quilts.[6]

In 1971, the Whitney Museum presented *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, curated by Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof. The exhibition received unprecedented media coverage and was followed by an extensive touring schedule. A prestigious art museum had displayed quilts as art and has been cited as fostering the current quilt revival. Penny McMorris and Michael Kile point out that "what was unsaid was that only antique pieced quilts had been accorded a measured status in the art world."[7] This paper focuses on events in the twenty years preceding that exhibition.

Before the advent of major exhibitions of non-traditional quilts, in the period between 1950 to 1970, certain artists began to adopt and incorporate various quilting techniques in their work. For the most part they used quilt work not as extensions of family needlework accomplishments, but because of a new awareness of the value of women's work and the acceptance of fiber as an art medium. This had come about through a long and gradual process.

A new regard for fiber arts had occurred in the nineteenth century through the influence of William Morris and his associates in England and the resulting Arts and Crafts Movement.[8] Recognition of the value of the handmade object came about through the work of Morris's followers in this country along with a growing interest in American history and handcrafts that fostered the development of the Colonial Revival. Morris and his associates were practitioners of the total concept of design for interiors and took particular interest in developing finely executed needlework wall hangings to complement their furniture and wallpaper.[9] Members of Morris's own family were willingly or unwillingly enlisted in production of the embroidery. Their work became known and admired.[10]

In every period of quiltmaking there are individuals who push beyond the accepted boundaries and try new approaches. At no time was this more pronounced than during the late nineteenth century when the crazy quilt fad reigned. In addition to breaking away from traditional pieced patterns and the usual applique designs by making crazy-patch blocks, their makers created heavily ornamented surfaces with paint, beads, photo-transfer, ribbon, elaborate embroidery, and other unquilt-like materials, approaches not uncommon in the 1990s.[11]

One of the major causes for the elevation of fiber arts in this century can be attributed to the Bauhaus School of Design, which was founded in Weimar, Germany in 1919, as a reaction to the ornamental influence of Art Nouveau. Its director, Walter Gropius, and its teachers advocated clean, sparse design in keeping with the modern age, stressing the concept of art and form as it relates to function. The school's radical changes in architecture and industrial design, as well as its approaches to painting, had worldwide influence. Within six years, however, due to its unorthodox philosophy, it was forced to close by the Nazis.[12]

Many Bauhaus adherents left Germany to find refuge in the United States. Several members of the group located in Chicago to establish a new school, the Armour Institute of Design. Some received other teaching appointments where their methods and ideas marked successive classes of art students during their tenure and beyond, continuing to this day. Other artists came to the mountains of North Carolina to share in founding Black Mountain College, an institution which existed from 1933 to 1956.

Foremost among the Black Mountain teachers were Josef Albers, later to have a distinguished academic career at Yale University, and his wife, Anni Albers. They propounded the Bauhaus philosophy that the artist had an obligation to society. The artist was to make his contribution by creating good and useful objects for everyday use in accordance with beauty, form, and function as interpreted by Bauhaus standards.[13]

Anni Albers was a gifted weaver whose work was considered an art form in accord with the movement's ideology that all objects for living were to function as art. As a designer/weaver, she and her students created prototypes of fabric intended for commercial manufacture as furnishing fabrics. The handwoven appearance was meant to soften the severe lines of "modern" interiors.

In addition to the Bauhaus influence on style, Swedish handcrafts and furniture were being imported to this country, became known as "Swedish Modern," and added yet another aspect to contemporary design. The introduction of these rugs and fabrics intensified the preference for the handcrafted appearance of machine-made drapery and upholstery material.

Woven hangings were considered appropriate art pieces for this setting long before quilts were displayed on the walls. Among the more prominent weavers of the 1950s, in addition to Anni Albers, were Trude Guermonprez, Sheila Hicks, Lenore Tawney, and Claire Zeisler. An exhibition, *Wall Hangings and Rugs*, at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York in 1957 included weavings by Guermonprez and Tawney, printed fabric by Jack Lenor Larsen, a hooked rug by George Wells, and embroidered fabric by Mariska Karasz. *Craft Horizons* reported that the "fabrics created to enhance architectural space . . . show some of the most exciting trends of this expression today."[14]

The use of paper collage had been enthusiastically explored some forty years earlier by Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Kurt Schwitters, and Juan Gris, among others. John Perreault noted the similarity to quilt technique in the introduction to *The Art Quilt*. "We can, if need be, redefine the quilt as fabric collage. Although collage as a term originally meant 'pasting' it has come to mean 'the piecing or placing together of various pre-existing two-dimensional elements'—which can be done by stitching as well as pasting. Hence, we can view quiltmaking as the origin of collage, since it certainly predates anything done by Picasso or Braque."[15]

The interest in needlework paralleled that of weaving. Other artists of the period found that collage lent itself easily to fabric and, when combined with derivations of embroidery from European traditions, they formed a new type of twentieth-century art which was given the name of stitchery. Art galleries displayed and sold stitchery.

Women's magazines prepared enticing articles generously illustrated with original works of art. Artists gave lectures and workshops, taught in universities, wrote books. Creativity and originality were encouraged as replacement for copy-work from printed patterns. Needleworkers felt a sense of freedom, a liberating of spirit which allowed them to choose their own materials, initiate their own explorations, invent their own designs, and even exhibit and sell their works.

Eve Peri was one of the first to exhibit her work of fabric collage and stitchery. In 1939, in Paris, she began making abstract compositions in fabric and embroidery in forms reflecting the influence of Miro, Picasso, and Braque. She had a calculated sense of space and movement, and intuitive response to fabric.[16] Coming to this country, she showed work at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts and other art galleries and was included in a number of publications.[17]

The American Craft Council initiated regional and national exhibitions to showcase the work of artist craftsmen, and its publication, *Craft Horizons*, covered major exhibitions and regional showings as well as those of smaller, privately owned galleries. Along with potters, furniture makers, metalworkers, and weavers, needleworkers' objects were shown. Dorothy Sturm of Memphis, Tennessee, was one of the first to have her fabric collage at the Parsons Gallery in New York.[18] Marie Kelly, of Pittsburg, sometimes showed work in three dimensions as well as flat-surface applique and embroidery.[19] Martha Mood's applique and stitchery was included in a milestone exhibition called *Inventions with Thread* at the Montclair (New Jersey) Museum in 1961, as was work by David Van Dommelan who dared to combine machine work with his hand stitching.[20]

Nik Krevitsky, Marilyn Pappas, Lillian Elliot, Helen Bitar, Elizabeth Jennerjahn, Kate Auerbach, Jacqueline Enthoven, Doris Hoover, Ragnhild Langlet, and the author were among the many who contributed to the growing interest in threads and fabric as a legitimate form of art. Their work appeared in a number of craft books and magazines. (Later some of them did use the quilt as a vehicle of expression.) Mariska Karasz, however, is recognized as the one, above all others, who most dramatically established fiber and fabric to be acceptably received as fine art.

Mariska Karasz was born in Budapest, Hungary, where she learned traditional needlework and, coming to this country at the age of sixteen, she studied costume design with Ethel Traphagen.[21] For a while she taught clothing construction and embroidery and wrote several books on those subjects. While exploring possibilities for costume ornamentation she realized that embroidery could be an art form in itself. She had already developed great sensitivity in the use

Figure 1. *Triptych*, stitchery by the author, was made of assorted fabric, leather, crochet, nylon yarn, and cotton tape hand appliqued on synthetic upholstery fabric. 48" x 72", 1976. Private collection. Photo courtesy of Bets Ramsey.

of color and texture, assets which she employed in her compositions with fiber.[22]

Mariska Karasz began exhibiting her remarkable work in 1947 and almost immediately was accepted as an artist at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery in New York, staging five shows there between 1949 and 1959. It was an extraordinary accomplishment to have been accepted then as a woman and fiber artist in the highly competitive New York art world.

Karasz's work appeared in numerous magazines and books, especially *Woman's Day* and *House Beautiful*, where she was needlework editor in 1953. Illustrations of her work provided stimulus for an army of needleworkers to abandon readymade patterns and produce their own designs. Her exhibits, her lectures, and her teaching sparked the imagination of many who attribute to her the beginnings of their own successful careers in fiber arts.

By her death in 1960, Karasz had given sixty solo shows and been part of many others. The following year the Museum of Contemporary Crafts presented a posthumous retrospective of the work of Mariska Karasz and ceramist Katherine Choy. Oppi Untracht wrote in a review: "That both of these women left us at the peak of their creative output is indeed loss, but they bequeath a body of work and ideas whose germination will flower in the many with whom they have had contact."[23]

Thus, in the 1940s and 1950s there was an increasing acceptance of weaving and stitchery as recognized forms of art which were finding a place in exhibition and domestic environments. Craft objects from the hands of accomplished craftsmen had become items of integrity and prestige. At this same time, within the various disciplines of art, there was lively exchange of ideas and use of materials, exploration, new technology, in fact, new purposes for the objects themselves. Many boundaries were being crossed. Rose Slivka, editor of *Craft Horizons*, wrote that the American craftsman "has created . . . a prolific and vigorous handcraft culture within the structure of industrial power . . . [and] has broken new ground and challenged past traditions, suggested new meanings and possibilities to old functions of habit and seeing."[24]

This extension of possibilities allowed artists to expand their techniques, try new materials, reorient their views and values, build on, instead of being bound by, tradition. With the inclusion of fiber arts in art galleries, it easily followed that painters began to use textiles in their work. In *The Art Quilt* Penny McMorris and Michael Kile describe the Pop Art culture of the 1960s when artists such as Claes Oldenburg, Christo, George Segal, Roy Lichtenstein, and others added fabric in a wide variety of ways.[25] "Artists began taking seemingly unrelated materials and media and reassembling them to form a new whole. . . . This approach of taking bits and pieces and putting them together to create an entirely new image is identical in spirit to that employed by quiltmakers. It is not surprising, therefore, that artists were more and more influenced by quilts as they experimented."[26]

Even before this period of new directions in art, quilts had already been displayed to the public. While bedspreads were constructed and used in a horizontal plane, they had been exhibited vertically in quilt contests and fairs of the late nineteenth century. Their "artification" became evident during the 1920s when traditional quilts became collectible.[27]

With the acceptance of Pop Art and broadening classification, in 1965 the Newark (New Jersey) Museum mounted an exhibition called *Optical Quilts*. "Old quilts are being looked at in new light at the Newark Museum. Displayed as banners and wall hangings, the handcraft of women working in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has a smashing *au courant* look. It's Op Art from prior centuries, and it really works. . . . They are labeled sparingly to encourage visitors to look at them as examples of abstract art. The effect is one of heraldic brilliance."[28] It was, as Perreault said, placing quilts in a vertical plane which allowed the definition of "art."

The first artists' quilts that I recall seeing were part of a monumental collection of fine contemporary American crafts assembled in 1969 for the S. C. Johnson & Sons Company of Racine, Wisconsin, called the *S. C. Johnson Collection of Contemporary Crafts*, and exhibited as *Objects: USA*. (It was later dispersed to the American Craft Museum and the various other museums that had shown the exhibit.) Anne Ogden, director of the Kentucky Arts Council, cited it as "a major international exhibition documenting the crafts aesthetic and rebirth in the 60's that has changed the face of the American craft movement."[29] On an extended tour that began in Washington, D.C. and traveled the United States and Europe, the exhibition came to the Hunter Museum in Chattanooga, Tennessee in the early 1970s.

Although quilts were not my personal interest at the time, the memory of two of them remains vivid in my mind. One was a large, ninety-six inch by fifty-eight inch, brightly colored quilt of small batik patchwork squares called *A Square is a Many Splendored Thing* by its maker, Katherine Westphal. The other, *Bathsheba's Bedspread* by Alma Lesch, was even larger with heavily textured areas of stitchery and applique.[30] Since then I have become acquainted with the many accomplishments of these two artists and their astonishing production and involvement in art.

Katherine Westphal, after attending schools in her native state of California, began teaching in 1945 at the University of Wyoming, proceeding to the University of Washington the next year. In 1966 she went to the University of California at Davis and remained there until her retirement. She was an exciting teacher and brought international recognition to the school's design department.[31]

Early in her career Westphal was designing fabric for industrial reproduction. Rather than render a design on paper with paint, she preferred to design directly on cloth, using a variety of techniques. When the textile agent who took her work retired in 1958, he returned a box of unsold designs to her. She began cutting up the samples and using them in collage, making ten or twelve wall quilts in as many years, dating from 1959.[32]

Westphal's pioneer exploration with dye-printing, Xerox- and heat-transfer introduced these techniques to many fabric artists. She was, and is, a prolific artist whose works continue to surprise and delight viewers with the products of her fertile imagination. "I was trained as a painter. I see things from that viewpoint. I build up; I destroy. I let the textile grow, never knowing where it is going or when it will be finished. It is cut up, sewn together, embroidered, quilted, embellished with tapestry or fringes, until my intuition and visual senses tell me it is finished and the message is complete."[33]

Comments by Spencer Moseley in a catalog accompanying one of her exhibitions relate to the artistic climate of the time.

> The quilted wall hangings of Katherine Westphal are unique examples of the unexpected possibilities of invention to be found in traditional techniques. . . . For this artist, the materials and elements of design provide the environment, the demand, that shapes the form. Katherine Westphal is keenly sensitive to the characteristics of her medium. To her they are resources, not limitations. Her work is the result of a continuous, impressive and exhilarating dialog between ideas and materials. . . . Several textile techniques are combined in these works—applique, stitchery, batik, tapestry, and quilting. The forms are built up, section by section, from disparate elements . . . to make a new order.[34]

Figure 2. Katherine Westphal's quilted wall hanging, *A Square Is A Many Spendored Thing*, was selected for the *Objects USA* exhibition in 1969. After an extensive tour, it became part of a corporate collection in Spain. Batik cotton patchwork, hand quilted, 96" x 58", 1967. Photo courtesy of Katherine Westphal.

Westphal expressed her personal commitment during an American Craft Council panel discussion in 1966: "We experiment, and we try different techniques, processes and the rest, but the whole thing is the doing. One reason I gave up silk-screen was because of its repetitive nature. My work with batik and quilting—it's like painting, you know—it grows as you go—and this is the important thing."[35]

Katherine Westphal and her husband, Ed Rossbach, a distinguished weaver, teacher, and scholar, have influenced hundreds of students and textile admirers, particularly on the West Coast, through academic associations and an impressive schedule of exhibitions here and abroad. Katherine's spontaneity serves as a model for those who wish to leave boundaries behind and explore new areas. She will not limit the exploration to right or wrong, only that it is done with the best of one's imagination and ability.

Alma Lesch, the maker of *Bathsheba's Bedspread*, likewise has an exemplary teaching and exhibition record. Both she and Westphal display sly wit and unexpected turns in much of their work. They have been dedicated and inspiring teachers but Alma Lesch's quiet demeanor and thoughtful deliberation contrasts with Westphal's ebullient personality.

Alma Lesch was born in McCracken County, Kentucky, and was educated in that state where she taught for twenty-five years. At first she worked with vegetable dyes and her book, *Vegetable Dyeing*, published in 1970, became a standard text.[36] She is best known for her fabric collage and stitchery pieces incorporating unexpected found objects. A favorite of many viewers is *Uncle Bob*, a fabric "portrait" consisting of blue denim jacket, eyeglasses, and framed wallet, heavily embroidered in some areas.[37] She has an uncanny ability to place such found objects, lace, and embroidery with cast-off clothing to become provocative works of art. "She continues to surprise and engage us," says Anne Ogden, "with common images uncommonly presented and expertly crafted. Her work reminds us of our past, as such parts of her life as her high school graduation dress becomes the central image in a wall hanging. But each piece keeps on giving and challenges us to examine our values and assumptions—when she transforms a work shirt, for example, into a work of art".[38]

Mrs. Lesch is particularly fond of blue denim, as noted above, especially if it appears to be indigo-dyed. She once told me that on an occasion when a local farmer was delivering blackberries to her door, she bargained with him for the overalls he was wearing.

While the assemblage pieces became her trademark, quiltmaking is included in her repertoire. She remembers making Nine Patch blocks at the age of five and later having heated discussion with her mother and grandmother on the proper way to set them. She was advised to use sashing but followed her own preference for joining them block to block. The resulting quilt hints of the whimsy that became such an important ingredient in later work.[39]

Bathsheba's Bedspread, with its heavily stitched surface, was a departure from the simplicity of the first quilt. Before its inclusion in the Johnson Collection, a reviewer noted that it received the second merit award in the First Regional Craft Biennial at the J. B. Speed Museum in Louisville. "The dominant piece is Alma Lesch's opulent *Bathsheba's Bedspread*, a rich fabric collage overlaid with embroidery passages, uninhibited in color, texture, and pattern."[40]

While *Bathsheba's Bedspread* may be Lesch's most spectacular bedcover, she was partial to a scrap quilt, albeit, an unusual gathering of scraps. She had been given a bag of scraps from Jack Lenor Larsen's extraordinary series of surface-design fabrics. She proceeded to assemble them in their existing irregular shapes to form a dramatic quilt. Again, it was the unexpected composition which caught the eye.[41]

A tribute to Alma Lesch's teaching career highlighted the many lives she had touched when work by thirty-five of her former students was shown at the Louisville Art Gallery in 1985. I asked Jane Burch Cochran, whose work is currently shown in major exhibitions, if she had studied with Alma Lesch. "No," she replied, "but when I finished *The Last Dance* piece I realized that her work, first seen in *Objects: USA*, had been in the back of my mind."[42] While Jane's work has a certain similarity, the pieces in the exhibition seldom reflected Lesch's imagery. She had taught her students well, then set them free.[43]

Concurrent with the exhibition of work by former students was a retrospective of Lesch's work curated by Jacque Parsley and shown

Figure 3. Alma Lesch shows the author her first quilt, pieced when she was five years old and quilted later, at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, 1973. Photo by T. Fred Miller.

at the Liberty National Bank. Lisa Gordon wrote in the catalog: "The work of Alma Lesch is unique in the world of contemporary fiber. Her impact upon the development of 'fiber art' has been no less than profound. As an innovator both in technique and in approach to subject matter, her work has influenced a new generation of fiber artists . . . and contributed to the acceptance of traditionally female processes as a viable medium for expression in contemporary art."[44]

It was most appropriate that a piece by Alma Lesch was included in the Kentucky Art and Craft Gallery during "Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt" festivities in 1992. In *Quilt Conceptions: Designs in Other Media* she showed a delightful work which featured fancy dancing slippers draped over a quilt-covered tombstone and entitled *A Quilter's Epitaph*. Her wit and imagination continue to play a part in her work.

It is probable that Jean Ray Laury is the fabric artist who has had the greatest influence on needleworkers of the last twenty-five years through her work, teaching, and publications—prior to television quilt shows, that is. In the 1960s I had seen magazine illustrations of Laury's stitchery and then was even more impresssed by the freshness and meticulous workmanship in a solo exhibition at the Crocker Art Gallery in Sacramento in 1963, but our paths did not cross until many years later.

Jean was born and grew up in Iowa, graduated from high school in Tennessee, and returned to Iowa for a degree in Art and Education. After several years teaching art, she moved to California, married, and had a son. It was then, when she was in her mid-twenties, that she made her first small quilt as a gift for a friend's baby. In the 1950s, while enrolled at Stanford University for a master's degree in design, she made an applique quilt for her son, Tom. It was filled with images familiar to children but Jean interpreted them in simplified contemporary style. The quilt was included in a student exhibition at the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco, and this piece led to a solo exhibition there several years later and her inclusion in other regional shows in the late 1950s.[45]

These successes gave her the courage to enter a quilt in the 1958 Eastern States Exposition at Storrowton in Springfield, Massachusetts where Roxa Wright, needlework editor for *House Beautiful*, was to be the judge. So intrigued was Mrs. Wright with the bold, modern aspect of the work that she went to California, interviewed Jean, and persuaded her to write an article about her work. It was published in the January 1960 issue of *House Beautiful*. When Roxa Wright went to *Woman's Day*, she invited Jean to design for that magazine.[46] Jean's designs were included in *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Family Circle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Needle and Craft*, and many other publications.

Jean Ray Laury says Roxa Wright was the one who made a difference in her life. Her encouragement gave an inexperienced author the incentive to write about her work and the repeated opportunities increased her self-assurance. Laury was impressed with Roxa Wright as a woman who had the ability to be a professional writer, raise her children alone, and maintain an abiding interest in textile history. She demonstrated that one could have a career in the field of fabrics.[47]

With the success and appeal of her magazine articles, Laury became a popular teacher and lecturer. From her own experience she learned that fiber arts lend themselves to the schedules of busy mothers and furnish a chance for creativity and self-esteem. She has empathy for women, especially those with young families, and a rare understanding of children, attributes that are reflected in many of her fiberworks.

An exhibition of Laury's work was arranged by the American Crayon Company in Los Angeles for showing to teachers, and it found its way, in 1962, to the New York office of the company for display in its art gallery. Alice Adams reviewed the event for *Craft Horizons*: "Among the larger works, an infinitely complex quilt-like hanging divides into a checkerboard and in each square a flower or bug or some species of bonbon, fruit, or ice cream cone has been pictured along with perhaps unknowingly Dadaistic images of toothbrush and a tube of tooth paste and an electric cord and plug. Here the incongruous and the unexpected heighten the meaning and perception of both."[48]

The result was an invitation to do an exhibit for the influential Museum of Contemporary Crafts, an opportunity granted to only a select few craftsmen. Laury was following the other innovative fiber artists who had shown there before, including Mariska Karasz. Jean told me she was familiar then with the work of Karasz and fascinated by her inventive use of embroidery and fiber.[49]

With encouragement from Roxa Wright, Laury hesitantly began work on her first book, *Applique Stitchery*, which Van Nostrand Reinhold Company published in 1966. It was well timed, appearing with several other books on stitchery, and covered techniques and ideas not included elsewhere.[50]

Four years later, in 1970, *Quilts and Coverlets: A Contemporary Approach* appeared. It was the first major book on contemporary quiltmaking.[51] Roxa Wright wrote in the foreword:

> In over twenty years as a needlework editor, I have seen countless quilts and helped judge many quilt exhibitions. It was at such an exhibition, about a decade ago, that I saw Jean Laury's first quilt—a delight-

Figure 4. Jean Ray Laury. Photo courtesy of Jean Ray Laury.

> ful, completely unorthodox quilt depicting all the things that interested and excited her children, at that time very young. It was like a fresh breeze, the first contemporary quilt I had seen that really came off successfully; yet it was far simpler and more direct in stitchery than the many fine traditional quilts in the exhibition. . . . We still have need to preserve our individuality by making things that delight the eye and convey the spirit of our times. I have always believed that use lends grace to anything we make; what better example is there than in a quilt or coverlet?[52]

The book came at a propitious period when interest in quilts was growing and, perhaps, that in stitchery waning. Other artists were showing quilts and including quilt techniques in the making of art objects. Jean introduced some of the more adventurous, innovative ones, including Charles and Rubynelle Counts, Joan Lintault, and Therese May, and showed examples of their work.

Doris Hoover had enjoyed Jean's friendship for many years, and I asked Doris when she had made her first quilt, expecting Jean to have had an influence. She replied, "My first 'quilt' was made about 1952 or 3 when we first moved here [to California]. I had gotten a

Forstmann woolens sample book and hand sewn all those bits into squares and made a pieced woolen lap robe. . . . Hardly an art piece. . . . I went to a quilt show, fully expecting to see new directions, only to find the usual pastel, sweet, traditional quilts. A few years later Jean Ray Laury filled the gap." And Doris's own quilt career took off.[53]

Through the years Jean has consistently maintained an incredible schedule of teaching, lecturing, publishing, and exhibiting, all balanced with family life and the nurturing of friendships. Many will say, however, that had she written only one book, *The Creative Woman's Getting-It-All-Together At Home Handbook*, she would be long remembered.[54] It has changed the lives of many women. Others, former students, have written that particular classes were turning points in their lives. Jean, in her modest way, says that they came at a time when they were ready to hear and understand what it was she was saying.[55]

Another fabric artist, Joan Lintault, attributes the beginning of her interest in quilts to an auction she attended in upstate New York. When Joan's cousin outbid her for a quilt, Joan consoled herself by saying she could make one of her own. She was familiar with piecing because, in her search for the right colors to go in wall hangings, she often resorted to piecing fabrics together. After earning a degree in Art Education in New York State, Joan went to Hawaii and there, in 1965, she started her first real quilt. Returning to California, she began collecting quilts with a passion. She made a habit of haunting a Salvation Army store early in the morning as the trucks were being unloaded to get first chance at any quilts.[56]

The following year she made *La Chola en La Colcha (The Woman on the Quilt)*, a quilt which combines small geometric and large open areas of pieced work as a background for a female figure of patchwork seemingly at rest on the bed. It was a break-through in quiltmaking. In *Quilts and Coverlets*, Jean Ray Laury calls it "one of the most unique quilts. . . . The background moves easily from the nostalgia of a precise, tight, traditional block repeat to the loose, less structural, contemporary pattern. Then, rising amidst all the blocks is the raised, padded figure of a girl. The quilt is thus 'occupied' even when not in use."[57]

When Joan Lintault went to Southern Illinois University for a master's degree, weaving classes were the sole offering in fiber. That not being her preference, she chose other art courses and concentrated in ceramics. Without having books on quilting techniques, other than Ruby McKim's *101 Patchwork Patterns*,[58] a gift from her father, she explored on her own. It allowed her to invent and construct without being fettered by the standard procedures for quiltmaking.

While living in Hawaii, Lintault saw the quilts made by Hawaiian women, took a class, and learned to applique. She says all the techniques she learned early on still serve her well, liberally augmented by techniques in dyeing and surface design. She is meticulous in her workmanship, continuing with her own time-consuming methods rather than embracing strip-piecing, cutting up and reassembling, painting on surfaces, and the like, or even having others assist in her work. When she was forced to curtail quiltmaking for several years due to a physical condition, she came back to it with renewed energy.

This is how Joan explained her working process. When she has an idea for a piece, first she plans how she will be able to carry it out, what colors she will need, what fabric will work. The initial stage to prepare fabric by dyeing and printing can be quite lengthy. Images on the fabrics, then, reflect the idea from which the composition will come. Only after that preparation is she concerned with the cutting of shapes and construction. Although her pieces may have personal significance, she does not intend them as message carriers.

In her teaching at Southern Illinois University, Lintault wants to train students in the details of using fabric and listening to history. She encourages departures from strict quilt forms and emphasizes that, while craftsmanship is important, the visual content is foremost. A dynamic lecturer and a strongly committed artist, Joan Lintault's long envolvement with fabric allows her readily to transmit that regard to her students.

Averil Colby's *Patchwork* was the second book Lintault acquired.[59] The text on quilting was instrumental in leading her to sculptural forms in her work. She still keeps old quilt books for reference and a

Figure 5. *The Sojourner Truth Quilt* by Jean Ray Laury. Alphabet stamps were used on paper, then letters and portrait were photo-screen printed on fabric. Pieced, cotton, hand quilted. 46" x 40." Photo courtesy of Jean Ray Laury.

set of old newspaper columns to serve as reminders of negative space and color. Unlike Westphal who feels inhibited by them, Lintault likes to explore with modular forms, leaf-shapes being a current favorite. An example is the intricate piece, *Gaia*, selected for the *Vi-*

Figure 6. A recent quilt by Joan Lintault, *Sashes*, is made of stencil printed cotton using rice paste resist, dye painted, appliqued, and quilted. 105" x 88", 1990. Photo courtesy of Joan Lintault.

sions 1992 exhibition. From a day at an auction, a career was forged, aided by Ruby McKim and Averil Colby.[60]

Charles and Rubynelle Counts embody the craftsmen of the 1950s and 1960s who studied art in college, perhaps got advanced degrees in a particular craft, and set up their own studios to lead a simple, creative life. At Berea College, in Kentucky, among their academic studies Charles and Rubynelle learned weaving, drawing, painting, ceramics, and how to write about them. Art was important; Art was Life. Becoming a craft artist offered a way of self-expression, a way to seek Beauty, Community, Family, Continuity, and Excellence.[61]

Following the Berea experience, Charles and Rubynelle went to California where they were further shaped by the Bauhaus discipline of the distinguished German potter, Marguerite Wildenhain. Later the couple bought property on Lookout Mountain in north Georgia and there established the Rising Fawn Crafts. Charles soon gained a reputation as an outstanding potter whose work appeared regularly in exhibition. Rubynelle wove rugs and textiles with a sure sense of color and design, sharing in exhibitions.

Grace Gray, a local woman who assisted with young Craig and Clair Counts, was a quiltmaker and, since the Countses had interest in all crafts, she introduced them to her quiltmaking friends. Their excellent quilting techniques prompted the two artists to design and make a few tops for these women to quilt.[62]

Following the concept that design was the central force in art and could be applied to any part of life, the Countses had no difficulty transferring their drawing skills from clay to fabric. With proper training a craftsman was expected to take whatever materials were available and utilize them in his or her work, so with the availabilty of locally manufactured cotton cloth and expert quilters, it seemed natural to begin to make quilts. Thus, with Charles and Rubynelle designing, an assistant helping with the sewing, and the local women quilting, the Rising Fawn Quilt operation began.[63]

Rubynelle recalls that the first collaboration in 1966 was a beige and white linen and cotton quilt that came to be named *Winter Industry* by their son, Craig. It was a simple design in rectangles and squares and a few circles—pieced, appliqued, cut back, stitched in lines and quilted in a close network of shifting parallel rows. The edge had small, irregular jogs which kept the eye on the move. Nothing like it had been seen before.

Another quilt made the same year was a floral sprig in orange, peach, and pale yellow in a field of white and called *Summertime*. Both quilts were selected for an American Craft Council exhibition, *Craftsmen: Southeast* 66, shown at the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, and *Winter Industry* went on to the national showing, *Craftsmen: USA* 66.[64] The exhibition catalog credits the quilt to Rubynelle (Men were not expected to make quilts!), although they both reiterate that it was a collaborative effort.[65]

The quilts combined well with the pottery in exhibitions of Rising Fawn Crafts.[66] Owners of contemporary houses and collectors who frequented art galleries came, admired, and often commissioned quilts to be made for particular settings.[67] The variety of design was endless and might involve applique, dyeing, or even bleaching of fabric, but was always combined with a complex and elegant quilting pattern which set the Rising Fawn Quilts apart.

I once asked Mrs. Gray how Charles marked a quilt. "Why, after we put it in the frame, he comes and draws on it with a pencil, light-like so as not to show up after we quilt it. He does as far as he can reach. When that is finished being quilted, we roll it and he comes back and does the rest. At first some of the others didn't like to work on something they weren't used to, but now we do all right." Mrs. Gray was especially proud that Sally Garoutte, who later became the founder of the American Quilt Study Group, came all the way from California to visit the Rising Fawn Quilters and join them for a day of quilting.[68]

The quilt production continued through the 1970s but Rubynelle devoted more time to developing a local weaving industry, later teaching in a county high school, later still teaching in Atlanta, Georgia. During several different periods Charles has taught ceramics in Nigeria where he presently coodinates plans for a ceramics department at the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria, West Africa. Always the total craftsman and collector—though less idealistic now, he says—he returns to the States at intervals with African textiles, pots, metalwork, and baskets to share with other collectors.

As did other burgeoning quiltmakers of the period, Therese May

Figure 7. Mittie Moore and Grace Gray work on a quilting design drawn by Charles Counts.Batik-bleached cotton, hand appliqued, hand quilted, 1973. Photo by T. Fred Miller.

Figure 8. Therese May projected a photograph of a child to use as the basis of an applique design to combine with several traditional quilt patterns for *Bridget*. Machine applique and piecing, tied with yarn, 90" x 69", 1968. Photo by Pat Kirk.

started as a painter when she was at the University of Wisconsin. Married and with a baby, painting became difficult for her to do, but she found sewing to be more manageable. Through her husband's grandmother, a quiltmaker, she was introduced to quilts. At first, from 1965 to 1968, she pieced bed and baby quilts with squares and triangles. Then, projecting slides on paper, drawing the image on the paper and reinterpreting it with fabric, she developed a method that gave a photographic quality to her work.[69]

In 1969, at the recommendation of a fellow craftsman, for the first time she entered a quilt, *Animals, Quilts, and Blunt Instruments*, in a competitive show in Walnut Creek, California. It received a hundred-dollar award! Because of her family she had put aside the idea of having a career in art and had never thought of her quilts as art works. The prize caused an awakening. She realized that it was possible to have an art career with needle, fabric, and thread, not canvas and paint.

Using the projected slide technique, she translated her own face into a photographic image to become many faces, each done with different fabric and treatment. The faces became a quilt called *The Therese Quilt* which Jean Ray Laury saw at an exhibition and included in *Quilts and Coverlets*, along with *The Bridget Quilt*, the repeated images of a child. The latter is combined with units of geometric pieced work as well as jigsaw faces. The technique is described in the artist's own delightful way in the book.[70]

Therese recalls the idea that initiated the self-portraits.[71] She felt that "it is a reflection of human nature. Everyone has certain qualities, but we have them in different proportions. We are the same person and yet we are never the same. With each passing hour we are slightly different." Therese May's quilts contain images and symbols that sometimes puzzle the viewers. "Don't look for a literal message," she says. "That language and imagery is just me." She is an active quilter who has found that talent and knowledge of art could, indeed, be expressed in a new way.

By 1969 Anne Raymo was showing her extraordinary quilts at the Terry Dintenfass Gallery in New York. Using unorthodox material—shiny satin applied with machine satin-stitch—she became known for the provocative, sometimes mysterious symbolism that

Figure 9. Therese May projected a photograph of herself for an applique pattern, *Therese*, which she varied eighty times in jig-saw fashion. Machine applique and piecing, tied, 81" x 70", 1969. Photo by Pat Kirk.

was part of her designs. She continued to show her work and execute commissions as other artists were exploring quiltmaking in the early 1970s. One of them was Lenore Davis who began making lively stuffed figures, quilted pillows, and wall hangings of cotton velveteen, using dyes, hand stamping, painting, stuffing, and machine quilting. Her *Garden of Eden* pillow of dye-painted velveteen, with padding and stuffing, was included in the first World Crafts Exhibition in Toronto in 1974.[72]

By the early 1970s Miriam Schapiro was already established as a painter working in the abstract expressionist and minimalist styles. She had shown her work at the impressive Andre Emmerich Gallery in New York since 1957. Through a study of women artists of the past who seldom had hope of recognition in the art world, she made a connection with women's handwork and began incorporating decorative portions of it into her paintings. Thus, by adding fabric and pieces of lace and even quilt blocks to her paintings and calling them "femmage," she brought high art to the feminist movement. In 1977 Schapiro's work exhibited in *Ten Approaches to Decorative Art* at the Allesandra Gallery in New York established her as a leader in what became known as the Pattern and Decoration Movement.[73]

Following World War II, these artists presented here and their contemporaries were breaking long-established precedents. Paul J. Smith found it so when he became Director of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in 1963. "There was much experimental work happening in all the craft media then," he said. "I felt it was important to report on new directions which resulted in the exhibitions [mentioned earlier]. The vitality of quiltmaking today has roots in the broader areas of fiber explorations in the fifties and sixties. Refinement and focus have developed more recently."[74] "Without experimentation and change," say McMorris and Kile, "without creative pioneers who are willing to test the limits of any art form, that form will surely die of its own tedium."[75]

As the two decades closed, Robert Hilton Simmons summarized the existing conditions for craftsmen. "Nearly everything that has happened in fine arts—pop, op, abstract expressionism, hard edge, funk, porno—is happening in crafts today. The borderline between arts and crafts is, in fact, as precarious as that between madness and genius. The diversity explosion is, it is said, as characteristic of the mediums, techniques, and purposes of the crafts as it is of twentieth century life in general as the now generation lives it."[76]

The artist quilters who exhibit today at the Red River Revels and San Diego and Athens and Paducah and all the other sites have followed a small group of daring adventurers of thirty or so years ago. They were making art because they had to. They took risks; they had no maps to guide them, yet they found fulfillment, even recognition, with quilts that went beyond the edge of tradition.

Acknowledgments

The American Quilt Study Group wishes to thank the Tennessee Valley Quilters' Association for their generous donation toward the publication of Bets Ramsey's paper.

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