

Uncoverings 2003

Volume 24 of
the Research Papers of
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Virginia Gunn



Quilt Symposium '77: "Fine Art–Folk Art" at Lincoln, Nebraska

Carolyn Ducey & Mary Ellen Ducey

This study examined the quilt symposium held in Lincoln, Nebraska, in July 1977, coordinated by the Lincoln Quilters Guild. Organizers of the symposium and individuals who attended shared their experiences through oral history interviews and primary documents. The interviews and textual information revealed how the symposium was part of the burgeoning first steps of the quilt revival of the 1970s and helped to propel quilting into full maturity in America. Quilt Symposim '77 "Fine Art–Folk Art" presented both a historical overview of traditional quilting and a tantalizing glimpse of the future of modern quilting to an international audience, while providing a model that inspired other organizations to follow.

In 1976, a resolute group of quilters in Lincoln, Nebraska, sat down with a dictionary, trying to define an idea whose inception sprang from conversations held around various dining-room tables. Members of the Lincoln Quilters Guild (LQG), charged with the responsibility to arrange a special event, settled on a "symposium," defined by Webster as "a social gathering at which there is a free interchange of ideas" or a "conference at which a particular subject is discussed and opinions gathered."¹ The LQG members set forth on a journey that led them from a simple desire to introduce quilting to local individuals to an internationally attended and celebrated symposium that provided a forum to analyze and discuss traditional quilting and innovative art quilting in a weekend event titled Quilt Symposium '77 "Fine Art–Folk Art."

More than six hundred people attended Quilt Symposium '77 held on the Nebraska Wesleyan University campus July 21–23, 1977, in Lincoln,



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Nebraska (see figure 1). Pivotal quilt artists and quilt teachers who forged paths in the contemporary quilt revival presented lectures and workshops, including Michael James, Jean Ray Laury, and Marcia Spark. Jean Dubois, Phyllis Hader, and Helen Squire discussed traditional quilts and quilting methods. A wide variety of related events—exhibitions, a quilt block contest, a fashion show featuring quilted garments, show and tell, and vendor sales—were all a part of one of the most influential weekends in American quilt history.

The Context of Quilt Symposium '77

A combination of events in the United States during the 1960s and early 1970s sparked a revival of interest in quilts and quilting in mainstream culture and inspired LQG members to organize and arrange the “Fine Art–Folk Art” symposium in Nebraska in July, 1977. Much of the success of the conference lay in the LQG’s ability to recognize and react to the new trends in needlework and quilting.

In the 1970s nostalgic interest in the past and a strong feeling of patriotism inspired by the American Bicentennial celebration spurred the growth of interest in hand-made items and in the desire to collect American antiques. Professionals representing museums and individuals following their passionate interest began to collect American artifacts, including quilts, in large numbers. The emergence of feminism and equal rights for women in the 1960s and 1970s also influenced the increased interest in quilting. Feminists promoted the value and appreciation of traditional women’s arts and defended the opinion that women’s work should be viewed as a legitimate art form. In an effort to promote and validate women’s art, textile artists like Miriam Schapiro began to incorporate traditional craft techniques in their artworks. Schapiro’s work “reestablish(ed) her connections with this older and—from a feminist point of view—more authentic tradition with which she, as an artist, identifies. When she incorporates craft into a high art context . . . she reveals them, perhaps fully for the first time—as objects of aesthetic value and expressive significance.”²

Feminist author Patricia Mainardi emphasized the importance of look-



Figure 1. Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln, Nebraska, welcomes attendees to Quilt Symposium '77 Fine Art–Folk Art.

ing at women's art in a new way when, in 1973, she wrote an essay titled "Quilts, the Great American Art." She theorized that:

Quilts have been underrated for the same reason that jazz, the great American music, was also for so long underrated—because the "wrong" people were making it, and because these people, for sexist and racist reasons, have not been allowed to represent or define American culture. Feminists must force a new consciousness in art, for one of the revolutionary aims of the women's cultural movement is to rewrite art history in order to acknowledge the fact that art has been made by all races and classes of women, and that art in fact is a human impulse and not the attribute of a particular sex, race, or class.³

Public displays and exhibitions of quilts also played a crucial role in raising appreciation and awareness of American quilting. In 1971, Jona-



than Holstein and Gail van der Hoof of New York curated an exhibition of quilts at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York titled, "Abstract Design in American Quilts." The exhibition elevated the status of quilts to the same level as "high" art by presenting them mounted on the museum's walls and by comparing the quilts' graphic and painterly qualities to those found in modern abstract art. In the exhibit catalog, Holstein explained the threefold goal of the exhibition: "The first was to establish new aesthetic criteria for quilt connoisseurship; the second was to exhibit the breadth and quality of traditional quilt design and the third was to bring this work to the attention of the art establishment and a sophisticated art public."⁴ Though not the first exhibition of quilts in a museum setting, the Whitney Museum exhibition "carried enormous weight (because it) was a fully sanctioned showcase for American Art."⁵ Selected quilts also traveled extensively in Europe and in numerous venues across the United States.

New York Times critic Hilton Kramer agreed with Holstein and van der Hoof's hypothesis. He wrote, "For a century or more preceding the self-conscious invention of pictorial abstraction in European painting, the anonymous quiltmakers of the American provinces created a remarkable succession of visual masterpieces that anticipated many of the forms that were later prized for their originality and courage."⁶

Quilt historian and author Robert Shaw credited the Whitney exhibition with "set(ting) off an explosion of interest in collecting historic quilts . . . It proved seminal for four reasons: it asked that the quilts on exhibit be judged solely as works of visual art; it was presented by a major metropolitan museum of American art; the timing was right; and perhaps most important, it traveled extensively and was seen by thousands and thousands of viewers across the country."⁷

Other early exhibitions drew attention to quilts and quiltmaking, particularly those highlighting the work of artists exploring new aesthetic choices. Beginning in 1972, Joyce Gross developed annual exhibitions in California that showcased non-traditional quilts.⁸ In November 1975, an exhibition titled "Quilts '76," at the Boston Center for the Arts in Massachusetts, featured both traditional quilters and young, innovative artists "representing a wide range of traditional and contemporary styles, techniques, approaches and abilities."⁹ Reviews touted the work of the inven-



tive artists: "Quiltmaking is not simply design in fabric, but a new art form . . ."¹⁰ The Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York (now the American Craft Museum) exhibited *The New American Quilt*, "the first major museum exhibition of non-traditional quilts" in 1976.¹¹ The museum "focused on innovation and new directions" and featured artists Lenore Davis, Radka Donnell, Joan Lintault, and Katherine Westphal among many others.¹² The exhibit introduced large numbers of viewers to modern approaches in American quilting.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries quilts had been exhibited at expositions and state and county fairs. This mode of display continued to contribute to popularity of quilting in the 1960s and 1970s. Kari Ronning, in her essay titled "Contemporary Quilt Revival, 1970–1990," stated: "Fairs were among the few places where women could display their quilts to an audience beyond friends and family, where they could see the work of other quilters and be judged by their peers. The fairs helped to set standards of design and workmanship as well as reflecting and transmitting fashions in quiltmaking."¹³

Increased numbers of quilts featured in magazines and the publication of numerous books that explored quilts and quiltmaking techniques also led to quilts' increased popularity. Jean Ray Laury, a leader in quilting and textile arts, published articles and patterns in the magazine *Woman's Day* throughout the 1960s. Her designs were also printed in a number of other publications, including *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Family Circle*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Needle and Craft*. Laury's work had an immediate and lasting impact, inspiring women to explore creativity in quilting. Researcher Bets Ramsey identified Laury as "the fabric artist that has had the greatest influence on needle workers of the last 25 years through her work, teaching and publications."¹⁴ In 1970, Laury published *Quilts and Coverlets: a Contemporary Approach*, suggesting, "If we can retain the structural integrity of the traditional quilt and add to it a contemporary approach in color and design, we will achieve a quilt which merges past and present."¹⁵

Beth Gutcheon published *The Perfect Patchwork Primer* in 1973. She explained her contemporary approach to quiltmaking:

Modern quiltmakers derive inspiration and information from the experience of their forebears, and yet, because Dacron is not cotton, because



silicone is not wax, because Nixon isn't Queen Victoria, and the 1970s are not the 1840s, it is inevitable that they are also adapting the old ways to their own tastes and needs. Truly, the current patchwork boom is . . . a new and vigorous phase of a perennial American tradition.¹⁶

Gutcheon suggested quilting for numerous projects—quilted gifts, clothing, and household items.

The revival of interest in traditional quilting, exhibitions presenting quilts as art, new publications, and works by new artists all contributed to a fresh, modern approach to quilting and to a spate of symposia and conferences simultaneously springing to life around the country. The first of its kind was an event sponsored by the City Federation of Women's Organization's Inc. and the Tompkins County Quilters Guild called the 1976 Finger Lakes Quilt Exhibit in Ithaca, New York, August 21–27th, 1976. It was advertised in the July 1976 issue of *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine* as “not an ordinary quilt show.” The event included “over 600 quilts, a continuous slide show, a quilting bee, demonstrations of quilting, and children's and adult workshops and lecture series led by nationally known quilting experts . . . Jean Ray Laury, Celine Mahler, Beth Gutcheon and Patsy and Myron Orlofsky.”¹⁷

Nebraska symposium coordinators were not aware of the event held in Ithaca, New York, in 1976, yet they followed a similar format of lectures, exhibitions, and demonstrations. This same format also appeared at three other national events that followed in 1978. In Arlington, Virginia, the First Continental Quilting Congress began on July 13, 1978 and continued for 3 days, with lectures, workshops, and exhibitions. Virginia Avery, Michael James, and Jean Ray Laury taught classes. In July 1978, the Kaw Valley Quilters Guild and the Division of Continuing Education at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, presented the Kansas Quilt Symposium. This symposium hosted speakers and presentations focusing on the significance of historical quilts and contemporary quilts and held exhibits of local quilts and quilt patterns. Mary Ghormley delivered a lecture presenting two exceptional Nebraska quilters, Grace Snyder and Ernest Haight, to the Kansas symposium audience. The West Coast Quilter's Conference took place in Portland, Oregon, during the summer of 1978.¹⁸

The symposium movement continued to develop. In California, the



American Quilt Study Group, an international organization that “establishes, sustains, and promotes the highest standards for quilt-related studies” was founded in 1980, inspired by founder Sally Garoutte’s interest in quilts and quilt history and informed by previous national symposia and conferences.¹⁹

Organizing Quilt Symposium '77

The Lincoln Quilters Guild reflected the nationwide trends. After its founding in 1973 the guild immediately planned exciting and innovative activities, beginning with an exhibition of quilts at the local university art gallery that same year. The exhibition, titled “Quilts from Nebraska Collections,” broke attendance records for the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. It traveled extensively in four states throughout 1975 and 1976, sponsored by the Mid-American Arts Alliance.

The LQG brought national artists Beth and Jeffrey Gutcheon of New York City to Lincoln for lectures and workshops in 1974.²⁰ Award-winning group quilts were made by guild members: their quilt titled “Nebraska is America” won the 1976 Bicentennial Award and Best-of-Show ribbons at the National Quilting Association quilt show in Greenbelt, Maryland.²¹

In 1976, Mary Ghormley and Frankie Best were instructed by the guild to “produce a special event.”²² Best came up with the idea of a national event focusing on quilts. Ghormley laughingly explained, “I just would have had a speaker come or something, but Frankie thinks big. I remember we were sitting right over there (pointing to living room couch). Frankie said she would be chairman. And I was her shadow.”²³ The Lincoln Quilters Guild had chosen wisely.

Best had become involved in quilting in the early 1970s when her daughter decided to make a quilt for a high school project. She scheduled quilting lessons for her daughter with Mary Ghormley, after seeing a sign advertising classes at the Nebraska State Fair quilt exhibition. Best also decided to take lessons in order to establish a common bond between her daughter and herself. Soon after she and her daughter began quilting, Best joined the LQG.

Plate 1. The Anti-Polygamy
Quilt. Collection of the
LDS Church Museum of
History and Art, #82-117,
Salt Lake City, Utah.

Plate 2. Detail, The
Anti-Polygamy Quilt.



Plate 3. A ring of sixteen-petaled chrysanthemums, symbols of Japanese royalty, graces the bottom of this circa 1890 crazy quilt, while the bird at the center is similar to the phoenix, a symbol of Chinese empresses. IQSC 1997.007.0764.

Plate 4. This crazy quilt is an example of a Midwestern adaptation of the Victorian fad. Likely made twenty to forty years after the peak of the style, this Amish version features cottons and wools pieced at haphazard angles. Private Collection of Robert and Ardis James.

Plate 5. Calligraphic hangings, Cairo, Egypt, 1979. Cotton, hand appliqué on a green, plain-weave ground layered over a half-basket-weave canvas ground, 25.75 x 22.75 inches (65.4 x 60.3 cm). Collection of Dr. Betty Wass.

Plate 6. Salah El-Den M. El-Ozy, Islamic hanging, Street of the Tentmakers, Cairo, Egypt, 1979. Cotton, hand appliqué and embroidery on off-white plain weave ground layered over a half basket canvas ground, 17.25 x 17 inches (43.8 x 43.2 cm). Collection of Dr. Betty Wass.



Best explained that she agreed to chair the symposium committee because “I am an organizer” and the task “fell in my lap” at the right time. After a back injury, she sat for three days on a heating pad and “planned the format and how we were going to do it.” She assigned tasks to the committee members and explained: “I liked to organize and tell people what to do. I had a feeling for what needed to be done.” She also believed that she had a “sense of people’s strengths, so I capitalized on it and used it. It was easy to delegate jobs.”²⁴

Symposium committee members Pat Hackley and Carol Dunklau agreed. Hackley stated, “Frankie was good at pulling people together and knowing how best to use them.”²⁵ Dunklau concurred, “Every person who asked to be on it (the committee) had (their) own area of expertise and (we) all worked so hard . . . everyone knew their job and you were expected to take care of it.”²⁶ The committee members met about every two weeks, to discuss “what we should do . . . would this go over.”²⁷ Other committee members included Donna Bonness, Sally Campbell, Soni Cassell, Velda Coffey, Millie Corkill, Helen Curtiss, Jacky Dittmer, Miriam Hecox, Louise Howey, Nancy Koehler, Lou Lessman, Kathy McKie, Hope Partridge, Helen Pejsar, Ann Raschke, Kari Ronning, Rosemary Seyler, Lou Shaneyfelt, and Genie Sullivan.

In addition to the coordination of speakers and events, the committee organized the financial details of the symposium. Speakers were reimbursed for their lodging, airfare, and meals and paid an honorarium. The symposium cost attendees \$10.00 per day. Committee members arranged housing in dormitories on campus for \$5.50 per day and meals could be purchased for a nominal amount. Best “paced the floor in the middle of the night wondering if we would make it financially. . . (But, by the) 3rd of June (I knew we were) going to make it . . . it was such a relief.”²⁸ Prior to the event Hackley remembered being “concerned that we were going to the poorhouse.”²⁹ Ghormley also remembered how Best worried about money: “She (Frankie) had this chart – How we’d do this, what we’d have to do to come out even.”³⁰ The committee’s fears were ungrounded. “We made ten thousand dollars!” recalled Mary Ghormley.³¹

Best noted that the symposium committee made the final decision regarding speakers but suggestions came from Ghormley, an avid collector of books relating to quilting. Extensive reading had made her familiar with



the names of authors who had recently published books or had contributed articles to magazines. Ghormley said, "I knew about the speakers. That was one thing that I could contribute . . . I knew who people were."³² Ghormley also handled the schedule for the speakers' visits during the symposium and all of the publicity. Publicity materials highlighted the presentations, a quilt block contest, a slide show, and quilt dealers as well as the books, patterns, and supplies available for purchase. She explained, "We sent out press releases (to) . . . all the quilt magazines, anything connected with quilts. Here it says we printed about five hundred. *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine* published information for us."³³

All of the committee members carried out tasks relating to the various needs of the symposium. Pat Hackley oversaw the symposium book exhibit. She contacted publishers and requested complimentary copies of their quilt publications. Her efforts resulted in more than one hundred donated books—no publisher turned down her request. These volumes became the foundation of the LQG library, a circulating collection of books available to members of the guild. Hackley also assisted in coordinating the audio/visual needs of the speakers.

Carol Dunklau served as treasurer and took registrations during the symposium. Hope Partridge and Donna Bonness sewed hundreds of tote bags for the symposium attendees. Millie Corkill and Nancy Koehler spearheaded the organization of an exhibition of quilts at the Elder Gallery at Nebraska Wesleyan University. Dunklau recalled that quilts were hung throughout the Nebraska Wesleyan campus so you could walk though and see them.³⁴ "Barn Dance," a raffle quilt made by the LQG, hung among the quilts displayed at the Elder Gallery.

Velda Coffey coordinated the Nebraska Quilt Block Design Contest. The guild offered a prize of \$100.00 for the winning block. Residents of Nebraska, or any individual who could demonstrate a Nebraska connection, were eligible to enter the contest and were asked to submit an "original design or an interpretation of an existing pattern. The name of the block must include one or more words usually associated with the state, such as Nebraska, prairie, pioneers or Cornhusker."³⁵

E. S. (Bud) Dunklau, husband of committee treasurer Carol Dunklau, won the Quilt Block Design Contest with his entry titled "Nebraska Windmill" (see figure 2). This personalized the symposium for Dunklau. Out of



Figure 2. “Nebraska Windmill,” winner of the Nebraska Quilt Block Design Contest sponsored by the Lincoln Quilters Guild, was designed by Bud Dunklau. Residents of Nebraska, or any individual who could demonstrate a Nebraska connection, were eligible to enter the contest and were asked to submit an “original design or an interpretation of an existing pattern. The name of the block must include one or more words usually associated with the state, such as Nebraska, prairie, pioneers or Cornhusker.”

148 entries, she recalled: “Bud’s block won the award. Bud got a lot of notoriety, (people) asking for his autograph . . . we got a lot of requests for the pattern for the winning block after the symposium.”³⁶ Dunklau’s block incorporated four light and four dark stylized outlines of the state of Nebraska, which formed a revolving windmill. The Panhandle area of the state formed a nine-patch in the block’s center. *Quilter’s Newsletter Magazine* described it as “an ingenious design that is traditional in its symbolism, graphic and effective, yet simple enough for a beginning quilter to make.”³⁷ In January of 1977, the Nebraska 85th Legislature designated the winning entry as the official Nebraska block through Legislative Resolution I.³⁸

The committee provided visitors with a list of quilt exhibitions titled



"Public Exhibit of Quilts in the Midwest July 1977." Those traveling to the symposium could see other exhibitions along their route. Joyce Gross particularly remembered that the list of Midwest exhibitions "impressed us all. (The committee) listed them all and told us what we would see."³⁹

The LQG chose the symposium as an opportunity to honor Grace Snyder of North Platte, Nebraska, recognized as one of "Nebraska's well-known quiltmakers and designers."⁴⁰ Snyder, who celebrated her 94th birthday in 1977, attended the symposium banquet.

Vendors were also a vital part of the symposium. Twenty-six vendors, ranging from local institutions such as the Calico Cupboard of the Lincoln Quilters Guild, the Calico House, and Miller and Paine, as well as book stores and quilt stores throughout the Midwest and from as far away as California, Florida, New York, Texas, and Canada set up temporary shops on the Nebraska Wesleyan campus.⁴¹

Quilt Country, a shop based in St. Joseph, Missouri, purchased a full-page ad in *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine* in both the June and July/August issues and devoted half of their advertising to the "complete franchise store (at) Lincoln, Nebraska, for Quilt Symposium '77."⁴² A section of the ad also announced: "Lincoln, Nebraska's Quilt Symposium '77 is the biggest quilt show this year! Many leading authorities will be lecturing on exciting aspects of our craft. Leading dealers in quilts, books, patterns and supplies will join Quilt Country in presenting what's new and current in the craft today."⁴³

The symposium committee left no element of comfort or convenience to chance. Members scheduled rides, arranged housing, and accommodated special diets. As Best explained, the committee members "tried to cover everything. We wanted it [the symposium] to be worth our efforts."⁴⁴ Best worked to make sure there would be no surprises at the symposium. She stated, "We never had anything frantic at the end."⁴⁵ Hackley recalled that the committee wanted to "highlight Nebraska hospitality. People were well treated . . . they were impressed."⁴⁶ Best "loved it, everything went so well, we didn't miss a beat."⁴⁷ She recalled the committee even placed dimes on cards taped in the phone booths, for emergency use only: "The cards and change were still there after the conference."⁴⁸

In fact, the symposium's organization, under the watchful eye of Frankie Best, gained notice in the reviews of the symposium. Joyce Gross expressed



amazement at Best's ability to keep the lectures on schedule: "Frankie Best started everything on time. She managed to get everyone out of the auditorium and back in time. She was the best master of ceremonies."⁴⁹ Gross also called the committee women "congenial. They seemed like women used to putting on events like this. The tone of the symposium, the topics covered, (were) so well done, (it was) stimulating. Everybody was so friendly."⁵⁰

Coordinating and planning the symposium built a real sense of family between women on the committee. Best recalled that they "approached things as team work, (there was) no prima donna, no starring role, everyone had a job to do. We were a team, friends, buddies, working together. (It) was a nifty affair for novice, naïve, young beginners."⁵¹ Dunklau explained that almost all members of the LQG helped out and so did a few husbands: "It was a big family thing."⁵²

The symposium weekend left the committee members exhausted. Dunklau remembered that committee members arrived at 7 a.m. each day and did not get home until midnight. Hard work, a large commitment of time, energy, and determination, and a good sense of humor, made the symposium a success. Dunklau admitted, however, that at the end of the three-day symposium some of the committee members felt saturated with quilts and with each other.⁵³

The press and publicity information for Symposium '77 stated the goals of the guild and their long-range benefits:

Promoting quilt interest helps to encourage men, women and children to become interested in crafts and reinforces the desire for self-expression. This interest nurtured in youth can be sustenance in adulthood. Quilts symbolize hearth and home, warmth and comfort, thrift and industry, in addition to being a beautiful work of art. For the purpose of education alone, the Lincoln Quilters Guild is committed to the efforts of presenting Quilt Symposium '77.⁵⁴

Best explained her goals, stating that she had hoped to "gather women with like minds, hobbies, and interests" and that she wanted the symposium to be more than a gathering of women "just sitting at the frame doing nine stitches per inch."⁵⁵



Quilt publications and local newspapers widely covered the symposium in the month prior to the event. In April, 1977, *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine* reported the upcoming event in their column "What's New—and News—in Quilting:"

The Lincoln Quilters Guild will present a three-day quilt symposium on July 21, 22, 23 at the Nebraska Wesleyan University. The following quilt authorities will be included in the program: Jean Dubois, Michael James, Jean Ray Laury, Marcia Spark and Helen Squire.⁵⁶

In the June issue of the magazine, Bonnie Leman, founding editor of *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, wrote in her column "The Needle's Eye:" "Judging from the information I have received about it (the symposium), this should be one of the most worthwhile quilt events of the summer. I do hope many of you will be able to go and that I will get to see you there."⁵⁷ Helen Haggie, writing for the "Arts of Living" column for the *Sunday Lincoln Journal and Star* on May 22, 1977, stated: "a youngster (only four years old), the Lincoln Quilters Guild has gained not only a national, but an international reputation."⁵⁸

Pat Hackley, who chaired the Films, Books, Slide and Periodicals Committee, received a letter from Rachel Maines, Executive Director of the Center for the History of American Needlework in Valencia, Pennsylvania. As outlined in the *Lincoln Journal and Star* article the letter stated:

The quilt symposium is an important event in the needlework history - to our knowledge the first of its kind to be held in this country . . . Many of your projects have been models for others around the country and your leadership in the field is part of a long tradition of pioneering needlework activism in the Midwest."⁵⁹

At Quilt Symposium '77

Symposium attendees were treated to a wide range of topics that introduced them to and educated them about both traditional quilting history and the modern aesthetic approach emerging in the 1970s. While both



viewpoints drew from quiltmaking's traditional patterns and techniques, each designated very different goals for their quiltmaking genre. By the late 1970s mainstream American quiltmakers had turned to tried and true patterns of the past for their inspiration. Their quiltmaking followed the aims of quilters working in the medium for hundreds of years: to create an object of beauty whose underlying purpose was functional. A select group of artists, however, turned to quiltmaking as a medium for exploring aesthetic elements of light, depth, surface pattern, and texture in new ways. Penny McMorris states, "These quilt artists . . . expanded the format, scale and subject matter of quilts. Before them, quiltmaking was, for the most part, dependent upon a catalogue of established geometric and appliqué patterns. Now . . . trained artists are making one original design after another . . . manipulating the traditional geometric plane with a new vivacity."⁶⁰

These seemingly opposing ideals represented the changing world of quilting in the 1970s. On one hand, the romanticism of America's Bicentennial inspired individuals to look to the past, to memories of family patriarchs laboriously hand-stitching assorted fabric pieces together. On the other hand, formally trained artists looked forward, producing unique quilts that reflected a new answer to the question "what is a quilt?"

Hackley explained that the speakers were an eclectic mix. "That's always been the LQG. [We] wanted it to appeal to a lot of people [and we got] calls from people all over the country and from Canada."⁶¹ The speakers included quilt artists and authors Jean Dubois of Colorado (see figure 3), Phyllis Haders of New York, Michael James of Massachusetts, Jean Ray Laury of California, Marcia Spark of Arizona, and Helen Squire of New Jersey.

In his lecture titled "Contemporary Quilt Art and Artists," Michael James explained that modern and contemporary quilters "are bringing quiltmaking into the present and beyond" (see figure 4). He believed that "quilts are created today more for beauty than for function." In 1977, James represented those quilters forty years old or younger that had "a whole different intent than did the quilters of the last century." Like James, many of these quilters had studied in art schools and had backgrounds "completely different from the rural women who learned quilt-making from their mothers and grandmothers."⁶²



Figure 3. Jean Dubois demonstrates how to mark a quilting design during her lecture "Feathers, Cables and Corners: How to Be a Master Marker."

Betty Ferguson, a symposium attendee, typed notes from each of the presentations. According to her notes, James stated, "whether quilting is a craft or an art, it is just a continuation of a tradition. Women used to go to quilting bees by wagon, now they attend national symposia by jet." James also described three levels of quiltmakers who work side by side: the quilter, the quilt artist, and the fabric artist. A quilter "copies traditional patterns and derives pleasure in the doing of the quilt." A quilt artist is "closely tied to traditional patterns, but makes a more personal statement by changing pattern and fabric." A fabric artist works to produce "quilts as design objects, as works of art that function as a vehicle of personal expression. The important point is that all three levels of quiltmakers work side by side, lending support and admiration to each other, which expresses the full flowering of quilting as an art form."⁶³

Ron and Marcia Spark's slide show, "Viewing Quilts as Art," highlighted connections between quilts and contemporary paintings and "made the point that the geometric themes upon which many quilt designs are based have appeared in artworks from other media as well—from the early masters to contemporary artists."⁶⁴

Jean Ray Laury titled her lecture "Quilt Design: Its Influence on My Work in Related Crafts." She discussed her experiences and diverse atti-



Figure 4. Michael James demonstrates his hand-quilting technique to attendees of Quilt Symposium '77 Fine Art–Folk Art.

tudes and approaches to quilting. She stressed as “most important, elements of composition, color, and pattern. Study fabric, learn to control it, be open to new materials and techniques. The ultimate effect desired determines the materials and techniques.”⁶⁵ Ferguson noted that Laury “reminded us to find time for enjoying quilting, to define our goals . . . expose yourself, share your work. Nothing comes out of a closet; it comes out of sharing your work.”⁶⁶

Helen Squire spoke at the symposium banquet, focusing on “Hawaiian Appliqué Quilts: Tradition and Technique,” and providing stunning examples for the audience (see figure 5). Ferguson wrote in her notes that “(I) must have been worn out—I have no notes here . . . I shall never forget, however, her sharing of the Hawaiian Quilts, an art I had never seen before—they were breathtaking.”⁶⁷ In a second lecture, “Quilts: Textiles and Folklore,” Squire explored the folklore of quilting and the context in which quilts were produced. For example, Squire differentiated between colonial women in the Northeast who “used all their scraps of any color in



geometric designs,” and those from the Southern colonies who “could afford to waste fabric so they could select colors to match and cut out designs such as flowers.”⁶⁸ Georgianne Leman noted in her review of the symposium in *Quilter’s Newsletter Magazine* that “she (Squire) used one beautiful quilt after another to illustrate each point as she discussed fabrics, dyes, and information used to date and appraise quilts.”⁶⁹

Joyce Gross vividly remembers the presentations. She recalled that Marcia Spark compared quilts to art and stated that quilters learned from the artists, and placed “art [as] superior to quilts . . . [she said] that we had copied [the artists, but I believed] . . . the quilts came first. I got up and said so, and that didn’t please Marcia. My knees were shaky and my voice was shaky but I felt I had to say it.”⁷⁰ Gross also noted: “Michael James was new to the quilt scene and quite young. Older women were crazy about that guy. [He was] backed into a wall the first time I saw him, looking petrified. I met him and he was charming and delightful and came out [later] to California for talks.”⁷¹

Figure 5. Mary Ghormley, member of the Quilt Symposium '77 committee, assists Helen Squire as she prepares for her lecture, “Quilts: Textile and Folklore.”



Gross, who calls herself “a collector of people,” expressed pleasure at meeting so many new people: “I spent most of my time talking to people. I always enjoyed talking to people informally rather than lectures.”⁷² Gross had heard about a conference in Ithaca, New York, in 1976, but could not attend it.⁷³ She made up her mind to attend the symposium in Nebraska.

A wide variety of women found the symposium appealing. Mrs. William Cash and her friends, from Monroe, Oregon, wrote to the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce to request a map of Lincoln and a good place to park near Nebraska Wesleyan University. The letter, dated May 31, 1977, explained:

We are all on social security and have pooled our money and are planning on driving a van and sleeping in it on the way. Now could you tell us, is their [sic] a place . . . where we can park our van, as one lady has Arthritis in both knees and has trouble walking. We don't drink or smoke, just happy quilt makers and quilters and lovers of fine Art . . . We have all worked hard, quilting extra quilts, baby sitting and various other jobs to make extra money to come to Lincoln Nebraska.⁷⁴

Responses to Quilt Symposium '77

Quilt Symposium '77 was a resounding success. More than six hundred people attended the lectures and watched slide presentations on American quilting. Another 1500 people visited the various exhibits held in conjunction with the symposium. The event raised \$10,000 dollars for the Lincoln Quilters Guild coffers. Dunklau felt “surprised that (we) made so much money”⁷⁵ and Best felt “flattered that people would actually come!”⁷⁶

Responses to the symposium were reported in newsletters, newspapers, and magazines. Bonnie Leman wrote to the readership of *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*:

I know from your letters a lot of you have been waiting to hear our report of the Lincoln Quilt Symposium . . . There was so much to see and hear and absorb, and so many old and new friends to chat with, it really took awhile to come down to earth when it was over . . . Every-



one I talked to seemed to be feeling great excitement and creative thrust. I'm sure that lots of projects are being planned and started now as a result of the meeting and that the quilting teachers who attended will be sharing the ideas inspired by it for a long time to come.⁷⁷

Her daughter, Georgianne Leman, reviewing the symposium for the magazine, concurred: "A "quilting bee" as stimulating and energizing as this one was can't help but play a big part in preserving and furthering the quilting art for . . . generations to come. For the hundred who attended and the thousands who will benefit in the future, Lincoln Quilters Guild—thank you."⁷⁸

Joyce Gross reported in *Quilter's Journal*: "Crammed into three exciting days were six speakers, four films, two slide shows, an exhibit of quilt block contest entrants, a quilt show, a Show-and-Tell and a variety of commercial exhibits. If there was a complaint, it was that we were kept *too* busy."⁷⁹

Helen Hester, of Jeffersontown, Kentucky, wrote a letter that appeared in the *Lincoln Journal and Star* in August 1977:

The Lincoln Quilters Guild deserves commendation and recognition for its successful endeavor in presenting the Quilt Symposium '77 July 21–23. A most valuable and delightful experience was had by all who attended. The ladies of the Guild are deserving of our heartfelt thanks. Well known artists who presented the many lectures and demonstrations were very gracious and worthwhile speakers. The highlight was meeting Mrs. Grace Snyder, Nebraska's Quilt Queen, and seeing her lovely work.⁸⁰

Enola M. Gish, author of "News from the Quilt Lady," a column in the *Baldwin Ledger* (Baldwin City, Kansas), attended the symposium with twenty-four other Kansas women. She wrote: "The speakers were so outstanding and personable that whenever I read a magazine article or quilt book of theirs I will remember the beautiful experiences at Lincoln." Gish mentioned several events at the symposium but concluded that her "list is endless and I can only say how thankful I am for the opportunity to have such beautiful and enriching experiences."⁸¹



Impact of Quilt Symposium '77

Quilt Symposium '77 had a significant influence on symposia, similar in design, which followed the Lincoln event. Best agreed: "Other symposia sprang up all over the country. Organizers of symposia in Kansas and California called to see if they could borrow our working papers. They patterned their events after ours—of course, they refined and improved on what we did."⁸²

Ghormley explained the success of the symposium. "One of the gals said she thought she'd died and gone to heaven. People had never had so much fun, or acknowledged quilting so much. People were just starved for this! There had been a sort of symposium, I think, in Ithaca, New York, but I don't think it was on the same scale ours was. We're still considered one of the first."⁸³ Ghormley considered the development of a network of people interested in quilts one of the most important outcomes of the symposium. She recalled, "We met people from other areas that were interested in the same thing we were. And it gave exposure to these speakers. A lot of people didn't know about the people who came to speak."⁸⁴

Best also explained: "The symposium made more Nebraskans aware of quilting. It wasn't a nucleus or beginning but it encouraged interest."⁸⁵ She called the experience "grand" and believed that the symposium "broadened our quilt background" on a wide variety of topics.⁸⁶ Even so, Dunklau explained that guild members "never felt we had to do another one (symposium), (we were) just relieved it (was) a big hit."⁸⁷

The inclusion of contemporary quilt artists at Quilt Symposium '77 helped pave the way for the acceptance of quilts that were grounded in the idea of quilts as art. It continued the work begun at exhibitions like "Abstract Design in American Quilts" at the Whitney Museum of American Art and "The New American Quilt" at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts.

Conclusion

Quilt Symposium '77 "Fine Art–Folk Art" presented both a historical overview of traditional quilting as evidenced by lectures featuring the histori-



cal context of Amish and Hawaiian quilts, and a tantalizing glimpse of the future of modern quilting as seen in the work of Michael James and Jean Ray Laury, to an international audience. It opened the eyes of its attendees to the value of quilts as records of women's achievement throughout American history and illustrated how quilts reflect the lives of women and provide a vehicle for their individual creativity and voices. It provided a template for future quilt-related symposia that inspired other organizations to follow the LQG's lead and provided valuable exposure to the artists and historians who presented lectures, giving them an opportunity to showcase their particular skills and providing a forum from which to educate and inform audiences around the world. The quilt symposium, and those who presented lectures and workshops, helped to propel the acknowledgement of the study of quilts as a legitimate academic field into the world's eye.

The impact of the LQG's efforts resonate yet today, evidenced by the thousands of quilt guild members who meet regularly to share their interest in quilt history and quilting techniques, in the development of private collections and public exhibitions of quilts, and in the ever-increasing numbers of individuals passionately committed to studying and creating quilts. The Lincoln Quilters Guild and its highly active members were leaders among those interested in promoting quilting and, through Quilt Symposium '77 "Fine Art-Folk Art," made a strong contribution that encouraged increased interest in quilts and quilting. The devotion of these women, fueled by their abiding love and passion for all things quilt-related, helped bring quilts and quilting to the forefront of American consciousness, spurring interest in the art and leading to a greater appreciation and love for quilting throughout the world.

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