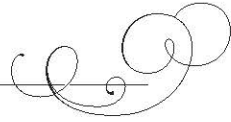


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Erica Wilson and the Quilt Revival



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Erica Wilson is best known as a teacher and designer of embroidery. Her role in the Quilt Revival of the 1970s is less well known. Through the lens of her television program, Erica, this essay explores several quilting techniques (such as English template piecing, cathedral window, and yo-yo) demonstrated by Wilson in the course of her program, as well as Wilson's interest in the intersection of embroidery and quilting, including in embroidered appliqué, "quiltpoint" needlepoint, and shisha work for ralli quilts. The author will show that beyond an interest in technique, Wilson also investigated the history (as it was then understood) behind American patchwork and appliqué quilts in Erica. The essay begins with an overview of the program itself, introducing readers who may not remember the 1970s to the role of Erica in shaping the nascent craft television program genre. An appendix provides the full list of Erica episodes digitized by WGBH Boston Media Library and Archives.

Erica

Erica Moira Susan Wilson (1928–2011) was born in Wiltshire in England, and raised between England, Scotland, and Bermuda (fig. 1). A graduate of the venerable Royal School of Needlework in London, Wilson emigrated from the United Kingdom in 1954 when she was invited to give needlework lectures and seminars in New York City at the Cooper-Hewitt

Fig. 1. Erica Wilson. Courtesy of
Ericawilson.com.

Fig. 2. Julie Nixon Eisenhower
doing needlepoint in the White
House, November 30, 1971.
Julie Nixon was a student of
Erica Wilson. National Archives
and Records Administration.

National Design Museum.¹ A history of the Erica Wilson brand notes that among her students were “the wives of Thomas Watson, founder of IBM, Mrs. Rodney Proctor whose husband was CEO of Proctor and Gamble, Dorothy Doubleday of the publishing firm, Julie Nixon (fig. 2), Rosie Greer and many others.”²

Fig. 3. Storefront of Erica Wilson's Nantucket shop. Courtesy of ericawilson.com.

Wilson quickly built a needlework instruction empire for herself in the United States. She worked as a needlework designer and educator, teaching correspondence courses by mail. Her 1962 book, *Crewel Embroidery*, sold over a million copies and paved the way for fifteen other books, including *Erica Wilson's Quilts of America*.³ These design, education, and publishing successes allowed Wilson to open needlework stores on Madison Avenue in New York City and on Nantucket (fig. 3).⁴ Then in 1971, Wilson was visited in Nantucket by Rick Hauser of the WGBH Educational Foundation and approached to consider shooting a craft program for the new public broadcasting distributor, PBS. Two weeks later, she was in Boston shooting the pilot for what would become her popular TV program, *Erica*.⁵ Erica became a global phenomenon and was broadcast in Australia and as “after-church” programming in the United Kingdom on Sundays on BBC One from 1976 to 1978.⁶ Through all of these avenues, but perhaps especially the television series, Erica Wilson helped to revive several needlework traditions, such as bargello, crewelwork, and turkey work in the 1970s.

On her program, which was produced by Margaret “Peggy” McCleod for WGBH beginning in 1971, Wilson also demonstrated several quilting techniques, including English template piecing, cathedral window, and yo-yo.⁷ Beyond an interest in technique, she also investigated—with all

the zeal of the Bicentennial—some of the history (and unwittingly, the myths) behind patchwork, appliqué, and whitework. One of the factors that made Wilson so popular and so influential was that while she was keenly interested in the past, she did not present quilts and needlework as old-fashioned or stodgy. Rather, she made quilts and needlework look and feel modern, with trendy colors and kitschy (to today's eyes) appliquéd motifs. *Erica* was first and foremost a program on embroidery, however, and it is here, where embroidery and quiltmaking intersected (for example in embroidered appliqué or “quiltpoint” needlepoint) that Wilson demonstrated the greatest impact on quiltmaking in the years to come.

Bringing Craft to PBS: *Erica* on Television

Erica Wilson has been called the “Julia Child of Needlework,” and her impact on the field of sewing and craft-related television has arguably been as great as that of Julia Child on the TV cooking program genre.⁸ Like Child, Wilson revived and modernized archaic techniques with boundless enthusiasm.⁹ In Wilson's obituary in *The Guardian*, Veronica Horwell wrote, “Wilson shared some of Child's enthusiastic style and all of her ambition to demystify and democratise what had become arcane skills.”¹⁰ Unlike the more renowned Julia Child, Wilson's contribution and legacy have been neglected for far too long.

Wilson was clearly aware early of public television's potential and of her role in shaping the future of the fledgling Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). PBS was founded by Hartford N. Gunn Jr. of WGBH as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in October of 1970, less than a year before *Erica* first aired. PBS filled the void left by National Educational Television (NET), which launched in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1954 with funding from the Ford Foundation.¹¹ The Ford Foundation withdrew funding from the NET in 1966, largely because the NET's left-leaning documentaries on race and class in America and on the growing conflict in Vietnam (including titles such as *The Poor Pay More*, *Black Like Me*, *Appalachia: Rich Land, Poor People*, and *Inside North Vietnam*) were not rating well in conservative media markets.¹² As Carolyn N. Brooks noted in the Museum of Broadcast Communications' *Encyclopedia of Television*, “Although NET Journal received positive responses from media critics, many of NET's affiliates, particularly those in the South, grew to resent what they

perceived as its ‘East Coast Liberalism.’”¹³ By 1970, the NET was defunct. PBS, then, was from its inception a gentler, more moderate vision of public broadcasting, and craft programs like *Erica* played a role in rebranding public television and extending its reach into more conservative parts of the United States. Above all, Gunn saw PBS as the potential to be a national network, rather than the disparate group of local stations that the NET had been in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁴ Wilson, who was already the architect of her own internationally successful needlework brand, well understood the power of marketing. In a 1971 episode of *Erica* on textual graphics and monograms in needlework (#105), for example, Wilson began by referencing *Sesame Street* (which premiered in 1969 on NET and then was picked up by PBS), announcing, “Today’s program is presented by the letters ‘E’ and ‘W’”

Erica was truly a pioneering program, providing a model format that countless other craft shows would follow, notably Emma Amos and Beth Gutcheon’s 1977–1979 program, *Show of Hands*, which was also produced by WGBH and featured many of the same production crew members as *Erica*. Today, PBS devotes an entire channel, Create TV, to cooking, arts and crafts, gardening, home improvement, and travel programming. The craft program format pioneered by Erica Wilson and WGBH on PBS was so popular that commercial television, such as the Home & Garden Television network (HGTV), later adopted the genre.

An essential element of the successful *Erica* format was Wilson’s mastery of stitchery, which allowed her to create projects, seemingly on the fly, for the camera. Wilson worked with Director Russ Fortier to get the camera’s distance and angle just right.

On one of the first shows, ‘Kaleidoscope Bargello,’ my able and handsome director, Russ Fortier, angled the camera slightly from the side and fairly far away, so that when I said, ‘Count six threads up and one thread over,’ I appeared to be working on a solid piece of fabric without any visible threads at all. I told him the camera must be much closer on the next shows. On the following show, which dealt with quilting, he did a magnificent job of bringing the camera so close that my fingers filled the screen completely.¹⁵

One of the cornerstones of the program was her instructional demonstration of various stitches, both common stitches such as backstitch, cross-

Fig. 4. Still from *Erica*, episode #104, "Bargello." Wilson models a pair of bargello boots. Courtesy of the WGBH Media Library and Archives, © WGBH Educational Foundation and Erica Wilson.

stitch, satin stitch, and tent stitch, and more advanced stitches such as Burden stitch and Gobelin stitch. Her needlework prowess was so immense that the show could have been intimidating, but her enthusiasm and encouragement made the show eminently watchable, even for those with the most rudimentary (or completely absent) needlework skills. In episode #112, "Geometric Needlepoint," for example, Wilson encouraged viewers to be bold: "I've selected pretty strong colors. You can be a lot bolder than you think," while reassuring viewers that, "Designing needlepoint is the easiest thing in the world." Often, it was not what Erica Wilson said, but how she said it, that made the *Erica* show so accessible. On the subject of bargello (fig. 4), Erica noted that, "It's like eating peanuts. You can't stop once you begin" (#104), and when speaking of choosing fabrics for a patchwork quilt, Erica used a similarly alimentary simile, "The first thing you have to do, of course, is choose the fabrics, and that's really just like eating candies" (#201).

Humor is another quality, now crucial to craft and how-to programs, that Wilson pioneered in *Erica*. Ever so discreetly comparing needlework

to sex, she saucily quipped, “You can do it in the car, in bed, even in the bath, if you like” (#124, “Needle Painting”). Wilson also presented a very humble persona on Erica. She could readily laugh at her own chief shortcoming as an embroiderer, namely, the very untidy quality of the reverse sides of her work. “Turning to the wrong side of the embroidery . . . it’s a terrible sin. It’s a waste of time, you see” (#114), she said. “You’re not supposed to turn the frame to the wrong side, because that’s terribly unprofessional” (#115).

All of this is not to say, however, that Wilson and WGBH perfected the television craft program format from the pilot episode of *Erica*. Especially in the first few episodes of Erica’s first season, the series is checkered with what are, by twenty-first century viewing standards, some quaint, even naïve, production choices. In *More Needleplay*, Wilson recalled the harried nature of shooting the first season in vivid detail:

Making a TV series for PBS was a memorable experience. When Rick Hauser first came to Nantucket to talk about it, I thought it would be a vague possibility some six months afterward. Not at all. Two weeks later I found myself in Boston making a pilot! ‘I see you’re always late and always in a hurry,’ Rick said. So he had a set built that looked like my living room. I would wait for a signal, dash through the door, trailing wools, frames, and the latest project, breathlessly apologize for being late, show my latest inspirations, and, at the sound of a clock chiming in the distance, rush out again.¹⁶

It is difficult for the modern viewer to believe that the awkwardly loud gong to signal the end of the episode and to signal Wilson to utter her catch phrase in a harried manner, “Too many stitches, too little time,” as well as the frequent scene of Wilson whizzing past a window in the set as the credits rolled, were actually planned production choices, based on Wilson’s own slightly scattered personality.

Related to the quaint naïveté of the show, one major element of *Erica* that, for the most part, was not adopted by television presenters who followed in her footsteps was costume. Wilson sometimes wore normal street clothes when presenting *Erica*, but equally often, she appeared in a fanciful costume that echoed the theme of the episode. In episode #211, “Native American Treasures,” for example, Wilson wore buckskin pants decorated with Tlingit totems. While she often used the element of cos-

tume to showcase the dress of non-Western cultures, she sometimes wore family heirlooms as costume pieces as well. In episode #110, “Satin Stitch,” Wilson wore her great-grandmother’s skirt, which she stated came from the Paris Exhibition of 1851 and was decorated with padded satin stitch in silks and cottons.¹⁷ Wilson sheepishly noted that while her great-grandmother’s corseted waist measured eighteen inches, she had had to let out the garment considerably in order to wear it. In another instance (episode #209, “New Points in Needlepoint”), Wilson donned a kilt for a discussion of how to imitate Scottish plaid in needlepoint, but noted that she was not wearing her own family’s tartan “because it was much too plain.”

Family was a recurring theme on *Erica*, and Wilson frequently mentioned making projects for or with her husband, furniture designer Vladimir Kagan, and their three children, daughters Vanessa and Jessica, and son Ilya. In episode #120, “Sentiments in Stitches,” for example, Wilson showed pillows on the theme of “Love”: a modern version that her husband had designed, and her daughter’s Victorian version, noting that, “Love is acceptable at any time of the year.” The mentioning of family has become an important aspect of how-to programs, making the host seem more down-to-earth and relatable to the average viewer. Today, programs from *P. Allen Smith’s Garden Home* to *Lydia’s Italy* frequently refer to the presenter’s family.

While family has become a mainstay of the genre, the role of the domestic wife and mother was much more accentuated in *Erica* than in more contemporary programs. Wilson generally, despite her use of her maiden name rather than her married name, reinforced the prevailing gender roles of the period, presenting herself as the ideal wife and mother in the series. At the conclusion of several episodes in Season One, for example, Wilson noted that she had to leave “to put dinner in the oven.” This was in stark contrast to Amos and Gutcheon’s *Show of Hands* series on WGBH in the late 1970s, which had a decidedly feminist feel.

Filming in the studio next to the one in which *The French Chef* was shot, Wilson became aware that the craft program was truly a unique (and difficult) genre to produce, especially in relation to cookery programming. Reflecting on the preparation that she had to put into each episode, Wilson said, “For each project, ideally, there would be one finished piece, one half-worked, and one just begun. Then I could pull out each one and say, ‘How amazing. This just grew very fast!’ Unlike cooking, where the food *can* be raw but look cooked, there are few shortcuts in needlework—hours of work have to be put into it.”¹⁸

One could argue, though, that for Wilson, crafting and cooking were both a representation of a woman's domestic autonomy, rather than of her subjugation, and that cookery and the kitchen were but another source of inspiration for the needle art. In episode #115, "Designs from China," Wilson discussed using designs from decorated ceramics, such as the Blue Willow pattern, blue and white delftware, and an eighteenth-century Worcester plate decorated with mushrooms (one of her favorite motifs), as sources of inspiration for embroidery. At the end of that episode, Wilson proudly states, "So next time you go to the kitchen, I expect you'll be stitching instead of cooking."

Erica and Quiltmaking in the 1970s

The rise of the feminist art movement in the 1960s and a heightened interest in American history spawned by the nation's Bicentennial celebration in 1976 paved the way for a popular upsurge in attention to historical and contemporary American traditions. Women's artistic contributions, crafts in general, and quiltmaking in particular all flourished during this period. Women (and men) in the 1970s, a decade marked by the colonial nostalgia of the Bicentennial, looked to figures like Erica Wilson to learn traditional techniques long lost to the average American. Today, *Erica* is generally remembered as an embroidery, rather than a quiltmaking program, and indeed, Season One of *Erica* (1971–1972) instructed viewers in several needlework techniques common in both colonial and post-independence America, with episodes such as #101 "Ticking Sampler," #104 "Bargello," #107 "Turkey Work," and #116 "Crewel Point."

In Season Two (1975–1976), however, Wilson branched out to quiltmaking techniques, with episodes on patchwork, which included instruction in English template piecing, yo-yo, and cathedral window (episode #201), and appliqué (episode #215), staking her claim as part of the Quilt Revival. The antique quilt turning that was a feature of episode #201, including patchwork quilts made in patterns such as Rocky Road to Kansas, Carolina Lily, Drunkard's Path, Hexagon Mosaic, and the Pineapple variation of Log Cabin, proved to be spectacular. Another highlight for the quilt-centric viewer was a quilt made of appliquéd velvet on silk made in Belfast, Maine, in 1840, which Wilson discussed to showcase a variety of different embroidery stitches, including feather stitch, herringbone, and double feather stitch, in episode #215.

While she did not devote a whole episode to it, Wilson also investigated whitework in the second season, showing a white-on-white Federal eagle quilt from the 1850s and reflecting, “Well I think whitework is one of my favorite things. It’s so beautifully frosty” (episode #213, “Creatures Great and Small”). Wilson used this whitework quilt as inspiration for a whitework embroidery of a rabbit on organdy, using turkey work to create a bushy rabbit’s tail. Wilson also introduced viewers to “quiltpoint” in Season Two (episode #209, “New Points in Needlepoint”), designing a Lone Star pattern in needlepoint.¹⁹

Quiltpoint is perhaps the most obvious area in which we see embroidery and quilts intersect in Wilson’s work, and Wilson explored quiltpoint further in *More Needleplay*, the companion book to Season Two of *Erica*. She asked, “Have you realized what exciting things have been happening to needlepoint lately? For years, we’ve been doing the classic continental stitch, with its beautiful, smooth tapestry shadings; but now we’re taking off in all sorts of exciting new directions—crewelpoint, plaidpoint, quiltpoint.”²⁰ Wilson went on to explain the trick to quiltpoint: selecting embroidery stitches that best visually mimic the look of various aspects of quilts, including patchwork and quilting stitches.

Once your roving eye has fallen on the “op art” geometrics of a quilt, with all its color possibilities, it’s a simple matter to find stitches to suggest the texture and pattern of patchwork and quilting. “Lone Star,” “Log Cabin,” and “Grandma’s Dream” are the traditional quilt patterns done in simple satin stitches, with the alternating directions of the stitches on canvas picking up the light and giving the padded effect of quilting. Then there’s the waffle stitch, raised so it gives a three-dimensional quality to your work; it’s fascinating to see the different effects you can get with it.²¹

Wilson suggested executing quiltpoints not in the traditionally “quilty” colors of the late nineteenth century, such as claret and dark blue, but rather in bright, bold, modern colors.

Erica Wilson’s approach to the needle and fabric arts on *Erica* was simultaneously rooted in the past and strikingly modern. At the beginning of most episodes of *Erica*, Wilson discussed museum pieces, often from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston or the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, which she herself had used for inspiration.²²

Fig. 5. (color plate 7) Still from *Erica*, episode #116, “Crewel Point.” Wilson shows a crewel-work pillow in the color palette of the 1970s. Courtesy of the WGBH Media Library and Archives, © WGBH Educational Foundation and Erica Wilson.

Wilson appreciated the beauty and quality of work in these museum pieces, but also urged viewers to find the humor in them as well. She delighted in reading out cheeky messages in needlework samplers, such as “This was done by Mary Pitt, who hated every stitch of it” (episode #120, “Sentiments in Stitches”).

While she usually took her historical inspiration from seventeenth-, eighteenth-, or nineteenth-century American or British textiles (she was particularly fond of the Jacobean and Victorian periods), Wilson also introduced viewers to textile traditions from a variety of non-Western cultures, including *shisha* work from India and Pakistan (episode #117, “Shisha Work”), couched work with gold thread from China (episode #121, “Oriental Gold”), and examples of appliqué from West Africa and India (episode #215, “Appliqué”).²³ She also delighted in historic textiles made through cross-cultural exchange. In the first episode of *Erica* (episode #101, “Ticking Sampler”), for example, Wilson took inspiration from a cross-stitch sampler done by students of a British missionary in South Africa.²⁴

Most of the projects that Wilson demonstrated on *Erica* were quite contemporary, despite their historical references. Her projects generally utilized the color palette of the 1970s—bright oranges, acid yellows, and

Fig. 6. Still from *Erica*, episode #114, "Thinking Bigger." Wilson stitches "Belinda the Owl." Courtesy of the WGBH Media Library and Archives, © WGBH Educational Foundation and Erica Wilson.

Fig. 7. Tie Dye Wallhanging.
Virginia Vis, c. 1976. Vis made this piece after seeing the *Erica* episode, "Creatures Great and Small," and watching Erica Wilson create free-embroidered animals.
Courtesy of the artist.

pea greens (fig. 5, color plate 7)—as well as popular motifs of the decade, such as owls and mushrooms. Of an owl in embroidery (fig. 6) that she executed in episode #114, “Thinking Bigger,” Wilson noted, “I simply adore owls. She might be a female, so I called her ‘Belinda.’” Her usage of large-scale designs in heavy rug wool and new, synthetic crafting materials such as plastic canvas (episode #106, “Space Age Canvas”) and Lurex® (“Oriental Gold”) also marked a conscious departure from the textiles of the past.²⁵

Animals were dear to Wilson, and she devoted episode #213, “Creatures Great and Small,” to depicting animals in needlework, from (predictably) Beatrix Potter characters to crewelwork raccoons.²⁶ This episode, interestingly, is perhaps the only episode of *Erica* in which Wilson could be described as having made an (albeit vague) political statement. She noted, “We’re all very concerned nowadays about the natural environment, and how crowded it’s getting.” Virginia Vis, now Curatorial Assistant at the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum, remembers watching *Erica* in college.²⁷ Vis created a hand-dyed, free embroidery wall hanging of various critters after watching “Creatures Great and Small” in 1976 (fig. 7). Indeed, Vis’s own embroidered raccoon bears a strong resemblance to the one worked by Wilson (fig. 8).

One topic not covered in her *Erica* television series, but which she addressed in print in the same period, was do-it-yourself coloration of quilt fabrics. In her syndicated *Needleplay* column for July 29, 1979, in an article entitled, “You Can Paint Quilt Fabrics,” Wilson wrote, “The excitement of quilting and patchwork is in combining fabulous fabrics. Sometimes the frustration of it is finding just the right one in the perfect color. The answer is: Create Your own!”²⁸ In the article, Wilson gave American newspaper readers tips on various methods of coloring quilt fabrics at home, including surface painting and tie-dye and other hand-dyed wax-resist effects (such as Vis used in her raccoon wall hanging).

Wilson returned to her British childhood, and particularly her love of Beatrix Potter, throughout the series. Wilson executed several needlepoints and stuffed dolls of Beatrix Potter characters—Hunca Munca, Peter Rabbit, Johnny Townmouse, and Squirrel Nutkin among them—in the course of the series. Ultimately, however, Wilson seemed very much to embrace her status as a British expatriate who had made a home and an identity for herself in New England. She frequently referred to the American past as “our past” on *Erica*. For example, in episode #201, “Patchwork,” Wilson described quilt patterns such as Robbing Peter to Pay Paul,

Fig. 8. Tie Dye Wallhanging (detail). Virginia Vis, c. 1976. This crewelwork raccoon is reminiscent of one by Erica Wilson illustrated on page 76 of *More Needleplay*. Courtesy of the artist.

Sunshine and Shadow, and Trip Around the World as “old patterns from *our* American ancestors” [emphasis added].

Further evidence of Wilson’s interest in American history (and American myth), in spite of (or perhaps because of) her status as a British expatriate, was the use of colonial American imagery in projects demonstrated on *Erica*. Like many people during the Bicentennial period, Wilson was captivated by the figure of Betsy Ross. Research by historian Marla Miller reveals that George Washington was indeed a client of Elizabeth and John Ross, upholsterers in Philadelphia, suggesting that the story of the making of the first United States flag might be grounded in fact rather than myth after all.²⁹ Whether quaint fiction or historical fact, the popularity of Betsy Ross remains unabated; as Miller notes in her book, *Betsy Ross and the Making of America*, “For most of the twentieth century, the making of the first flag remained an essential episode in any popular history of the Revolution . . . Betsy Ross enjoys the dubious distinction of being one of only four figures from United States history (together with Paul Revere, Daniel Boone, and Elvis Presley) immortalized as a Pez head.”³⁰ Perhaps

more salient than a Pez head is a needlepoint picture done by Wilson for episode #213, “Creatures Great and Small” (1976) depicting the Beatrix Potter character, Mrs. Tittlemouse, in the guise of Betsy Ross, sewing the American flag.³¹ One might well read this picture, with its juxtaposition of the colonial and the Edwardian, the American and the British pasts, as a sort of self-portrait of Wilson herself. Wilson seems to be using here the figure of Mrs. Tittlemouse to navigate her British roots and newfound role as one of the pre-eminent figures in American needlework.

Clearly, Wilson was tuned into the Bicentennial and the Quilt Revival. Did she, like so many others, buy into the many myths that surrounded quilting in this period? Virginia Gunn, in her 1992 essay “From Myth to Maturity: The Evolution of Quilt Scholarship,” argues that the myths surrounding quilting have become a part of quilt history itself. Romantic myths were combined with history as scholars and quilt enthusiasts wrote about American quilts, such as the very widely held belief that the first American quilts were patchwork, rather than wholecloth.³² Wilson’s needlework portrait of Mrs. Tittlemouse in the guise of Betsy Ross suggests that her vision of quilt history was very much bound up in these popular ideas—and indeed, her 1979 book, *Erica Wilson’s Quilts of America*, does much to perpetuate myths of the American quilting past. She wrote,

France has petit point, England has smocking, Scandinavia has white openwork embroidery. But patchwork is a needle art that is America’s own, and perhaps no other art form so symbolizes the pioneer values of thrift, industry, and ingenuity that built America. For the New England colonists and later for the settlers of America’s West, quilting was a necessity, not only because it provided warm bedcovers, insulation against harsh winters, and a means of renewing worn clothing; but also because it acted, in some measure, as solace to the strong women who spent their days struggling to survive. Out of these needs and a scarcity of fabrics, a brilliant art form emerged—patchwork quilts.³³

A few pages later, Wilson addresses the utter lack of quilts that have survived from the colonial period, echoing another popular myth by asserting that, “None of the earliest American quilts have survived to the present because they were made of fabric already worn thin with age.”³⁴ Wilson believed that colonial quilts had, by necessity, been patchwork, crafted in

a random pattern of a large assortment of drab-colored scrap fabrics.

Of particular interest to Wilson were embroidered colonial quilts and other bedcoverings. In *Erica Wilson's Embroidery Book*, she noted that in the eighteenth century, "Busy Colonial housewives set to work to embroider 'quilts, coverlids, counterpins,' and 'bedticks' in crewel embroidery."³⁵

Fig. 9. *Vegetable Garden* quilt. Mary Lee Kennedy, c. 1973. Courtesy of the Michigan State University Museum and the Michigan Quilt Project. Photo by Pearl Yee Wong.

The late Victorian crazy quilts were, from Wilson's point of view, the first return to the patchwork of the colonial past, and thus crazy quilts were particularly fascinating to her.³⁶ No doubt, Wilson was attracted to crazy quilts because of their embroidered embellishment, the art form in which Wilson was most prolific. Indeed, she suggested that modern quiltmakers should return to this combination of appliqué and embroidery with patchwork, as the "result" of a quilt is "completely different when stitchery is added."³⁷ For traditional crazy quilts, she advocated using stitches such as feather stitch, herringbone stitch, and French knots, while satin stitch, stem stitch, split stitch, and couching were all recommended by Wilson as modes of embellishment for appliquéd art quilts.³⁸ Certainly, many quiltmakers in the 1970s learned the embroidery stitches that they incorporated into their crazy quilts from *Erica*.

A search of "embroidery" on the Quilt Index website yields several embroidered quilts from the 1970s, with techniques including satin stitch, cross stitch, and French knots. At least one of these bears Wilson's particular influence. The record for *Vegetable Garden* (fig. 9, color plate x), an embroidered appliqué sampler quilt made by Mary Lee Kennedy of Cadillac, Michigan, in 1973 or 1975, states that, "The embroidery and center of the quilt are from a pattern."⁴⁰ Wilson published numerous embroidery kits featuring vegetable motifs, including Hiawatha Creative Crewel's 1969 "Rope of Vegetables," and the vegetables in Kennedy's quilt look to have been modified from these.

Erica Wilson and Quilt Scholarship

While Erica Wilson had an influence on quiltmaking practice in the 1970s, she also had an influence on the nascent discipline of quilt history. Her work has been cited in various studies on quiltmaking, from scholarly essays to college syllabi. For example, Janet Catherine Berlo cites *Erica Wilson's Quilts of America* as her source on the Museum of American Folk Art and *Good Housekeeping* "Great Quilt Contest" (50 states quilt contest of 1975) in her essay, "Feminism and Nationalism in the Construction of a Quilt Heritage in the United States in the 20th Century."⁴¹ Erica Wilson had worked with Robert H. Kline, then President of the United States Historical Society and the Museum of American Folk Art to present the fifty-one winning quilts in her book, along with her own commentary and technical instructions.⁴² *Quilts of America* is also cited as recommended

reading in a course syllabus, “The Art of the Quilt,” taught by Sylvia Sherertz at Yale University in 1995. Of the book, the professor states, “Good history of quilts in the United States. It also has great quotes.”⁴³

The 1970s was a decade of tremendous interest in folk art forms such as quilting and embroidery, but of limited information and resources for scholarly study of those techniques. Quilt historian Gaye Ingram noted Erica Wilson’s importance to the growing, but still relatively small, pool of literature available in the 1970s in an email to a “newbie,” posted to *Quilthistory.com* in 2006.

What seems to hold all these [the various needle arts, including quilting] together—and this might be my perspective, which is clearly traditional and historical in orientation—is the interaction of tradition with new materials and techniques and visible examples. But always there seems to be history (NB Erica Wilson’s important book on historical embroidery techniques, pub’d in late 70’s or 80’s)—the “rediscovery” of metallic threads in embroidery, e.g., the Eastern embroideries, the medieval embroideries, etc.⁴⁴

Ingram’s email indicates that in the 1970s, there was not so much of a divide between quilt scholarship and the history of other textile arts or needlework techniques. Instead, as Ingram said, an interest in history held all of these disparate objects of study together. So it was in *Erica*.

The importance of Erica Wilson’s PBS program to the Bicentennial-era revival of interest in the needle arts and as a model for future television craft programming is enormous. The revival of interest in embroidery that Wilson led parallels the Quilt Revival, which dominated American craft sewing in the 1970s. In several episodes of *Erica*, one can see clearly how one art overlapped the other—for example, embellishing a quilt top with crewel embroidery. As this paper has presented, although Wilson is usually associated with embroidery (and especially surface freestyle embroidery), the seminal *Erica* series also explored quilt-related topics, including patchwork, appliqué, whitework, and “quiltpoint.” Ultimately, her interest in the practice, study, and teaching of the needle arts—including quilting—and her own nostalgia for the colonial period and zeal for the Bicentennial places Wilson squarely within the milieu of the Quilt Revival. It is the author’s hope that this essay for *Uncoverings*, along with the collection of episodes of *Erica* and later quilting and needlework pro-

grams recently made available by WGBH Media Library and Archives at openvault.wgbh.org/, inspires other scholars to continue the study of Erica Wilson's work and legacy.⁴⁵

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A: List of Episodes of *Erica* Digitized by WGBH Boston Media Library and Archives in 2013

1971

Episode 101: Ticking Sampler

Episode 104: Bargello

Episode 105: Graphics from A to Z

Episode 106: Space Age Canvas

Episode 107: Turkey Work

Episode 108: Just Ties

Episode 109: Christmas Tree

Episode 110: Satin Stitch

Episode 111: Thinking Big

Episode 112: Designing Needlepoint

Episode 113: Chains

Episode 114: Thinking Bigger

Episode 115: Designs from China

Episode 116: Crewel Point

Episode 117: Shisha Work

Episode 118: Roumanian Stitch

1972

Episode 120: Sentiments in Stitches

Episode 121: Oriental Gold

Episode 122: Geometric Needlepoint

Episode 123: Cross Stitch

Episode 124: Needle Painting

Episode 125: Bell Pulls, Borders, and Bandings

Episode 126: Stitches in Needlepoint

1975

Episode 201: Patchwork

1976

Episode 203: 3D Collage

Episode 209: New Points in Needlepoint

Episode 211: Native American Treasures

Episode 212: Fun, Fashion, and Costumes

Episode 213: Creatures Great and Small

Episode 215: Appliqué

Notes and References

1. The school, which was founded in 1872 as the School of Art Needlework, became the Royal School of Art Needlework upon receiving the patronage of Queen Victoria three years later. In 1922, “Art” was dropped from the title, and the school name became The Royal School of Needlework. The School had an important impact on American embroidery fashion, particularly in the 1870s when faculty works exhibited at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia inspired the redwork craze in the United States. http://www.royal-needlework.org.uk/content/13/royal_school_of_needlework_history; accessed February 3, 2015. The importance of the School for American redwork is noted in Marsha MacDowell, Justine Richardson, Mary Worrall, Amanda Sikarskie, and Steve Cohen, “Quilted Together: Material Culture Pedagogy and the Quilt Index, a Digital Repository of Thematic Collections,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 47, no. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn, 2013), 154.
2. Erica Wilson Nantucket, <http://www.ericawilson.com/aboutUs.html>; accessed March 9, 2015.
3. Erica Wilson, *Crewel Embroidery* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962); information about its sales figures comes from Erica Wilson Nantucket, <http://www.ericawilson.com/aboutUs.html>; accessed March 9, 2015; Erica Wilson, *Erica Wilson’s Quilts of America*, (Birmingham: Oxmoor House, Inc., 1979).
4. See <http://www.ericawilson.com> for the Erica Wilson Nantucket Boutique.
5. Erica Wilson, *More Needleplay* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1979), 7.

6. BBC Genome Project, <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/schedules/bbccone/london/1977-07-03>; accessed March 9, 2015.
7. Wilson, *More Needleplay*, 7.
8. Veronica Horwell, "Erica Wilson obituary," *The Guardian*, January 2, 2012.
9. Interestingly, *Erica* was filmed in the studio next to the one that Julia Child used. Child's own program, *The French Chef*, debuted on WGBH in 1963.
10. Horwell, "Erica Wilson obituary."
11. National Educational Television (NET): Subject Description, UM Libraries, <http://web.archive.org/web/20120822192909/http://www.lib.umd.edu/NPBA/subinfo/net.html>; accessed March 9, 2015.
12. Carolyn N. Brooks, "National Education Television Center," The Museum of Broadcast Communications, *Encyclopedia of Television*, <http://www.museum.tv/eotv/nationaleduc.htm>; accessed March 9, 2015.
13. Ibid.
14. Peter J. Boyer, "Hartford N. Gunn Jr. is Dead; Public Broadcasting Founder," *The New York Times*, January 3, 1986. <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/01/03/obituaries/hartford-n-gunn-jr-is-dead-public-broadcasting-founder.html>; accessed March 9, 2015.
15. Wilson, *More Needleplay*, 10.
16. Ibid., 7.
17. Wilson may mean here that her great-grandmother acquired the skirt at the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London in 1851, as Paris did not host an *Exposition Universelle* in that year. France did, however, have an exhibit at London's Great Exhibition.
18. Wilson, *More Needleplay*, 10.
19. While the term was used somewhat interchangeably with "counterpoint" in medieval England, Erica Wilson gives the term "quiltpoint" its modern meaning of the replication of traditional quilt patterns in needlepoint. I am unsure of whether Wilson herself coined this new usage of the term.
20. Wilson, *More Needleplay*, 18.
21. Ibid., 19.
22. The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities is now called Historic New England.
23. Notably these were almost entirely all countries that had been colonized or otherwise subjugated by the British Empire. Wilson's father was a colonel in the British military, and she had been born at a time when Britain still held most of its imperial possessions. Shisha, pronounced with a short 'i,' as in "ship," is the art of embroidering small mirrors onto fabric. *Shisha* is a traditional embroidery technique in northwest India and Pakistan.
24. A sampler is a piece of embroidery created to demonstrate one's competence in various stitches. They were often done by young girls as a part of both their domestic and moral education.
25. Lurex is the trademark name for a metallic-looking yarn.
26. The episode title is a reference to the popular books and BBC television series *All Creatures Great and Small*, featuring British country veterinarian James Herriot.
27. Email from Virginia Vis to author, May 29 and 31, 2013.
28. Erica Wilson, "You Can Paint Quilt Fabric?" *Needleplay*, *Chicago Tribune*, July 29, 1979.
29. Marla R. Miller, *Betsy Ross and the Making of America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2010), 8–9.
30. Ibid., 5–6.
31. Mrs. Tittlemouse, a wood mouse who lives in a "funny house," is the title character of

- the Beatrix Potter story, *The Tale of Mrs. Tittlemouse*, first published in 1910.
32. Virginia Gunn, "From Myth to Maturity: The Evolution of Quilt Scholarship," *Uncoverings*, ed. Laurel Horton (San Francisco: American Quilt Study Group, 1992), 194.
 33. Wilson, *Erica Wilson's Quilts of America*, 2.
 34. *Ibid.*, 6.
 35. Erica Wilson, *Erica Wilson's Embroidery Book*, (New York: Scribner, 2nd ed., 1973), 8-9.
 36. Wilson, *Erica Wilson's Quilts of America*, 6.
 37. Wilson, *Erica Wilson's Embroidery Book*, 336.
 38. Wilson, *Erica Wilson's Quilts of America*, 142-145.
 39. The Quilt Index, search results for "embroidery," http://www.quiltindex.org/search_results.php?page=2&page10=0&pattern_name=&quilter=&quilting_group=&quilt_id=&overall_loc=&city_made=&state_made=Any%20State&province_made=&country_made=&period=Any&start_year=&end_year=&owner_name=&qproject=Any&collection=Any&predom_color=&spec_color=&overall_color=&FiberTypesF035=&FabricTypeF036=&FabPrintF037=&publications=embroidery&religious=&Search=Search; accessed March 9, 2015.
 40. Mary Lee Kennedy, *Vegetable Garden*, 1973 or 1975, from Michigan State University Museum, Michigan Quilt Project, published in *The Quilt Index*, <http://www.quiltindex.org/basicdisplay.php?kid=1E-3D-125E>; March 9, 2015.
 41. Janet Catherine Berlo, "Feminism and Nationalism in the Construction of a Quilt Heritage in the United States in the 20th Century," *The Quilt Index*, <http://www.quiltindex.org/essay.php?kid=3-98-22>; accessed March 9, 2015.
 42. Wilson, *Erica Wilson's Quilts of America*, 1.
 43. Sylvia Sherertz, "The Art of the Quilt," Yale University syllabus, 1995. <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1995/4/95.04.04.x.html>; accessed March 9, 2015.
 44. Gaye Ingram, "Email to a Newbie," November 1, 2006; <http://www.quilthistory.com/2006/270.htm>.
 45. WGBH Open Vault, search results for "Erica," http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog?f%5Bmedia_sim%5D%5B%5D=Video&q=erica&tutf8=%E2%9C%9C; accessed March 9, 2015.