

# Uncoverings

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## A Passion for Quiltmaking

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My title comes from a question I raised in Pat Ferrero's film, *QUILTS IN WOMEN'S LIVES*. In the film I wondered why there is so much emotion invested in quiltmaking? Why do people feel so passionate about this craft? This intense interest that I feel about quiltmaking has also been expressed by other quiltmakers. How can the making of bed covers arouse such zeal, such passion and intensity? What is there about quiltmaking that is so all-encompassing?

I have been trying to find answers. I have examined my experiences and I have talked to other quiltmakers. I shall try to articulate reasons why I think quiltmaking evokes these kinds of feelings.

When I reached the age of 50 a shocking thought occurred to me. Now that I was half a century old, I would need to start to think about retirement! My first thoughts were not thoughts at all, but a panic reaction to the idea of future change.

I had been very actively involved in teaching young children. Teaching Kindergarten had required much energy and devotion, but I was challenged and content in my work. Life stretched out ahead of me with a seemingly endless parade of more, and yet more five year old children and their accompanying problems and challenges — that is, until I hit that 50 year old mark. I pushed the idea of retirement into my subconscious, and went back to teaching — this time to the then new experimental program of Follow Through. Occasionally the idea of retirement would peek out into my conscious thought, and firmly I would bury it again.

About this time I made a commitment to a friend who greatly admired my quilts. At Christmas I told her that I would help her make a

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quilt the following year. My mother, with whom I had learned to quilt, had recently died, and I had brought all of her quilting equipment from Ohio to California. In helping my friend, I also revived my interest in quilt making. While I refreshed my recollections of how to go about making a quilt, we worked together on her project. My friend turned out to be an apt pupil and became an excellent quilter. We finished her quilt just about the time the quilt revival of the past decade began.

I had the feeling that that quilt revival was meant just for me. I reveled in all of the new books that came out. I especially loved the historical books with the colored plates of beautiful quilts. With another friend we went searching through the new quilt stores to find the "right" quilt for my friend to take to Great Britain as a special gift.

About that time that little thought about retirement pushed its way out of my subconscious again. This time I embraced the idea of retiring. I knew that I could spend the rest of my life making quilts. From that time on I looked forward to the time when my life would be free from school routines, bells and schedules. I have been retired for more than two years now, my life is filled with quilts and quilt making, and I have never been more content.

In 1977, I impulsively decided to attend the Lincoln Quilt Symposium. By that time I realized that I had developed a passion for making quilts, but because I mostly worked alone, I did not know how other quiltmakers were feeling about their craft. Walking into the auditorium, that first day of the symposium, I suddenly became aware that here were 500 women who felt as I did about making quilts. I felt a wonderful sense of community. I left the symposium greatly enriched by the knowledge that this craft, which had become all consuming to me was shared by many others and that it was a valid form of expression and creativity.

Just recently another experience indicated to me how widespread is this passion people feel for quilting. Marilyn Davis, owner of the fabric store, Patience Corners in Albany, California, recently conducted a survey of quilters. The last question on the survey dealt with the affective part of quilting, and asked the quilter to express, if possible, what quilting meant to her. I am indebted to Marilyn for sharing this part of the survey with me. Most of those who filled out the survey made an effort to respond to this question. The responses were poignant and touching.

Most quilters, above all, believed their quilting to be a creative expression of their ideas. They talked about the tactile pleasure they had in working with fabrics. Some talked about the therapeutic quality of

the act of quilting, its calming and restful effect. For one, it relieved her depression; for others, it opened doors to friendships especially with women of different ages. Some women found supportiveness among other women and identified with the women's movement through their quilting. Another important area was the linkage with the past, with their ancestors, or with women who have gone before, and a link with their children and friends now.

I should like to share with you what one woman eloquently wrote. She seemed to sum up what all of the others were saying.

Quilting is the emotional center of my life. The planning is my most creative outlet and the piecing and quilting my meditation. I make quilts as an act of love for my friends and family. Each quilt is a story (abstract) which tells of feelings and ideas. My quilts are a journal.

Quilting is a process, both trivial and profound. There are certain tasks (marking) which seem tedious and others, equally as routine and demanding precision (piecing) which seem glorious. Choosing fabrics is exhilarating and frustrating. There is in the process, in its life, which is at least a year for a bed-sized piece, the evolution of a relationship with the work.

I feel related to the women who made the quilts shown in the books I pore over. I study their work and see into their most intimate moments.

I am also a participant in the quilts my friends make. I share the joy and sorrow I know is captured in their work. Quilting ties me to my most beloved grandmother. I have slept under the quilt she made for me since I was sixteen. When I began to make quilts I felt as if a central part of me had come home.

Quilts are humble and magnificent. They are bed covers for warmth and decoration for the most private room.

I rapture on. As is apparent quilting is a rich, magic craft, akin, I think, to the making of boats and tools and furniture. Quilts are practical, especially when made from scraps, and useful and beautiful. They are made by hand over a long stretch of time. They *emerge* from piece to piece, block to block, section to section. The pieced top emerges again when quilted and again as it ages and fades and softens with use. The process is, from the first notion of color and design through to the end of its life, an unfolding story.

Obviously, others feel a great passion for quilting, too. I have

some subjective, personal opinions about the questions I first posed concerning the passion and emotion in quilting.

First and foremost, quilting is a folk art and a craft. As such, its first requirement is that one who would make quilts must learn the craft—all of it, not just some portion of the craft. Once learned, the practitioner is free to explore creatively within the limits set by function and the materials used. The use and size of a quilt determine its shape and dimensions. The fabric and tools determine what can be done with it.

Women of the past acquired these skills early in life. Sewing was a necessity, and the women in a family had the responsibility for clothing the family and providing the bed covers and other necessary textiles. Sometimes these were processed in the home from the original fiber source, including spinning, weaving and sewing. Girls learned to sew at a very early age, and quilting skills were learned along with garment making. Quilting became an outlet for creative ideas, in part because women were systematically excluded from serious formal art education.

Today sewing skills are often harder for modern women to acquire. Several generations of women have not had to sew, and chose not to. Those who choose to sew today often come to it at a much later age, and have no sewing models in the home. Still, many women are learning to do fine stitching of various kinds, and are doing it very well. Women are coming to needlework by choice, because they find values and means of self-expression, as well as utility, in sewing. Our young quiltmakers want to make all the quilt, not just part of it. Many are rejecting the statement that Rose Kretzinger wrote in her book, *THE ROMANCE OF THE PATCHWORK QUILT IN AMERICA*, "When you have finished your "top" turn it over to an experienced quilter, for a beautiful quilt may be made or marred by the quilting." Many quiltmakers want to do all of the work on their quilts.

There is room for less than perfect quilting when one is learning a craft. It says something about the integrity of the quilter when she insists upon having a part in all of the processes. I personally feel that a person loses credibility as a quilter if she does not perform all of the steps in making a quilt.

As one goes through the various stages of making a quilt, there is a relationship that evolves between the maker and the quilt. When the quiltmaker misses one of the phases of quilting one loses the tactile and textural experiences that are an integral part of quilting.

I would like to see credit given to those skilled quilters who quilt other

people's quilt tops, and I would like to believe that in our time the "anonymous" quilter will disappear.

As a folk art quilting relates intimately to people's lives and their culture. The passion and emotion come from the intertwining of the life experiences of the maker and those with whom the quilt has intimate contact. All of the painstaking work is worthwhile when this made object, the quilt, conveys a message of caring to someone dear. The quiltmaker reveals herself when she makes choices and decisions about pattern, fabric, color, texture and workmanship, and makes a strong statement about herself. That many women have found a means of defining their identity within this folk art form, whether the quilt is signed or not, is an emotion laden thought.

Ours is a wordy, verbose society. We try to articulate all of our experiences and ideas with language. But there remains a need to express some ideas in an intuitive, non-verbal form. Writing this paper, for example, is almost counterproductive, for I am trying to convey, with words, my feelings about making quilts. In so doing, I lose some of the essence of quilting.

Making a quilt is an organic process, closely related to the deepest feelings one has about life and the society in which one lives, and those individuals with whom one is most intimate. As one progresses with the craft and one's skills improve, I believe the quiltmaker comes closer to the core of what her life and beliefs are all about. It is the union of the hands with the mind and the spirit. One's identity as a person becomes clarified and belief and practice and craft become a celebration of that life.