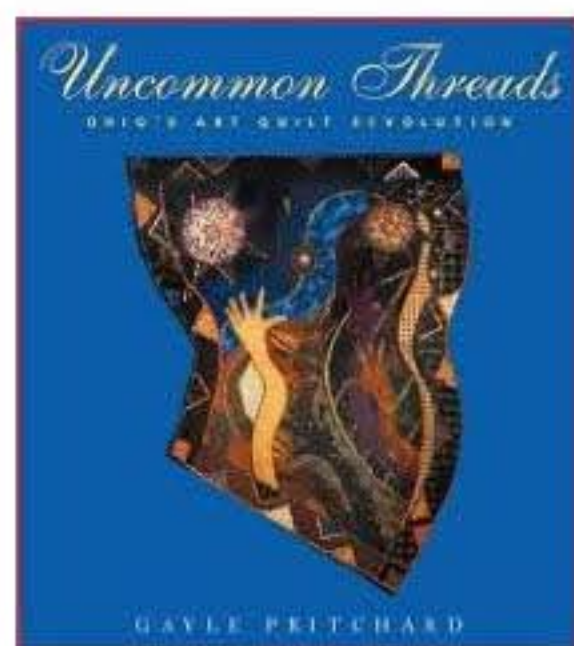


Sometimes you have to wonder which came first, the art quilt or the art quilter.

Art Quilting in the Past?

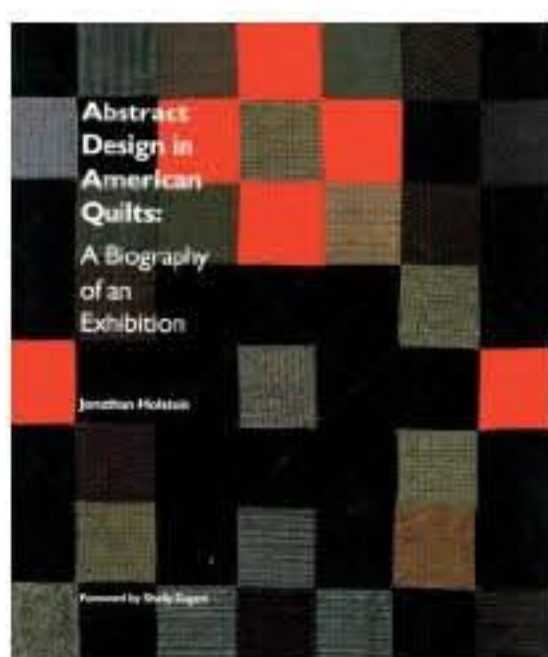
You might use the argument that when people began to put quilts on their wall that quilting as art was born. But if you go back to Colonial America you discover that the master bedroom was also the sitting room. The finery around the bed including the bedcoverings and canopy draperies were meant for show. Whether it was a whole-cloth, broderie perse or medallion quilt the center of the quilt was the focal point because that was what would be seen between the drawn drapes.



There is no doubt in my mind that much as a quilters today might make an art quilt to hang above their mantel the well-to-do women who so long ago made these fine bed quilts considered them to be an important part of the room's decor. After all it was there that guests would be brought for conversation and tea.

Also as I study quilters throughout our past I realize how important it was to them that they make something beautiful in their quilting. Of course society didn't see these quilts as art and the quilters would never have thought to call themselves an artist.

The Discovery of Art in Quilts

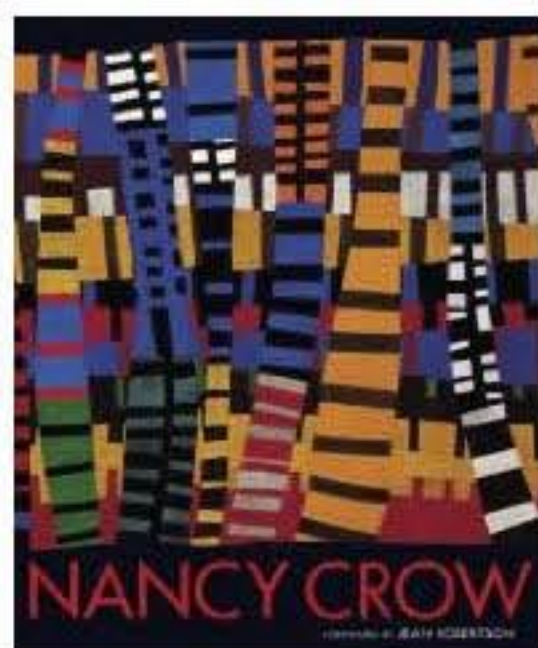


This quietly began to change in the late 1960s when two art collectors, Jonathan Holstein and Gale van der Hoof, recognized that quilts could display abstract art much like the modern art that was in vogue at the time. They began to collect quilts that caught their eye for their artistic expression. With their enthusiasm for these quilts as art they were able to convince the Whitney Museum in New York to do an exhibition. I find it most amusing that this display replaced an Andy Warhol exhibit of cow wallpaper.¹ The presentation titled "Abstract Design in American Quilts" was such a hit that the exhibit went on to travel around

the United States and to Europe. Soon after that Amish Quilts were discovered by art aficionados and people began to buy them as art.

Artist's Turn to Quilts as Art

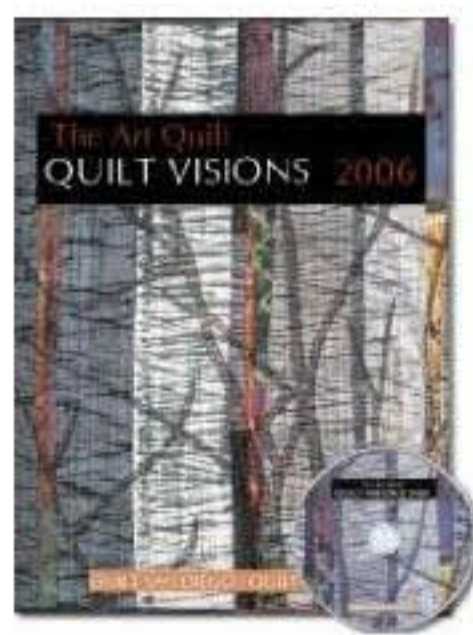
While the early emphasis was on art in quilts of the past it wasn't long before artists began to create new quilts as art. You notice I said "artists". The quilt art movement was primarily started by artists who originally created in other art media. For example early art quilter Michael James had been trained in painting and print making while Nancy Crow began her art career in ceramics and weaving. It has been more recently that quilters have gone from traditional quilting to quilt art.



Rejected by Traditional Quilt Shows

In the beginning there was a dearth of places to show art quilts as quilt guilds and fairs favored traditional quilts.

They often had rules like insisting that entries must have batting which eliminated some art quilts. In addition judges favored traditional quilts with fine quilting and perfect mitered corners over creativity.



This was nothing new. The Sears National Quilt Contest featured at the 1933 World's Fair encouraged quilters to make modern quilts featuring the fair's theme, "A Century of Progress". To the ire of many who made such a quilt the judges gave the top awards to traditional quilts. So it's not surprising that quilt artists in the later part of the century still had to deal with this prejudice against innovative quilts.

Given the lack of venues for art quilts [Quilt National](#) was born in a barn in Athens, Ohio in 1970 and on the west coast [Quilt San Diego \(now Visions\)](#) came to be in 1985. They are both well known show cases for quilt art. But the process has been slow and there has always been a real need for both major and small quilt shows to accept and

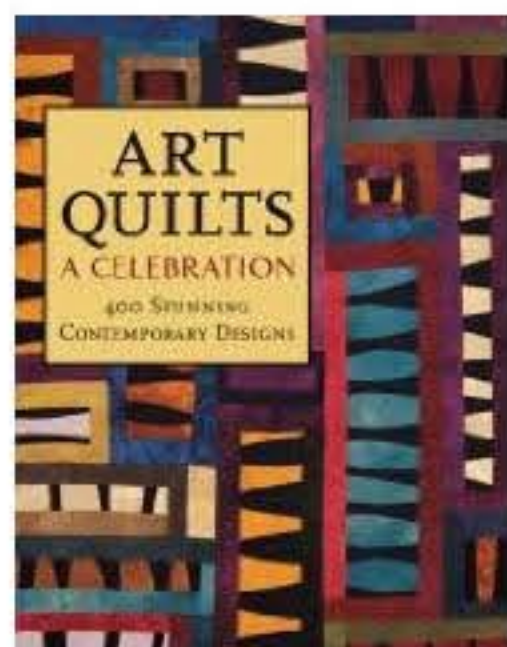
even promote art quilting.

In 1988 frustrated art quilter, Elaine Plogman, responded to this problem by declaring that "we are turning ourselves into quilting machines when we place more value on the quality of work than on the design of the work."²

New Opportunities but Limitations Still Remain

Even in the new millennium this attitude remains among some quilters. In 2004 Hollis Chatelain's quilt, "[Precious Water](#)", won Best of Show at Houston. It is hand painted with dyes and is machine quilted using thread painting consisting of 200 different thread colors. Yet a newspaper article questioned that, though this winning quilt was a work of artistry, was really a quilt? But most quilters admired it as an amazing art quilt.

Today we find a positive attitude toward art quilting and many quilters are trying their hand at creating quilt art. They are taking classes in fabric dyeing, painting and stamping. They are trying their hand at embellishing with beads and even found objects. Some quilters are making wearable art and are showing their creations at quilt shows. A few are pushing the old boundaries with quilts in unusual shapes. While quilters are turning to art, artists are still discovering textiles as a media for their art.



We are so fortunate to live in a time where there are so many choices open to quilters. Many guilds include programs and classes on art quilting in their schedule and some have an art quilting group as well. But we still need to be constantly aware of the ways we limit our creativity with the old images of what a quilt "should" be like.

© 2008 Judy Anne Breneman

References:

¹ p112, "[American Quiltmaking 1970-2000](#)" by Elanore Levine

² p44, "[Uncommon Threads: Ohio's Art Quilt Revolution](#)", by Gayle Pritchard