

Contemporary American Quilts: An International Review

by Michele Walker

A designer and contemporary quilt artist and author, Michele Walker was one of three jurors who picked a show of contemporary American quilts for an exhibition in Britain funded by the British Crafts Council. The exhibition gave British quiltmakers a needed look at the work of the most provocative and innovative American quilt artists. Ms. Walker here discusses the contemporary quilting milieu in Britain, and describes the exhibition's impact on that scene.

-Editors' Note

Interest in quilting has, since the 1970s, grown as prodigiously in Britain as it has in other parts of the world. There as elsewhere, the majority of those involved in the revival have taken up quilting as a pastime.

The boom, largely American-inspired, continued during the past decade despite a recession, and its financial potential has not escaped notice. A number of populist quilting events, publications, textile lines, etc., have emerged to cater to this ever-growing audience. Quilting at this level has unquestionably enrolled the largest number of contemporary makers and should not be underrated. Yet it represents only one area of quilting, and the work which comes from it is rarely innovative, stimulating or challenging. Good technique is the main criterion of judgment.

After a promising start in the early 1980s, there are still only a small number of imaginative quiltmakers working in Britain, and few seem to be emerging from the younger generation. For quiltmakers who are interested in working at this level, Britain still has no important juried shows of the caliber of America's Quilt National. So contemporary British quiltmakers look to show their quilts in more prestigious exhibitions abroad. Well-established contemporary British quiltmakers with international reputations, such as Pauline Burbidge, are represented by one-person shows. But the stimulation which might come from large, mixed exhibitions displaying diversity in attitude, design and technique has been sadly lacking.

British quiltmakers have had some exposure to American quilts both antique and contemporary. Historic (or antique) American quilts were first exhibited in London in 1974 as part of a touring show *American Pieced Quilts*, circulated by the Smithsonian Institution. For a British maker like myself, who had previously associated patchwork solely with hexagons and paper templates, this show offered an exciting

alternative in terms of color and design and the use of fabric on a large scale. It inspired a new generation of makers with an art school training.

In 1978 Beth and Jeffrey Gutcheon visited Britain and introduced the concept of repeated block design in a series of workshops and lectures. They were followed by Michael James who continues to retain strong connections with British makers. By the early 1980s the work of such quiltmakers as Nancy Crow, Jan Myers-Newberry and Linda McDonald was becoming familiar to the British audience through lecture tours and workshops. British quiltmakers who wished to work at this level, however, have found it very difficult at home.

It was against this background that in 1991 Linda Theophilus, Head of Exhibitions at the British Crafts Council (she was involved in the 1982 Council exhibition, *Quilting Patchwork, Applique 1700-1982, Sewing as a Woman's Art*) announced that it intended to organize and finance a selected exhibition of contemporary American quilts.

The backing of the Crafts Council for this show indicated to the British public that it was to be a reputable event. The Council, publicly funded, is the national body which supports and promotes contemporary crafts in England, Wales and Scotland. It aims also to encourage public understanding of craft, and extend its boundaries, in Britain.

In recent years a change in Council policy has enabled foreign makers to be included in its exhibitions. It was felt that a show of contemporary American quilts would be of great interest not only to British makers with whom they share a tradition, but to a wider audience both within and beyond the world of textiles. It was the first time that an event of this nature had originated in Britain.

The show was researched and selected by myself, Pauline Burbidge, Linda Theophilus and Penny McMorris (American quilt historian and writer). Our main aim was to present the strength and diversity of innovative, contemporary American quilting.

From the outset it was decided to show the work not only of well-known, established makers, who have been influential since the beginning of the 1970s revival, but also that of newcomers, or those working outside the "mainstream" who are not making quilts in the traditional sense. This latter group was the most difficult to contact, and this was the area in which we felt we would have liked more entries.

Approximately 200 letters were sent, mainly to individual makers but also to organizations, etc., which we thought

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might be able to make recommendations. We also tried to follow up any work we had seen in previous exhibitions or publications that appeared interesting.

From about 100 replies, we made a selection (from slides and statements) of 46 pieces of work from 35 makers. Slides were first seen by Penny McMorris, who then sent them to the Crafts Council together with her comments so that they could be incorporated with our selection.

The exhibition occupied both galleries at the Crafts Council in London, approximately 3,000 square feet. Although it was not selected with specific categories in mind, it was when hung, organized into the sections described below.

The exhibition began with new pieces from Michael James and Nancy Crow, well-established makers who have been instrumental in both countries in encouraging this revival.

Political quilts followed, the work of makers who have chosen to exploit the paradox between the warmth and comfort that a quilt symbolizes with the harsh events of modern life. They addressed issues such as environmental pollution, the Gulf War, the LA riots and divorce. Makers included Merrill Mason, Katherine Knauer, Lee Malerich and Ilisha Helfman. It was this section that many viewers found most interesting. The quilts were seen to be commenting on the times in which they were made and indicated a challenging new direction away from the preoccupation with surface design that has, until the last few years, dominated the present resurgence of interest.

The highly embellished quilt surface, developed by many makers during the 1980s was represented by the work Jane Burch Cochran, and by a GREEN QUILT made as a collaboration by Susan Shie, James Acord, Anne Warren, Therese May (who also submitted a new work) and Terrie Mangat. Parallels can be drawn between the Crazy work made during the same period of the last century with quilts from this section. Today however, the deliberate use of raw edges and unfinished threads directly challenge the traditional standards of order and neatness.

While still adhering to the basics of quilting (several layers of fabric stitched together) many makers are now creating their own "cloth," eschewing the use of commercially dyed and printed fabrics. Linda MacDonald, Nancy Erickson, Lenore Davis, Joan Schulze, Elizabeth Busch and Ellen Zahorec were representative of makers in that section, while Susan Wilchins chose to layer and sculpt the fabric to create a complex textured relief.

The second gallery included the work of Faith Ringgold and Miriam Schapiro. Both are fine artists, instrumental in gaining attention and status for women's art. Barbara MacCallum also addressed issues of gender within a traditional female art form. Her work created the most controversy not only in its subject matter (the work synthesized previous concerns of gender, her experience of living in New

York and having several years earlier nursed a close relative with AIDS) but also in its use of materials not conventionally associated with quilting. Both works conveyed an intimation of disquiet, as did the work of Rise Nagin, with its multi-layered meanings.

Overall, the submissions indicated that American contemporary quilting is diverse, alive and well. The work was vigorous, though at times many quilts displayed a frenetic patterning and embellishment of the surface which made them indistinguishable from each other. There was also a notably common use of either painting directly on the fabric, stenciling, dyeing or using photographic transfer techniques. The tendency for makers to create their own "cloth" is less usual in Britain. From a selectors point of view I found the work of makers less well-known in the quilting world particularly impressive. I think, for example of Ilisha Helfman, Merrill Mason and Barbara MacCallum, none of whom regard themselves as quilters but whose work nevertheless gives the medium a more challenging dimension and new direction. I was also interested in the number of makers exploring political and social themes in their work.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the education section organized a series of events, study days, lectures, workshops, gallery tours and residencies within the galleries to explore in greater depth issues relating to the show and contemporary quilts in general. It was an opportunity for discussion and debate.

The exhibition attracted about 12,000 visitors, treble the number normally expected at that time of the year (July 15 - September 5). It stimulated interest across a wide-ranging audience and certainly challenged people's preconceptions about quilts.

For many viewers it offered a first opportunity to see work previously known only through reproductions in books and lectures, where scale and subtlety of detail is lacking. I am thinking, for example, of Rise Nagin's work "Exile: House and Mountain" and "Dwelling," in which she used layers of translucent fabrics and colors to produce haunting, dream-like imagery. It is only on close inspection that the amount of thought and skill that went into making the work, and the technique, can be appreciated. All too often a quilter's skills (and this applies to both new and old quilts) are reduced to "6 easy steps" in a how-to book.

Judging from the reaction of visitors, many of whom made several visits to the show, and the comments of those who have seen it since it has been on tour, *Contemporary American Quilts* has stimulated a great deal of interest in Britain, particularly through the wide diversity of approaches it illustrated. The traditional American pieced quilt has undeniably been a major influence in Britain during the present quilting revival and this show will undoubtedly foster and strengthen creative links between the two countries in

BOOK ORDERING INFORMATION

the future. It is interesting to note also this resurgence of interest completes a circle, for it was the British quilt styles of the 18th century that played a major role in establishing the strong American tradition. During the 19th century these styles were reinterpreted and developed in a uniquely American way, and now, recognizable descendants, they are returning to re-invigorate their ancestral stock.

Contemporary American Quilts, *a fully illustrated book, accompanied the exhibition and is available in the Gallery Shop. Price £9.50. An education handbook, Exploring Contemporary Quilts, is available from the Crafts Council Gallery Shop at .£5.50, or £6.00 mail order. A major illustrated article discussing modern American quilts was published in the July/August issue of Crafts magazine, available in the Gallery Shop. Price £4.50.*

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