

# The Quilt Journal

Published by  
The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc.  
Louisville, Kentucky

Volume 1, Number 1  
1992



## The Quilt journal: Mission Statement

The past several decades have witnessed an extraordinary, worldwide explosion of interest in exhibiting, making, collecting and studying quilts. Supporting this and in turn supported by it, there has developed an international boom in the gathering, production and dissemination of information on quilts and quilting. Books, periodicals, articles and literature drawing thematic material from the symbolism of traditional American quilt making and quilt folklore have proliferated. Quilt information in non-printed media has experienced commensurate growth. This quilt information extravaganza shows no signs of abating, appears to be recession-proof, and includes material ranging from quilt pulps to the most thoughtful scholarly journals. While the great impetus for this has come from the United States, there has begun to be, as would be expected, feedback from other countries which is influencing and enriching what happens in America. This is particularly true in the area of contemporary quiltmaking but is not confined to that arena. During the two years of planning and review which accompanied the production of "Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt"\* we surveyed this vast outpouring of quilt information in all media. The Quilt Project was particularly interested in identifying the most significant trends in quilt scholarship, the future needs of quilt scholars, and the future of quilt scholarship. We came to three conclusions:

### Infancy of Quilt Scholarship

First, *quilt scholarship in all areas, domestic and international, is in its infancy*, and that, barely. Other significant areas of quilt interest are equally at a beginning. The evidence for this is clear. The number of professionally trained scholars in the field in relation to the number of scholars working in the field is very small, much smaller than in any other area of the decorative arts. American quilts have accounted for more exhibitions in major museums over the past several decades than all other American decorative arts (furniture, glass, samplers, etc.) combined, and those fields are staffed by scores of professional, salaried curators. There is only one quilt curator in an American art museum. Also, most scholars in the field are

women, and very few scholars make their livings in the field. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, while other work done largely by women, such as samplers, had secure niches in the hierarchy of American decorative arts, quilts were until very recently in a sort of art world limbo. Samplers, because they were meant to be hung on the wall like paintings, seemed to have an acceptable functional link to the "high" arts. Quilts, because of their functional nature as bed covers, had no such immediately discernible link and thus had no firm, respected place either in the American decorative arts or in the realm of American folk art. Curatorial careers could not be built around them.

Their status was changed dramatically and forever by those exhibitions which in the 1970s began to show them on the walls of museums to emphasize their design rather than their function. This aspect of quilt history is very new and often conflicts with the traditional views and folklore of quilts. It disturbs not only folklorists, who prefer to see quilts in the context of their social history, but also traditional quilt makers and aficionados who are uncomfortable with the idea of quilts as hanging objects, divorced from their traditional functions. Equally uneasy have been some art historians, who feel that the objects are out of context on museum walls. Thus there is still even within the field great confusion about intent, status, and the role of function and history versus aesthetics. In no other field would there be serious scholars and appreciators of the form who on the one hand want quilts honored for their beauty and the accomplishments of their makers noted, discussed, and praised, yet on the other are opposed to exhibiting them in a way which emphasizes their aesthetics, honors their

*continued on page 2*

### IN THIS ISSUE

Janine Janniere  
A New World  
in the Old:  
European Quilt  
Scholarship ..... 4

Laurel Horton  
Rethinking  
Quilt Projects:  
A Folklorist's  
Perspective ..... 10

makers as artists, and discusses them as significant designed objects. Reproductions of American crafts have been a mainstay of museum shops for decades. In no other field would thousands of women be ready to march on Washington because objects famous in the field had been reproduced for sale. This is a product of one of the field's unique aspects: No other has so many parallel interest groups, whose activities are mutually supportive. No other has an enormous constituency actually working in the craft. Quilt scholars and collectors, quilt makers and dealers, museums collecting and exhibiting quilts and museums devoted entirely to quilts, the contemporary quilt making movement and within that, the rise of a group of highly accomplished quilt artists, a publishing industry centered around the subject, all are interconnected, a phenomenon witnessed in no other field. And all are in their infancy. This ferment, controversy, freshness, is what makes the quilt field so exciting. It has also kept from joining it people trained in art history, museology and aesthetics, who wish to make their livings as scholars in the decorative arts and who would bring to it a needed perspective and professionalism. If more aestheticians wrote about quilts, fewer people would feel uncomfortable with exhibitions that emphasize their aesthetics. If more museums had quilt curators, quilts would be studied and viewed differently by the cultural establishment. If more professionals were attracted to the field and made their livings there, the quantity and quality of scholarship in the field would increase dramatically.

While we have concentrated here on aspects of quilt scholarship, the infancy of the field is no less apparent in its other components: exhibitions, publishing, quilting. It may safely be said that we are at the beginning of a new quilt era in which we will see phenomenal, worldwide development in all areas. It might also be noted that, as a consequence, an extraordinary and unprecedented opportunity exists for documenting and studying the field as it grows and develops. For this reason we have pressed for the establishment of an international quilt index, first proposed and discussed at "Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt" earlier this year. Both the Journal and the Index have been brought under a parent organization, The Quilt Project, to facilitate management. We invite your participation in The Quilt Project which will support efforts of The Quilt Project, this journal, and The International Quilt Index.

### **Interdisciplinary Involvement**

A second conclusion, which grew from our study of current quilt scholarship and our experiences at the Celebration, was that *the future of quilt study is interdisciplinary*. No other decorative art object carries the quantity and quality of significant social and aesthetic information that is to be found in quilts. Embodied in the objects are data of the greatest interest to art historians, social historians, feminist scholars, students of industry and economics, etc. Within the field many scholars have been specializing, a few concentrating on aesthetics,

others on social history, others on quilts as women's work, others on pattern names and origins, others on ephemera, others on the work of specific regions, others on particular types of quilts. As knowledge grows, such specialization will increase. As quilt scholars continue the difficult process of separating quilt folklore from facts, as more hard information is produced by responsibly conducted research and made available to scholars in other fields, the extraordinary nature of the quilting phenomenon will attract increased attention from other disciplines. Conversely, as quilt scholars work to increase their grasp and understanding of the field, they will seek information and methodology from other disciplines, and this will increase contact and interaction among different fields. Once such a process has started, it is self-perpetuating and irreversible, and it seems clearly to be happening. It will be one of the purposes of The Quilt Journal to bring significant work of quilt scholars and other information that might be of interest to the attention of those in other fields. It is equally our intention to alert those in the quilt field to important developments in other fields which bear significantly on quilts. The Index and The Journal will together serve this burgeoning scholarship.

### **International Focus**

The final conclusion was that *in many areas of quilt activity, there will be more international participation*. This will certainly be true in contemporary quilt making, exhibitions, and in many areas of study. Ambitious quilt scholarship is already underway in other countries, and the results are evident in important discoveries, in new exhibitions and in publications. This tempo will increase and will enliven and inform research, quilt exhibitions and quilt making in this country. We intend to seek a wide international audience, to bring significant information generated in other parts of the world to the attention of the American quilt community, and to act as a reference source on important American quilt information for those living and working elsewhere.

There are many admirable publications in this field, and it is not The Journal's wish to compete with any of them. The need, however, for a source of quilt information directed toward other fields and other countries as well as to the American quilt establishment, toward the future, is clear. There is neither already functioning nor in the planning stage, any source of quilt information which deals with our concerns and the concerns of many currently working in the field. It is one of The Journal's missions to facilitate the work of those around the world who will be coming to quilt research from other fields, other places, and with different visions. The Journal will avoid publishing the sorts of information capably reported by others, concentrating instead on quilt issues of interdisciplinary and international interest and important issues avoided, misinterpreted or overlooked elsewhere.

We will act as a filter with a mind, one which will separate

from the enormous flow of quilt information produced in the United States and abroad, things which will be of interest to other disciplines and to quilt professionals and amateurs in this and other countries. Conversely, we will filter out for Americans significant information from other disciplines and places. We intend to search diligently for and publish interesting and provocative articles and reviews which might not otherwise be printed; we intend to offer a forum to quilt scholars with unusual and interesting ideas; we will draw attention to exhibitions, articles and ideas which we feel are important and might be overlooked; we will discuss controversial issues which are not being generally aired where we feel it is appropriate. We will highlight articles and books we might not review but feel people should know about. We will invite all in the field to submit articles and article ideas and will have guest editors from time to time. We will do entire issues on a single subject. We will take critical looks at some publications, conferences, exhibitions. In short, we intend to act as a listening post, a sign post, and a filter. And we intend to do so using the extraordinary talent available among our colleagues in the field. We wish to welcome all of you to our first issue and look forward to communicating important quilt information to you in the years to come.

\*For a description of the Celebration, see The Publisher.

### The Publisher

*The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., was founded in 1981 by Shelly Zegart, Eleanor Bingham Miller and Eunice Ray to survey the state's quilts. An exhibition "Kentucky Quilts: 1800-1900," which traveled widely in the United States and abroad with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, and a catalogue of the same title followed the completion of the survey. The Kentucky project was the first such state-wide quilt survey and has served as a model for many others in the United States and elsewhere in the world. Others of its projects include securing for Kentucky a quilt by the American 19th century master quiltmaker Virginia Ivey, assembling an exhibition of Kentucky quilts for Australia, and giving financial assistance to other quilt groups for special projects. In 1991-1992 it sponsored "Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt," planned to illustrate and further the worldwide growth of interest in quilts and quilting which has developed over the past several decades and provide a wider forum for emerging quilt scholarship. Included were six exhibitions: a re-creation of the 1971 Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition, 'Abstract Design in American Quilts; "A Plain Aesthetic: Lancaster Amish Quilts;" "Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts;" "Quilts Now;" "Narrations: The Quilts of Yvonne Wells and Carolyn Mazloomi;" "Quilt Conceptions: Quilt Designs in Other Media;" and four conferences: "The African-American and the American Quilt;" "Directions in Quilt Scholarship;" "Quilts and Collections: Public, Private and Corporate;" "Toward an International Quilt Bibliography." Two books were published in conjunction with the Celebration: Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition, written by Jonathan Holstein, foreword by Shelly Zegart; and Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts.*

*authored by Cuesta Benberry, forewords by Jonathan Holstein and Shelly Zegart. The Quilt Project, an offshoot of The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., is a new parent organization for this journal and a forthcoming international quilt index.*

### The Editors

*Jonathan Holstein's interest in quilts began in the 1960s when he and Gail van der Hoof began to collect and study quilts, concentrating on their aesthetic qualities. The exhibition they curated at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 1971, 'Abstract Design in American Quilts,' showed quilts for the first time as designed objects and is noted as the starting point for the modern quilt renaissance. Numerous other exhibitions curated by them and drawn from their collection were seen across the United States and abroad and gave wide circulation to their view of quilts as aesthetic objects. These exhibitions were instrumental in creating a worldwide awareness of American quilts. Holstein continues to curate quilt exhibitions. His writing in the field began with the catalogue of the Whitney exhibition. His book The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition, a study of the history and aesthetic basis of American quilts, was published in 1973, and many articles and exhibition catalogues followed. He wrote the introduction and commentaries for The Kentucky Quilt Project's exhibition catalogue, Kentucky Quilts 1800-1900 in 1983 and has been a Director of that group since 1984. In 1991-92, with fellow Directors Shelly Zegart and Eleanor Bingham Miller, he organized and produced "Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt." A new book, Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition, was published in 1992.*

*Eleanor Bingham Miller was a founder of The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., organized in 1981 to survey her state's quilts; and she has been active in all of its projects since then, including the 1991-92 production of "Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt." She is a filmmaker and a partner in Double Play Productions, New York.*

*Shelly Zegart was a founding director in 1981 of The Kentucky Quilt Project, the first state documentation project. Her initial interest in collecting quilts expanded with the Kentucky state survey to a full-time involvement in the field. Zegart lectures on all aspects of quilt history and aesthetics. She has curated many exhibitions here and abroad, including an exhibition of Kentucky quilts in Australia. In 1992 she curated "Quilts Now," an exhibition of contemporary quilts. Her articles have appeared in numerous publications. In 1992, she wrote forewords for Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition and Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts. She continues to act as an advisor to other groups conducting state quilt surveys. In 1991-92 with fellow quilt project directors Jonathan Holstein and Eleanor Bingham Miller she organized and produced "Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt."*