2008

Fabric as a Narrative: Constructing a Global Quilting Tradition

Evan Bland
*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

Laura Chapman
*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

Ashley Ermel
*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

Takako Iwatani
*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

Tanna Kimmerling
*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

*See next page for additional authors*

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CONSTRUCTING A GLOBAL QUILTING TRADITION

FABRIC AS A NARRATIVE
People seem to identify with quilts. Maybe they slept under one as a child at their grandmother’s house. Maybe they received one as a family heirloom or painstakingly crafted one themselves. Whatever the case, people all over the world connect with quilts.

As we began researching quilting from an international perspective, we learned virtually every continent has a quilting tradition. Many of those traditions are connected as well, through war or trade or colonialism, and we have tried, with the stories in this magazine, to explore the rich history of quilting around the globe.

In addition, we quickly learned that just as people connect with quilts, quilts can connect people, and we tell those stories here as well. As a creative outlet, a means of revenue and a social focal point, they have been especially influential in women’s lives. Some people use quilting as a form of outreach, either to teach others a valuable skill or to make a comforting wrap for someone in need. Others, like those at the International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, Neb., and other museums, study quilts as historical objects. Some say their beauty alone makes them worthy of museum display, whether they were made as utilitarian bed covers or intended as “art quilts” from the outset.

Quilts and quilting seemed an especially timely topic because the International Quilt Study Center was preparing to open its museum in Lincoln. To get the international story, six student reporters, a student photographer, two broadcasting students and an advertising student traveled to the Festival of Quilts in Birmingham, England, in August 2007. Another print reporter went home to Japan to explore quilting traditions there.

The reporters talked to people from all over the world – quilt historians and curators, quilt guild leaders, vendors who sell quilting supplies, quilters who set out consciously to create art and quilters who simply enjoy the process.

Quilters, we learned, are eager to share their knowledge and passion, and this project would not have been possible without the help of all the fine people we met along the way. We were especially inspired by the enthusiasm and encouragement of Sara Dillow of Fremont, Neb., who was our first source in our exploration of the world of quilting. We are saddened that her unexpected death in February means that she will never get to read these stories for which she provided so much impetus.

Our students’ work was aided immensely by Bridget Long of Ashwell, England, who took us into her village and shared her quilting expertise with us. Finally, thank you to Patricia Crews and the staff at the International Quilt Study Center who took the time to talk to us and to help us better understand their world.
“Quilt” and “quilters.”

The words have always held narrow, rather precise connotations. Many people initially envision an elderly grandmother, rocking slowly in her chair, piecing together a patchwork quilt out of old fabrics by the light of her living room fireplace.

But not all of today’s quilters are 80-year-old women, and not all of today’s quilts are traditional patchwork. Some of them aren’t even close.

Michael James, professor and chairman of the textiles, clothing and design department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said his passion for fabrics and quilting led him to his career at the university. While quilting may be unorthodox for his gender, James said he takes pride in what he does.

“I’ve always identified myself as a quilt maker,” he said, “but it’s a stigma to have it associated with what your grandma used to do.”

Despite the common clichés surrounding quilts and their makers, the truth is quilts are made by people of all ages and are found almost everywhere on the planet — and in more places than on the bed.

And yet, at least stereotypically, quilts are considered high in sentimental value but low in artistic value.

The roughly 27.7 million quilters in the United States are part of a $3.3 billion industry. With each quilting household in the United States spending an average of $172 on quilt projects and supplies every year, it’s clear that quilting is a bigger part of the nation’s economy than people may think — and that’s not even including the amount of money spent on quilting in the rest of the world.

But quilting isn’t just about dollars and cents. For many, it’s an art form. Although quilts have a lengthy history as utilitarian objects that kept people warm and clothed, today many are recognized as works of art that are to be hung on the wall and never used or touched. Museums and galleries are creating exhibits to display new styles that have appeared in the past 30 years as well as both antique and newer quilts made from traditional patterns. Perhaps the most famous quilting exhibit — and the one that started it all — is the 1971 Whitney Exhibition.

That year, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City exhibited 62 antique quilts acquired by Jonathan Holstein and Gail Ann van der Hoof. The ensuing publicity sparked a national interest in quilting, and the popularity of quilting soon spread across the world.

The quilts in the show may have been made for utility, but exhibiting them in an art museum spurred people to see them in a different light. The exhibit is credited with introducing quilting as art and showing people that quilts may be created simply for aesthetic purposes. Quilts had finally gained some credibility.

The International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, Neb., is adding to that credibility. The center’s new build-
"GLORY OF THE RISING SUN" Floy Elizabeth Lyle Buell.

COURTESY OF THE NEBRASKA QUILT PROJECT COMMITTEE OF THE LINCOLN QUILTERS GUILD
ing, which opened in March 2008 after 10 years of planning, is in the heart of the country and has approximately 2,300 quilts in its collection.

James, the UNL professor, said the building was inspired in part by the success of the university’s quilt studies program. The textiles department boasted an enrollment of 235 undergraduate students in 2007-2008, with 24 students in the quilt studies master’s degree program.

“Quilts are as worthy of study as the collective work of Walt Whitman,” James said.

It’s obvious that millions of people are into quilting, and the reasons people quilt are as diverse and abundant as the quilters themselves.

They do it for creative expression. They do it for income. They do it to stay warm. They do it for love. They do it for family. They do it to remember the past. They do it to honor the present. They do it to create the future.

Many quilters use the craft as a means of reaching out to loved ones or those in need. Famous works such as the AIDS Memorial Quilt, begun in June 1987 in San Francisco, help raise awareness of deadly diseases worldwide. Each of the 44,000 3-by-6-foot patches is created by someone who died from the disease. Project Linus, a non-profit organization of family members and friends in memory of someone who died from the disease, contributes more than 11,000 volunteers, gives quilts to sick or needy babies in hospitals throughout the country.

Quilts have often mirrored the changing political and social atmosphere. Quilts commemorated wars like the American Revolutionary War, the Civil War and both World Wars. They have also been created to memorialize events such as the Great Depression and the American Bicentennial in 1976. During World War II, the American Red Cross sent quilts to Europe to help those displaced by the war. Since the war in Iraq began in 2003, quilting groups across the country have made quilts for the families of fallen soldiers to help them remember their loved ones.

And Americans aren’t the only ones who create politically motivated quilts. The Bosna Quilt Werkstatt, or workshop, was created for displaced Bosnians after war forced them to flee to Austria in 1993. The workshop’s director, Lucia Fenig-Giesinger, said the group was created to give the refugees hope and to bring them together in their time of need.

Helen Joseph, a former curator at the Shipley Art Gallery in London who now works as a private art consultant in England, said the messages within and the stories behind quilts are what make them so interesting to study.

“Behind the fabric is a narrative,” she said. “It can be political, it can be social, it can be figurative, it can be abstract; they all have underlying layers of notions and suggestions and answers to questions.”

To understand the quilts’ stories, it is important to know where they came from. But no one place on Earth can take all the credit for inventing quilting and spreading it to others. Little parts of history in one country can be tied to historical findings in another country across the globe within the same time frame.

The craft has been traced as far back as 770 B.C. in China and the 35th century B.C. in Egypt. Historians believe quilting traveled from Asia and the Middle East to Europe during the Crusades late in the 11th century. Warriors from the Middle East wore quilted garments beneath their armor for comfort, warmth and security. As they traveled farther west, the Eastern warriors took their quilted armor to the British Isles. European warriors began to take quilted armor on their campaigns as well. Researchers have found that quilts were used in France and Germany as far back as the 12th and 13th centuries.

And just as quilting had arrived in Europe from other places, the European explorers of the 15th and 16th centuries took quilts on their journeys, and the craft continued to spread.

Quilts traveled across the Atlantic Ocean with Puritan settlers in the 17th and 18th centuries. The craft spread through the American colonies and into Canada as more immigrants settled farther north and west. But as Great Britain and the United States split into two separate nations, their quilting styles began to differ. American quilts from the Colonial period are recognized for their block-style patchwork while British quilts from the era are mostly whole-cloth quilts, in which the pattern is created by stitching on one large piece of fabric, not by piecing blocks of fabric together.

The spread of quilting wasn’t restricted to Western exploration. European missionaries took the craft with them to colonies in Africa as well. But except for the use of quilted horse armor in Africa in the early 1800s, quilting hasn’t been strongly evident in the continent’s history.

Carolyn Ducey, curator of collections at the IQSC, said the intense, year-round heat in much of Africa makes quilts and heavy bedding unnecessary in a utilitarian...
ian sense. Since the worldwide quilting revival following the Whitney Exhibition, however, even African nations have become involved in the trade.

South Africa boasts the most quilters of any country on the continent with nearly 5,000. Kenya, Botswana, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria and Zimbabwe all have quilting groups as well. Dena Crain, a quilter and instructor from Kenya, said her country has only a few hundred quilters. Although many of these quilters are not native Africans but hail from countries such as the United States, Canada, England, Russia and Australia, quilting is nonetheless alive and continues to grow in Africa today.

Despite Japan’s proximity to China where historians have found some of the earliest evidence of quilting, patchwork—pieces of fabric sewn together but not necessarily quilted in three layers—was more common in Japan in centuries past. Trade with Portugal and Spain that began in 1543 brought rare and expensive fabric to the Japanese, fabric they began making into kimonos as signs of authority and wealth. In Japan, as in other parts of the world, quilting has grown strong in the past 30 years, and today there are more than 3 million quilters in the island nation.

Australia and Hawaii were among the last parts of the modern world to be exposed to quilting. It was not until 1818 that women such as Elizabeth Fry began teaching women to quilt on ships carrying convicts from England to Australia. Missionaries from New England introduced quilting to Hawaii’s natives in 1820 to deter them from “satanic” activities such as dancing and tattooing.

One thing has remained consistent during quilting’s thousands of years of existence: It has been known as women’s work. Erika Carter, an art quilter from Santa Barbara, Calif., is known interna-

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HELEN JOSEPH

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“...and today there are...”

“A LUXEMBOURG TOWN” is a small quilt, part of a collection meant to represent postcards from various countries.

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“...in front of computers and TVs, the wait. “They can’t put something to hear you.”

Karen Pearce, a teacher in Bournemouth, England, has been offering quilting workshops for children for the past four years. Competing with sports, music and technology for the young generation’s attention has made her job difficult, she said. “A lot of children spend a lot of time in front of computers and TVs these days,” Pearce said. “It would be good if they could do things with their hands—it’s really important.”

Kathleen Sciortino, a teacher at Burke High School in Omaha, Neb., said quilting teaches children something video games and computers don’t: patience. “They get instant rewards for everything they do,” she said, but with sewing, the reward is delayed.

Sciortino said students learn that the quality of a quilt is important and worth the wait. “They can’t put something together in 25 minutes and make it look good,” she said.

Britta Doeschot, a 17-year-old quilter who lives south of Lincoln, Neb., learned exactly that when she made her first quilt. The pinwheel-pattern quilt, which she made after her grandmother taught her to quilt when Britta was 14, took her more than two years to make.

While the process was lengthy, Britta said in the end she felt a stronger connection to her grandmother and came away from the project with a new passion.

With the support of avid quilters, James said, quilting will never go out of style.

“These are the things that help give us reasons to get up in the morning,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to live without this stuff.”

“...and today there are...”
Erika Carter has always enjoyed a variety of artistic activities. Over the years, she discovered that her favorite one is quilting. The Washington state native began quilting more than 20 years ago, and she has found that quilts contain messages she can’t convey as clearly through other forms of artistic expression.

Her most recent series of quilts contemplates the idea of time, with quilts that address concepts like being frozen in a moment or honoring the achievements of a person’s life. One quilt, “Dissolution,” graphically portrays the notion of memory erosion with intentionally cracked and dried fibers on the front and ripped sections on the back. The solid border of the work suggests that hope remains amid the terrifying mental turmoil of afflictions such as Alzheimer’s disease.

“The underlying question behind my many, many years of my work has been the strength in the fragile and delicate,” said Carter, who is in her mid-50s. “I knew I had strength, but its evidence is not in bold color or bold form.”

Carter’s quilts aren’t just aesthetic objects boasting dark colors and fine stitch work. Her pieces contain a clear – often powerful – message, and they do it as only a quilt can.

Carter’s quilts are distinct, but her passion is hardly exclusive. For centuries, quilting has been known as a craft many women love. While that zeal still flourishes, the way women approach the familiar art form has changed markedly. The creation of a quilt is no longer only

**Quilt**

Needlework technique of sewing together two layers of fabric and a middle element, such as batting, with lines of stitches.
a practical necessity or means of entertainment.

As societies worldwide have changed and adapted, so too has a woman’s liberty to express herself. Though quilting was once a woman’s rare opportunity for expression or an excuse to spend an evening with friends, it has evolved into a new form of empowerment, allowing a group of formerly marginalized people to express themselves however they see fit.

It takes courage to speak when it’s quiet, Carter said. “If you whisper long enough, someone’s going to hear you.”

* * *

In a world previously dominated by patriarchal values, quilting has provided many women with a creative outlet. Radka Donnell, a Bulgaria native, wrote the 1990 book “Quilts as Women’s Art: A Quilt Poetics” in which she suggests that psychological reasons draw women to the process and the product. Quilting techniques follow patterns that are distinctively female in nature, Donnell wrote. For example, women working on a quilt may intimately feel its tactile and sensual properties and then will put it near the most intimate place possible – a bed.

Inge Hueber, a German native and quilter, said she believes a deep-down passion to create something and give it to others inspires quilters.

“They are one of the groups of people that are so willing to share. It’s wonderful,” Hueber said. “I find it very interesting because it’s the same things that were important to women during colonial times.”

Quilters still come together as they did in the 18th century to exchange design ideas and individual quilts with friends and family members.

Donnell said much of a quilt’s significance is found in its creation. Connecting separate fabrics represents a psychological connection. Touching the fabrics represents healing, similar to human touch. Piecing the textiles together has the effect of establishing order, and the final quilt is symbolic of a new existence.
“The creation of something new takes courage and is aimed at liberation,” Donnell wrote. “Taking a piece of cloth and using it for something other than defining social status and gender is not an aesthetic talent. It is a step to social deliverance.”

In her book, Donnell suggested that the biggest reason women love quilting is its personal nature. After all, a quilt is a combination of fabrics from the creator’s own life, mixed with expressions from his or her own mind.

Donnell also advocated a quiet atmosphere as the best place to develop those thoughts.

“If I am to lift ideas and images out of silence, I must do so without offending or betraying the silence itself,” Donnell wrote. “I work from silence, and I speak out of silence.”

Though Donnell was born in 1928, the expectation that women will work quietly goes back centuries. In Europe particularly, wives and young ladies weren’t allowed to just sit and converse, even if they had nothing else to do. Many times, the only way they could meet was under the guise of working on a quilt or other forms of needlework because men viewed these gatherings as productive.

Lilian Hedley, an English quilter and teacher, has continued to hone her craft for more than 30 years. She said such strategies were especially common in Wales. In a country dominated by miners, the wives were lucky to have any free time after doing the daily chores. The men usually didn’t want the women leaving home in the evenings – but would allow it for quilting. Gathering in groups, women would spend parts of many evenings chatting and quilting.

“[The wife] would come back after half an hour or an hour, and that was her night out,” Hedley said. “But the husband knew where she was, so they did a lot of that.”

For many women, that communal outlet was all they needed from quilting. From centuries past to present day, the biggest allure of the craft might be its opportunities for social contact. Hedley has taught classes for years, and she has seen her share of women who may never create a masterpiece but keep coming back for more lessons and fun afternoons.

Hedley remembers many occasions when women came to class as they were dealing with the death of a family member. On those evenings, quilting wasn’t
The focus.

“They get in among the quilters, and they all talk to each other, and it’s therapeutic,” Hedley said. “Sometimes that’s the only social activity those particular people do.”

Similar quilting support groups are common throughout England and the United States. Bridget Long, an English quilt historian, has her own club of 16 women who gather to quilt once or twice a month. The gatherings are as varied as the quilts the women produce.

Long said her group has experienced times when someone just needed some love. Other times, everyone debated who had the best quilt. But most often the women just enjoy the quilting, and they enjoy the company.

“It is a group of women who are actually very supportive of each other,” Long said. “I’ve actually seen the girls disintegrate into crying with laughter because we’ve had such good fun.”

* * *

Olga Prins-Lukowski gave up her job for quilting. Formerly a psychologist in the Netherlands, Prins-Lukowski decided to stop splitting time between her profession and her passion 12 years ago when she was 52.

She discovered that the two weren’t so different.

Prins-Lukowski said that during the Bosnian Civil War in the early 1990s, when many Bosnians were in refugee camps in Austria, the women were taught to quilt. What was originally intended just to give them something to do kick-started a quilting craze in Bosnia. More importantly, it provided an opportunity for the war victims to talk — and quilt — about what happened to them.

“That’s psychology,” Prins-Lukowski said. “If you have bad experiences, it’s very good to talk about it so you get rid of it.”

As much as quilts soothe in times of crisis, they also serve as memorial objects passed down from one generation to the next. While some portray an event or period in history, the quilts that usually hold the most value for women are the ones made by someone close to them.

Penelope Deiro remembers the day she changed another woman’s life with a quilt.

In 2003, Deiro was the driving force behind a quilt of more than 1,000 patches celebrating Esther Coleman’s 60th anniversary of sobriety. Both women were members of Alcoholics Anonymous, and Coleman, who had been Deiro’s mentor when she sought sobriety more than two decades earlier, died two years later.

The quilt, made from an assortment of colors and fabrics to represent the array of personalities AA has helped, contained words of encouragement from fellow AA members.

“It just took the wind right out of
her to see those names from all over the world,” Deiro said. “She couldn’t believe that we had done that. It was overwhelming to her.”

The quilt, which is now back with Deiro, was more than just a gift for Coleman: Helping to create it provided the social involvement another AA member needed to stop cutting herself, Deiro said.

The quilt has become invaluable to Deiro, who still uses it to feel close to a woman she considered her mother. “Sometimes when things get a little difficult, I take the quilt down and wrap myself up in it, because that’s her now,” Deiro said.

Sue Prichard has also seen the power of quilts at work. As the curator of textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, she is organizing a quilting exhibit that will run for five months in 2010.

“They are objects that talk to the soul, and that’s because they tend to pass through the female line,” Prichard said. “Women tend not to inherit property, but what they do inherit are textiles. So I certainly think this is our connection with our kind of female past, and that’s why they speak so strongly.”

Prichard is an advocate for keeping quilting in its historical context. That means not focusing on so-called art quilts – quilts hung to view like paintings – but sticking with quilts displayed on beds, as most quilts originally were intended to be seen. Their first use was as blankets, after all.

In 19th century England, quilting was a chance to gain respect within the community. The role of women was restricted to maintaining the home, and quilting gave them a way to display their talents to visitors. “They were, in effect, prisoners in their own home,” Prichard said. “And it’s an opportunity for them to finally show what good managers they are and, indeed, how skilled they are.”

It was in this time of chauvinism in the 1800s that quilting began to be known as an activity unique to women, a transition away from jobs for men that required sewing skills. That perception shift marginalized quilting as an art form. Only recently has quilting started to attract the attention afforded to more well-known media like sculpting and painting.

Some women say gender exclusivity

Lilian Hedley still doesn’t know why she decided to try quilting. The English woman in her mid-60s is an expert on the topic. She teaches four how-to quilt classes during the week, and spends the rest of her days traveling around England doing historical lectures and workshops.

In her free time, Hedley quilts. “I give government health warnings,” Hedley said with a laugh. “It’s very addictive once you start.”

But Hedley’s was an unconventional beginning. Neither her mother nor her grandmother even sewed or knitted, and neither saw the allure of constantly using a needle and thread.

By the time Hedley was 9 years old, she had taught herself to mend socks, and she eventually charged neighbors one penny for every hole she fixed.

Twenty years later, that practice would evolve into a quilting interest.

By that time the year was 1975 and Hedley was married. She had a 5-year-old daughter who was starting school, and she would have more free time to work with.

“It was purely just a hobby,” Hedley said. “I decided to try patchwork.”

As she had done with the socks, Hedley taught herself to quilt, using only an American how-to book that just contained pictures and drawings. It was a slow process, but she eventually caught on and began quilting. By 1983, Hedley was tired of quilting alone and put an ad in her local newspaper calling for “like-minded patchworkers” to meet at her house with the intention of forming a group.

Twelve people showed up that night, but Hedley quickly learned she had more experience than the rest of them, and a bigger house to hold the meetings.

It was her unofficial start as a quilting teacher. “But once I taught them everything I knew,” Hedley said, “I had to keep learning something new for the following week.”

Now Hedley combines her storytelling ability with a history of quilting in England dating back centuries. Her motivation is to pass along her love for the craft, especially in younger people.

Hedley learned how to quilt years ago without instructions, a teacher or the Internet, but she believes it’s a practice that won’t antiquate anytime soon.

“Quilting always starts out as a hobby, like it did for me,” Hedley said. “Then gradually, the more you do, the more you do.”
has made quilting so special to them.

“Those are objects that are very evocative; they touch the soul,” Prichard said. “They’re not about things that have been signed and dated or promoted by man.

“This is women’s work.”

* * *

Patricia Bolton didn’t buy a sewing machine until she was 28 years old. A few years later, she owned her own quilting magazine.

Bolton quickly developed a passion for crazy quilting, a style of patchwork in which the individual pieces of fabric fit asymmetrically together to form a scattered-looking design. As a former intern with a financial magazine, Bolton, who lives in Massachusetts, figured she knew enough about the technical aspects of running a publication to try to fill a niche in the quilting community.

Quilting Arts Magazine premiered in January 2001 and has been published six times a year ever since. The magazine, which now has more than 110,000 readers, includes how-to instruction, profiles of quilters from around the world and other contemporary news involving the craft.

“People will pull me aside and tell me stories of what quilting has done for them,” Bolton said. “Some of it is really powerful stuff.”

One story that came to the editor’s mind involved Jane Johnston, a 48-year-old woman who had always wanted one of her quilts to appear on the cover of the magazine. She died of cancer in April 2007 while her quilt was being considered for the cover spot.

When her husband found out the quilt had been chosen, he flew with the quilt from Maryland to the magazine’s headquarters in Boston so the publication could photograph it. He could have mailed the quilt but didn’t want to risk losing his wife’s beloved work.

Johnston’s quilt, with vibrant images of a sunflower, a cardinal and plants, appeared on the cover of the August/September 2007 issue.

Bolton said the magazine staff could hardly work in the days leading up to publishing that issue because they were so moved by Johnston’s quilt and the story it represented.

“Everyone can relate to a quilt,” Bolton said. “Everyone has a memory with a quilt. Everybody loves to touch fabric – it’s tangible, it’s accessible.”

Now more than ever, quilting is accessible. High-speed communication, the Internet and publications such as Quilting Arts Magazine have enabled quilters to share their work and ideas with each other all over the world.

Moreover, quilting is no longer restricted to a certain style, like patchwork. Women are free to express themselves in whatever way they choose, and they decide how much time to devote to that end.

Even men have entered the quilting scene. Michael James, a professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and a quilt maker, is known globally by colleagues for his passion for collecting and making quilts.

Though he is a leader in his field, James said he still gets strange looks when he tells people what he does, but it doesn’t matter. He does what he has a passion for and makes no apologies for it.

“Maybe it’s some kind of long-standing neurosis of some sort that is behind this,” James said with a laugh. “I’ve never been psychoanalyzed, so I don’t know.”

In contemporary quilting, though, the notion of “women’s work” still prevails. For example, James said about 225 of the 235 undergraduates in UNL’s textile department are female.

Prichard, the curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, said such gender exclusivity is good for quilting. In her opinion, having men involved takes away from the intimacy of the quilt, reducing it to a simple piece of art.

Others like Long, the English quilt historian, and Bolton welcome the male influence. In their minds, more overall participation in quilting means a better collection of work and confirms quilting as a legitimate art form to the world in general.

Long said the power of a quilt remains the same, regardless of who created it.

“Maybe also it brings back to people memories of being wrapped up in a blanket – wrapped up in a quilt – and having a feeling of warmth that people connect in a way that maybe a portrait behind glass, a picture behind glass, wouldn’t work in the same way,” Long said.

Carter, the quilter from Washington, has strived to stir emotions in her quilting series. She sees quilting, a blend of past and present traditions, as self-expression but prefers to work alone.

In the silence, Carter communicates loud and clear a message to women just like her.

“It’s important to me that I express myself, not because I think I’m unique but because I am not unique,” Carter said. “There are a lot of quiet people, a lot of sensitive and fragile people that need to know what strength is like with that kind of a voice.”
Put simply, quilts are history books without written text. The quality and workmanship may differ from piece to piece, but each new quilt – just like those made in centuries past – has a history and a story to tell. Whether it is to call for social reform or to recreate a sunset the artist remembers from childhood, the reasons for making quilts and the stories behind the work can be read in the dozens or hundreds or thousands of pieces of fabric sewn together with yards of colorful thread.

But only in very recent history have observers begun to see the historical significance, thanks to museum exhibitions and academic programs dedicated to quilt study.

In the 1960s and ’70s people turned to material expressions to find the voices that weren’t included in the written records, said Patricia Crews, director of the International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, Neb.

“That’s what quilts provide for us,” she said. “They provide a text that was not left by individuals.”

Crews said quilts provide an opportunity to study expressions from women who didn’t have the opportunity to vote, were often left out of the public record and yet needed a way to voice opinions, political affiliations and expressions of concern.

In addition, “They raised money for their churches, their communities, by making these and leaving them,” she said, “and so they’re just a rich – a huge – resource.”

A 1971 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York proved most influential in getting observers to look at those old resources that had been viewed as common household items.

Jonathan Holstein, one of the owners of the quilts exhibited at the Whitney, said quilts have become some of the most significant artifacts of the study of culture via material objects.

“Nothing embodies the material cultural study more than quilts,” he said. “[They] became an icon of the feminist movement. They owe nothing to men.”

Before Holstein and Gail Ann van der Hoof’s collection of 62 pieced quilts went on display at the Whitney Museum in a two-month exhibition titled “Abstract Design in American Quilts,” most people had not thought of quilts as museum pieces.

Holstein said even the Whitney curators weren’t expecting the quilt exhibit-
tion to be such a big hit.

“We just wanted to tell them: ‘You don’t know what you’re doing. You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into,’” he said. “They were totally taken by surprise. We weren’t, but they were.”

Sue Prichard, curator of contemporary textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, said throughout history, written documents and property have passed through the male line, speaking volumes about the life and times of men. To study women’s history, however, people must turn to material goods, such as quilts and other textiles.

“Women don’t inherit property; they inherit textiles,” she said. Quilts are iconic objects “passed through the female line,” just one thing Prichard finds so enchanting about them.

“Quilting has an evocative and personal resonance with the female soul,” she said. “No intermediary is needed to explain how beautiful it is.”

The Whitney Exhibition showed art museums around the world that it was acceptable to consider quilts as art, said May Louise Zumwalt, executive director of the Museum of the American Quilter’s Society in Paducah, Ky. The Kentucky museum, built 20 years after the groundbreaking Whitney exhibit, displayed quilts as art from the beginning.

Holstein said he wanted to show quilts as aesthetically pleasing objects in their own right. Thanks to the Whitney Museum, he got that opportunity.

“People began to take quilts seriously,” Holstein said, “as a category of American design.”

Quilts might still be seen as bedcovers – that’s what they were originally made for, Holstein said – but the show changed the perception that that is all they are.

“It was the beginning of the recognition of an art movement,” he said. “It had been going on right under their noses.” The notion exists, Holstein said, that quilts were transported in one bold move from beds to walls. “There was such an instant, and all it took was one exhibition.”

Once quilts were seen as art, people noticed the messages embedded in the stitches and fabric.

“There are two main groups of people interested in studying quilts – those who wish to look at them purely for the designs and those who are interested only in the background information or social history,” said Valerie Wilson, curator of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in Northern Ireland.

“Increasingly, though, the two groups are overlapping as designers choose to incorporate aspects of history into their interpretations,” she said.
Prichard, who is planning a quilt exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2010, said she is looking forward to “telling an alternative history” through her show, a history that museum goers might not have seen or heard before. To provide a narrative of the past, she plans to display at least some of the quilts on beds, which is how she said they were meant to be seen.

But to tell that alternative history, the exhibition needs an audience. Prichard’s not worried about the quilters. The quilting audience will show up no matter what, she said, pointing to one quilt exhibit that attracted 250,000 visitors “just by tacking textiles onto a wall.”

The real challenge, she said, will be attracting people who might not immediately see the appeal of quilts. That’s where marketing the roughly $2 million

A significant exhibition in 1971 took quilts to a place they had never been displayed before – the walls

BY ASHLEY ERMEL

It all started with weekend excursions in the Northeast. Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof, in the late 1960s and early ’70s, would often spend their weekends traveling from their home on Manhattan’s Upper West Side to attend open air, seasonal markets in Pennsylvania and New England, looking through hundreds of car trunks filled with goods for sale.

Both had an eye for modern art, and they were intrigued by the idea of a centuries-old household object resembling a modern painting hung in a museum.

Eventually those weekend trips turned into nearly full-time jobs for both Holstein, a writer and editor, and van der Hoof, a University of California at Santa Barbara fine arts graduate. Their singular focus was to find utilitarian quilts that most people wouldn’t have thought twice about.

“We weren’t interested in the normal, traditional criteria that had been used to judge quilts in the past,” said Holstein, 71, who now lives in Cazenovia, N.Y., about 20 miles southeast of Syracuse. “Some of them were of extraordinary handiwork, but most of them were normal, everyday utilitarian quilts.”

Their obsession set off a modern quilt revival and changed the way the ordinary household objects are viewed.

Robert Murray, an aluminum and steel plate sculptor and long-time friend of Holstein’s, said he was initially skeptical about the couple’s visions for the quilts. At the time, quilts were not widely recognized as examples of American design, and Holstein’s belief that they were meant for more than just bed coverings was far from a mainstream view.

“Jon pressed this whole idea,” Murray said, “and I have to give him credit for it because he saw this possibility.”

By the time the couple thought about showing the quilts in a museum, they had collected more than 160. Because Holstein and van der Hoof, who died in 2004, were so interested in modern art, they believed that the quilts they had chosen

THE WHITNEY EXHIBIT

QUILTS are viewed in a gallery setting at the Michigan State University Museum, where visitors can get a closer look at the details of the small geometric quilts on display.
The second exhibition will be Quilting Across the Globe from the International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, Neb. www.quiltersguild.org.uk

The museum's textile collection, only 3 to 5 percent of which is permanently displayed, includes more than 80,000 items, from large objects like quilts and tapestries to small objects like hat pins.

"We've never actually done a real textile exhibition before, so this is going to be a real opportunity for us," she said.

 Whereas the Victoria and Albert Museum has an average audience of about 2.5 million visitors a year, the quilt museum in Kentucky attracts about 40,000 visitors annually, Zumwalt said. The guest book, she said, indicates that within any two-month period the museum receives visitors from all 50 states. They are not exclusively quilters.

"Our visitor's book doesn't specifically ask 'Are you a quilter?' or 'How did you hear about us?' but some entries will say they specifically came to Paducah just to see the museum," she said. The museum also attracts what Zumwalt calls "cultural tourists, for a lack of better terms," non-quilters who travel to Kentucky to take in the exhibits.

With more than 27 million quilters in the United States alone, and many more around the world, collecting quilts for a museum isn’t necessarily a problem. Finding enough room to house and exhibit them safely can be.

The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in Cultra, Ireland, has a collection of more than 500 quilts, mostly from the nine counties in Ulster. The quilts, from 1790 through the 1990s, are displayed in 20 model homes that reflect the lifestyles of the householders of the time, said Wilson, the museum's curator.

The Paducah quilt museum has a permanent collection of 200 quilts made by the public response earned it an extension through Oct. 5. The curators were surprised, Holstein said.

"Two installers, both artists, carried it with care to the wall, held the stave end high, and let it unfold down the wall. It was an extraordinary moment. Everyone who was watching gasped. I had seen the quilt hundreds of times, had folded and unfolded it, photographed it, examined it minutely; I knew it well. But as it came down the wall, it had a force and dignity which enlivened it in a way I had never seen. It was beautiful; but more, it was commanding, with a confident and powerful aesthetic presence. Everyone was held by it."

Holstein said he warned curators that the exhibition was going to be bigger than they imagined. The show, which opened July 1, 1971, was scheduled to run until Sept. 12, but the public response earned it an extension through Oct. 5.

Robert “Mac” Doty, curator at the Whitney Museum from 1970 to 1974, wrote in a reminiscence for Holstein's book that Jon wasn’t having any of this,” Murray said. “He persevered. Jon made his point, and he succeeded.”

In his 1991 book chronicling the Whitney show, “Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition,” Holstein wrote about the moment the first quilt was hung at the museum.

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The IQSC at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has about 2,300 quilts, but most sat in storage for years before their new home opened in March 2008. Crews said 40 to 60 quilts will be displayed at a time in one of the center’s three galleries.

"When you get into the hundreds you sort of become dazed when walking down the aisles,” Crews, the center’s director, said.

But the IQSC isn’t just about exhibiting quilts. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln, in conjunction with the quilt study center, offers a master’s degree in textile history with an emphasis in quilt
the curator of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.

Not that Wilson foresees a time when every college has a quilt studies department. “It is much more important that the major quilt collections around the world, whether they are in museums, libraries, national trust properties or universities, should have a viable program for interpretation and public access,” she said. “This is the best way to foster new research and to encourage development.”

Educational programs allow people to see the visual force of an object, said Worrall, whose museum at Michigan State University has encouraged university instructors to include quilts in their curriculum. A quilt studies program can be an asset to the university, but if that’s not the case, having departments open to using quilts in the classroom and in the curriculum is the next best thing, she said.

The Nebraska program can help pave the way, Wilson said.

“The opening of the IQSC in Nebraska and the proliferation of major quilt shows is all part of a growing acceptance, I believe, of quilt studies as a legitimate strand of academia,” she said.

Crews is proud of the work her 24 master’s students do and the topics they delve into in their course work.

“We have been able to create an intellectual community for students to really discuss various aspects of textile history with an emphasis on the quilt as an artifact or as a text for studying and gaining a lens on social history, women’s history, cultural history, America, and now we are trying to extend that into areas around the world,” she said.

Crews said much of the history taught in school focuses narrowly on political or military history or on the affluent. Expanding the story to others — women, slaves, African Americans and other minorities — provides a more-complete picture.

“[Historians] realized, ‘You know, those people didn’t leave diaries. Generally they were uneducated. Many could not read and write. They’re not in the public records. So how are we ever going to construct what their life was like?’” she said.

Historians wanted to construct the life of ordinary individuals and move history into a broader spectrum. “Everyone was forced to turn to objects,” Crews said, “and so there’s been just an explosion of study of all sorts of household objects to try to build that knowledge.”

he initially felt other New York museums were better suited for the quilt collection.

“My first reaction was negative,” Doty wrote. “Since the Museum of Contemporary Crafts had an excellent program, the Whitney Museum had no desire to duplicate their efforts.

“But Jonathan is bold, and persistent, and his response to my rebuff was immediate and effective,” continued Doty, who died in 1991. “Throughout the exhibition, Jonathan and Gail taught us to look at quilts and see the extraordinary pleasure of a stimulating visual experience.”

The Whitney curators weren’t the only people taken by surprise. The exhibition was reviewed widely — across the United States and even overseas. The New York Times published several articles during the show’s run, as did the Wall Street Journal, the English magazine Interiors and the quilting newsletters Antiques and Quilter’s Newsletter Magazine.

The Times published a story about the exhibition the day before the quilts were to be delivered to the Whitney. But Holstein said he believes Hilton Kramer’s review, which appeared in the Times the day after the show opened, started the “avalanche of publicity.”

In his review, headlined “Art: Quilts Find a Place at the Whitney,” Kramer wrote: “It is the kind of exhibition that prompts us to rethink the relation of high art to what are customarily regarded as lesser forms of visual expression. This is an issue any serious historian of American art is going to have to come to terms with in the future dealings with this subject. … One can hope, indeed, that this is the first of many such exhibitions. Among the quilts, the aesthetic quality is generally so high that it would be foolishly arbitrary to single out particular examples.”

Today, all but two of the quilts that Holstein and van der Hoof collected, the ones that traveled the world in exhibitions after the show ended at the Whitney, are housed at the International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, Neb.

More than 30 years after the exhibition, Holstein, a member of the IQSC international advisory board, still lectures about his Whitney collection and quilts in general. In 1971, he wrote “The Pieced Quilt: An American Tradition,” which highlights the history of patchwork in the United States. Over the next three decades, he wrote or co-wrote numerous articles, catalogs and books about pieced and Amish quilts.

Today, the Whitney exhibition is revered as the start of it all — the first time quilts found a home in the world of paintings and sculptures, the beginning of a whole new art movement.

It’s far from what Murray thought would happen.

“I’m the first to admit that I was a little apprehensive to wonder whether the Whitney Museum was the right place,” Murray said. “But Jon made you think about the aesthetic aspects of the quilts themselves.”
SUE PRICHARD, curator of contemporary textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum, carefully folds a 19th-century quilt. The care of historic textiles is a meticulous process because of the fragile fabric that was pieced together hundreds of years ago.

PHOTOGRAPH BY K.J. HASCALL
In their upstate New York home, Robert and Ardis James were running out of room for their extensive collection of more than 900 quilts. Even after the Jameses built on to their house and bought four king-size bed platforms (complete with trundles underneath for more storage) to display their quilts, the quilts were piled one on top of the other – not an ideal way to keep them in mint condition.

“They knew they didn’t have a great place to share [the collection], and they didn’t have a great place to store them any longer,” said Patricia Crews, director of the International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, Neb.

In the early ’90s the Jameses began looking for a good home for their quilt collection, shopping around at the nation’s top museums: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Colonial Williamsburg and the Smithsonian, to mention a few.

“None of them were willing to take the entire collection, because the Jameses collected the entire gamut of the American quilt-making tradition from antique classic to contemporary,” Crews said.

Each museum favored quilts from a particular time period or theme that would accent their various exhibitions, but accepting and caring for more than 900 quilts – some of which did not fit into the museums’ missions – would have been a hefty task.

But, as though the quilts were children being put up for adoption, the Jameses didn’t want them separated and placed in different homes across the country.

When Crews’ book “Nebraska Quilts & Quiltmakers” won the Frost Prize for distinguished scholarship in American crafts from the Smithsonian in 1993, it was as though pieces of patchwork came together for the future IQSC.

Initially a task of the Lincoln Quilters Guild, the project that sparked the book “Nebraska Quilts & Quiltmakers” was an attempt to record information about quilts from the state before the owners of these heirlooms sold them in the wake of the quickly growing market for old quilts.

Crews said the Lincoln Quilters Guild became alarmed when Nebraskans began selling their quilts.

“When they were in the family, most people knew who made them, when they were made, where they were made,” Crews said, adding that it was easier to document the works while they were still in Nebraska instead of locating the quilts later and backtracking.

“Nebraska Quilts & Quiltmakers” documented nearly 5,000 quilts and more than 3,000 quilters from Nebraska and, in turn, documented immigration to different regions in the state.

Originally from Nebraska, the Jameses recognized the state’s strong quilt tradition and began to consider the Uni-
A CROWD gathers on the second floor of the IQSC waiting to see the museum’s first exhibit, “Quilts in Common.” The show gathered 24 antique and modern quilts from nine different countries showcasing similarities among various cultures.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNA MOSTEK
versity of Nebraska-Lincoln as a home for their collection.

“They really wanted the collection to continue to grow, to be a dynamic collection, and they really wanted [it] to be shared with students [and] with the public at large,” Crews said.

The proposition from the Jameses came in 1993 – an opportune time because then-Chancellor Graham Spanier was also a quilt collector and welcomed the donation. His successor, Chancellor James Moeser, was also interested in textile arts.

“I quickly realized that this was a world-class collection of quilts and that, with this collection at UNL, Nebraska could become the leading American center for the study of the quilt as an art form,” Moeser said.

Robert James said, “The chancellors are smart guys. ... They were able to say this is something we want to do.”

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Instead of merely obtaining the Jameses’ massive collection to display, Crews also noticed an opportunity for study when she looked at the textile history program and saw that by adding only a few more courses, the program could offer a master’s degree program in quilt studies.

“I wanted it to be more than simply a collection that we would share and that we could curate exhibitions. I really wanted it to be an academic center. … I really wanted to fully engage students,” Crews said.

When the university began advertising its one-of-a-kind master’s program in 1998, the opportunity attracted a number of students, both traditional and non-traditional.

Crews said some students enrolled in the program hoping to advance their careers in museum work, while others were simply interested in quilting and wanted to find new careers doing something they loved.

After the 1971 Whitney Museum Exhibition of quilts sparked a quilting revival unseen since the 1930s, both quilters and history enthusiasts began to take note of quilting’s role in history.

Quilting was a craft that hadn’t earned much credibility in the past because many thought of it merely as women’s work, different from arts and crafts. Today, the faculty, students and other quilt enthusiasts at the IQSC are working hard to uncover the personal and social significance of each quilt acquired by the center.

“It’s a major cultural expression … an expression around the world,” said Michael James, professor of textiles and clothing design at UNL. “Every culture in the world does it in one form or another,” said James, no relation to Robert and Ardis James. “That has to be just as worthy of study as music or literature, but these aren’t exclusively viewed as women’s work.”

Marin Hanson, curator of exhibitions at the IQSC, said, “Most people can relate to quilts on some level … quiltmaking is a worldwide phenomenon, practiced by people from every imaginable background.”

Bridget Long, former president of the Quilters Guild of the British Isles and former member of the IQSC advisory board, said she believes the IQSC is actually giving quilts the status they de-
“Because it’s international, they are trying to be a center to promote quilts across the world and the heritage across the world.”

The international aspect of the center is something that makes it distinct from another group in Lincoln, Neb., The American Quilt Study Group, and other quilt study programs around the world.

“It’s important for a center like that to become a focal point for all of the work that’s going on around the world,” said Dorothy Osler, a former member of the advisory board from England, referring to the research and critical appraisal of quilt making.

Including the initial donation in 1997 of the Jameses’ quilt collection, the IQSC has acquired more than 2,300 quilts — both traditional and contemporary.

An acquisition committee discusses and ultimately decides which quilts the center will obtain. These have included renowned collections such as the Robert Cargo collection of African American quilts, the Jonathan Holstein collection of Amish quilts and the Kathryn Berenson collection of French textiles.

The committee consists of six people: the curator of collections, the director of the IQSC, Robert and Ardis James, and two experts — one in traditional quilts and one in contemporary quilts.

Carolyn Ducey, the curator of collections, said her job entails seeking quilts, responding to dealers who offer to sell quilts to the IQSC and handling donation offers. If she finds a suitable quilt, the acquisition committee decides whether to purchase or accept it.

“Because we have an obligation as a study center to study the entire phenomenon of quilt making, it is vital for us to consider all areas of quilt making — from the utilitarian quilts to the art quilts,” Ducey said. “Each has its own value and at the same time has shared value.” Obviously, she said, art quilts are not going to be studied as utilitarian objects, but they do share techniques, materials and, at the very least, the three quilt layers.

One art quilter whose work was featured at the IQSC, “Constructions #77: Looking for a Reprieve!” was hand-quilted by Marla Hattabaugh in 2004.
chosen is English quilter Jo Budd. The IQSC purchased her quilt “Oil Rig” in 2006.

“When people are buying a piece of work, they’re buying a piece of you,” Budd said. “They have said that they would very much like to have some of my other larger pieces, and, of course, I would be delighted if they wanted them.”

One part of the acquisition process the committee must take into account is which type of quilt the center needs for study. Acquiring well-preserved quilts from the 19th century is appropriate for the historical study of quilts, but the center also has purchased contemporary quilts in traditional styles.

Annette Gero, a quilt historian and member of the IQSC advisory board from Australia, said traditional quilts are very different from art quilts. “I think what quilters are doing today has moved away from the restrictions of the old quilts, resulting in wonderful new works and ideas,” she said. “So collecting for the comparison of the two areas is a good idea.”

Another member of the advisory board, Olga Prins-Lukowski from Holland, had similar comments, saying an art quilt created now will be antique in 50 years. When it is studied in the future, the trends and growth will be visible and able to be classified in history.

Prins-Lukowski also said that while both types of quilts are beautiful, art quilting is a “complete evolution” that historically shows how quilts have gone from being utilitarian objects to works of art.

This mix of beauty and utility has kept the acquisition committee busy, and with the quantity of quilts at the center growing, the IQSC, which had been borrowing space in other museums and buildings on campus to display and store the quilts, needed more room to display its collection.

“[We] developed an ambitious exhibition program … and that was a challenge because we had a collection, and we had a place for the storage of the collection, but we didn’t have any dedicated gallery space,” Crews said. “When people learned that we had the largest public-owned collection of quilts, naturally people wanted to see them.”

In addition to their collection, the Jameses set up a $1 million endowment to help the university construct a building for the center, so long as the university could raise an additional $2 million.

“They felt – and they were right – that we could not depend on state funds … and that it would take at least a $3 million endowment to support the activities that we all hoped would take place,” Crews said.
The university achieved its goal through an adopt-a-quilt program in which private donors participated. Members of the IQSC also submitted an application to the National Endowment for the Humanities Challenge Grant Program and the Nebraska State Quilters Guild.

Initially Robert and Ardis James weren’t interested in funding a building to house the collection, but they realized if they didn’t step forward, there was a chance the public wouldn’t be able to see all of their quilts.

Solving the storage and gallery space conundrum, the Jameses also decided to fund a competition for architects to design a new state-of-the-art, environmentally friendly facility for the IQSC’s new home.

More than 100 architectural firms around the world expressed interest in the job, and the University of Nebraska Foundation narrowed the competition first to 30 firms and then to three architects who submitted their designs. Robert A.M. Stern Architects from New York won the competition and designed the modernistic building now seen at 33rd and Holdrege streets in Lincoln.

Large panes of glass cascade from roof to ground on the east side of the 30,000 square-foot limestone building. Three stories, just like three layers of a quilt, are packed with galleries, offices, research rooms, a café and storage space — with climate control to ensure the quilts’ safe preservation.

The building is the first on the UNL campus to be constructed as a sustainable building according to Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

The non-profit organization is a division of the U.S. Green Building Council that focuses on making buildings environmentally friendly by mandating that the building use specific interior and exterior materials and water-saving strategies and creating proper indoor environmental quality.

The quilt galleries, on the second floor of the building, will display between 40 and 60 quilts at one time in the climate-controlled setting.

Patricia Crews, director of the IQSC, said the advisory board was encouraged not to display too many objects in the gallery at once because doing so could be dangerous for the quilts if too many quilts and people are crammed together.

Although the IQSC has the largest collection of quilts in the world, Crews said, it never aimed to have the largest display of quilts. With too many quilts on display, it’s hard to fully appreciate the work in front of you, she said. With a smaller number of quilts to look at, people can digest the theme of the display.

“When you get into the hundreds, you sort of become dazed when walking down the aisles. It really has to be something to stand out and for you to stop and take notice,” Crews said.

Marin Hanson, curator of exhibitions, said the larger displays will rotate every six months while the smaller displays will rotate every three months. She said some quilts will never be put on display because they are too fragile. However, all quilts are available for researchers to view and study.

Carolyn Ducey, curator of collections, said employees are expecting about 40,000 visitors a year.

The IQSC charges an entrance fee, which will help sustain the center along with private endowments and grants and the fees that accompany quilt exhibitions traveling to other museums.

Crews said the traveling exhibition fees differ with the size of the exhibition, but the cost will range from $5,000 to $15,000, which includes the cost of shipping and the expenses for sending an IQSC employee to help assemble the exhibition.

The first exhibition at the opening of the IQSC on March 30, 2008, was titled “Quilts in Common,” which compares the visual and conceptual similarities among quilts from different times and locations. Thequilts featured included some from the Jameses’ collection.

“We have been able to create an intellectual community for students to really discuss various aspects of textile history with an emphasis on the quilt as an artifact or as a text for studying and gaining a lens on social history, women’s history, cultural history, America,” Crews said.

Bridget Long, former IQSC advisory board member, summed up the mission of the IQSC in four words: “collect, preserve, promote, educate.”

“It’s maintaining the cloth, respecting the cloth and promoting the future,” she said.
From the beginning, national research-oriented organization set high standards for quilt study

BY AUDREY PRIBNOW

In 1980, Sally Garoutte was gathered with a small group of friends around her kitchen table in Mill Valley, Calif., when the women decided to take action to preserve quilt history. They were ahead of their time as they planned an organization dedicated to academic quilt research, and from this informal meeting, the American Quilt Study Group was born.

Judy Brott, AQSG’s executive director since 1998, summarizes the organization’s mission simply: “We try to set the mark for high standards for quilt study.”

The AQSG’s members research quilt-related topics of great variety, novelty and significance. Some of their research is published in the AQSG’s annual Uncoverings publication.

In recent years, up to 25 manuscripts have been submitted for inclusion in just one issue of Uncoverings, which usually features only six or seven articles per issue. Topics have included quiltmaking, patriotism and gender in the Mexican War era; the history of the sewing machine and its influence on quilting in the United States; Amish quilts; and crazy quilts.

Brott said the more than 1,000 members come from the United States, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Membership is open to anybody, the AQSG Web site says, who wants “access to a network of knowledgeable people who are passionate about quilts, their past, present and future.”

In the fall of 2007, about 250 members attended the AQSG’s seminar in Lowell, Mass. The annual five-day convention featured a quilt exhibition, show-and-tell, book signings, silent and live auctions, quilt study sessions, a keynote speaker and a business meeting.

The seminar location changes each year but the event is consistently the biggest draw for members. Recent sites have included Connecticut and Colorado, and the 2008 seminar will be held in Ohio. AQSG members will look to the past, though, when the 2009 seminar returns to California.

“That’s where we started,” Brott said, “so it will be nice to go back.”

By the time 2009 rolls around, it will have been 11 years since the AQSG met formally in California. The organization’s headquarters have been in Lincoln, Neb., since 1998, when Brott was hired as executive director.

Dillow said the board of directors at that time chose Lincoln for various reasons.

“The board, for financial reasons, needed to look at more inexpensive office locations and needed to find a place where the library could be housed and would get more use,” Dillow said, re-
Referring to the AQSG’s collection of approximately 5,000 books, journals and exhibition catalogs, most of which are now housed at C.Y. Thompson Library on the University of Nebraska–Lincoln’s East Campus.

Another part of the collection, which includes AQSG administrative records and research materials, calls UNL’s Love Library home. Sally Garoutte assembled this assortment of records and materials, which includes various quilt guilds’ newsletters and correspondence, photographs, records of quilt historians and makers, exhibit posters, catalogs and more.

“The library is listed online – accessible to anybody in their bunny slippers all over the world,” Dillow said. “It is still the AQSG’s collection, and it will always be listed as such.”

While some may question a move from California to Nebraska, Dillow was positive about the move’s benefits.

“Really, they didn’t lose anything,” she said. “They gained identity and accessibility.”

Another reason the move was appealing was the promise of the International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln.

“The board considered Lincoln, Nebraska, as an attraction because of the development of the International Quilt Study Center,” Dillow said.

Brott said she is proud of the guild’s relationship with the IQSC.

“The catchall word is cooperative,” Brott said. “We’ve been involved with a lot of things with them over the years.”

One cooperative event to be featured in fall 2008 will be a display at the IQSC of quilts created by guild members for the 2008 seminar.

The AQSG has come a long way since its humble beginnings in Sally Garoutte’s kitchen.

But even 30 years after the first meeting and 19 years after Garoutte’s death, Dillow was confident the organization is still moving in the direction Garoutte originally intended.

“The organization’s standards for research of impeccable detail and high values continue to impact the work the organization does.”

ABOVE FAR LEFT: STUDY GROUPS are a popular feature of the AQSG’s annual seminar. Polly Mello stands to present information on both Southern and Northern quilts.

ABOVE LEFT: DEB ROBERTS sorts through quilts as she discusses a potential purchase at the Vendors Mall, another event taking place at the annual seminar.

ABOVE RIGHT: RARE BOOKS, quilt ephemera, quilts and quilt tops sold at the seminar’s annual auction help to raise funds for AQSG.

ABOVE FAR RIGHT: AQSG MEMBERS specializing in antique quilts provide an amazing array of quilts, tops, clothing and ephemera from the late 18th century through the 20th century.

RIGHT: AN AUCTION helped to raise money at the seminar.
If you know how to read it, a quilt can tell you a story. It might shed light on its maker, or its patterns and designs might reveal clues about a society’s fads and culture. Whether the stories relate to family heritage, a quilter’s personal life or something happening halfway around the world, quilters across the globe have decided the stories are worth preserving.

But it’s not an easy task – just ask Nebraska’s Lincoln Quilters Guild. In 1991, Nebraska made a name for itself with its groundbreaking book full of professionally advised research and documentation of historic quilts. “Nebraska Quilts & Quiltmakers” was the end result of a five-year project that gave Nebraska quilters a great sense of pride and accomplishment.

A quilt documentation trend actually began in 1981 when Kentucky became the first state to tackle the task of documenting as many of its historic quilts as possible. Kentucky quilters aimed to document the state’s quilts, organize select quilts in an exhibition and eventually publish the information they gathered.

Kentucky’s project got things rolling, and now almost every state in the United States, in addition to areas of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Ireland and Great Britain, has completed a similar project.

It was 1986 when the women of the Lincoln Quilters Guild began to seriously consider including Nebraska on that list of states working on quilt documentation projects. There was a sense of urgency. In the 1980s, “American quilts were becoming such collectible items, so hot among antique collectors, that they were being snapped up and bought out of family hands,” said Patricia Crews, director of the International Quilt Study Center.

And when the quilts were no longer in family hands, they were also no longer in the possession of those who knew their stories.

Lincoln Quilters Guild members knew they couldn’t stop the buying and selling, but they realized they could record the quilts’ information “before it was lost forever,” Crews said.

By inviting Nebraskans to bring their quilts to an appointed place to be analyzed, documented and photographed, the guild could document many of the quilts in Nebraska and ask the owner questions about the history and story behind each quilt.

“It’s a lot easier to record a story when it’s there than to try to put the story and the quilt back together many years later,” Crews said.

Crews, who was a University of Nebraska-Lincoln professor of textile history and textile science, was approached by a guild committee headed by Frankie Best, who asked for her expertise and assistance.

Best, formerly of Lincoln, Neb., and now of Topeka, Kan., had successfully organized a quilt symposium just a few years before, and the other 20 women on the committee decided she should head the project.

“I fit the need,” Best said.

The first task: Find money.

Best said the first grant the committee wrote was to the Nebraska Humanities Council for $500. The next grant proposal was for a higher sum: $17,000 requested from the National Endowment for the Arts.

The committee secured this large grant in addition to a few other family grants. Other small, private gifts of money and time fulfilled the committee’s needs.

“Primarily it was all volunteer work and donations as small as $2,” Best said. “I had lots of $2 donations.”

By Audrey Pribnow

Nebraska quilting book increased the cultural importance of quilts on a local and national scale

Establishing a New Era in Textile Documentation

Nebraska Quilts & Quiltmakers

“NEBRASKA QUILTS & QUILTMAKERS,” published in 1991, made waves in the industry and established Nebraska as a serious influence in the world of quilting.

Opposite Page: A Crazy Quilt, made around 1900 in Boone County, Neb., by Catherine Levina Middleton Johnson. It is one of the quilts included in the Nebraska documentation project.
COURTESY OF THE NEBRASKA QUILT PROJECT COMMITTEE OF THE LINCOLN QUILTERS GUILD
Without the number of volunteer hours committed to the project, Best estimates the total cost for documenting Nebraska’s quilts would have easily reached, and maybe surpassed, $500,000.

“It was just a job that had to get done, and it was very important to me that it was done right,” Best said. “If it couldn’t be done right, it was not my kind of project – to have it done sloppily.”

To Best, doing the project right meant going to professionals for help.

“Our state was the first to do it with an academic focus,” Best said.

Enter Crews and Ronald C. Naugle, a history professor at Nebraska Wesleyan University.

According to Best and Mary Ghormley, one of the founders of the Lincoln Quilters Guild and a committee member for the documentation project, Crews and Naugle trained the 21 committee members for the tedious process of collecting data.

“GLADIOLA,” made by Juiliamae Duerfeldt Dunn, was started in 1946 from a quilt kit. Originally intended to be a memento in Dunn’s hope chest, the piece was not finished until 1988, more than 40 years later.

“GLADIOLA,” made by Juiliamae Duerfeldt Dunn, was started in 1946 from a quilt kit. Originally intended to be a memento in Dunn’s hope chest, the piece was not finished until 1988, more than 40 years later.

“We had to accomplish something. It was very pleasant, but it was not fun and games.”

FRANKIE BEST

Crews specialized in technical analysis, advising the women what to look for in fabrics and quilting styles. Naugle helped the committee choose where to go in Nebraska to find and document the quilts and taught them how to interview the owners.

“We tried to pick areas that had different ethnic groups so we didn’t get the same kind of people everywhere we went,” Ghormley said.

From there, the women of the Lincoln Quilters Guild committee took charge. The committee chose 28 sites to visit, and from 1986 until 1990, the project was in full swing.

Much planning went into ensuring that the day reserved for each site would be productive. The committee made a local contact for each site in advance, often through the YWCA or an extension club, and then relied on that person to advertise locally.

When the day arrived, a group from the committee set up shop, usually at a church or school building, at 8 a.m. and sometimes worked into the evening, depending on how many people came.

The committee wanted to document “anything we knew about who made it, when it was made, about the family that made it,” Ghormley said – “anything interesting about the quilt we could learn.”

Sometimes the owners had special names for their quilts, Ghormley said, like “Aunt Rose’s quilt” or “the pink quilt.”

“And then we would tell them what the pattern book called it,” Ghormley said.

In the process, the committee educated Nebraskans on quilt terminology.

If a quilt and its owner were deemed to be of particular interest – whether because of an unusual pattern, an especially fascinating story or any other standout characteristic – the committee would conduct a more in-depth interview with the owner.

It was a meticulous process. One committee member photographed each quilt before it left the building, and the committee sewed a label on each quilt to mark its inclusion in the project.

These women, of course, were not being paid to sit and document quilts all day long. But their passion kept them going.

“We were all quilt lovers – we were interested in that – and we wanted to have these quilts recorded before they were all lost or given away or destroyed,” Ghormley said.

“It was just a labor of love. We all
worked voluntarily and really worked hard from early morning to late night,” she said.

As the committee traveled from site to site, a couple of self-imposed stipulations helped them work with consistency and class.

First, they documented only quilts that had been made in the state or those that were brought or sent to Nebraska before 1920.

Second, they made sure none of the committee members were looking to purchase quilts on the documentation days.

“We agreed among ourselves that we would not buy anybody’s quilts,” Ghormley said.

The women did try to impress on the quilt owners the importance of these historical items, though, and sometimes even discouraged them from ever selling their quilts. If they didn’t want the quilts, they should pass them on to a family member or donate them to a local museum, Ghormley and her cohorts told Nebraskans.

Once the committee had visited all 28 sites and documented approximately 5,000 quilts, the committee members began meeting at Best’s home every Wednesday morning to sort through and analyze the information they had gathered.

“We became known as the Wednesday girls,” Ghormley said.

And although these women enjoyed one another’s company, and still do today in their 60s, 70s and 80s, Wednesdays were for work, not play, Best said.

“We had to accomplish something,” she said. “It was very pleasant, but it was not fun and games.”

As they went through the information, the committee members also decided which quilts would be included in the book. Once they finished this tedious process, they handed things over to Crews, who worked with the University of Nebraska Press to publish the book in 1991.

Thanks to the collective work done on the project, the culminating book, “Nebraska Quilts & Quiltmakers,” won a Frost Prize, awarded by the Smithsonian Institution for distinguished scholarship in American crafts, in 1993. It was also nominated for a George Wittenborn Memorial Book award, given annually to fine arts publications for excellence in content, documentation, design and production.

In the wake of the Nebraska project, which documented quilts owned by Nebraska residents, a similar project to document quilts owned by museums was started and completed in the mid-1990s.

Sara Dillow, former president of the American Quilt Study Group, who died in February 2008, formed a committee in conjunction with the Nebraska State Quilt Guild to document those quilts. The material gathered by a consultant from Los Angeles under Dillow’s direction is now housed at the Nebraska State Historical Society, available for any researcher or interested citizen to use.

In addition, each museum received the records of its own quilts.

With the documentation that has been done in Nebraska and around the world, countless quilts’ stories have been preserved and can be retold for generations.

And while Best said Nebraska was the first state to do the documentation project with an academic focus, this quilting claim to fame seems to be only modestly celebrated.

But, as Dillow noted, perhaps Nebraskans prefer it that way.

“We do things quietly and just get it done and don’t make much noise patting ourselves on the back,” Dillow said.

“We’re movers and shakers here in Nebraska.”

“It’s a lot easier to record a story when it’s there than to try to put the story and the quilt back together many years later.”

PATRICIA CREWS

“This indigo appliqué quilt was made by Rachel Armstrong Chase in 1874. The heart and diamond border indicates it was a bride’s quilt.”

COURTESY OF THE NEBRASKA QUILT PROJECT COMMITTEE OF THE LINCOLN QUILTERS GUILD
The stitches of modern quilters may soon be hung with famous paintings in galleries, but what makes quilts art is being debated by many in the quilt community.

BY LINSEY MARSHALL

His worn hands moved quickly, looping and pulling the multi-colored threads. As he worked, awe-struck fans surrounded him, whispering to one another. His eyes rarely left his work, but a small smile remained on his face, as if he knew he was being watched.

Some of the spectators clutched one of his many books in their hands, crowding into his gallery at the 2007 Festival of Quilts in Birmingham, England, waiting for a break so they could get a quick autograph. Once in a while, he glanced up from behind his reading glasses framed with a zebra print and paused for a moment to indulge a happy fan. Then it was back to work.

Kaffe Fassett, an internationally known quilter and California native, moved to London in 1964 to become a painter. After a trip to a Scottish mill a few years later, he said he developed a love for the feel of fabrics and yarn. Soon after, he began his textiles career with knitting, then moved on to painting fabrics.

Fassett said he was eventually drawn to quilting by the beauty of American antique quilts. “I loved the repetitions and how people could take a diamond or a square and work it to death and it’s never boring,” he said. “Every piece is compelling.”

Fassett is best known for painting colorful and vibrant fabrics before making quilts out of them. His distinctive work makes him what many would call an art quilter. He’s not alone, but defining exactly what an art quilt is and who art quilters are has been a hot topic within the quilting world for quite some time.

In 1991, Clover Williams was a doctoral candidate in folklore at the University of Indiana in Bloomington. She wrote an article titled “ Tradition and Art: Two Layers of Meaning in the Bloomington Quilters Guild” that was published in the 1991 edition of Uncoverings, the research papers of the American Quilt Study Group.

In her thesis, Williams wrote that she “found a profound ambivalence towards the designation ‘art,’ which was sometimes associated with modernity. Art was explicitly contrasted with ‘tradition,’ or – tellingly – with ‘utility.’”

In two sentences, Williams summed up the debate that quilters have been engaged in for more than three decades: How is an art quilt different from what is considered to be a traditional quilt? Carolyn Ducey, the curator of collections at the...
“OIL RIG,” a quilt made by Jo Budd as part of her "Beyond Surface" collection, was acquired by the International Quilt Study Center.

PHOTOGRAPH BY K.J. HASCALL
International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, Neb., said members of the IQSC advisory board don’t have an exact definition for the term “art quilt,” but they take the intent of the artist into consideration when evaluating a piece.

“One overly simple way (to define art quilts) is to state that the quilts are meant to be viewed on a wall, like a painting or photograph, never to be considered in a functional context,” she said.

Dana Fritz, an associate professor of art at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said many artists know art when they see it. Some quilts just look artsy, she said.

Studio Art Quilt Associates is a non-profit international organization comprised of artists, teachers, collectors, gallery owners, museum curators and corporate sponsors. It defines art quilts as “contemporary artwork exploring and expressing aesthetic concerns common to the whole range of visual arts: painting, printmaking, photography, graphic design, assemblage and sculpture, which retains, through materials or technique, a clear relationship to the folk art quilt from which it descends.”

Laura Kemshall, a quilter from South Staffs, England, said despite the differences in terminology, she doesn’t like to see the traditional quilters and art quilters divide into two camps because the categories are so similar.

“We’re all sewing with a needle and thread,” she said. “The art quilters are often using the traditional technique; they’re just doing it in a different way.”

The idea of art quilting itself is fairly new. Between 1950 and 1970, quilts began to be accepted as a new art medium. According to the 1993 edition of Uncoverings, this was because of a new appreciation for what was once called “women’s work” and the acceptance of fiber art as a medium. New books and magazines were appearing on bookstore shelves, and gradually the increasing interest in quilts led to the famous 1971 Whitney Exhibition.

“Abstract Design in American Quilts” at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York marked the first time quilting was widely recognized as art in the United States and Europe. The exhibition, in which antique traditional quilts were displayed on museum walls as if they were paintings, is considered the birthplace of art quilts as they are known today. The six-week exhibition was so popular among art critics and received such favorable publicity that it was extended.

According to the IQSC Web site, “The exhibition elevated quilts to the

“It’s like saying a painting is an art painting. The problem is, what do you call stuff that isn’t traditional?”

MICHAEL JAMES

“If it looks like art, and smells like art, then it must be art,” she said.

“If it looks like art, and smells like art, then it must be art,” she said.
same level as high art by presenting them on the walls of a prestigious art museum and by comparing their graphic and painterly qualities to those found in modern abstract art.”

Galleries and museums still struggle to grasp the concept of quilting as an art form, despite the success of the Whitney Exhibition and others, said Michael James, chairman of UNL’s Department of Textiles, Clothing and Design. Long-standing biases about quilting being women’s work and being done only by little old ladies have affected how many quilts actually get shown in art museums, he said.

Helen Joseph, a former curator at the Shipley Art Gallery in London who now works as a private art consultant in England, agreed that it is hard for textiles to be taken seriously in the art world because they aren’t considered to be fine art like paintings or sculptures.

“People are wary of hanging textiles even at home,” she said.

Fritz said while she personally views quilting as an art form, she knows many others in her profession still see it only as a craft – creating something to be used. Fritz credited the Whitney Exhibition with giving quilts the opportunity to be seen for aesthetic purposes and nothing more.

Sandra Williams, an associate professor of art at UNL, said it’s hard to say whether the art community as a whole leans one way or another on the issue of quilts. Each individual has his or her own opinions of what art is and whether quilts qualify.

“It’s really an issue of perception,” she said. “We always have artists that transcend the barriers – that’s the definition of art.”

James said some artists refer to their quilts as “fabric art” or “textile art” to legitimize their work to galleries, but he said he would rather “tell it like it is.”

“Gallery owners say ‘quilt’ is a deadly word,” he said. “But I’ve always identified myself as a quilter. That’s what I do.”

For some quilters, the word “quilt” isn’t what they avoid – it’s the word “art.”

James said he despises the term “art quilt” and called it an invention of the 1980s.

“I hate it because all quilts are art,” he said. “It’s like saying a painting is an art painting. The problem is, what do you call stuff that isn’t traditional? (Quilts) meant just for the wall need a new description.”

His term of choice?

“Studio quilts,” James said, “because people making traditional quilts don’t use studios.”

Lilian Hedley, a quilter from England, specializes in traditional whole-cloth quilts and said she prefers traditional quilts to art quilts. Despite increased interest in art quilting over the past few decades, Hedley said she doesn’t expect the “trend” to last.
“Art quilting is just a phase,” she said. “Traditional quilting will go on forever. It’s the kind of thing you can do until you’re old.”

Williams wrote in her 1991 article that traditional quilters who felt the way Hedley does aren’t against new styles or novelty in quilting but feel a sense of community when tied to their fellow quilters who also use the more traditional styles of quilting. She noted that antique quilts hung in museums as art were not usually considered art quilts by traditional quilters.

Many traditional quilters simply don’t like the terminology and the basic assumptions that go with certain terms. Williams’ thesis explained that phrases such as art quilt can produce an image in people’s minds of less tradition and closeness between quilters and their work. Traditional quilters, she wrote, don’t want that to happen and often make sure to point out the traditions within their quilts.

“These women usually favored descriptions which, while not abandoning the creative aspects of their work, highlighted … belonging within the community,” Williams wrote.

Joseph said art quilters want their quilts to send messages the way traditional quilts do. She referred to art quilters as “social commentators” whose quilts are all about concept.

“Behind the fabric is a narrative,” she said. “It can be political, it can be social, it can be figurative, it can be abstract; they all have underlying layers of notions and suggestions and answers to questions.”

Those messages make quilting an art, said Jo Budd, an art quilter from Suffolk, England. Budd said the meaning each quilt has to its maker and the story behind it contribute to its artistic value and credibility.

“All of these have beauty and creativity in their soul, and if you’re a creative person, you will create with whatever you have,” she said. “(Quilts) gave you more than just warmth and comfort. There was love, and there were aesthetic sensibilities.”

Budd said she believes people began to recognize quilting as art in the 1970s because more people became aware of the craft and the visual beauty behind its practical uses.

“The fact that we can now put them up on the wall and appreciate the more abstract qualities about them – it’s a continuum, not a change,” she said.

Kemshall, the quilter from South Staffs, England, said she quilts with the intent that admirers can – and will – touch her work and not just look at it on the wall.

“What’s really nice about quilts and textiles is the way they feel when you hold them in your hand,” she said. “When everybody’s at a quilt show, you can see them getting right within an inch of the work, and they want to touch it, and it’s just driving them mad.”

Kemshall’s work includes a freestanding quilt that extends out from the wall and curves around to create a spiral enclosure that viewers can stand inside. The piece is intended to make viewers feel as though the quilt is wrapped around them, she said. She has also created quilted books that spectators can flip through, touching the quilting all they want.

“I just want people to enjoy it, so I let people touch it,” she said.

Fassett said his quilts are also meant for everyday use on beds and sofas.

### THE UNUSUAL BOB ADAMS

**BY ASHLEY ERMEL**

Finding male quilters is one thing, but male quilters with an unusual quilting style? That’s even more difficult.

Bob Adams, from Lafayette, Ind., is known for his discharging process. The process, which includes pulling dye out of black or hand-dyed cloth using bleach and gels, is responsible for much of the color in his quilts.

Adams, who also relies heavily on thread in his quilts, said it started as a way to keep articles together, but over time, “thread has become a really important element, as much as color.”

First introduced to the art world by his seventh-grade teacher, Adams eventually pursued a degree in art from Butler University in Indiana. Knowing that becoming a full-time artist wouldn’t pay the bills, Adams became an art teacher, teaching high school drawing, painting and printmaking.

With his extensive background in the use of color, Adams began to help his wife, Natalie, choose fabrics for her own quilt-making projects. He quickly became interested in textiles and learned how flexible fabric can be artistically.

"With painting, I can get the color but I can’t get the texture,” Adams said, which is one reason he made the switch from canvas to fabric.

Adams, who has only been quilting for 10 years, said he isn’t fazed by the fact that quilting has long been considered a female’s pastime. “I don’t care if you’re female or male, red, green or purple; I love what I’m doing, but I do catch a lot of grief for it,” he said.
“It’s a lot like dress-making. You want to make the most beautiful dress you can, and sometimes people call it art, but pretty much you just want to have a beautiful dress for yourself,” he said.

Some argue the fact that quilts can be considered both art and traditional prove the two categories are not mutually exclusive. In fact, some quilters have begun to take a stab at both traditional and art quilting. Patricia Bolton, chief editor and founder of Quilting Arts Magazine, said this trend is helping art quilts cross over into the traditional quilting world.

“Art quilting is getting much stronger because many traditional quilters now want to make their own one-of-a-kind, innovative quilts,” she said.

Sandie Lush, a quilter from England, is one of the best and most widely known quilters in England or the United States who exemplifies the trend Bolton spoke about.

“I’m regarded as a traditional quilter,” she said, “but I do have this other life where I make smaller quilts that look like sweaters.”

Lush’s display at the Festival of Quilts in Birmingham focused on her whole-cloth sweater quilts. Lush said the quilts, designed to look like real sweaters that a person could pluck off the wall and wear home, are just another example of how traditional quilters are finding ways to cross into the art world.

“Certainly, in Britain, traditional quilts are on the decline,” she said. “More people want to do quick quilts, and whole-cloth quilts are quite labor-intensive.”

But Lush was quick to point out that she doesn’t make her sweater quilts to be “arty.”

“I’ve never regarded myself as a quilt artist,” she said. “I just look at it as fun. I’m still very much based in tradition as well. Those sweaters just give me an opportunity to play.”

Some quilters are combining more than just tradition and art, said Tina Lindstrom, a glass-maker and artist from Sweden. Lindstrom brings another entire craft into the mix. She said she began creating glass replicas of quilts made by Barbara Weeks, a British quilter and member of the British Quilt Guild, after they met at a glass-making workshop in Turkey. The replicas can be made to whatever size the artist desires, she said.

Lindstrom said she creates the glass art by pouring hot glass into molds resembling the quilt and adding sand to create texture. She said owners can display the quilt on the wall next to the glass version anywhere in their home or business to see the similarities between the quilt and the glass.

“It’s interesting to combine those two different worlds of textile and glass,” she said.

Olga Prins-Lukowski, a quilter from the Netherlands and a member of the IQSC advisory board, said some of the new techniques themselves draw the line between traditional and art quilts, and James was essential in introducing her to the art side of quilting.

“I never thought that I was an artist,” she said. “My first quilt was completely traditional. It built slowly … I learned a lot from Michael.”

Prins-Lukowski said James taught her to alter her fabrics with dyes, bleach and burning techniques that involve soldering irons. Destroying the fabric, she said, can give it new color and texture that adds a distinctive twist to the quilt it eventually becomes a part of.

“Now my studio is more like a chemical laboratory,” she said.

Pauline Burbidge, a quilter who lives along the Scottish border of England, said these new techniques are drawing in younger artists and encouraging colleges across Europe to adopt textile degree programs.

“It’s just great to push things forward with the new generation,” she said.

Bolton said she has no doubt that quilting will continue.

“I’m of a generation where home economics wasn’t a part of the school machine,” said Bolton, who is in her mid-30s. “People my age feel kind of dissed that they never had this kind of education. They want to play with fabric, and we need to capitalize on the generations that don’t want to make traditional quilts but want to do art quilts.”
Vibrant quilting cultures span multiple countries, boasting unique patterns, details and colors as varied as their origins.
A GLOBAL QUILT COMMUNITY

“TRANSITION,” a detail of a piece by Dena Crain, a quilter from Kenya.

COURTESY DENA CRAIN
A quilted block titled “Survival” features a prominent tree in the foreground that seems to have just shed its leaves. The mixture of dark and light browns combined with layers of textured fabrics and threads make the bark look real. The large, sturdy trunk and the branches reach high and taper into nothingness.

Burnt umber and Tuscan yellow fabrics surround the tree. A mixture of cool lavender threads and fabrics throughout the piece contrasts with the warm shades of yellow.

A closer look at the quilting reveals the outlines of elephants with long trunks and tusks.

“Ear-shattering trumpeting as the elephant bulls challenge each other in the dry Sand River bed,” writes Helga Beumont, the block’s artist, in her description of the piece. “The other elephants freeze – a split second – before the leading matriarchs hastily march their herds in opposing directions.”

This block, as well as the dozens of others in the Major Minors II series, is a 10-inch square, about the size of a small pizza box. Like the other blocks in the series, it was made by a South African textile artist.

Major Minors II is an exhibit of small textile works that has toured the world. A group of 50 South African textile artists and quilters, formed in 1997 under the name Fibreworks, produced this exhibit and others.

Patricia Bolton, the editor of Quilting Arts Magazine, featured nine pieces of
the Major Minors II collection in the magazine’s fall 2006 issue. Upon looking at the quilts that have come out of South Africa, Bolton said it was hard for her to believe quilting gained popularity in the country only in the 1970s.

“To have it not be even three decades old and see how advanced they are with textiles is amazing,” Bolton said.

Though quilting is neither a traditional African craft nor a common practice among indigenous Africans, it has gained a following in the past 30 years. African quilters draw from the continent’s textile history and traditional Western patterns when making their quilts.

An ivory figure of a king wearing a quilted cloak dating from 3400 B.C. has led scholars to believe quilting originated in Egypt. The carving, excavated from the Temple of Osiris in 1903, is now in the collection of the British Museum in London.

The next quilts on world record are in China in 770 B.C., with no further evidence of quilting in Africa until the 1800s.

Because the climate in most of Africa is hot, people likely did not need multi-layer bed covers or garments, said Carolyn Ducey, curator of collections at the International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, Neb.

“In warmer climates,” Ducey said, “we just don’t see much quilting.”

The number of quilters in Africa has grown since the 1970s with a major hub in South Africa, which has an estimated 5,000 quilters. There are quilters in other African countries as well, including notable groups in Kenya, Botswana, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

“With its four densely populated

**ADINKRAHENE**
A pattern made using the outline of three circles that stands for authority and grandeur. The word means chief of Adinkra symbols.
urban areas, a strong textile tradition among the Dutch and British colonials and the general prosperity of the country, South Africans have turned to patchwork quilting in a big way,” said Dena Crain, a quilter and instructor from Kenya. This is much larger when compared to the country she now calls home, Crain said, because the number of Kenyan quilters is in the hundreds.

European textiles from colonial times have had a major influence on South African quilters, she said, and quilting instructors from South Africa are in demand internationally.

Pat Parker, a South African quilter, author and instructor, said that when interest in quilting started to grow in the country 30 years ago, the following was small. Parker said her mother and grandmother were talented seamstresses, but they did not quilt. She said few people quilt in Africa because it is not a traditional craft.

Some European women may have quilted in Africa during the European colonization, Crain said, though little concrete evidence of this remains. Colonial settlers could have known how to quilt before arriving in Africa and continued once they arrived. European missionaries also taught Western-style sewing and quilting to indigenous people.

In 2003, Pearlie Johnson, a University of Missouri-Kansas City graduate student, studied abroad in Ghana to research African textiles. Knowing that quilting is not part of African tradition, Johnson said she did not expect to see anyone practicing the craft.

“When I discovered people making what looked like patchwork quilts, I was surprised,” she said at a 2007 IQSC symposium. The women were working together to make quilts to sell at the local market.

In Ghana, Johnson saw groups of six quilters, typically overseen by a man, working outdoors at sewing machines to make one quilt together to sell at the markets. She said the quilts’ patterns and colors were similar to African American quilts. Instead of cotton or wool batting, the women used foam.

Bolton said the quilters she has worked with in South Africa have been of European descent, a trend also seen in other parts of Africa.

The quilt community in Nairobi, the largest in Kenya, includes a high percentage of white quilters. The guild members, who are all women, come from countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, Australia and Canada. Crain said many of the quilters, herself included, were born in other countries but have lived in Kenya for years. Others, she said, were born in Africa to parents of European or Western descent. The 2001 census indicates only 9.2 percent of the country is white.

Many Kenyan quilters are of Asian descent; most are Indian because of the large number of people from that coun-
try who moved to Kenya decades ago to help build railroads. These women tend to come from a high socio-economic background that includes an estimated 1 percent of the country's total population.

Crain said few indigenous people quilt, in part because they typically have low incomes and because quilting materials are expensive. Kenyans with high incomes do not appear to have an interest in quilting, she said, and those in the middle class usually work full-time and do not have time to quilt.

“No lower income woman will waste her time and energy, not to mention expensive fabrics and out-of-her-price-range batting, to make a cozy quilt for her family,” Crain said. “That would be a luxury she could ill afford.”

Parker, who teaches quilting in South Africa with her sister Jenny Williamson, has had few black students through the years. She said several outreach groups run programs to teach black women how to quilt, and they have a small following.

Like Parker, Odette Tolksdorf, a member of Fibreworks and the South African Quilters Guild, speculated that constraints of time and money prevented more black South Africans from quilting.

“It is unfortunate that there are not so many black South African quilters,” Tolksdorf said.

It’s a different situation in Nigeria and Ghana, where most of the quilters are black men.

Victoria Scott, another speaker at the IQSC symposium, lived in Nigeria from 1969 to 1979 and witnessed the growth of quilting in Africa. She said that, traditionally, men produced the majority of textiles across the continent.

“Men have continued to dominate textile-making in Ghana, and that includes quilts,” Scott said.

Most African quilters today use American and British patchwork patterns and cotton fabrics imported from the United States, though early African patchwork was not influenced much by either country.

An early form of patchwork quilting in Africa was found in quilted horse armor. In 1823, a British soldier made the first report of quilted armor in Africa, according to James Hamill, a curator at the British Museum.

Both people and horses wore the quilted armor in south-Saharan Africa in the present-day countries of Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Hausa, Kanem-Borno and Sudan. The armor was paired with chain mail, metal plating or pieces of leather for added protection.

The British Museum has a piece of Sudanese horse armor in its collection dating to 1898, according to museum records. Composed of scarlet, black, yellow and indigo cotton triangles, the armor is stitched together and stuffed with kapok — the wool-like strands that surround the seeds of silk cotton trees. Hamill said people harvested the materials locally.

Today, in addition to Western fabric and patterns, some quilters are again drawing on local materials, including traditional hand-dyed fabrics such as the popular Adinkra cloth. This cloth, which royalty historically used, conveyed messages through the symbols stamped on the fabric.

For example, a pattern called mpuan-num, meaning five tufts of hair, represents the traditional hairstyle of priestesses, according to the 2001 book “Quilt Inspirations from Africa: A Caravan of Ideas, Patterns, Motifs, and Techniques.” Another, the adinkrahene, means chief of Adinkra symbols and is made using the outline of three circles. It is the highest Adinkra symbol and stands for authority and grandeur, according to the book by Kaye England and Mary Elizabeth Johnson.

The name Adinkra comes from a king of the same name who, when taken
In “Misconceived Communications 2,” Margaret Leets uses a background of darkly colored fabric painted with words and silhouettes of broken hearts, topped by thin sheets of chartreuse and purple fabric with stitches that look like writing to show the trouble and pain caused when words are misconceived. South African quilter Parker said their students did not show much interest when she and her sister decided a few years ago to start making quilts with an African theme. For this reason, the sisters decided to write “Quilt Africa,” a book depicting patterns they deemed African. Since then, Parker said, there has been a little more interest in making African-inspired quilts.

“We earnestly hope that we have done something to inspire the quilters here to ‘sell our country’ by way of quilts” she said.

### ADDED QUILTERS: KAYE ENGLAND

BY LAURA CHAPMAN

When she isn’t at home feeding the chickens and goats on her Indiana acreage, Kaye England tours the world giving speeches on her life’s work – quilts. England – a publisher, quilter, fabric designer and lecturer – spoke to a full room of fellow quilters at the Nebraska State Quilt Guild’s “Threads Across Nebraska” conference in July 2007. Her message, which was part educational and part motivational, was about the importance of women using quilts as an outlet for themselves.

“My quilting has saved my life,” England told the women in her brusque southern drawl acquired in the years she spent growing up on a Kentucky farm.

England featured her “Voices of the Past” pattern series, which is a compilation of patterns named after historical women figures, and explained why the collection was so important for women to study.

“When I started researching (the quilt blocks), I could find less than a dozen with names assigned to women,” England said before adding that there were hundreds of patterns made to commemorate men.

“Women didn’t value themselves enough.”

For her series, England created several original designs to honor different women that she admired in her life, such as the Harriet Tubman block pattern she made using inspiration from the Underground Railroad block.

As England showed the audience quilts made by American women in the 19th century, she said that when she looks at the different quilts, she likes to imagine the woman who made the quilt and what was going on while she worked.

“I wonder what she was thinking when she did that,” England said, pointing to a spot on the quilt she held.

England said she believes that women made the quilts to express themselves artistically and for a social outlet, not just as a way to keep warm.

“Not for a moment do I believe that’s the only reason she did it.”

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**EXPLORE**

prisoner, wore a garment covered with symbols that conveyed his sorrow for the death of his soldiers, according to the book. In the language of the Ashanti, from Ghana, the word “Adinkra” means “saying goodbye to one another.”

Magie Relph, owner of the African Fabric Shop based in England and a collector of African fabrics, said African people traditionally made the fabrics the way they did not for aesthetic reasons but as a means of communication.

The fabric’s color, as well as its symbols, conveyed meaning. Relph said. The most popular hand-dyed fabric in Africa is the Kente cloth. Most Kente cloth is indigo, but other colors convey different meanings. Black Kente, for example, symbolizes maturation or intensified spiritual energy; blue means peacefulness, harmony and love; and green means vegetation, growth and spiritual renewal.

“We just wear a red dress because we like it,” Relph said of Westerners. “But there it means more. … Often they’re not just wearing a piece of clothing, they’re sending a message.”

Crain said quilters in the Kenyan Quilt Guild make quilts using American patchwork patterns and calicos because those are what they know best.

“Because quilters in Kenya have seen only American and European quilt books,” Crain said, “they have a false notion that these quilts are the finest, the loveliest and the most desirable.”

This is also true in other countries, though the trend may be changing, thanks to the South African influence. Tolksdorf said that in recent years, more quilters have drawn on what is unique about the South African landscape, animals and culture for inspiration. She has seen color choices and patterns that are different from those in quilts from other places.

“South Africa does not have a long tradition of quilting so maybe the ‘rules’ of quilting are not ingrained in use and we feel more freedom to do our own thing,” Tolksdorf said.

Studio art quilts made in South Africa, like those of Major Minors II, convey these landscape and cultural themes. “Nguni,” by Judy Breytenbach, has a dark black base and includes smaller blocks, colored with dark and light browns, burnt oranges and golden yellow. One block depicts the Nguni cattle.

Other pieces make social statements.
Nearly lost among the thousands of quilts scattered throughout the large exhibition hall was a piece that compelled many visitors to stop in their tracks and stare.

At first glance, the expansive quilt portrayed a group of Indian women huddled together, enduring a dust storm. Bright colors and finely sewn details alone made the work stand out among its peers.

But many observers found this particular quilt could only be appreciated by examining it from a few inches away. The stitch work was intricate, and the transition from one colored fabric to the next left more than a few onlookers shaking their heads at its complexity.

“Very powerful, isn’t it?” one awestruck woman said softly to another as camera flashes illuminated the work.

The judges for the international competition, which was part of Festival of Quilts 2007 in Birmingham, England, thought so. Among the 104 quilts in the pictorial category, the aptly named “Dust Storm” quilt received second place, as well as one Judge’s Choice Award and the Amateur Award.

What wasn’t listed on the index card-sized plaque next to the quilt was that its creator was Paramjeet Bawa, a woman from Punjab, India, who had been quilt-
ing for only six years.

Bawa’s story of quilting success is gradually becoming commonplace in a country such as India, where ancient practices of quilting out of necessity are being transformed into an imported enthusiasm for artistic pieces. Indeed, a similar transformation is occurring in areas across the vast expanse of the Asian continent. The largest and most populous land mass on the planet, Asia is home to perhaps the oldest evidence of quilting, as well as some of the craft’s latest innovations.

Every Asian country has a textile history, but the quilting tradition of many regions has faded away. What remains is a cultural mystery as to where and how the quilting traditions of many nations began.

Scholars and quilters have only recently realized how intertwined the influences among Asian nations and other countries around the world really are. They’re now inextricable, to the point that many countries are reexamining their own pasts and embracing a new culture of quilting for the future.

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Selenge Tserendash, a young woman from Mongolia, works as a lawyer in the impoverished country sandwiched between China to the south and Russia to the north. She wanted to make a difference in her country, particularly for women in need.

So, in 2003, Tserendash sent e-mails to every quilter she knew. Her hope was that some empathetic European or American would come to Mongolia and teach women to quilt, a skill that could, in turn, enable them to earn extra money for their families and give them a hobby in a region where alcoholism runs rampant. Drinking is such a problem in Mongolia that studies show more than half the adult population drinks more than it should, with 8 percent of that majority being women.

Finding the right teacher for this remote region proved difficult at first.

“Some of them were asking me, ‘How much are you going to charge? Do you have a good toilet?’” Tserendash said. “Maggie Ball, she didn’t ask me anything. I think she was very interested. She paid for all of the things by herself.”

Ball, who lives in Washington state, responded to Tserendash’s call for help, and in 2004, she spent a month teaching free quilting workshops for Mongolian women.

The experience many women already had in knitting and sewing, along with their enthusiasm to learn, made the transition to quilting a quick one.

Two of the quilters were so engrossed in their new skill that when Ball and some fellow American quilters returned from an 11-day trip to the Mongolian countryside, the pair had quilted 45 tote bags in the teachers’ absence.

“We thought, ‘Oh, no, we’ve created a sweatshop here!’” said one of the American teachers with a laugh.

Tserendash and her American supporters are still teaching the only non-profit, non-religious quilting workshops in Mongolia, though Ball’s role has since decreased as native women have assumed greater leadership roles. Ball went back in 2006 to help organize Mongolia’s first international quilt show and still gives Tserendash occasional advice, but the workshops are now taught almost entirely by Mongolian women.

While Tserendash is passing along the American staple of making patchwork, the end product is uniquely Mongolian. Affixed in some form on many of the quilted tote bags and patchwork designs is the olzi, a Buddhist symbol for long life and prosperity. Also, Mongolian women moved from quilting with long strips of cloth—which are expensive and rare—to salvaging the plentiful scraps from old clothing and tents. The shift has resulted in more “crazy quilting.”

“It is important to know where these quilts come from because they often come from some very unlikely spots.”

CAROLYN DUCEY
with assorted random shapes, and fewer traditional patchwork patterns.

Mongolia, like much of Asia, is making a relatively easy transition to quilting because of a long history of textile work. Many of the women Tserendash taught were already familiar with some appliqué techniques — that is, applying a piece of fabric to a bigger piece of a different fabric — because they had used them to create wall-hangings, tablecloths and book covers.

Though various sections of Asia are just being introduced to quilting or are experiencing revivals, as is Mongolia, most scholars agree the continent is the site of the richest tradition of textiles on the planet.

Quilthistory.com, an online forum of historians and quilters, even labels Asia the birthplace of the quilt. According to the account, the first evidence of quilting appeared on a linen carpet found in a Siberian cave tomb and is dated to sometime before the first century.

The International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, Neb., compiled its own history of quilts. Assembled by IQSC curator Carolyn Ducey, the timeline says the first evidence of quilting appeared in the 35th century B.C. in Egypt, in the form of an ivory carving of a figure wearing a quilted mantle or cloak. According to
the IQSC timeline says, boasts the oldest surviving quilted object—a different linen carpet found in a Mongolian cave tomb, which dates to about the first century.

Ducey said the discrepancy in historical accounts is largely because of imperfections in the way textiles are dated. As recently as 30 years ago, Ducey said, textiles excavated from ancient sites were dismissed by researchers as secondary to the more exotic items they discovered. That meant many textiles were not dated by their own features but were lumped into the estimate for the entire site.

“I think textiles is still early in its study,” Ducey said. “Because we’ve only been studying quilts for the last 30 years, there’s always room for development.”

The timeline compilation was an arduous process for Ducey, who had to study piles of documents to make sure the quilted items actually existed. The more she researched, the wider her scope of sources became.

“It is important to know where these quilts come from because they often come from some very unlikely spots,” Ducey said. “I think we’re now realizing the roots of it go far deeper than we ever could have thought.”

Like accounts of the first quilt, much of Asia’s early quilting history remains lost because the quilts themselves no longer exist. What scholars do have is a firm grasp on the textile history of the continent, particularly in and around China.

Though the famed Silk Road was actually used more frequently for transporting spices than cloth during the first centuries A.D., the route was also used to send gifts of silk from the Chinese government to other countries in an effort to ease international relations.

Along with textiles, symbols of Chinese ideals traveled the trading roads from the well-populated country and appeared in quilts in western Asia and Europe into the 16th century. Among this intellectual exchange were images of dragons (symbolizing imperial authority), suns (intellectual enlightenment), pheasants (literary refinement) and flames (brilliance of spirit and mind).

Despite the ongoing influx of ideas for images and fabrics, most Asians remained focused on the traditional and simple ways of quilting they had followed for many hundreds of years.

Olga Prins-Lukowski, a former psychologist and an expert in Asian textiles, said the region has had much to offer the global quilting scene. One contribution has been chintz fabric, which the Dutch imported to Europe starting in the late 17th century.

Chintz is a type of cotton cloth glazed with waxes and starches, which creates a shiny appearance. Though this form of finishing was an established practice in Asia, the look was completely new to Europe.

British quilt historian Bridget Long said European, particularly British, de-
mands for specific colors and images began affecting what the Asian countries made soon after the unveiling of chintz in Western societies.

“When they started supplying us with their wonderful printed cloths,” Long said, “it wasn’t long before the European market told them what colors to use and said, ‘Actually, next time don’t make it look quite so exotic; put more roses in it.’”

Primarily, the brightly colored cloth came from India, where artists had become accustomed to dyeing cotton along with materials such as silk and wool. The cotton cloth was printed, meaning it had to be bathed by hand in a dye at least once for each color in the pattern. The intricacy of the process meant the final product was expensive on the European market.

“But the European textile industry didn’t have the ability to print cloth with dye,” Long said. “And it wasn’t until it started coming from the Indian subcontinent to Europe did the users, the buyers of the goods, realize what wonderful stuff it was.”

So wonderful, in fact, that threatened European textile industries stopped its importation a few decades later, continuing the ban until 1774. The material still reached England through smuggling operations, though, and restrictions were lifted as tensions in North America were building toward the American Revolution.

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As a self-proclaimed “young hippie” in 1969, 17-year-old John Gillow hitchhiked across Europe, from Great Britain to Istanbul, Turkey.

That would be where he first discovered his love for textiles — and later, quilts.

Gillow bought a piece of Turkish embroidery one day, and its beauty and texture fascinated him to the point that he decided to devote himself to collecting and learning about other fabrics worldwide.

He traveled to Syria, India and Morocco but eventually settled in Kutch, a region on the east side of Pakistan, bordering India. There, Gillow set up his own business, buying textiles and quilts from locals. He then relocated temporarily to tourist hot spots and sold the relatively simple quilts to travelers for $10 to $20 apiece.

Today, the business continues as he also researches the region’s textile and quilting history.

Though Gillow said many elements make a quilt uniquely Indian or Pakistani — like using absorbent materials on quilts made to mop perspiration on hot days — he has a hard time believing all the signature styles and materials of those quilts actually originated from within the countries. After all, anything much older than 80 years in the region today gets worn out and thrown away.

“If you ask the women who did these quilts where the tradition came from, they’ll say, ‘We’ve been doing it since the dawn of time,’” Gillow said. “But there’s no evidence of anything even 19th century. There’s no proof either way of what the origins of it were.”

Gillow sees what he calls a “cyclical influence” in Pakistan and neighboring countries. That is, he’ll see an American quilt that copied a Pakistani quilt, even though that Pakistani quilt copied a European quilt and so on. He doesn’t believe anyone can ever know where some of the styles and types of quilting began.

But Gillow does have some more re-
cent evidence of Western influence. He owns a quilt from Calcutta, India, that depicts a bearded American sailor wearing a United States Navy cap. It’s an image he believes was gleaned from a U.S. aircraft carrier that sat off the coast of India in 1942 and was put onto the quilt only months after the encounter.

The world traveler said quilting in the region is growing today because of Western interest. Items that once were created for practical uses and had little economic value are now considered art. It’s to the point that many people are commissioning others to make quilts.

“The interest in quilts, particularly from America, is stimulating a craft industry,” Gillow said, “particularly in Pakistan.”

That level of interest doesn’t seem to be present in bigger countries like China, Gillow said, but the Chinese do have a history of quilting clothes and making some quilts to battle the cold nights.

And although China is a major world producer of silk, most Chinese quilters use the more-practical cotton in their quilts because silk is significantly more expensive.

As for India, Gillow said, it was mostly influenced from the West when British ships and other European vessels arrived to trade with the country beginning in the late 1600s.

The exchange made England a significant amount of money because the British traded gold to India in exchange for cloth, then turned around and traded that to Indonesia for spices, which they used to preserve meats and other foods.

“Never trust the Brits,” Gillow said with a laugh.

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More than ever before, quilting in Asia has been a reason for people to get to know each other.

With technology like the Internet proliferating, quilters are communicating with fellow crafters they might never have met otherwise.

In Kuwait, quilting is undergoing a radical transformation. People from around the region are forming online quilt groups, while styles and ideas from a plethora of adjacent countries are making their way into the Middle Eastern nation. Though quilting was once occasionally practiced as one way to combat cold desert nights, today it has become an art form all its own.

As more Kuwaiti citizens gain wealth because of the area’s booming oil business, many are investing some of their spare time and money in quilts for the beauty they provide, as well as for their monetary value.

Joan Fisher, a former president of the Kuwait Textile Arts Association, said quilting is a way to show the world that the Middle East is about more than just violence.

“We actually are good, fun-loving people who enjoy our quilting,” said Fisher, who is originally from Europe. “We want to show all the different aspects of all our cultures, how multi-cultural we actually are.”
Quilts from Kuwait are influenced by the sandy terrain, and thus many include bright colors and images of nature. Because of the strong traditionalist Muslim view that any images of people are sinful, most quilts in the region don’t portray groups or individuals.

Janine Ibbini, who has been a textile artist in Kuwait for eight years, said the country doesn’t have its own distinct style. Instead, it’s a melting pot of ideas from all over the region.

“We are bits of everything, and we just grab what we like,” Ibbini said. “But it’s definitely influenced by the bright sunshine and skies and the desert.

“And sand creeps into everything, more or less, because that’s what we see all the time.”

Quilting has also gained momentum in other areas of the continent, including Japan, where a quarter of a million people attended the Festival of Quilts 2006 in Tokyo despite a snowstorm in the area. Even China, though it hasn’t noticeably increased its quilting interest, has begun to cater to the movement as Chinese silk and wool are increasingly available at commercial quilting events.

Paramjeet Bawa, the Indian woman honored for her “Dust Storm” quilt, has also become an enthusiastic member of the quilting movement. But like so many quilters in so many countries, she got her inspiration from an outside source. In the case of her award-winning quilt, it was a photo she saw in National Geographic magazine.

“I just wanted to do that as a quilt for myself,” Bawa said. “I’m not a professional. I didn’t know I would put it in an exhibition.

“I made the quilt, and it was good.”

As a result, Bawa began getting international attention for what began as a simple fascination.

Yes, Bawa is a relatively new quilter. She says she doesn’t have an ingrained style, nor does she need the money from her works, though she has sold a few.

She just enjoys doing it. And now she has something to talk about with quilters from around the world.

That’s enough for her.

“I would say I’m very superficial,” Bawa said. “I’ve never gone into the depths of it. I like the color, the flow, the picture.

“It’s beautiful.”
As a teenage girl growing up in Tokyo in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Chuck Nohara was in awe of everything American.

“I was blown away by the strength of America,” said Nohara, who was 1 year old at the end of World War II. “I was hungry to learn American culture.”

Part of Nohara’s American “education” included watching cowboy movies on TV after school during those teenage years. As she watched her black-and-white screen one day, she could not take her eyes off a stitched bedcover shown in the movie.

“I didn’t know even what it is, but I was so interested in it,” said Nohara, now 63.

Later, looking at a Seventeen magazine left by the American military in a used-book store, she found similar quilts. She finally knew what she had fallen in love with: patchwork. She gathered old fabrics that the American military had left behind and started to stitch them together, imitating quilts in the magazine.

“I even made new fabrics have textured surfaces on purpose to duplicate quilts in the magazine,” Nohara said.

Patchwork quilting has traveled around the world and connected people across borders as cultures combine. Western patchwork quilts arrived in Japan after World War II and developed a new style, mixing with the Japanese traditional quilts that had existed since ancient times. Patchwork quilting has evolved in Japan, influencing people’s lives and passions.

Michael James, professor and chairman of the textiles, clothing and design department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said he admires Japanese quilts.

“The quality of Japanese quilts is always outstanding,” he said, showing pictures from a Japanese quilt competition for which he was a judge.

Many Japanese quilters honor traditional styles and patterns from the West, but the complexity of their designs is extreme, James said.

“Japanese people take traditional styles to stages of more complication and in detail,” he said.

Even though Western patchwork quilts became very popular in Japan only about 30 years ago, Japan has its own rich textile history.


“Japanese quilts are worked in rich and unusual fabrics, in strange color combinations and usually are of simple but often asymmetrically distorted design,” said Liddell, a journalist who traveled the world to study quilts.

Japanese traditional quilts include ancient sewing techniques. Yosegire, which means “collecting clothes,” is similar to patchwork, and sashinui, which means “stitching,” refers to items that are quilted. Both techniques were used centuries ago to make kimonos.
“We can say patchwork quilts are everywhere people have cultures of fabrics in the world, even though people call them with different names,” Noriyuki Ito, a professor at Kyoritsu Women University, wrote in his 2006 book, “American Antique Quilts: Comparing Western and Japanese Textiles Through Patchworks.”

“The origin of quilting is collecting small pieces of fabrics and making one big fabric,” Ito said. “Also, the origin of quilts is stitching together some fabrics. On these basic ideas, I think we can see yosegire and sashinui as patchworks and quilts.”

These traditional styles illustrate two characteristics of Japanese textile culture: recycling fabrics and showing off valuable fabrics.

The oldest yosegire is in the Shosoin museum in northern Japan, which keeps the treasures of Emperor Shomu. The piece is a kimono made from small pieces of cloth and known as Shinoukesa. It is estimated to be from between 701 and 756 A.D.

Another example of yosegire is hunzoue from the same era. It was based on the Buddhist theory “It is virtue to reuse what people throw away.” Hunzoue were made of cloth that was thrown away by society—fabrics chewed by cows, gnawed by mice, charred by fire or soiled by blood from childbirth. High-ranking monks gathered fabrics and stitched them together to make hunzoue.

Japanese also made yosegire kimonos, believing they would bring blessings to the person who wore them. For example, a hyakutoku kimo, which means “a hundred virtues” in Japanese, was made from 100 pieces of kimonos that had been handed down from a mother or grandmother.

At about the same time that trade was resuming with the West, another culture clash was happening to the north.

During the 18th century, people who called themselves Aynu lived in what is now the northernmost Japanese island. Japan and the Aynu fought several wars, but eventually they began a trade relationship: Japan imported natural resources from the Aynu, and Aynu people had access to goods they had never seen before.

One of those was cotton, a fabric the Japanese used for clothing, which contrasted with animal hides, barks, grasses or fish skins that the Aynu used. Cotton had been imported to Japan from China and Korea since 799 A.D. Likewise, the Japanese became exposed to Aynu culture and goods, including Attushi, an old fabric made from plants. This fabric was brought back to Japan from Aynu by a Japanese man as a souvenir in 1798. The oldest Aynu cloth made with cotton is assumed to be from 1826.

The Japanese cotton, which is easy to sew, inspired the creativity of the Aynu women, said Nobuko Tsuda, who studies Aynu culture in Japan. Her father was Aynu, and her mother was Japanese.

As Japan began to control Aynu, the Aynu people’s traditional clothing styles were in danger of disappearing. Japanese people started to immigrate to Aynu, and Aynu people were forced to speak Japanese and were kept out of the higher positions in the society. Japan started to govern Aynu as a part of Japan, and eventually the congress passed a law that made it legal to treat Aynu people “differently.”

“I was always wondering why Aynu people were so looked down [on],” said Tsuda. When she was young, she tried to avoid her family’s culture, but when she was in her 40s, she decided to learn about Aynu ways. Her strong passion to know her ancestors led her to investigate the past.

Tsuda studied ancient techniques and materials of Aynu clothes from old records of Aynu in Western countries and Japan. She has succeeded in restoring some ancient techniques of Aynu.

“Aynu clothes were based on the Aynu’s belief that ‘we are living in and with nature,’” Tsuda said. “When I touch the clothes, I feel our ancients closer.”

When I touch the clothes, I feel our ancients closer.

NOBUKO TSUDA

The Aynu culture was rediscovered and restored after World War II. While Aynu people were re-evaluating their traditional ways, Japanese people were experiencing another culture clash with Western countries.

Japan’s loss in World War II devastated the country. It was the end of an era that had destroyed the country emotionally, economically and physically. It was also the beginning of a new era in which people decided to rebuild the country step by step, culturally and economically. Some people tried to recover from the war by working hard to achieve economic growth. Others tried to recover from the war by learning and practicing America’s culture.

Chuck Nohara, the girl who first saw patchwork quilts in cowboy movies, was one who made such quilts as a tie to American culture. Nohara’s turning point came when many Japanese media covered the Bicentennial celebration in the United States in 1976. Furniture of the colonial era was introduced as a symbol of American male culture, and quilts were introduced as symbols of American female culture.

Traditionally, Japanese customs forced
Japanese women to stay in their homes and serve their families. However, the influence of Western cultures changed the tradition. At the same time, the number of “culture schools,” where Japanese housewives could learn hobbies, was dramatically increasing. Home electronic appliances were introduced, and housewives had more free time. Japanese women sought freedom and made advances into society. Studying patchwork gave them opportunities to communicate with each other and express themselves in their free time.

Nohara is acknowledged as a pioneer of patchwork in Japan. She started the first television program about quilts in Japan. And, 32 years ago, she established Chuck’s, Japan’s first school for quilters, in which students can be certified as professional quilters and begin teaching their own students. Five years later, she established another school, Hearts and Hands.

Nobuaki Seto, the director of Japan Handicraft Instructors’ Association and a member of the International Quilt Study Center’s international advisory board, said one reason Japanese quilts are different from Western quilts is Japanese women learned to quilt in different ways.

It started with magazines and correspondence lessons 28 years ago, Seto said. Japanese women learned the basics of quilting through these systems and then went to classes hosted by their favorite quilters. They chose their instructors depending on their tastes, Seto said. Special quilting schools provided courses to certify primary, intermediate and advanced levels.

Ryoko Fujimoto, 47, is one of the new generation of Japanese quilters. She has been interested in handicrafts such as knitting since she was a child, and when she saw patchwork quilts in the magazine Patchwork Tsushin, she became interested. When she had enough free time after she raised her child, she started to learn how to make quilts from a neighbor who had learned about American quilts at a church when she was in the United States. Later, Fujimoto went to an exhibition of quilts by Keiko Goke, one of the first generation of Japanese quilters.

“It was a culture shock,” Fujimoto said.

Goke, 60, discovered patchwork quilts 40 years ago in an interior design magazine. Her work is characterized by unusual color combinations, and it is valued in Japan and other countries where she had her exhibitions: the United States, New Zealand, North Korea and Denmark. She said many people ask how she produces patchwork quilts with these vivid and different color combinations. Her technique is based on her sense of colors and, she said, springs from her naturally.

“I am just using colors I like,” Goke said.

Goke’s works reminded Fujimoto of colors and designs of oil paintings that Fujimoto studied. She thought Goke’s works were very different from traditional works. Fujimoto decided to learn quilting from Goke and became one of the first students at the quilt school hosted by the Japan Vogue company 10 years ago.

“Thanks to Goke, I can be who I am now,” Fujimoto said.

Just as Fujimoto met her favorite quilter by going to exhibitions, many people who enjoy making quilts seek quilt exhibits.

Toshiyuki Higuchi, who is the director of Kokusai Art, has held many exhibitions of American quilts in Japan, and his motivation is closely related to quilts’ role as a cultural messenger.

At the Osaka Expo in 1970, Sashiko Buton, the Japanese name for patchwork quilts, was exhibited. Japanese people feel a connection with them because their designs are similar to Japanese Sashimui. Higuchi was introduced to American quilts at that exhibit.

These quilts illustrated not only American culture but also American economy, society and women’s history. American women reflected their society’s movements, including wars, in quilts, Higuchi said. People can see American women’s contributions to the society from quilts, and he believes these contributions made it possible for the United States to be the most powerful and wealthy country in the world, Higuchi said.

“I wanted Japanese women to learn these American women's efforts through quilts, and I thought these contributions were needed for Japan to be a strong country like the U.S. in the world,” Higuchi said.

Higuchi started to focus on quilts as a symbol of American cultures and held many quilt exhibitions in Japan. Later he exhibited about 60 quilts from Denver, the first exhibition of quilts in Japan since the Osaka Expo. At the Tokyo Kokusai Forum in 1998, he exhibited 60 works from the Robert and Ardis James collection, part of the International Quilt Study Center’s collection at UNL. About 100,000 people came to see the show over three days.

Nao Nomura was one of those people. When she graduated from Keisen Uni-
University in 1997, she wrote a thesis on how the 1995 movie “How to Make an American Quilt” illustrates American culture and society. After graduation, she started to work at an importing and exporting company in Japan, but the collection at the Tokyo Kokusai Forum made her decide to study American quilts at UNL. She quit her job and registered in UNL’s graduate quilt studies program.

After she earned a master’s degree at UNL, she worked at the IQSC, studying American culture in the colonial revival era through quilts.

“Studying at IQSC was great experience because I could touch actual quilts there while I was researching them,” Nomura said.

In 2007, she returned to Japan to study quilts as material culture at Tokyo University. She analyzes American quilts and studies their backgrounds.

Today, not only is Japan influenced by quilts from other countries, but it is also influencing other countries with its own styles.

One style is called Janesque. It uses Japanese traditional materials or techniques with Western quilts. Since these works have earned acclaim in competitions, many quilters worldwide have applied this style to their work.

Shizuko Kuroha is one of the most famous quilters to mix Japanese culture and Western culture in quilts. Michael James said Kuroha’s works remind him of yukata, a kind of kimono. Kuroha uses indigo-dyed fabrics, and indigo dying is a traditional, ancient Japanese way to dye yukata, or summer kimonos.

Kuroha saw her first American patchwork quilts when she stayed in the United States with her husband, a foreign correspondent. Being in the foreign country awakened her identity as a Japanese woman and triggered a desire to use old indigo-dyed fabrics in quilt works, Kuroha said.

The other influential Japanese style is Taupe, which uses traditional Japanese subtle tone color variations instead of bright colors with Western traditional patterns.

“Only Japanese people can express these colors with quilts,” said Naomi Ichikawa, editor of Patchwork Tsushin magazine. At first, this style was introduced as one of the American country styles in Japan. However, one quilter from a different country watched the work and said, “This is a new style, Taupe.” And a new Japanese style was born.

Taupe is popular in the United States and Europe, especially in France and Italy, and the export of Taupe is expanding, Ichikawa said. She said she saw some Taupe quilts made by Americans, but something was different. In Taupe, Japanese quilters use colors that are not clearly different, and they then use red, blue and brown in contrast. Taupe is based on the concept of Japanese beauty, wabi-sabi, which values simpleness, Ichikawa said.

“It seems [to be] the sense which we have handed down from our ancients,” Ichikawa said.

Taupe are the first quilts in which the Japanese succeeded in making their own styles without using traditional Japanese materials. “We are in the era that we produce new styles,” Ichikawa said, “and those styles are earning acclaims in the world.”

Quilts change their styles as cultures mesh. However, people’s attachments to their fabric cultures don’t have borders. As people communicate with each other, their fabric cultures influence each other.

Jill Liddell wrote that quilting became her passport as she traveled the world.

“Wherever you go in the world today, you find pockets of quilters who are stitching away and using the same techniques, the same terminology, and who are always welcoming to a newcomer.”

KEY QUILTERS

INDIGO IDENTITY: SHIZUKO KUROHA

BY TAKAKO IWATANI

Famous Japanese poet Shuntaro Tanigawa wrote, “Indigo should be admired from a distance.”

Shizuko Kuroha, a Japanese quilter famous for using indigo-dyed Japanese traditional fabrics, tries to incorporate the admired color into her works.

Indigo is the color of the sky and ocean. People are attracted to the color, and they never get bored, Kuroha said. Also, because the color of the sky or ocean changes, people go closer to realize they never can touch or feel the color because the water or air is clear when they are close enough.

“I want to make patchworks with the color that people can go through,” Kuroha said.

Kuroha was first introduced to patchwork quilts in 1975 when she was in Maryland visiting the United States with her husband, who was a foreign correspondent. A friend took her to a shopping mall where she saw a 150-year-old quilt.

Though she did not know the quilt’s maker, Kuroha said, she felt the quilter’s presence.

“I want to live in my work even after I die as the maker keeps living in her work,” she said she thought.

And so, at age 38, Kuroha started to make quilts. She learned from books, and she went to museums, many of which exhibited quilts celebrating the United States Bicentennial. For her, these quilts were great teachers.

She wanted to make something different from American traditional patchwork quilts. She was careful in choosing what she wanted to say with her quilts because they represented herself in different forms, she said.

“Being in America made me think of my identity as Japanese more,” she said, and that identity has strongly influenced her work.

She started to learn about Japan, its history and its culture, and asked friends and family to send books about traditional Japanese styles. In reading one of the books, Kuroha learned about indigo dyeing to make traditional Japanese fabrics. These fabrics reminded Kuroha of her grandmother and brought back memories of her own childhood, Kuroha said.

When she returned to Japan in 1977, she started to collect indigo-dyed fabrics at secondhand stores. She washed the old kimonos, cut out parts that could be used in quilts and successfully restored old Japanese fabrics in different forms.

“Indigo-dyed fabrics are everywhere in the world, but I believe any of them cannot beat Japanese ones,” Kuroha said. “I want to tell how Japanese traditional fabrics were great to people.”
Seventeen women sit elbow-to-elbow around a long conference table cluttered with papers, sandwich crumbs and half-empty tea cups. To say the women are stylish would be an understatement. Colorful, modern eyeglasses, bold jewelry, trendy purses – even silver fingernails – rest on the table.

With a detailed agenda carefully guiding topics of conversation from the politics of the European Union to the promotion of quilting among youth, discussion is spirited – so spirited, in fact, that from time to time fists pound the table in search of restored order, and choruses of “shhhhh” resound.

It’s 2 p.m., and the group has been behind closed doors since 9 this morning. An occasional yawn sneaks out, and minds begin to wander. When asked a question, Winnie Egefjord of Denmark sheepishly admits, “I’m not paying attention.”

A five-minute break seems in order.

As the women wander out into the hallway, a large sign reading “Festival of Quilts” just down the way reminds them of their purpose, and the masses of people milling inside the Birmingham, England, exhibition hall rejuvenate their spirit and enthusiasm.

A few minutes later, the European Quilt Association’s annual meeting reconvenes, moving on to discuss quilt guild membership benefits, possible additions to the organization and coming showcases.

Fifty years ago, waning interest in quilting likely would have made a gathering of international representatives from European quilt guilds smaller, drearier and maybe even unimportant in the quilting world. Today, thanks to the modern revival of quilting in Europe, it is quite the opposite.

Quilting is on the rise.

Women from the Swiss Alps in the east to the banks of the River Thames in the west are discovering the joy and personal satisfaction quilting provides. In the midst of this recent resurgence, though, quilting’s rich history in Europe can be easily overlooked. Truth be told, Europe boasts one of the oldest quilt histories in the world. And while present-day quilts shout fresh and innovative, they still rely on techniques first learned and perfected centuries ago.

It was nearly a millenium ago that Pope Urban II called Europeans to join together to recapture the Holy Land from the Muslims. No one could have guessed that their journeys under this mission, later known as the Crusades, would signal the beginning of quilting in Europe.

Middle Eastern warriors sported quilted garments under their armor for comfort, warmth and security, and the Europeans brought this idea back to Europe and the British Isles to try for themselves.

Beginning in the simplest fashion, quilting soon spread. And although no quilts have been preserved from the 12th and 13th centuries, references to quilting in French and German literature confirm its quiet existence.

For example, a French poem called “La Lai del Desire” chronicles the tale of the immortal in search of love from a mortal maid. At one point in the poem, fairies lead the maid to a bed that is covered by “a quilt of two sorts of silk cloth in a checkerboard pattern, well made and rich.”

In the 14th century, more and more quilted armor and clothing began surfacing across Europe, some stitched by professional quilt makers. Various items such as moss, feathers, grass and lamb’s
wool were used for the quilts’ middle layer of warmth.

Sue Prichard, curator of contemporary textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England, said although these early quilt makers were poorly paid, quilting was a popular profession.

Quilting allowed women to excel creatively despite their need to spend much time at home.

“Quilting has an evocative and personal resonance with the female soul,” Prichard said.

Women came to appreciate quilting even more when a 14th-century change in Gulf Stream weather patterns uncharacteristically caused the rivers Rhine, Rhone and Thames to freeze for entire winters. During these winters, women were confined to the warmth of the indoors for long periods of time, and the craft of quilting grew in popularity. Warmth became an increasingly valuable characteristic of quilts during this time.

During the next hundred years, the quilted clothing items that emerged in the 14th century became more and more common. Quilted bed covers and furnishings were valuable, and these items were often bequeathed in wills as heirlooms.

The 16th century brought designs of increased intricacy and diversity, and...
EXPLORE

a switch from wool to raw cotton batting, or wadding as it is known in Europe. Trade routes facilitated the arrival of such delicacies as Persian silk, satin, taffeta and even tussuh-silk – produced by wild silkworms – from Bengal. Royalty such as Mary, Queen of Scots, and Queen Elizabeth I popularized quilted fashions, and soon the rich and famous across Europe wore quilted jackets, doublets, waistcoats, caps, gowns and petticoats.

But even with quilting growing in popularity, interest in the craft had not yet reached its full potential in Europe. It was during the 17th century that Europe hit its quilting prime. In Great Britain, which boasts arguably the strongest quilt history of all European countries, quilting and patchwork – two terms often mistakenly considered synonymous by non-quilters – were still separate at this time.

Puritan settlers from England took the craft with them across the ocean, and American quilting remained similar to British quilting throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Both countries produced many log cabin quilts, using a pattern of uniformly arranged rectangular strips, and crazy quilts, consisting of random, interlocking shapes. Soon, though, quilters in the U.S. and Great Britain parted ways.

“As the settlers in Canada and the United States established themselves, developed their own industries, developed their own in-house manufacturing and didn’t have to rely on imports anymore, the style of patchwork and quilting definitely changed,” said Bridget Long, a quilt historian and former president of both the European Quilt Association and the Quilter’s Guild of the British Isles. Britain and the United States developed their own styles in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Americans stuck to the block-style patchwork, with a quilt consisting of many similar blocks, while British quilts featured larger designs covering entire quilts, developments that led to the misconception that patchwork was created in the United States. As Long, of Ashwell, England, is quick to point out, “Patchwork developed in Britain; it didn’t come to Britain.”

The British also turned to frame quilts, which, according to Sue Marks, a quilt historian from Britain, are ones in which “the central area is surrounded by a number of borders, or frames – sometimes pieced, sometimes appliquéd.” The framed layout remained popular in the U.K. until well into the 20th century.

During the 19th century, though, while patchwork quilters remained, Britain returned predominantly to whole-

"Quilting has an evocative and personal resonance with the female soul."

SUE PRICHARD
cloth quilting, a style in which the stitching itself provides the sole decoration on a single piece of fabric.

In Britain’s North Country, strippy quilts, a variation of whole-cloth quilts, became popular. Strippy quilts are made with the same quilting patterns and basic techniques as whole-cloth quilts, but instead of just one large piece of cloth, several long strips are sewn together to create the quilt top. Although much of Great Britain had returned to whole-cloth quilting, circumstances had changed.

“In the 18th century, whole-cloth quilts were made in professional workshops and were quite expensive. … They were for people with money,” Long said. “In the 19th century, it’s a sign that somebody maybe could not afford to have a variety of fabrics for patchwork. It’s a different social level.”

So, while wealthy quilters bought a variety of fabrics specifically for patchwork quilts, those with less money stuck with whole-cloth quilts.

And as the 20th century dawned, quilts simply were not considered must-haves in Britain. Whole-cloth quilting continued, but Long said it was regarded as something that only working class people made and used.

“It was definitely unfashionable,” she said.

The 1920s and 1930s saw an uptick in quilting when it helped some women earn a living during the Depression. Women were trained to quilt for commission, and the wealthy ordered quilts out of benevolence.

“There was quite a big trade of women who would order these quilts with no intention of ever using them but as a charitable thing,” Long said.

Lilian Hedley, renowned quilter and noted British quilt historian, said such quilts frequently were made by clubs. The women running the clubs were often widowed and in need of extra money. Sometimes, they simply had no other way to make a living.

“That’s why this survived as long as it did,” Hedley said. “And the only thing that stopped it really was the second world war because you couldn’t get fabric.”

During World War II, the Canadian Red Cross sent thousands of quilts to Britain to aid war efforts, but quilting as a craft had lost much of its appeal across
Great Britain, in part because of the scarcity of supplies. Quilting was regarded as old-fashioned until the modern revival in the late 1970s. Many of the leaders of this revival attribute their renewed interest to the Whitney Exhibition, a museum show which, after sparking interest in the United States, then traveled overseas.

The Whitney Exhibition floored Americans. When it was displayed in Europe soon after, Europeans were also intrigued. The exhibition, titled “Abstract Design in American Quilts,” included more than 60 pieced quilts, most from the 19th century, on loan from Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof’s private collections.

A New York Times review of the exhibition on July 3, 1971, called the quilts impressive, dazzling and full of “appealing vigor.”

Clearly, the artistic presentation of quilts caught people by surprise, and it single-handedly lured a new crop of quilters into the fold.

“There were a number of very young women at art school, or just out of art school, who went to that exhibition and decided to put their art into quilting,” Long said.

The Whitney Exhibition does not stand alone, though, as the revival’s instigator. By the time the display arrived in Europe, other smaller exhibitions were sprouting there. In the 1980s and 1990s, quilt guilds began forming across Europe. These guilds provided women opportunities to share ideas and resources, sponsor and attend exhibitions and quilt together in groups.

“There’s always food,” said quilter Fiona Brockie of Aberdeen, Scotland. “You can’t quilt without cake.”

“It’s another way for them to blossom.”

FIONA BROCKIE

The friendships that form as a result of the guilds also appeal to quilters. “I have made a huge number of friends over the years,” said Sabine Hodgkinson, of Peine, Germany. “That’s the best thing about it.”

While guilds across Europe share many common characteristics, some have unique features, too. For example, Denmark, Sweden and Finland join to sponsor a special “Nordic Meeting” each year.

In the same way, although much of the quilting across Europe has been comparable throughout history, different countries do feature distinctive styles.

Great Britain is historically known for patchwork patterns, especially those that employ hexagons – although British quilters are quick to say they like to use other shapes as well.

France is recognized for its whole-cloth quilts. These often fall into categories such as Marseilles and boutis. The Marseilles group, which includes solid-color quilts, often white and featuring hand embroidery, comes from the seaport city of Marseilles, France. Boutis
quilts involve bulkier motifs, cords and a special needle made out of boxwood.

Italy is home to the beginnings of trapunto, a whole-cloth quilting technique resulting in a raised surface when extra batting is sewn beneath certain motifs. From Italy also came Europe’s oldest preserved quilts—a trio of quilts dating to 1392, which collectively tell the story of the Tristan Legend. Centered on a young relative of King Mark of England, scenes on the quilt depict battles, the family’s coat of arms and even a love tragedy.

Ireland is known for the chain pattern. This patchwork block is comprised of small squares and rectangles arranged to look like chains running diagonally across the middle of the block.

While some countries do have specialties, quilters in Europe—and the rest of the world—are discovering a common and growing interest in the more contemporary art quilt style. Traditional quilters still exist, of course, but as the quilting movement gains steam, art quilters also abound.

Pauline Burbidge, whom Long calls “probably the best known quilt artist in Britain,” is one of these.

After studying fashion and textiles at St. Martin’s Art College in London, Burbidge was one of the first to begin making art quilts in the United Kingdom.

“I made one traditional quilt and then started designing my own,” Burbidge said. “But at that stage I didn’t know anyone else [who was making art quilts].”

Burbidge is now one of many art quilters in Europe. Her acknowledgment of her beginnings with traditional quilting illustrates the importance of both traditional and contemporary quilting styles across the continent.

Working to keep Europe’s entire quilting community unified, despite its diversity in quilting preferences and tastes, is the European Quilt Guild. This diverse group represents the differences and similarities in European quilting styles.

In the spring of 1989, representatives from several European guilds gathered in Oxford, England, to form the continental guild. With a common goal of exchanging information about events, ideas, projects and more, the European Quilt Guild originally attracted quilters from 14 countries; today, 17 nations are represented.

Heidi Hunninghaus, president of the guild’s board, which includes one representative from each member country, spoke of growth during the board’s daylong symposium at the Festival of Quilts in Birmingham.

“Do you ever hear anything about
your neighboring countries wanting to join the EQA?” she asked representatives.

Turkey? Poland? Portugal?

While some women at this meeting had heard rumors that people are quilting in the Czech Republic, and talks with Spain are in the works, the extent of the EQA’s growth for now has not progressed beyond conversation.

Rather than targeting additional European countries, Europe’s current guilds are pursuing a specific demographic – young people.

Though it would be hard to pinpoint exactly when most women begin quilting, many don’t start until well past their youthful years.

Ann-Christine Tielinen, of Vesteras, Sweden, speculates many women take up quilting when they take on child rearing.

“I think now when young women have their first baby, they start to quilt,” Tielinen said, “and then can quilt for the baby, and then they will go on.”

Brockie, who teaches quilting classes in Scotland, notices many of her students are retired women, many of whom have lost their husbands.

She said some of her students attend classes as a way of making friends and in an effort to avoid isolation.

“It’s another way for them to blossom,” Brockie said.

Marit Iversen, president of Norway’s quilt guild, has yet another idea.

“When you grow up and get into your 50s maybe, then you have more money to use on yourself,” Iversen said.

Regardless of the reason, the majority of avid quilters in Europe are past their youth. As these quilters reflect on Europe’s rich quilting history and revel in its resurgence, they realize the importance of passing the art of quilting along to the next generation.

One obstacle exists. While quilters who now are in their 50s, 60s or 70s grew up learning how to sew in school, today’s youth often do not.

Five quilters from Belgium, who traveled together to Birmingham for the Festival of Quilts see this as a potential problem.

Viviane Deroover, one of the five, said, “The young mothers now, they didn’t learn [how to sew] in school, so there’s a generation gap.”

Crowded around a small table at the festival’s café, the other women echo Deroover’s sentiments with hopeful encouragement.

“We’ll get there.”
“No problem.”
“We are very stubborn!”

This sense of hope seems to resonate among European quilters.

No doubt Europe’s older, experienced quilters value the inclusion of young minds in the quilting world.

Brockie is thrilled when 20-year-olds sign up for her classes.

“Young people have such a good eye for detail and color and style,” Brockie said. “It will be so nice just to see what younger people do with it.”

Having a new generation involved keeps quilting alive. Brockie said. “It’s lovely to see young people around and doing it, because these things die out if young people don’t get involved.”

One way Europe is trying to catch the attention of young potential quilters is with the Festival of Quilts, hosted in
Birmingham, England, for the past five years.

While attracting youth is not the only, or even main, purpose of this event, the festival’s exciting atmosphere cannot be ignored.

This annual festival in August 2007 attracted 27,220 visitors from more than 44 countries to the National Exhibition Center, with attendance up 10 percent from 2006.

Andrew Salmon, director of Creative Exhibitions, which presents premiere textile exhibitions in the United Kingdom and Ireland, sees this growing attraction as a great way to market quilting to young artists.

“I just feel there’s going to be something out there on the walls that excites just about anybody,” Salmon said. Many have been caught up in this excitement in Europe, but the market still has room to grow, he said. “But it is dependent on all of us involved in terms of quilting almost marching in step with each other.”

Salmon can be assured that the EQA is strutting to the same beat.

While Salmon walks the floor of the exhibition hall in Birmingham carefully monitoring visitors’ experiences at the festival, the EQA board meeting continues moving down its long agenda.

Next topic: Increasing awareness about quilting and encouraging children to join the fun.

“Quilting is still foreign to many, many people around Europe – even handicraft teachers,” Hunninghaus reminds her board. She believes that most everyone in America and possibly the U.K., too, has heard of patchwork and quilting, but Europeans are less familiar with quilting history and traditions – even their own.

But with quilting on the upswing in Europe, perhaps worldwide knowledge and appreciation of its rich history will grow as well.

EQA representatives on the board are among those who serve as living examples of quilters who recognize Europe’s quilt history and are committed to its preservation.

In fact, “appreciating our history’s role in today’s revival” sounds like a great agenda item for the board.

But maybe for another day – when the tea is freshly poured and everyone is still paying attention.

KEEPING IT TOGETHER

Whole-cloth quilts bind varied pasts on a single, detailed piece of fabric

BY TANNA KIMMERLING

When Sandie Lush was introduced to quilting 17 years ago by her sister-in-law, she loathed it. The tedious binding of fabric squares bored her, and the seams of patchwork interfering with her designs frustrated her.

“I absolutely hated it. Hated it!” Lush said. “It was such hard work.”

She kept at it, but with each quilt she made, she used fewer and fewer individual pieces of fabric.

Eventually she realized it was not all quilting that she disliked. “It’s quilting through the seams of patchwork that I didn’t like,” Lush said.

She had yet to see anything called a whole cloth quilt, and when she did see one, at an English quilt show around 1994, she was intrigued that such a thing could be classified as a quilt.

“Then I went to a class, learned how to draft out a whole-cloth quilt, and I’ve been off with the fairies ever since,” Lush said.

Whole-cloth quilting is exactly what it sounds like: Instead of patchwork, which typically comes to mind when people think about quilts, the tops of whole-cloth quilts consist of one piece of fabric. In patchwork, much of the design comes from the pattern that emerges from the different blocks of fabric being sewn together, but with whole-cloth quilts the design is made by thequilting itself, the stitches that bind the three layers together.

Variations of whole-clothquilts have been created across Europe, capturing the distinct essence of different regions. And the quilts, depending upon the geography, go by a variety of names.

Whole-cloth quilts, for example, are often called the quilts of Provence because they are thought to have originated in the fertile region in southeast France in the early 17th century. Early Provençal quilters were fascinated by the dimples made from stitches in the satin and silk fabrics, which were often used there.

According to Kathryn Berensen’s 1996 book “Quilts of Provence,” Provençal quilters were distinguished from others by their vision of the decorative possibilities created by the lines of stitching.

“They developed the ability to realize complex, minutely detailed patterns in beautiful, well-proportioned motifs merely through the play of light and shadow on the surface of a textile,” Berensen wrote.

Provençal quilts, which typically used printed or colored fabrics, are also called Marseilles quilts because of the importance of fabric trade in that seaport town in the Provençal region.

Printed cotton fabrics arrived in Marseilles from India in the first years of the 17th century. The French, in awe of the new fabrics, dubbed them Indiennes. Although the availability of these fabrics allowed for the first use of printed cotton fabrics in whole cloth quilts, these quilts were not as prestigious in Marseilles as the all-white broderie de Marseille, which Berensen describes as a “corded, quilted work that encased narrow cord in between two layers of cloth.”

Quilters who made broderie de Marseille were generally artists who specialized in the technique because they understood that light patterns on the fabric would be accentuated by the cord underneath.

The broderie de Marseille designs usually portrayed signs of wealth, such as ropes of pearls, scrolled monograms and depictions of favored animals and
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Humans. White fabric was preferred for such projects because it best emphasized the stitched designs. English quilters also preferred using white or ivory fabric for the same reason.

In England, whole cloth quilting basically comes in two styles: Welsh and Durham.

Welsh quilts employ leaf patterns, which also typically include hearts and spirals. “The Welsh ones are very geometric, and traditionally they are laid out as a center medallion with a series of borders,” Lush said.

The Durham quilts, or quilts of the North Country, instead often feature feather and twist designs and a large center motif.

A whole-cloth variation that became popular in the 18th century in the North Country was the strippy quilt, in which the top was made from wide strips of more than one piece of fabric — usually white alternating with another solid color. Even though more than one piece of fabric is used, strippy quilts are still considered a form of whole-cloth.

Historically, the North Country region is known for its quilt designers, such as Joseph Hedley, George Gardiner and his apprentice, Elizabeth Sanderson, who plotted out patterns for stitching whole-cloth quilts.

Though Gardiner is one of the most notable quilt designers from the late 19th century, his apprentice eventually surpassed him. According to Rosemary Allan’s 1987 book, “North Country Quilts and Coverlets,” Sanderson was so skillful that she could mark two quilts a day. She charged between one shilling and a sixpence and two shillings for mapping out designs with blue pencil in the 1930s. At the time, one American dollar was equal to about five shillings.

*I*I’ll continue to make traditional quilts. Although, I expect I’ll occasionally break a few rules.*

SANDIE LUSH

Lilian Hedley, an expert on North Country quilts who started quilting in 1975, prefers traditional designs of the region.

“It’s just like uncovering a design in front of you,” she said. “You think, I’ll just finish this piece — then you do the next piece. It’s just coming alive in front of you.”
Hedley learned most of what she knows about quilting from whole-cloth quilter Amy Emms, who died in 1998. In 1957 Emms quilted a wedding dress for her daughter, intending that the bride could reuse the dress, with a few simple alterations, as a bed covering.

“They were going to take the bodice out of it and replace it with a raised gathered circle of the same material,” Hedley said. “Then it would be a circular quilt for the bed.” The dress became so famous that it was never re-worked into a bed cover.

Using whole cloth quilting on garments was not new. In the 17th and 18th centuries, quilted corsets, camisoles and vests were popular and demonstrated the wealth in European societies.

Lush, the quilter from England, puts a different spin on quilted clothing. She uses knitted fabric to create whole cloth quilts that resemble the shape and design of sweaters or vests.

“Technically, that is the hardest quilt I’ve ever made,” Lush said, “because trying to quilt knitting — it sort of cracked and botched.”

Lush believes that keeping whole cloth designs fresh is important for the medium to stay appealing.

“All of my designs tend to take a few design elements — some old, some new — mix them all up and then try to arrange them in some sort of symmetrically pleasing pattern,” she said.

Whether the designs are new or centuries old, whole cloth quilting seems secure as a European passion unlikely to be cooled by more prominent quilt styles.

“I’ll continue to make traditional quilts,” Lush said, “although, I expect I’ll occasionally break a few rules and will certainly continue to design my own motifs rather than use the same two dozen that have been kicking around for a century or more.

“Things have to evolve and move on; otherwise, we lose interest in them and they die.”

**UNSOLVED MYSTERY**

**BY TANNA KIMMERLING**

Few quilt stories send chills up one’s spine. The story of Joseph Hedley, an infamous whole cloth quilter from Warden, England, does just that.

Hedley, known more commonly as “Joe the Quilter” or “Quilter Joe,” was born around 1745 and, as a young man, served as an apprentice tailor in northern England. He created intricate designs with thread on fabric, and his quilting became known to the rich and poor around northern England.

His work was regularly requested across England, in Ireland and even in America.

Late in his life, Hedley became a hermit, seldom leaving his cottage. On Jan. 7, 1826, he was found murdered with at least 44 wounds on his face, head and neck. Hedley’s murder was never solved, but at the time of his death, people speculated he was murdered for the money he had earned from years of quilting.

His death created such a stir that a poet named A. Wright memorialized him. Wright’s poem read, in part:

> His quilts with country fame were crown’d
> So neatly stitch’d and all the ground
> Adorn’d with flowers, or figured round,
> Oh clever Joe the Quilter.

> Who raised the tale ’twere vain to scan,
> But far and wide the story ran
> That there was scarce a wealthier man
> Than poor old Joe the Quilter.

One of Hedley’s most famous designs is “Old Joe’s Chain,” in which two sets of three lines twist and overlap to form a chain. Each intersection is then marked with a diamond. He was also well-known for his designs that incorporated flowers and fruits, innovations that are still popular today.
GLORIA LOUGHMAN, an Australian quilter, stands in front of her quilt “Kimberly Mystique.” The quilt was the winner of Australia’s national quilting award in 2003.

PHOTOGRAPH BY K.J. HASCALL
Look at any of Gloria Loughman’s colorful and elaborately designed quilts, and her love of Australia’s beautiful scenery and laid-back lifestyle is readily apparent. Stare deeply into the luscious images recreated with fabric and stitching, and you can almost feel yourself in the heart of the Australian outback. Shades of yellows and orange form a sunset whose rays bounce off the fat trunks of Boab trees in Loughman’s quilt, “Kimberly Mystique.”

“I have a love affair with the Australian bush,” Loughman said.

Her fascination with nature started early: She spent most of her childhood outdoors climbing trees and exploring the rural area around Melbourne, Loughman wrote in her 2007 book “Luminous Landscapes.”

Loughman, 58, started quilting about 18 years ago when friends invited her to a patchwork class while she was nearing the end of her chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer.

“I planned to create a family heirloom, perhaps something to leave behind for my young daughters,” Loughman wrote.

But she realized hand quilting was not for her, and that quilt was never finished. Since that first project, she has used a machine to make an array of brilliantly colored quilts by recreating the Australian landscapes for which she has such an affinity.

“I spend a lot of time planning and designing my quilts,” Loughman said. “For me it is probably the most important part of the process.”

Loughman said she loves camping with her husband and photographs the Australian outdoors for inspiration.

While Loughman creates and teaches others to make lavish artistic quilts, many Australian quilters are still embracing the traditional English patchwork that was brought to their country nearly two centuries ago.

Julia Wallace, owner of the Quilter’s Barn in Melbourne, sees a lot of Australian quilters recreating traditional patchwork.

“We do have a lot of contemporary artists in Australia like Gloria but certainly a lot more traditional as well,” Wallace said.

Wallace fell in love with patchwork when she and her daughter visited Pennsylvania and saw American block-style quilts. But unlike the traditional standard, Australian quilts don’t require three layers.

“Sometimes we use only two layers … and we still call it a quilt,” said Jenny Bowker as she attended the 2007 Festival of Quilts in Birmingham, England.

Bowker, an Australian quilter, now lives in Egypt where her husband, Robert Bowker, is the Australian ambassador.

Unlike the traditional quilts that were brought to America by immigrants from all over the world, patchwork made its way into Australia through a rather unconventional route.

“Our light here is very different and very bright; hence all our colors of the land and trees are bright. Quilters love to use these colors.”

ANNETTE GERO
lia in the late 18th century, they also introduced patchwork down under when they docked at settlements in New South Wales, Tasmania and Western Australia in the early 19th century.

Exiles from the United Kingdom were sent to Australia for relatively trivial acts of mischief. Murderers or rapists were usually executed in England, but the English government sent criminals such as thieves, bigamists and political reformers – especially those who supported the 1789 French revolution and its ideals – to Australia.

Women who were exiled usually were sent because they had loose morals and foul mouths; others committed minor crimes intentionally so they would be sent away with their husbands. Prison reformers taught sewing skills, including patchwork, to many of the women.

According to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the first fleet of convict ships consisted of 11 vessels carrying nearly 1,500 people and arrived at Botany Bay in January 1788. Those aboard the ships included convicts from Germany, France, Holland, Sweden, Norway, Portugal, Madagascar and the West Indies, but most came from the British Isles.

“Not all women arriving in the colony in that early period were convicts,”

“CANOPY,” a quilt by Gloria Loughman, was inspired by the Australian landscape. The artist says the piece reminds her of childhood, lying on her back and staring up at the trees.
Annette Gero, an Australian quilt historian, professor and collector, wrote in her 2000 book “Historic Australian Quilts.” Gero said women who arrived before 1850 were classified by three social statuses when they arrived: “female,” “woman” or “lady.”

“‘Females’ were usually convicts or the wives of convicts,” Gero wrote. “Women” were in Australia seeking a better life and were generally free settlers, while “ladies” were considered superior by birth or by their husbands’ rank in society.

British do-gooders hoping to keep the convicts in line and assimilate them into civilized communities were among these women and men who made the voyage to Australia. Among these was Elizabeth Fry, the one woman to whom Australia can attribute its quilting history.

According to the 2005 book “Elizabeth Fry: A Quaker Life; Selected Letters and Writings,” edited by Gil Skidmore, Fry was born Elizabeth Gurney in Norwich, England, to a wealthy Quaker family in 1780. She married John Fry, a London merchant, and became involved in charity work including work in London’s Newgate prison in 1813. Margaret Rolfe wrote in her 1998 book “Australian Quilt Heritage” that Fry became a prison reformer because she was appalled by conditions for women and children there.

Insisting the key to reforming women convicts was in practical work, Fry taught the women needlework. Other Quakers were hesitant about Fry’s reformist ideas, but she eventually persuaded them to supply materials needed for patchwork.

After conquering the dreadful environment of Newgate, Fry brought her reformist ideas to the convict ship Maria, which traveled to Australia in 1818.

“If you were a convict, you were sent out with a couple of pounds [worth] of fabric and some thread and needles and encouraged to sew on the convict ships,” Wallace said.

On board the 106 convict ships Fry was involved with, female prisoners were divided into groups of 12 and were monitored but unshackled to be free to do their needlework.

The conduct of the women on the ships impressed Fry. In a journal entry from June 1820 Fry wrote: “The women improve in their work, and accomplish a considerable quantity, and we believe that some will render themselves very valuable in New South Wales, by the variety of the articles they are able to make.”

According to Rolfe, in 1827 Fry wrote, “Formerly, patchwork occupied much of the time of the women confined in Newgate, as it still does that of the female convicts on the voyage to New South Wales. It is an unexceptional mode of employing female prisoners, if no other work can be procured, and is useful as a means of teaching them the art of sewing.”

The completed patchwork was sold at ports along the way and to other immigrants in Australia.

“Women of the Wellington [another convict ship] found they could sell their quilts for a guinea each in Rio de Janeiro,” according to Rolfe. A guinea is an old English currency that was worth a little more than one pound.

While some quilters hoped to make a profit from their work, many of the quilts were made for the convicts’ own uses.

Through her reform work, Fry influenced future Australians such as Esther Clark, who was exiled to Australia in 1823. In an 1843 letter to Fry, Clark wrote about her success after imprisonment, adding that a patchwork quilt she made from pieces of fabric she received as a convict then covered her bed.

After Fry died in the 1840s, other charity workers continued her prison reform movement until the last convict ship arrived in 1868.

Aborigines had been quilting on the island long before Europeans arrived.

Jenny Bowker, the Australian quilter from Egypt, said that before the convict ships arrived, Aborigines stitched together animal skins, which are considered some of the first quilts in Australia.

Activist James Dawson wrote “Australian Aborigines: The Languages and Customs of Several Tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria, Australia” in 1881. While researching the book, he observed Aborigines making quilted rugs, which they draped across their shoulders and used as blankets in the night for warmth.

Dawson wrote that fur “rugs” were made from wild dog, opossum and kangaroo skins and were very valuable. “A good rug is made from fifty to seventy skins.” Diagonal lines, about half-an-inch apart, were scratched across the flesh side of each skin with sharpened mussel shells. “This is done to make them soft and pliable.”

Today at least one Aboriginal quilt and one quilt from the convict ships have been preserved at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, but few of the convict-made quilts have survived through the years because they were so heavily used. Rolfe noted that former prisoners probably did not have sentimental reasons for keeping their quilts because they did not want to be reminded of their shameful pasts.

Around the time the United Kingdom stopped transporting convicts in 1868, Australia experienced a burst in free settlement – an effect of gold rushes during the 1850s and a rise in wool production. As wealth increased and more fabrics became available, quilting became a popu-
lar pastime in Australia.

Along with the traditional medallion quilts commonly made with hexagons and log cabin quilts made with blocks, crazy patchwork became extremely popular among Australian quilters in the late 19th century.

By the time the continent became the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, quilters were heavily embroidering their quilts. The most popular style of embroidery was red thread on a white or cream background, a style still seen during the first and second world wars when the Australian Red Cross sent quilts to troops and prisoners of war.

One woman who quilted for the Red Cross, Rolfe wrote, was Julia Ross of Leongatha, Great Southern Star, commended Ross for the amount of money her quilt brought in. She also received a certificate from the Red Cross for being one of five workers who did the most work that year.

When the Great Depression hit Australia in the late 1920s, fabric became scarce, and, like people all over the world, Australians had to make do with what they had.

“We have a lot of Depression era quilts, which were simply ways of making warm covering by sewing together old scraps and flower bags and anything – clothing, jackets, jumpers – anything they had that would make them warmer,” said Jenny Bowker, the Australian quilter from Egypt.

These quilts were called waggas, named for the town Wagga Wagga in central New South Wales, which was known for its wheat production. Wagga quilts were “make-shift covers created out of wheat bags from the district,” Rolfe wrote.

Jaz Ishtar, an Australian native and owner of the Australian inspired fabric store Aussie Dreams in Bristol, England, said waggas were simple quilts. “You just cut up large squares of different widths and run them together.”

Wagga quilts usually consisted of three layers. The outer layer was made from flour bags, and the inner layer from old blankets or food sacks, which made the quilts uneven and lumpy.

Though the quilts were made out of necessity when money was tight, Rolfe wrote that “this was a society that valued the ability to ‘make something from nothing.’”

** * **

The quilts uneven and lumpy. Though quilting never completely left Australia, Gero noticed a quilting revival in the 1970s. Gero said she saw people coming back to Australia from the United States in the ’70s and ’80s with new ideas about quilting.

Barbara Macey, a 72-year-old quilter and coordinator for www.ozquilt.com, an Australian art quilting Web site, said, “Very few people were making any quilts at all in Australia in the 1960s and early 1970s.”

Though embroiderers had guilds, no such groups existed for quilters. There were no special supply shops, no quilt exhibitions.

“Art quilts first appeared in the early 1970s,” Macey said, “but there were probably only two or three people making them at that stage.”

Despite gaining new influences from the quilt exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art that traveled the world after its debut in New York, Aussie quilters stayed true to Australia with their brightly colored fabric and Australian inspired designs.

However, staying completely true to Australia isn’t always an option. Aussie quilters and other artists are unable to use true Aboriginal designs in their works.

“We’re not allowed to use their [Aboriginal] patterns,” Bowker said. “It is absolutely and totally politically incorrect. You would be pilloried by any gallery if you put up any exhibition with work that involved dots or X-rayed bones.

“I would love to use a ring of hearth-stones, which are dots, which means home or heart or the home base … but I can’t use their image.”

Ishtar sells Aboriginal-inspired de-
signs in her England store.

“The earthy tones and the dots [are Aboriginal inspired designs],” Ishtar said as she rubbed between her fingers a light brown patch of fabric covered with scattered, irregular dark brown dots. The designs she sells are inspired by the Aborigines but aren’t exact replicas. “The dots are very traditional Aboriginal design; they also use some of the imagery that represents the people, the places, the food, the environments.”

Some confusion exists among Australian quilters as to why these Aboriginal designs can’t be recreated. Some quilters attribute the problem to lingering racism, while others believe that Aboriginal designs are inferior.

Bowker denies that racism is at fault. “No Australian artist would use any Aboriginal emblem or symbolism,” she said. Australian artists know and understand the law.

Ishtar, who said she is intrigued by the history of fabrics, said that the government, in the 1970s, encouraged Aborigines to copyright their designs, some of which dated from the ‘40s, and put them on fabrics.

Aborigines were removed from their traditional lands and put in segregated communities. They began to look for ways to earn money and found an outlet in arts and crafts such as decorating fabrics, according to the National Gallery of Australia.

Loughman, the landscape quilter, said the patterns are sacred to the Aborigines. “It is just not appropriate for us to use them as we respect that they belong to this special group of people.”

The colors, which she describes as “strong and powerful,” are another matter. “There is no problem using that palette of colors, just not their designs and symbols.”

Australian quilters accept the inviolability of these designs and are content to use Aboriginal-inspired designs.

“Because of copyright laws, one can’t just make a quilt which is a copy of some Aboriginal work of art,” Gero said.

She pointed, as an example, to a selection of tea towels produced as tourist items that were a copy of an Aboriginal painting. “Of course, you couldn’t do this with anyone’s painting. Aboriginal or not, because they hold the copyright. Same as copying someone else’s quilt. I am sure there is a range of Aboriginal-like fabrics available but made up, not a direct copy of their designs.”

Today, Australian quilters are experimenting with their own designs and expressing themselves through the natural colors from down under.

Australians find bright colors appealing because they stand in red soil, gaze into distant orange sandstone hills and relax beside mesmerizing turquoise waters.

“I think what quilters are doing today is outstanding,” Gero said. “It’s the Australian colors and its harsh environment which makes the Australian quilts different, because quilters use these colors, which are so different from the colors of the rest of the world.”

“Our light here is very different and very bright; hence all our colors of the land and trees are bright. Quilters love to use these colors.”

Loughman agreed. “The Australian quilts seem to feature more burnt oranges, browns and turquoise.” Only quilters in South Africa, she said, seem to use brighter colors.

Bowker said that although she now lives in Egypt, she has not stopped being Australian. “I think my style will always be Australian,” she said with a smile. “And I think one of the things that happens when you’re in a fringe area like Australia – small population, large country – and not a lot of background tradition, you get a sort of freedom to experiment.

“You don’t get that pressure of great tradition around your shoulders. Ah, it’s a great feeling.”

ANNETTE GERO, textile historian and author of “Historic Australian Quilts,” holds up a photograph of Edward Woodman with wagga quilts his mother, Ethel, made him. Wagga quilts were made from food or fodder sacks such as Hessian bags, or woolen clothing, covered on both sides with cotton fabric and quilted or roughly tied to hold them together.

COURTESY QASC

“I planned to create a family heirloom, perhaps something to leave behind for my young daughters.”

GLORIA LOUGHMAN

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American quilting combines many diverse pasts and traditions from countless countries.

BY ASHLEY ERMEL

To uncover the history of American quilts, one needs to look no further than the history of the country itself. When America fought, quilts became part of the war effort. When Americans found themselves in an economic slump, their quilts, too, were affected. When the United States commemorated its 200th birthday, American quilters celebrated the Bicentennial with textiles.

Immigrants began shaping the American idea of quilting while they were shaping the country. Each quilter brought her own techniques and styles from Europe into the New World. Over time, these colonists’ quilting styles and techniques merged with America’s culture and history, creating a quilting style that was the nation’s own. The American quilting style has been especially influenced by the Colonial era, which inspired quilt revivals in both the first and the last decades of the 20th century.

“With each one of those groups coming in — and they may not have had a quilt-making background — they brought with them pretty sophisticated ethnic needlework skills,” said Merikay Waldvogel, a quilt historian, author and lecturer who lives in Tennessee. “In America, because we had so many native groups coming in, the quilt is a [mixture] of a lot of people.” Americans owe their quilting styles...
to the early settlers, according to Patricia Crews, director of the International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, Neb.

“The quiltmaking traditions here in America really did come with the early settlers,” she said. “It was a tradition that they had known and brought the knowledge and the skills with them, so it’s not a uniquely American tradition by any means.”

Quilts did not originate in America, but quilting in America has transcended its roots.

Until the late 1700s and early 1800s, quilting was uncommon in the New World. Most colonial women concentrated only on basic survival, considering the time it took to operate a household.

Consequently, upper class women made most of the quilts from this time, and their creation didn’t stem from necessity, said Mary Worrall, the assistant curator in the folk arts division at the Michigan State University Museum. Numerous wealthy households employed servants, giving women more time to do what they wanted to do, including quilting.

Xenia Cord, an associate fellow of the IQSC, author and lecturer who lives in Indiana, agreed. “It was always a leisure activity and art form for those people that did it. Some people made some more extravagant quilts depending on their situation,” she said. Then and today, “anyone who’s made a quilt knows that it’s something more than necessity.”

Quilts allowed people to create an object of beauty, Crews said, while also producing something practical.

“The excuse was that they were creating something of use for the family, but in reality it was the hours they wanted to spend in creative expression and art, and so they seized the opportunity,” she said. If it were only warm bedding that the women were seeking, she said, you wouldn’t find quilts with “800 tiny, near perfect circles.”

America’s history, as well as its people, influenced the quilting styles.


Waldvogel said quilts from the colonies represent the bond between the New World and its English counterparts. Before the Revolutionary War, English ships brought the latest fashions and fabrics to East Coast ports, where colonists who could afford them bought goods to take home.

“The colonies were a marketplace for England and its empire, and so the fabrics that were available for people … were coming from England,” she said.

“And so [quilts] reflect the nature of the relationship between the colonies and England.”

Once the war started and England cut off supplies, colonies were forced to trade textiles and ideas with each other, leading to new quilting techniques.

Three main types of quilts are associated with Colonial times:

- Whole-cloth quilts are made from one large piece of fabric, often a solid color, in which the quilting itself creates the design.

- Medallion quilts are characterized by a central image that appears once and is then balanced and accentuated by a pieced border along the outside of the quilt.

- Mosaic piecework consists of a pieced block repeated throughout the quilt. It’s closely related to block-style patchwork, which surfaced during the early 1800s as a basis for many quilts.

Mosaic piecework may have been popular in colonial times, but it wasn’t...
just a fad. Many quilters consider it a staple in American quilting, and some even consider it modern art.

In 1971, two quilt devotees displayed quilts from the late 1800s and early 1900s in an exhibition titled “Abstract Design in American Quilts” at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Jonathan Holstein, who still travels the world lecturing about his exhibition, said the quilts he and his partner, Gail van der Hoof, collected and put on display reminded them of contemporary artwork.

“We began to see quilts that were very reminiscent to modern painting in many ways,” he said. “When we realized that many of these were a century or more old, we began to become intrigued. We began to travel in New England and, sure enough, we found quilts that to us looked like modern art.”

Holstein was interested in one type of quilt style, which at that time, few people wanted to exhibit.

“The kind of quilts that we were interested in were utilitarian quilts,” he said.

“We were really interested in finding pieced quilts.”

The classic American quilt for many people is exactly what was exhibited at the Whitney: block format pieced quilts that emerged in the 19th century. Crews said the pieced block quilting style, whose entire composition is squared off into blocks of the same pieced pattern, captured the imagination of American quilters.

However, although people might associate patchwork with American quilts, Janet Price, the IQSC collections manager, said patchwork isn’t necessarily as American as people think. “When we think of American quilting, we think of patchwork. … Patchwork is what we’re known for, but it’s not something we developed.”

Sewing patches of fabric together into a pattern became a lot easier in 1846 when Elias Howe patented the sewing machine. The invention dramatically altered the sewing and quilting craft. No longer did women have to spend tedious hours piecing, binding and quilting everything by hand. The price of the sewing machine, however, was initially too much for most women to afford.

During the Industrial Revolution, desirable but expensive sewing machines became accessible in large part through Isaac Singer’s innovative marketing techniques: He developed installment plans, making sewing machines affordable for the middle class.

“Singer basically said, ‘Guess what. I know a way to make them more accessible to you,’” Price said. “And we’re still seeing the repercussions of installment plans today.”

When the sewing machines became available, they cost $500, but as the number of machines increased, the price dropped. Sewing machines revitalized American quilting. In a single year in the 1870s, 600,000 machines were sold, according to Kiracofe’s “The American Quilt.”

As machine sewing became a possibility for women in the second half of the 1800s, the Civil War gave quilters another big reason to do it. The war moved quilters to contribute to support troops and provide comfort for both military and civilian victims.

Women sending loved ones to war tried to find ways to contribute to their well-being, making T-shirts, quilts—anything they could for the soldiers. Even children worked on quilts to send to the troops.

When the war ended in 1865 and...
The world’s landmasses make up seven continents, but only five are featured in this magazine. What happened to the other two?

Antarctica’s situation is pretty obvious. Because the continent is home to many animals but no indigenous people, quilting has no history in Antarctica.

South America’s situation is less obvious. The continent has a rich history of textiles, especially in the areas that now make up the nation of Peru. But the history apparently does not include quilting: the traditional two layers of fabric with a filler in between, bound or sewn together.

The women, I think, were experiencing hard times themselves,” she said. “To look back to what their ancestors had done gave them a sense of pride and understanding knowing that they, too, had gotten through it. I think it was the resourcefulness of making quilts, worthwhile of their time, making something beautiful for their family and for their homes. That’s why quilmaking picked up right then, too.”

At the time, Americans’ way of life was changing. More men were going out into the world to work for strangers, instead of for themselves, while the women continued to tend to the household, Price said.

“So people started looking to the past, and quilting became a way for people to remember all the fabulous things Americans used to do,” she said. “It’s a symbol, a reminder of a time gone by.”

Driven by the media and the marketplace, the Colonial Quilt Revival paid homage to the artistic style of the women of the 1700s. The idea, Waldvogel said, was to “bring back the handicrafts, document the handicrafts and then replicate them.”

To do this, many magazines featured colonial-style patterns. Companies selling the paper patterns, fabric blocks and quilt kits capitalized on colonial styles as well, Cord said.

Price said the magazines made manufactured patterns accessible to women across the country.

“When the magazines, the availability of information spread across the United States,” she said. “It impacted more than just quilts, though. It was an expres-
tion of America at the time. We still live it. We still think of those times as being particularly honorable.”

Unlike colonial women, American quilters during the early 20th century entered quilt competitions to showcase their skills and receive prizes. The popularity of American quilt competitions reached its peak at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair, which 20 million people attended.

Sears Roebuck and Company sponsored a national quilt contest and received 25,000 entries, a staggering number given the hard times of the Great Depression. A woman from Kentucky won the $1,200 grand prize, which would be valued at $20,000 today. Her winning quilt was given to Eleanor Roosevelt, and it soon disappeared from public view, never to be seen again, Waldvogel said.

“The Century of Progress contest at the World’s Fair was really a knock-out. They didn’t realize what they were unleashing,” Price said. “This was 1933, it was the Depression. A lot of men were not working, and if a woman could bring prize money into their home for the quilt she made, that was huge.”

Waldvogel, who co-wrote the 1993 book “Patchwork Souvenirs of the 1933 World’s Fair” with Barbara Brackman, said women felt a need to take the time to make a quilt and enter the competition.

“Unlike anywhere else, [people] never felt intimidated by it. Nobody told them they couldn’t do it, and I think that’s the beauty of an American quilt.”

MERIKAY WALDVOGEL

Quilt competitions did not need big-name sponsors to garner public interest. In fact, the competition didn’t even have to be official. Record-breaking quilts began making the newspapers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

At one point, a quilt made of 10,000 individual pieces received attention, but it was only a matter of time until a competitive quilt maker beat the record — by thousands of pieces. One woman who made a 21,840-piece quilt told reporters, “I certainly pity the woman who beats that record, because I know how much it takes,” according to “The American Quilt.”

Price said, “In the late 1800s, early 1900s, you have this kind of public and private competition for women that want to be known for how many pieces they have in their quilt.”

Over time, quilters from all over the country made history with their quilts: 63,467 hexagons from a man in Illinois, followed shortly by 69,649 pieces in a quilt made by a woman in Iowa in 1940, Kiracofe wrote.

Three years later, Grace Snyder from North Platte, Neb., completed her “Flower Basket Petit Point” quilt, comprising 87,789 triangles. The quilt, in the Nebraska State Historical Museum
in Lincoln, Neb., is entirely hand-sewn and modeled after a china pattern Snyder admired.

Snyder’s daughters told Price they didn’t recognize their mother’s extraordinary talent at the time. “It was like watching mom make bread, do dishes, quilt – so what?” Price said.

The quilt, according to Snyder’s 1986 book “No Time on My Hands,” features “triangle shaped pieces so small that eight of them sewed together made a ‘block’ no larger than a two-cent postage stamp.” It was selected as one of the 20th century’s 100 best American quilts at the 1999 Houston International Quilt Festival.

Although quilt festivals awarded monetary prizes to talented quilters, the nation was still entrenched in an economic disaster. The Great Depression hit the industrial, economic and private core of millions of Americans, including quilters.

Quilting, however, was still popular. Kiracofe wrote about Carrie Hall, a quilter during the Great Depression, who said, “Without money for costly diversions, the women have turned to a renewal of quiltmaking. … The making of quilts in the home has become astonishingly popular, even to the extent of interfering with bridge schedules and attendance at the matinee.”

Because many women couldn’t afford fabric during the Depression, feed sacks became a popular source of material. At first, plain white feed sacks came with a printed label on them that women had a hard time removing, Price said. Over time, however, manufacturers caught on and began making patterned feed sacks with glued-on labels so women could remove them.

“It just became a common thing to use feed sacks for clothing, quilting, anything else,” she said. “It was also relatively easy to sew since many feed sacks had a finer weave since they were made for flour.”

The popularity of quilting dipped once the United States entered World War II. The war brought women out of the home and into the workplace like never before, creating a mid-20th-century lull in quilt making that lasted through the 1950s and ’60s.

But some women still quilted as a way to pass time while their husbands went to war. A number of quilts made during the war had the “V” for victory emblem in their designs. Just as they did in the Civil War and WWI, people used quilt making to raise funds for the war effort.

“Quilting’s always been there in some form but during this time, it was relatively inexpensive to buy the same bed coverings that you could make,” Price said.
said. “It was the perception that quilting was becoming old-fashioned, something your grandmother did.”

Many quilt historians would say the popularity of quilting today is part of quilting’s second 20th century revival, which started in the 1970s with the Whitney Exhibition and picked up steam with the American Bicentennial. Quilting was considered in a historical context, but after the unprecedented 1971 Whitney Museum exhibition of Holstein and van der Hoof’s collection, quilting was seen as artwork.

“It was the first time a major museum, a New York museum on top of that, said that quilts can be art,” Price said. “And an increasingly growing group of people took that idea and ran with it.”

In the mid-1970s, Americans rediscovered the colonial times as they celebrated the nation’s Bicentennial, and the colonial period once again exerted a strong influence on American quilts.

More than 27 million Americans quilt, and with such a deeply rooted history, quilting will continue to thrive in the United States, partly because of its accessibility.

“The American quilt has always been a democratic activity,” Crews said.

Rich and poor, educated and uneducated could afford to do it, at least after the Industrial Revolution.

The enthusiasm for quilting in America is different from that seen in any other country, Waldvogel said.

“Unlike anywhere else, [people] never felt intimidated by it,” she said. “Nobody told them they couldn’t do it, and I think that’s the beauty of an American quilt.”

“CROSSES,” Nancy Crow’s machine-pieced quilt, was made out of cotton broadcloth and muslin in 1976.

COURTESY IQSC, UNL 1997.007.1088
Hawaiian style draws life and beauty from the islands’ colorful, tropical surroundings and presents them in a snowflake appliqué

BY LINSEY MARSHALL

Poakalani Serrao has been quilting since she was a little girl. Like most Hawaiian quilters, her family has passed the tradition from mother to daughter for generations.

“It’s a love given to your next of kin,” she said.

But just as important as the love behind the quilt, Serrao said, is what it has to say.

Serrao said keeping the Hawaiian tradition of telling personal stories through quilts is important to native Hawaiians. The older quilt designs used more flowers and fruit, but she said today’s quilts include musical instruments and images of marine and family life in the designs.

“They quilt everything you think of in Hawaii today,” she said. “You see Hawaii [in the quilts].”

It’s not just the subjects or colors of the quilts that make them Hawaiian. It’s also the unique appliqué design, often compared to a paper snowflake. The quilter folds a layer of fabric into eight sections and cuts the pattern. When the fabric is unfolded, the pattern is symmetrical. The top layer is then pinned, basted and appliquéd to a piece of background fabric so the backing fills in the design.

Maggie Davies, a quilter born and raised in England, knew the best way to learn Hawaiian appliqué was to head straight to the source. In the spring of 1995, she traveled halfway around the world to Hawaii to study its quilting traditions. After a few classes on the islands, she returned to her home in Gloucestershire with a goal of spreading the art form to England.

“I love the Hawaiian handwork and appliqué,” she said from her booth at the 2007 Festival of Quilts in Birmingham, England. “No one else in the U.K. was doing it,” Davies said, so she wanted to introduce the style to quilters in her country.

Davies said she enjoys the stories Hawaiians tell about the birth of their quilt designs, adding that two are most commonly referenced. One is that of a native laundry girl who laid sheets out in the sun to dry. When she saw the shadows cast by a tree, she cut out the pattern and appliquéd it to the fabric.

The other is that the Hawaiian technique began to evolve after the birth of an heir apparent, Prince Albert, in 1858 when Hawaii was still its own nation. Many women in Hawaii began to quilt to commemorate the birth of the prince – the first son born to the monarch in 45 years, she said.

While no one knows for sure how the Hawaiian designs originated, Davies said textile art was already flourishing when British Capt. James Cook and his team of explorers arrived in 1778. Cook noted that the islanders had a “curious” style of textiles, which included feather work, fiber-weaving and the production of pounded bark cloth known as “kapa.” The firm kapa material was mostly used for clothing and was unlike the softer cotton and linen fabrics the explorers’ clothing was made of.

Laurie Woodard, a quilt historian and former curator for the Mission Houses Museum in Honolulu, said there is no record of quilting on the islands until 1820, when missionaries from New England arrived. The missionaries taught pieced quilting at first, Woodard said, and the first appliqué quilt on record was made in 1848. The arrival of the missionaries sparked an increase in quilting because they brought valuable supplies not previously available to the Hawaiians – cotton, wool, silk and linen.

Jenny Newell, the curator of Oceania–Polynesia at the British Museum in London, said the pounded bark fabrics the natives used felt like cardboard or stiff paper, and the materials disintegrated if they became wet. The fabrics the missionaries brought were waterproof and softer, making quilts easier to make and more desirable as bed covers.

Newell said the new fabrics did more than provide a more convenient material for the natives to use, however. Before the missionaries arrived, the most com-
monly used color in Hawaiian quilts was a Turkey red, named for the color’s use in cloth made in Turkey. The new fabrics were easier to dye, expanding the natives’ selection beyond primary colors, she said.

The missionaries started with the island royalty, teaching the traditional New England sampler quilting method to Queen Kalakua. As quilting’s popularity spread, the styles and themes began to change. Christian themes and symbols appeared in quilts, and the missionaries used quilting as a way to distract the Hawaiian women from what the missionaries considered to be “demonic” activities such as dancing and tattooing.

Newell said the missionaries also visited Tahiti, where they introduced a textile style called tifaifai, a combination of New England patchwork and Hawaiian appliqué. The word, sometimes spelled tivaivai or tivaevae but pronounced “te-FI-FI,” means “to patch” in Reo Maohi, the Tahitian language.

Allen Camara, who owns a Honoluluquilting supply shop, Hawaiian Style and Crafts, explained that tifaifai is more like a bed sheet than a quilt because it is simply a top layer. While tifaifai does not require batting or sewing three layers together like quilts do, Camara said a piece of tifaifai could be used as a quilt top.
Hawaiians originally used the tifaifai and appliqué quilts in practical ways. Tifaifai was commonly used as bedcovers, and most quilts started out as bedding, known to the natives as kapa lau. Tifaifai was also used for pillow cases and shams because of the thinness of the material, Camara said.

Camara said tifaifai is still used today as bedcovers and for home decoration, placing the handwork in high demand on the islands.

“We do a lot of tifaifai,” he said.

Quilts later became popular wedding gifts and were used as ceremonial tributes. According to the 1997 edition of Uncoverings, the research papers of the American Quilt Study Group, pregnant women would make quilts for their unborn children. Once the child grew up and married or went away to school, the mother would present the quilt to him or her as a gift.

After the United States annexed Hawaii in 1898, Davies said, many natives used the art of quilting to hold onto their patriotism in secret ways.

“During the annexation of the islands, [the Hawaiians quilted] the flag and would hang it above their beds so the Hawaiian flag was toward the ceiling and a patterned fabric was down, because they were frightened of retribution,” she said.

Davies said that while class lines were not as prominent in 19th century Hawaii as they were in other parts of the world, many “gentlewomen,” or women of the upper class, used quilting as a way to pass the time they spent at home caring for the children. The lower-class women did not have as much free time to quilt leisurely but still did it when they could.

As was true in other parts of the world, quilting in Hawaii became far less popular in the mid-1900s. Woodard said quilters didn’t stop quilting, but a huge decline in the advertising and selling of quilts worldwide gave the appearance that it had started to die out.

A quilt revival came in 1964, Woodard said, when Laurance Rockefeller built one of Hawaii’s first resorts on the big island of Hawaii, Mauna Kea Beach Hotel. Rockefeller had an interest in oriental design and asked a local church quilting group to create 30 Hawaiian quilts in six months. He used the quilts almost like wallpaper, decorating some of the walls in the public spaces, Woodard said, and international interest in Hawaiian quilts grew from there.

Davies said the revival that followed the opening of the hotel introduced bold, bright colors and patterns new to Hawaiian quilting.

“[Quilters were] putting blues and pinks together, greens and blues, and introducing browns,” she said. “The patterns were much more striking.”

Since then, Davies said, quilting is passed on to new generations through public classes more than from mother to daughter. Hawaiian quilt patterns and fabrics are sold throughout the world, but entire quilts are rarely sold anywhere. When they are, she said, they are usually purchased by tourists who aren’t interested in making the quilt themselves.

Serrao and her husband John, a quilt designer, opened their business, Poakalani Hawaiian Quilt Designs, in Honolulu in 1972. Her husband makes custom patterns based on what customers ask for, and Serrao offers classes.

Serrao said she would like to see more quilt shows and conventions year-round to accommodate the growing number of tourists who are interested in learning Hawaiian quilting.

The Original Creative Festival, an annual event in Honolulu, features displays of native quilting. The 2008 show will feature more Hawaiian quilts than it has in the past 14 years, she said, which is a step in the right direction.

Davies said the survival of quilting in Hawaii, as well as in the rest of the world, will depend on the next generations of quilters.

“Like everything else, it’s cyclical,” she said. “Some years it will be much more evident than other years.”

But she’s certainly not worried about it disappearing altogether.

“It will always be there,” she said. “You will still have your avid followers.”
When a group of Mennonites gave cardboard patterns to their African American quilt students in the 19th century, the students used the patterns to make two or three perfect quilt blocks before making the rest free-style and unmeasured.

“Sometimes [the quilts] were called primitive or unsophisticated,” said Yoshiko Wada, who curated an exhibit of African American quilts at the 2007 Festival of Quilts in Birmingham, England. But like Wada, quilt scholars don’t think the students were unsophisticated. Instead, they believe the African American quilters wanted to make up their own designs.

“You cannot help but see that African American quilts have unique designs,” Wada said. “It’s like jazz came from improvisational music — the quilting is similar.”

Although African American quilts come in many styles, improvisational ones are perhaps the most notable. Such quilts do not follow a specific pattern but rather vary in their use of lines, shapes and colors. The completed quilts contrast with traditional patchwork, which uses more precisely measured fabric pieces and follows a set design.

“[Improvisational quilters] approach
improvisational quilts in parts of Texas, while the rest resemble more traditional quilting styles.

Many scholars see similarities between the American-made quilts and African fabrics and weave designs: asymmetrical blocks of fabric, strong color choices and the significance of symbols and patterns. Often, these quilts and textiles are meant to convey stories and values important to African American culture not just to be aesthetically appealing.

African textile traditions include the use of patchwork in flags and garments, weaving in basket symbols dyed on fabric. Many of these designs have made their way into African American quilts.

Maude Wahlman, a professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, has written extensively about these similarities, including in a 1986 article, “African Symbolism in Afro-American Quilts,” published in African Arts magazine.

Many improvisational African American quilts consist of large shapes and strong colors, which many Africans use in their designs to help tribes distinguish themselves or to stand out in hunting parties, Wahlman wrote.

Similarly, many of the shapes and lines in improvisational quilts are asymmetrical, an element also prominent in African woven textiles, where the weaver made the pattern his or her own.

Wahlman wrote that improvisation in African design arose for several reasons. For example, a break in pattern was seen as a way to deflect evil spirits, who followed a straight line, and to make them disappear.

Leon, whose collection of quilts was featured at the Birmingham exhibit, said people were first drawn to improvisational quilts because they were so different from what most people were accustomed to.

During the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and ’60s, interest in African American quilts grew, and collectors from around the world wanted to get their hands on them.

Leon said many collectors began to buy the quilts simply because African Americans made them. Collectors, he said, cared more about the person who made the quilt and less about the quilts themselves.

Some of the most famous improvisational quilts are from Gee's Bend, Ala., a small town of about 700 African Americans. In Gee's Bend, an impoverished farm community on a peninsula formed by a curve in the Alabama River, women traditionally made their warm bedcovers from scraps of worn clothing. With no money for fabrics or quilting materials, they used what they had.

But the women also found the work enjoyable and, for six generations, continued to make quilts to satisfy their desire to create. By 2002, the group of Gee's Bend quilters had gained success in museum exhibits and by selling their products.

While the Gee’s Bend quilts are well-known examples of African American quilts, said Ducey, curator of the Robert and Helen Cargo Collection of African American quilts at the IQSC, “They really represent a small subdivision of African American quilts. It’s just one of the improvisational styles.”

While African design shows up in African American quilting, some scholars think these American-made quilts have, in turn, influenced quilters in Africa.

Odette Tolksdorf, a South African quilter, said some quilters in her country “are inspired by African American quilts and the exciting possibilities in this style of quilting.”

Likewise, in some of his research on African American quilts, Leon said he came to the conclusion that African slaves could have influenced the quilting styles of their masters.

Leon said it is difficult to know how much influence people of African descent had on quilting because attitudes toward slaves at the time discouraged an accurate record of their abilities. Still, scholars see the influence of African designs and African American culture on the quilts made in places like Gee's Bend and elsewhere in the United States as well as in other parts of the world.
Love or Money

Shop owners show little concern for profit and focus on sharing their passion for quilting.

CORD was one of the many products seen at Festival of Quilts 2007, where many products other than the basic fabric, needle and thread were sold.
Between 2003 and 2006, the number of quilters in the United States increased nearly 30 percent to a total of 27.7 million.

During that same three-year period, the country’s total quilting industry grew by 35.5 percent to $3.3 billion spent annually.

These statistics were provided by Quilting in America, a survey analyzing the quilting habits of Americans, which provides a dramatic illustration of the quilting market’s recent explosion. And while talk may be cheap, reliable numbers carry great value.

This dramatic increase in both the number of quilters and the amount of money being spent in the industry is attention-grabbing. A look at those numbers might make a quilting business attractive to would-be entrepreneurs.

Not every quilting niche offers appealing financial benefits, though. Cottage industries throughout the world, frequently in the form of small, home-based quilt shops, are often anything but great moneymakers.

Ann-Christine Tielinen, of Västerås, Sweden, used to own a quilt shop but was not in it for the money. “You will not be rich selling quilting supplies in Sweden,” Tielinen said. “You do it with your heart.”

Considering both the tangible and intangible motives that lure people into the business, the quilting market’s growth likely is fueled by both monetary incentives and a pure love of quilting. Together, these two factors can receive much of the credit for the present state of the quilting business not only in the U.S., but across the globe.

Fiona Brockie, of Aberdeen, Scotland, doesn’t own a quilt shop, but she has made a career of teaching quilting classes. “For me, it’s not to make a profit,” Brockie said. “It’s to introduce other people to it and hope they’ll get involved – to spread knowledge.”

Often, quilt shops offer classes for their patrons. Sew Creative, a quilt shop in Lincoln, Neb., has many such classes.

Some of Sew Creative’s classes, which cost $15 on average, focus on teaching a particular skill, such as free-motion quilting or quilting on a frame. Others are purely for enjoyment. The “Dinner and a Sew” class runs from 5 p.m. until midnight on select Fridays, and quilters are invited to bring their projects to work on while Sew Creative employees fix dinner and even do the dishes.

If one night out of the house isn’t enough, the Heart To Hand quilt shop in Portland, Ore., sponsors a nine-day cruise through the Caribbean. Tickets for this Celebrity line cruise start at $920, and passengers can participate in numerous quilting seminars and events as well as more typical cruise activities.

But not every quilt shop goes this far. Often, budgets only allow for selling fabric and supplies.

If owners of small quilting businesses started out to make a quick buck, most of them would probably be disappointed. Outside the United States, small quilt shops are rare and are often found outside cities’ centers. Higher fabric prices and a lower overall awareness of quilting may be the cause. Or perhaps it is the time commitment required by owners that keeps quilt shops scarce.

Tielinen closed her quilt shop in Sweden after seven years because the heavy work load kept her from enjoying the craft she loved. “I was too tired,” she said. “Quilting wasn’t fun anymore because I was just working, working, working.”

Tielinen’s quilt shop was the only one in a city with more than 100,000 residents. Fremont, Neb., has one-fourth as many people as Västerås with twice as many quilt shops. This example seems to illustrate the general trend.

Many possible reasons exist for the relatively low number of quilt shops in countries outside the U.S.

As the number of quilters and the amount of money being spent in the industry continues to grow, quilt shops may become more common outside the U.S. But for now, the market is still relatively small.
Quilt shops flourish in her country, Belgian quilter Chris Van Calster pointed out the advantages of expanding businesses’ stock to include supplies for other crafts.

“When (quilt shops) are taking other crafts with them, trying other needlework arts also, then they survive easier,” Van Calster said.

A quick stroll through the vendor aisles of the annual Festival of Quilts in Birmingham, England, illustrated this idea. The vendors at this festival did not represent quilt shops alone.

Businesses such as The Crazy Wire Company, Sew Good Books, Button Company, Candle House Crafts and Horn Cabinets did not sell fabric or other specific quilting supplies, but they did sell related items. Accessories such as buttons as well as cabinets and chairs designed specifically for quilters are now offered by quilting businesses.

One of the busiest booths throughout the four days of the festival was that of The Quilted Bear, which featured arguably the hottest selling item – quilting lamps.

Signs claimed the lamps were the best in England, and it appeared that shoppers agreed: The man behind the counter went from customer to customer selling lamp after lamp throughout each day of the festival.

The Quilted Bear’s lamp labeled “cheapest in the country” sold for 99.99 pounds – about $200 in the summer of 2007 – while the lamp marked “best in the country” sold for 199.99 pounds, or about $400.

Another product closely related to quilting and developed in response to quilters’ demands is the rotary cutter, a revolving cutting device with a razor-

Fabric, which is normally expensive in Europe and Great Britain, is a popular sale item at quilting festivals where it is sold at discounted prices. The fabric shown here is sold at roughly $10 for a little more than a yard.
sharp tungsten carbide-steel blade. The rotary cutter has been labeled by some as the greatest quilting invention since the sewing machine.

In the late 1970s, Japanese inventor Yoshio Okada was watching a television program featuring a tailor who was using scissors to cut silk. Okada noticed the scissors left unattractive, rough edges and decided to create a solution.

Okada and a team of developers introduced the world’s first rotary cutter in 1979. Over the next few years, this simple tool transformed quilting.

Not only could patterns be cut much quicker, they also could be cut with much greater accuracy. The success of this revolutionary instrument prompted Okada to introduce self-healing plastic mats, virtually a required accompaniment to the rotary cutter because the self-healing nature of the mat keeps it from being cut apart and destroyed by the sharp blade. The blade does cut into the mat, but once it has been removed, the two sides of the mat join back together and “heal,” keeping the mat’s surface smooth.

Special clear rulers in various shapes—squares, rectangles, triangles—also became must-haves, serving as the guide for a straight cut. Now, any quilt or fabric store would be foolish not to offer rotary cutters and their accessories, and one would be hard pressed to find a serious quilter without these items in her or his sewing room. A rotary cutter, mat and ruler can easily cost $40.

The 2006 Quilting in America survey, conducted by NFO Research Inc. and DP Research Solutions, said that each quilting household spends an average of $172.29 annually on quilting.

The 4.7 percent of all quilters singled out by the survey as “dedicated” spend more than $600 each year on quilting-related purchases such as tools, supplies, books and magazine subscriptions.

Dedicated quilters annually purchase an average 98.7 yards of fabric and five quilting books with a typical price of $21.50 each, subscribe to or read 4.2 quilting magazines and own an average total of $6,017 worth of quilting tools and supplies.

Included in the latter are sewing machines, which alone can cost thousands of dollars.

Sewing machines are displayed and demonstrated prominently at festivals such as the one in Birmingham and elsewhere. Regular sewing machines are advertised, demonstrated and sold in addition to more advanced equipment such as programmable sewing machines and long arm quilting machines.

Programmable machines use digital technology, allowing users to set them up to independently sew a certain pattern or design without manual labor. Visitors to the Birmingham festival watched these machines move and stitch as if they had minds of their own.

Long-arm machines are another step forward, specifically for quilters. While a regular sewing machine requires the user to move the fabric under the needle, the long arm allows quilters to guide the machine across the fabric instead.

When a quilter sews three layers together, this capability not only speeds the process, it also facilitates the creation of various stitched designs on the quilt. Attempting to quilt a curvilinear floral pattern across the surface of a quilt with three bulky layers stuffed into the minimal space offered by a regular sewing machine presents a test of patience and will. Because the long arms are able to move freely, they feature an open-air quality that typical machines simply cannot.

Long-arm machines don’t come cheap, though. An average machine rings up at $31,000, and its purchase itself can be a business investment. Many who buy long-arm machines make money by quilting for people who sew only the quilt tops.

Marlene Bryant is the national sales manager for Gammill Quilting Systems, based in Missouri, which sells long-arm quilting machines internationally. Bryant travels primarily throughout North and South America searching for dealers.

As she travels, she compares different countries’ quilting markets.

“For me, it’s not to make a profit. It’s to introduce other people to it and hope they’ll get involved—to spread knowledge.”

FIONA BROCKIE

said, but this is not true in other countries, hence the draw of a quilt festival—especially in Europe.

“For (European quilters), this is one-stop shopping,” she said. “They can find everything and anything they need, all in one place.”

“The vendors can afford to discount their prices here because they have such a large buying public,” Bryant said. A veteran of quilt festivals, Bryant said the booth space at Birmingham’s festival is about four times more costly than it would be in the United States. One reason for this price difference is Birmingham’s smaller sized festival.

Andrew Salmon, director of Creative Exhibitions, the company presenting Birmingham’s festival, said vendors pay between 155 and 170 pounds, or between $310 and $340 in summer 2007, to rent a booth space.

“It’s very, very expensive to vend at a show like this,” Salmon said. “So therefore, these vendors all have to turn a profit.”

They must be doing just that because Salmon estimated 95 percent of the vendors return year after year.

Perhaps one reason they keep coming back is the initial excitement when the festival doors are unlocked on opening day. Eager crowds rush in, buzzing right past the quilt exhibits to the vendors’ booths in the back of the exhibition hall.

And just how much do these vendors make over the course of a four-day festival?

Salmon would love to know.

“We’re about the last people they would ever seek to tell,” Salmon said with a grin.

Instead of dollar figures, Salmon looks at attendance numbers to determine his professional success.

Salmon said the inaugural Festival of Quilts in 2003 had an attendance around 17,000. It grew annually: 19,000 came in 2004, 21,000 in 2005 and about 24,700 in 2006. In 2007, the number rose to 27,220.

Because the admission price is 8 pounds—about $16 in summer 2007—Salmon’s grin can confidently spread into an ear-to-ear smile.

The world’s largest quilt festival is the International Quilt Festival in Houston, Texas. To accommodate anticipated visitors to the 2007 festival, Houston or-
ganizers added block reservations at two overflow hotels with special convention rates ranging from $119 to $185 for a standard room.

It is attendance numbers at these festivals that encourage people like Sue Prichard, curator of contemporary textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Prichard is preparing a major quilt exhibition to debut at the museum in 2010. When pitching her idea to museum officials, Prichard pointed to attendance records from past quilt displays in museums and said she is confident her exhibition will attract plenty of people – and pocketbooks.

“We know there is a quilting audience out there,” Prichard said.

Museum officials must have believed her, because they budgeted roughly $2 million to stage the exhibit, which will be supported by a two-day conference, lectures, workshops, a special Web site and gift shop.

Paducah, Ky., boasts an entire museum dedicated to quilting. The Museum of the American Quilter’s Society opened in 1991 in a 27,000 square foot, $2.2 million building with a collection of 85 quilts, which has since grown to 184. This museum acts as a non-profit institution, created to educate, promote and honor today’s quilters, according to the museum’s Web site.

Although museum officials do charge admission, $8 for adults and $6 for students and seniors, this museum’s main goal is not to make money.

Both the Museum of the American Quilter’s Society and the Victoria and Albert Museum have informative Web sites to complement their facilities. Prichard said the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Web site receives about 1 million hits every month, demonstrating the ever-increasing influence of the Internet in the 21st century.

The Internet is undeniably aiding the fast-paced growth of quilting worldwide. Because U.S. fabric prices are often considerably cheaper than prices abroad, quilters on other continents use the Internet to place orders with U.S. vendors.

More recently, the Internet has also been used to teach virtual classes.

Mother and daughter Linda and Laura Kemshall offer a variety of quilting classes through their DesignMatters Online Centre. Students can learn at their own pace, working through various levels of courses to earn a diploma from the Kemshalls.

When projects are completed as required by the courses, students take pictures of their work and submit them for “online assessment,” Linda Kemshall said. This Web-based evaluation system makes perfect sense, she said, rather than having students write letters and e-mails with questions about specific colors or designs.

“How do I know if I can’t see it?” Kemshall asked.

Like many quilting teachers, Linda Kemshall is a quilter herself. Her background as a quilter helps her earn credibility from students, who range from age 16 to 83.

“One of our American students said, ‘You not only talk the talk, you walk the walk,’” Kemshall said. “You’ve got to be seen to be part of it. You don’t just tell people what to do, you show them by example, you know.”

Six virtual quilting centers now exist in the United Kingdom, but the Kemshalls’ was the first and is the biggest, and the elder Kemshall is a firm believer in Internet instruction.

“It is the way forward because it
makes learning much more flexible,” Kemshall said.

For Linda Kemshall, perhaps it is both the tangible and intangible benefits of the business that drive her forward. Her love of quilting motivates her as she helps pioneer a new dimension of the quilting industry.

But the Kemshalls’ online courses are not free. The cost of one entire course is 650 British pounds, or about $1,300. Furthermore, Kemshall did not grow up dreaming of opening a virtual quilting center. Her love of the craft guided her there.

Salmon did not set out to be a career quilt capitalist, either.

“I think there’s a long way to go before you could make a sort of career choice in (the quilting) route,” Salmon said of the way quilt-related business owners advance through the industry.

“Most of those particular people came to running a company because they had a love for stitch in the first place, and the love for stitch became a bit of a business, and a bit of a business grew up.”
In the western Nebraska town of North Platte, eight to 20 women meet monthly at the Bethel Evangelical Free Church to make quilts to send to children's charities worldwide.

Since 2000, Carol Swain has led the group, which makes quilts of all sizes and styles. In 2006 and 2007, Swain estimates, the women made and sent more than 100 quilts each year. The number is not exact, but it’s Swain’s best guess.

“We just don’t keep track of that because that’s not what our mission is,” she said.

Swain said she and the members of the group are proud of their work because the quilts are put to good use. She said the quilts represent warmth and love and surpass the boundaries of language to convey this message.

Jan Fry, a quilter from Omaha, said 80 to 90 percent of the 20 quilts she makes each year are auctioned at fundraisers for charities of schools, hospitals and churches.

Quilting is one of Fry’s favorite activities, and doing the work is something that benefits her and the recipients of the quilts alike.

“If a group needs a quilt, it’s an easy way to support their work but do what you love,” she said.

For 10 years, Ginny Landkamer of Lincoln taught a group of women at her church, Cathedral of the Risen Christ, to quilt. The women’s quilts were then raffled off to raise funds for the church at its annual art show.

While teaching others to quilt could be difficult and time consuming, Landkamer said the work gave her the chance to interact with members of her community that she might not otherwise have gotten to know.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity to get to know people on a one-on-one basis,” she said.

Quilting as a form of outreach transcends the boundaries of Nebraska and spans generations and continents. People worldwide use quilts to connect with others.

While many enthusiasts quilt for artistic expression or enjoyment, others quilt to teach people a skill that could improve their lives or create a product that gives the recipient comfort.

Throughout history, quilters have taught others in hopes of helping them earn an income with the finished product.

Elizabeth Fry, a British woman who worked in the women’s section of Newgate Prison in London in 1813, taught a group of women to quilt. She required the women in the prison to sew and to read the Bible. She is credited with spreading patchwork and quilting to Australia by teaching female convicts and the wives of convicts to quilt on the long voyage from England to the penal colony.

Two centuries later, quilters continue to teach others in hopes of improving the students’ quality of life.

Members of the South African Quilters Guild encourage members to offer free lessons or materials to low-income women in their communities. The programs help women from disadvantaged backgrounds learn to quilt or to make patchwork blocks, said Grace Nobili, outreach coordinator for the guild.

To finance the program in its early years, Nobili said guild members made a quilt display to raise awareness about the project in the early 2000s.

“This turned out to be very successful as the [quilts] were subsequently sold, funds were banked and our project was started,” she said.

Nobili said the South African Mambambane program, which translates to “let’s hold hands together,” consistently has more than 70 students registered for classes.

In Egypt, quilters teach impoverished...
Lucia Fenig-Giesinger, a former psychologist from the Netherlands, spreads out a quilt that she designed, which was made by the Bosnian women’s co-operative.

Photograph by K.J. Hascall

people to quilt as a source of income, although profits have been low.

Jenny Bowker, a quilter whose husband is the Australian ambassador in Egypt, said she and some other quilters have reached out to the Zabaleen – the garbage collectors in Cairo – to teach them the craft. City records estimate the Zabaleen population to be between 60,000 and 70,000 within Cairo. These people collect the trash from upper class neighborhoods and reuse or recycle nearly 85 percent of the trash to survive.

Most of the quilts the Zabaleen make are small children’s quilts with animal shapes and printed fabrics inspired by traditional Western patterns. The quilts are sold in street markets. Bowker said, however, that there is little demand for quilts in local markets and that the quilts the Zabaleen produce aren’t made well enough yet to sell in international markets. Though they are proud of their work, the Zabaleen do not make much money from their quilts.

Thousands of miles north of Africa in the European country of Bosnia, a group of refugees made quilts after war plagued their country in 1993 and forced them to flee to Austria, where they lived for five years.

When the group started, its purpose was to give the women something to do, said Lucia Fenig-Giesinger, an Austrian artist and director of the Bosna Quilt Werkstatt. But the quilters found more than just an activity to pass the time; they also felt a sense of accomplishment, she said.

“They think, ‘If I can finish a quilt, I can finish the roof on my house. I can do anything.’”

Learning to quilt not only empowered these women; it also gave them a source of income. On display at the 2007 Festival of Quilts in Birmingham, England, the quilts ranged in price from about 500 to 1,000 pounds, approximately $1,000 to $2,000.

When the Bosnian conflict ended in 1998 and many of the women returned to their homes, Fenig-Giesinger said, some of the women found their communities devastated from the war. Work was hard to find, so the workshop continued.

“They have a new image of themselves. They’re like a new person,” Fenig-Giesinger said. “They’re proud of this work.”

Some 4,000 miles to the east, Mon-
Golian women are taught to combine their sewing skills and native materials to make quilts.

Selenge Tserendash, a young lawyer, started teaching Mongolian women to quilt for a profit and, in 2003, created the school and workshop Shin Zamnal, the “new way life.”

Tserendash said she saw people in her community, many of whom live outside, burning scraps of fabric, a practice she believed harmful to the environment and the people because of the dangerous fumes. She decided to teach women to use these scraps, which were mostly silks, to make quilts that could turn a profit.

The women Shin Zamnal teaches are typically poor, unemployed or widowed, said Magie Ball, a British-born quilt instructor who has traveled to Mongolia twice to help the cause. Other British women have also volunteered their time and visited Mongolia to give lessons and donate cotton fabrics, which are easier to work with than silk but harder to find in Mongolia.

“They’re just so grateful for what we do,” said Jane Grendon, a quilter from England, who went to Mongolia to teach.

As Ball looked at some of the Mongolian products on display in the group’s exhibit at the 2007 Festival of Quilts, which included items ranging from small cotton tote bags to large silk quilts, she marveled at the quality of craftsmanship.

“It’s incredible how it’s blossomed over three years and what they’re making now,” she said.

Many quilters quilt to reach out to others and to give cheer to those they believe need it most.

In the American Civil War, for example, women from the North made about 25,000 quilts and sent them to soldiers on the battlefields, said Carolyn Ducey, curator of collections at the International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, Neb.

Ducey said there is a strong connection in American history between quilts and wartime, stemming from these Civil War blankets. During World War II, she said, many people made quilts for the Red Cross. The finished products were sent to Europe to help people displaced by the war.

Since U.S. troops entered Iraq in 2003, several organizations have formed to make quilts to send to wounded soldiers and to the families of soldiers killed in the war.

Jonathan Gregory, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate student in the Department of Textiles, Clothing and Design, researched some of the makers of these quilts for his 2007 master’s thesis.

Gregory said the 11 people he interviewed from three organizations told him that after the war started and as the number of casualties mounted, the groups felt compelled to do something to honor the memories of the fallen soldiers and to show support for the families they left behind.

He found it interesting that some quilters supported the war and others did not but that their beliefs seemed to have no influence on their work. They all found satisfaction in making quilts for these people suffering from a loss.

While the volunteers gave different reasons for making their quilts, Gregory said a few similarities were apparent. The most common was that a quilt is something a person can wrap up in and find comfort and warmth.

“A quilt is unique in that it means something other objects don’t,” Gregory said. “They said a quilt is like a hug.”

In a thank-you letter to one of the organizations that makes the quilts, Gregory said one mother wrote that when she wrapped herself in the quilt, she felt as if the son she had lost was giving her a hug.

Other organizations make it their mission to give quilts to sick children.

At the Project Linus UK booth at the 2007 Festival of Quilts, volunteers kept busy as people stopped by, wanting to support the organization. Project Linus is a non-profit organization that donates quilts and blankets to seriously ill children. The United Kingdom branch was established a few years after the Project Linus had donated a quilt to her sick grandchild, and she wanted to help continue the organization’s work so it could make a difference in another family’s life.

As Fordham told the story, the woman...
letters sent by thankful family members

she said.

blocks to do her part.

wanted to make a quilt out of the donated
holding the blocks nodded and said she

JENNY BOWKER, whose husband is the
Australian ambassador to Egypt, lives in Cairo
and has participated in quilting outreach
activities within the city.

and hospital workers who had received
the quilts, Scott-Long explained why she
volunteered for Project Linus.

“When you see letters like this,” she
said, “it’s overwhelming.”

On the other side of the world in San-
ta Monica, Calif., the letters of gratitude
that pour in to Stitches from the Heart
are only part of what motivates the or-
ganization’s president and founder, Kathy
Silverton.

More than 11,000 volunteers had made
more than 500,000 quilts and blankets for
babies in more than 600 hospitals nation-
wide as of August 2007, Silverton said in
a telephone interview.

Silverton founded the charity nine
years ago after reading an article about
babies born without necessities like blan-
kets. Silverton and other volunteers make
blankets and quilts measuring 32 inches
by 40 inches, about the size of an incu-
bator, that are sent to hospitals to give
to low-income children and babies born
prematurely.

When Silverton and her group of quil-
ters, knitters and crocheters send their
quilts, all they ask for in return is a letter
from the hospital, she said. Through the
years, many of the family members have
sent her letters as well.

In one letter, Silverton said, a mother
wrote to thank Stitches from the Heart
for the blanket given to her newborn.
The baby died, but the mother kept the
blanket and slept with it because it helped
her feel connected to the child.

Some parents are so appreciative that
they become volunteers themselves. Sil-
verton told of a father who was so touched
by the gift for his newborn, that now ev-
every year on his son’s birthday, he sends a
check to help finance the charity.

Though most people supply the ma-
terials to make the quilts and blankets
themselves, Silverton said the organiza-
tion also collects materials to give to vol-
unteers who might not have the money
to purchase fabric. One particular volun-
teer, an elderly shut-in, cannot afford to
buy the materials, but with donated fab-
rices she has made more than 4,000 quilts
and blankets.

Silverton said volunteers like this
woman devote their time to making a
quilt or a blanket for a person they have
never met and likely will never meet.

“That’s really giving from the heart,”
she said.

Most of the quilters who donate their
work to charities never know the impact
their work has on the recipient because
the quilts are actually distributed by hos-
pitals or other organizations.

Omaha’s Children’s Hospital is one re-
cipient of the quilts and blankets from or-
ganizations like Stitches from the Heart
and Project Linus. Cherie Lytle, a hospital
spokeswoman, said people donate quilts
for both infants and older children.

The hospital is grateful for the quilts it
receives, Lytle said. The blankets are very
important to the children and the fami-
lies who receive them because the quilts
give a sense of protection.

“It’s like a bit of home for them,” she
said.

While quilts are made for people in
need, either physically or emotionally,
the work gives something back to the
teachers and quilters as well.

Fenig-Giesinger of the Bosna Quilt
Werkstatt said her work teaching refu-
gees to quilt has brought her pride and
changed her life as well as those of the
quilters. Through the workshop, she has
had the chance to interact with women
from different backgrounds. She has been
able to learn about the quilters’ stories,
religion, country and lives.

“It is my profession now,” she said. “I
can’t imagine something I’d like to do
more.”

Fordham, president of Project Linus
UK, said the people who make quilts to
donate in Great Britain like being able to
do something for people in their com-

munity who could benefit from the quilt.
The work itself brings enjoyment, too.

“It’s an outlet to stitch,” she said.

“They like to stitch.”

Janice Gunner, president of the Quil-
ters Guild of the British Isles, said the
people she knows who participate in dif-
ferent outreach programs do so for many
reasons. Among the motives is the thera-
petic process of making quilts.

“Sometimes it’s just the action of mak-
ing something,” she said.

Participating in outreach programs is
a way for the quilters to feel that they are
contributing to their community with
something that is a symbol of comfort,
Gunner said. The quilters donate to dif-
f erent charities and organizations because
of the satisfaction of knowing they are
helping someone in need while making
something they love.

“People want to feel what they’re do-
ing is good,” Gunner said.
Families and friends remember loved ones through NAMES Project

BY ASHLEY ERMEL


All these items are part of a quilt that has been embroidered, spray painted, collaged and appliquéd, memorializing more than 91,000 people. Even more friends and families have grieved the loss of loved ones from a once mysterious and taboo disease.

The purpose of the quilt, the largest community arts project in the world, is to give names and faces to the millions of people who have died from HIV and AIDS and to pay testimony to the hundreds of thousands of people whose lives have been affected by the disease.

The wall looked more like a patchwork quilt than a wall of placards. “They taped the names on the wall because these people, and these names, mattered,” Rhoad said. “Jones stood back and saw a quilt. Without really knowing it, he really struck a cord of warmth and comfort and handmade material culture that got people fostering change. … It was a form that took a traditional art form and transformed it into a modern response.”

A little more than a year later Jones created the first quilt panel in memory of his friend, Marvin Feldman, and by mid-1987, Jones and others created the NAMES Project Foundation. By October of that year, more than 1,900 panels had been sent in. The project was first displayed on Washington’s National Mall during the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. The quilt was longer than a football field, and more than 500,000 people visited. Since
THE AIDS MEMORIAL QUILT, started in 1987, is the world’s largest community art project and has been displayed numerous times in Washington, D.C., to generate HIV awareness and to recognize HIV testing day.
then, more than 14 million people have viewed parts of the quilt at thousands of displays around the world. Twenty years later, in May 2007, the AIDS Memorial Quilt contains more than 5,700 quilt blocks, and almost every one includes eight individual panels, according to AIDSquilt.org.

Rhoad said the quilt powerfully teaches AIDS prevention but is also a tool for remembrance and healing.

“With the founding of the quilt, mothers and fathers, brother and sisters, partners and other people who were creating the panels became the voices for the people dying of the disease,” she said. “But as we’ve grown and changed, as the quilt began to tour the country, displays of the quilt drew people into ways of outreach.”

The NAMES Project Foundation, which accepts any kind of panel it receives, cares for the quilt to the best of its abilities, but preserving it for display on museum walls isn’t the intention.

“If we were to try and conserve it to extraordinary museum standards, it would never travel, and it would never do its job,” Rhoad said. “At the core, this particular quilt is about how valuable an individual life is. Individual life should be valued equally. I think … to see [the quilt] is to understand. To see it is to transform statistics into souls.”

The panels people send to NAMES, whose headquarters are in Atlanta, must meet no requirements except one: They must measure 3 feet by 6 feet, the same size as a grave site. Each panel may be in remembrance of a single person or of several people who have died from AIDS. Regardless of how many lives are memorialized on a single panel, each piece of the quilt is valued in the same way.

United Airlines and Kodak each created an entire block, consisting of eight panels, in memory of employees and friends and family of employees, Rhoad said. Prisons across the country have sent panels to the AIDS Quilt Project in memory of inmates who have died from the disease. Nursing units have created panels in memory of all the infants in their hospitals who were victims of HIV and AIDS.

Along with the quilt panels, people often send letters, photographs and anything else they feel would help with their testimony to the loved ones they have lost.

**ABOVE: THE AIDS QUILT** traveled to Omaha and was shown at the Metropolitan Church of Christ. During the week, new patches were made, and a memorial service was held for victims of the disease.

**LEFT: EACH UNIQUE PATCH** is a tribute to the life of someone who has died from HIV and AIDS.
“I think this is a compelling part of our history, and when you unite a single voice with that of 91,000 others, it makes it more powerful,” Rhoad said. “People wanted their loved ones’ lives remembered, their stories told, and they wanted everyone to understand these people didn’t die in vain. They were loved.”

Pastor Emmett said the quilt makes the HIV and AIDS victims more than just statistics or numbers.

“You can see how it stopped someone’s life who enjoyed bowling, how it killed somebody who loved to dance, who loved to play the piano, who loved to read,” he said. “Those realities are inscribed on these panels.”

The quilt weighs more than 54 tons, which is one reason it has been displayed in its entirety only five times since the project started in 1987, each time on the National Mall. Although the quilt receives support and donations from communities across the world, the project doesn’t have the financial backing to display the quilt in its entirety again any time soon, Rhoad said.

The quilt, which is broken into 12-by-12 foot blocks, travels the world and is displayed in churches, in schools, in gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender centers and community halls, any place where people want to display the oversized pieces. If a school can display only one block from the quilt, The NAMES Project Foundation will send one block. If a GLBT center can display 25 blocks, then 25 blocks will be sent.

In addition, people who have created panels and want to see them on display can request their panel’s block be displayed in their area.

“At the core, this particular quilt is about how valuable an individual life is. Individual life should be valued equally. I think… to see [the quilt] is to understand. To see it is to transform statistics into souls.”

JULIE RHOAD

Seeing the panels may comfort families and friends of AIDS victims, Emmett said, but creating the panels helps with the grieving process.

“I think when people work on a panel it gives them an opportunity to inscribe their grief and to go through a deeper process, probably also validating their relationship with that person and what that person meant to them,” he said.

“It takes time to make a panel, and it takes time to grieve. So in the time that it takes to make a panel, that much more grieving is done.”
At first, Karen Pearce hardly noticed that her occasional volunteer work was becoming her life’s quest.

As a school teacher in Bournemouth, England, in the mid-1990s, Pearce spotted an advertisement in a magazine published by the Quilters’ Guild of the British Isles. The ad sought someone to mentor young quilters in her region on the country’s southern coast. Wanting to fill some of her spare time, Pearce replied to the message and soon was using her expertise to assist aspiring quilters.

After a couple of years, her part-time service became a full-time pursuit. The Quilters’ Guild of the British Isles asked Pearce to oversee volunteer workers from every other region of the country as the guild helped teach a younger generation the techniques and traditions of quilting. When the Festival of Quilts, in Birmingham, England, began in 2003, Pearce noticed one glaring omission from the bustling weekend of activities and seminars: programs for children.

“I said it wasn’t right,” Pearce recalled. “We should have workshops for children – any children that came along.”

Pearce received permission to teach lessons for children at the festival – that is, if she didn’t mind creating the classes and teaching free of charge – unlike

A new generation of quilters chooses the needle and thread over digital distractions

BY EVAN BLAND

A BANNER, made by Emily Poppe, an 11-year-old Nebraska quilter.
every other workshop presenter at the gathering.

Four years later, after the 2007 festival, where she worked with nearly 100 children over four days, Pearce said she hasn’t regretted her decision.

Pearce, who is in her 50s, is part of a large, concerted effort to teach young people how to quilt. But in the 21st century when children have more activities – sports, music, television – to devote their time to, many older quilters are unsure whether their precious pastime will live on.

Convincing contemporary youth to choose quilting over other time-consuming activities is hard enough, but technology has become another source of competition for the traditional practice.

“A lot of children spend a lot of time in front of computers and TVs these days,” Pearce said. “It would be good if they can do things with their hands – it’s really important.”

For established quilters, finding young people willing to take on and preserve the quilting heritage is part of an unfamiliar struggle.

* * *

Britta Doeschot likes to view her hours of quilting as an investment in a skill that will last a lifetime.

That’s only part of the reason Britta takes the time to quilt. The 17-year-old,
Britta’s grandmother taught her how to make her first quilt by machine when she was 14. They would spend more than 10 hours a week together during the summer, quilting and conversing about their lives.

“My first quilt was kind of a mess,” Britta said. “It was a little bit more challenging than I should have started with. It took me two years to get done.”

But along with a simple Pinwheel Quilt, Britta gained a greater understanding of herself. She put increased value in her relationships with family members and found a joy in creating gifts for them.

It’s that kind of self-discovery that also inspired Kathleen Sciortino to make a career out of teaching sewing and textile history to young people.

As an instructor at Burke High School in Omaha, Neb., Sciortino has already seen how quilting can open students’ eyes to opportunities they would have never known otherwise within the textile industry. In just two years of teaching, she already has students who, once they find they enjoy working with fabric, have decided they want to make a career out of designing clothing for major companies worldwide.

Even more important, Sciortino said, is how the creation of something as intricate as a quilt cultivates patience in an American culture that values instant gratification.

“In this day, it’s, ‘I do this, I get an award,’” Sciortino said. “They get instant rewards for everything they do, whereas the (reward in) sewing is delayed until the end.”

The two enjoy a strong relationship, which became even stronger when

“I’m a very creative person in general. I think that there’s always more to learn about quilting.”

ROSIE WARDMAN

Under the theme “from dark to light,” each person was to quilt a specific patch. After the patches were finished, the girls would assemble the quilt.

Rosie said she has a head start in quilting over many girls her age, though that may change as school continues.

“I think that I will get to do textiles at school,” Rosie said, “but it will be very boring to start off with!”

Some students have trouble finding time to quilt amid homework and other activities. Cassee Spellmeyer, a 16-year-old from Lincoln, Neb., said she quilts only on weekends. Even then she sometimes doesn’t find the time.

For Cassee, quilting is something she does alone to relax. She hopes to be an architect or interior designer someday, and creating a quilt combines mathematical and organizational skills useful to both occupations.

Outside the structured curriculum of school, quilting has allowed Cassee to express her creativity. She has made a quilt called “Neopolitan” – because its brown, pink and white colors reminded her of Neopolitan ice cream – and another called “Three Square Meals,” named for its three big patches of fabric.

“It’s something different you can do for many years,” Cassee said of quilting. “And the quilt keeps you warm on cold nights.”

Cassee is one of the many students across the United States who credit their involvement in quilting to 4-H, an organization devoted to teaching practical skills such as raising livestock, cooking and sewing.

In Lancaster County, Nebraska, alone, Cassee is one of 44 students of varying ages involved in 4-H quilting classes.

Cassee said her sewing background provoked her first interest in quilting when she was 12 years old. Now she quilts with other people her age in more social settings.

Debra Spellmeyer, Cassee’s mother, also occasionally quilts. She said her daughter has become more outgoing and confident after quilting with her peers.

“But she hasn’t started her own quilt group yet,” the elder Spellmeyer said with a laugh.

Despite a conscious and often organized effort to teach quilting to a new
generation, established quilters are divided over where the craft’s future is headed.

One of the biggest questions is posed by the progression of technology, both outside and within the quilting world.

Terry Scigo is among those skeptical of technology’s positive effects on quilting. As a teacher for the 4-H office in Fremont, Neb., Scigo saw quilting’s popularity grow from the 1970s until the early 2000s, when she said it stabilized.

In recent years, the classes she teaches have dwindled in size, mainly because of a lack of funding from the 4-H office, Scigo said. As a result, she teaches her workshops with only one sewing machine that must be shared by all participants.

The problem often isn’t how expensive a machine is, Scigo said, but that fewer adults today feel the need to own one. As a result, most youngsters don’t have easy access to one.

“I think there’s a need for young people to appreciate quilting,” Scigo said. “It’s pretty sad because right now there isn’t a sewing machine in the home.”

As a teacher, Sciortino said technology can be a challenge because it forces established quilters to learn new ways to design and assemble a quilt. Like any other professional, Sciortino said, quilting instructors owe it to their students to learn the latest innovations in the craft before teaching others how to quilt.

With new sewing machines that “do everything but sit up and talk to you” and complex computer programs to help design patterns, Sciortino said keeping quilting current is important in getting people interested. After all, students who are up to date on the possibilities quilting offers are more likely to make it a permanent hobby.

Many quilters observe that young people are becoming involved in quilting in ways unimaginable only a few generations ago. Popular fashion shows such as “Project Runway” expose young viewers to the possibilities of working with fabric. This is a far cry from the strict sewing lessons most girls took only a few decades ago.

Pearce, the quilting teacher in England, was once one of those girls. She remembers her teacher making her undo stitches if they were not straight and uniform. If the quilt wasn’t made by hand in the traditional patchwork style, it was considered inferior.

It’s a perspective Pearce has seen evolve to a freer form of quilting in the 21st century.

“It’s good to use technology; it’s good to use lots of different things,” Pearce said. “It’s good to go against all the rules about this and that.”

Instead of establishing quotas for cross-stitching by telling the children how many lines they have to stitch per lesson, Pearce encourages children to experiment and gives beginners small projects to work on. Pearce refuses to restrict students’ creativity for the sake of tradition.

It’s all part of an effort to pass along her love of quilting to future generations.

“It’s important to be creative, and everyone can be creative,” Pearce said.

“When you create something that you’re proud of, I think you feel much better.”

"It’s something different you can do for many years. And (the quilt) keeps you warm on cold nights.”

CASSEE SPELLMEYER
REPORTERS

EVAN BLAND of Lincoln, Neb., is a news-editorial and broadcasting major and plans to graduate in December 2008. He has worked at the Daily Nebraskan as a sports reporter and as an editor and has had a reporting internship at the Norfolk Daily News in Norfolk, Neb.

LAURA CHAPMAN of Omaha, Neb., graduated in May 2008 with a news-editorial degree. She has worked as a reporter, designer and editor at the Daily Nebraskan, as a city desk reporting intern at the Lincoln Journal Star and as a Lee News Scholar intern at the Southern Illinoisan in Carbondale, Ill.

ASHLEY ERMEL of Omaha, Neb., graduated in May 2008 with a degree in news-editorial journalism. She has worked at the Daily Nebraskan.

TAKAKO IWATANI of Kuwana, Japan, is a senior news-editorial major and plans to graduate in December 2009. She has worked as an intern at the American General Bureau of the Asahi Shimbun in Washington, D.C., and has been awarded the New Nebraskan and H&L Gerdes scholarships.

EDITORs

ANTONA BECKMAN of Lincoln, Neb., is a senior textiles, clothing and design and news-editorial major. She plans to graduate in December 2008.

METTA CEDERDAHL of Lincoln, Neb., is a senior news-editorial major and plans to graduate in August 2008. She has worked as a copy editor for the Daily Nebraskan and has had an internship as a copy editor for Special Interest Media at Meredith Corp. in Des Moines, Iowa.

MADELINE DONOVAN of Sioux Falls, S.D., is a senior news-editorial and broadcasting major and plans to graduate in December 2009. She has worked as a copy editor and as co-copy chief of the Daily Nebraskan and has had a copy editing internship with the Pioneer Press in St. Paul, Minn.

TANNA KIMMERLING of Beatrice, Neb., is a senior news-editorial major and plans to graduate in May 2009. She has worked at the Daily Nebraskan as a features writer. She also had an internship with the Beatrice Daily Sun and has written for the Norris News Magazine, also in Beatrice.

LINSEY MARSHALL of Sidney, Iowa, graduated in May 2008 with a news-editorial degree. She is now in law school at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and works as a legal assistant at Lincoln Law. Marshall worked at the Daily Nebraskan as a reporter. She also won the 2005 grand prize editorial award from the UNL Publications Board.

AUDREY PRIBNOW of Fremont, Neb., graduated in May 2008 with a news-editorial degree. She works for Teach For America and will be teaching high school English in Kansas City this fall. She has worked as a features reporter for the Fremont Tribune in Fremont, Neb., and as a copy editor at the Daily Nebraskan. She also wrote stories and designed the newsletter for the Teach For America staff and corps.

KRISTIN LIMOGES of Lincoln, Neb., is a senior textiles, clothing and design, broadcasting and news-editorial major. She plans to graduate in May 2009. She writes for L Magazine, Lincoln’s Premier Magazine.

ALICIA ROTH of Columbus, Neb., is a senior textiles, clothing and design and news-editorial major and plans to graduate in May 2009. She has worked for the Columbus Telegram and Three Eagles Communications, both in Columbus, Neb.
BROADCASTERS

MAIKA BAUERLE of Imperial, Neb., graduated in May 2008 with a degree in broadcast journalism. She has worked as a reporter and videographer for 10/11 News KOLN/KGIN in Lincoln, Neb., and managed and reported for KADL radio in Imperial, Neb. She has studied abroad in Spain and Costa Rica.

MICHAELA STEVENS of Omaha, Neb., graduated in May 2008 with a broadcast journalism degree.

PHOTOGRAPHER

K.J. HASCALL of Centennial, Colo., is a senior news-editorial and English major. Hascall, who has studied abroad in Greece and Egypt, plans to graduate in December 2008. She has worked for the Nebraska State Patrol as a photography intern and as a summer intern at Summit Daily News in Frisco, Colo.

DESIGNERS

KATIE NIELAND of Omaha, Neb., graduated in May 2008 with a news-editorial degree. She has been a reporter, artist, cartoonist and managing editor for the Daily Nebraskan, had a reporting internship at the Grand Island Independent and a Lee News Scholar internship at the Montana Standard.

SHANNON SMITH of Hickman, Neb., a junior news-editorial and history major, is also in UNL’s Honors program. She plans to graduate in May 2010. She has worked as a news-editorial assistant in the College of Journalism and Mass Communications and as a features reporter for the Daily Nebraskan.

ADVERTISING & PROMOTION

KIRK FELLHOELTER of Broadwater, Neb., is a senior advertising major and will graduate in December 2008. He has worked in the Washington, D.C., office of U.S. Rep. Adrian Smith.

JILL HAVEKOST of Scribner, Neb., graduated in May 2008 with a degree in advertising. She has worked with the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service and as a communications intern at the University of Nebraska Technology Park.

FACULTY

RICK ALLOWAY is a journalism professor and the general manager of 90.3 KRNU, the university’s FM radio station. He supervised the broadcasting students.

NANCY ANDERSON worked as a lecturer at the UNL College of Journalism and Mass Communications, where she helped supervise the reporters for this magazine. Before that, she worked for 15 years as an editor at Newsday, a Pulitzer Prize-winning daily newspaper on Long Island, New York.

TIMOTHY G. ANDERSON is a journalism professor in the news-editorial sequence and formerly worked as executive news editor of New York Newsday and as news design editor of The New York Times. He supervised the editing and design students.

CHARLYNE BERENS is a journalism professor and chairwoman of the news-editorial sequence and was co-publisher and editor of the Seward County Independent before joining the journalism faculty. With Nancy Anderson, she supervised the reporting and photography students.

STACY JAMES is a journalism professor in the advertising sequence and has worked for advertising agencies in Kansas City, Mo., and Lincoln, Neb. She supervised the advertising students.

SPECIAL THANKS

MARILYN HAHN, communications specialist at the journalism college, for her production help.

ANNA MOSTEK, of Omaha, Neb., a junior news-editorial major expecting to graduate in 2010, for her coverage of the opening of the International Quilt Study Center.

BRUCE THORSON, photography professor, for his assistance in editing photographs.
Creating a quilt requires hard work, commitment, passion and love. So, too, does creating a quilt center and museum.

Dedicated to all with quilters’ hearts who turned a wishful dream into a brick and mortar reality, the Quilt House.

International Quilt Study Center

Publication of Fabric as a Narrative made possible through the generosity of

Sarah Meyer Lahr  Sara Rhodes Dillow
Educational Fund  NU ’62
NU ’39

The University of Nebraska Foundation