



Roundness (detail)
by Emiko Toda Loeb
see page 19

A brief history of the art quilt

In honor of SAQA's 25th anniversary, the *SAQA Journal* commissioned a series of four articles from Robert Shaw which explored different aspects of the history of art quilts. This publication brings those articles together into one place.

Discovering the roots of the art quilt

by Robert Shaw



Although academically trained artists had been making quilts since at least the mid-1930s, the term art quilt was not generally applied to their work before 1986. That's when quilt historian and curator Penny McMorris and quilt dealer and publisher Michael Kile organized *The Art Quilt* exhibition. Quilts in the exhibition were intended to be seen as works of visual art distinct from traditional bed quilts.

Many of the 16 artists who were asked to make quilts for the show—Pauline Burbidge, Nancy Crow, Deborah J. Felix, Veronica Fitzgerald, Gayle Fraas and Duncan Slade, Jean Hewes, Michael James, Terrie Hancock Mangat, Therese May, Ruth B. McDowell, Jan Myers-Newbury, Risè Nagin, Yvonne Porcella, Joan Schulze, and Pamela Studstill—had earned degrees in studio art.

Today, an online search of “art quilts” brings more than 1.4 million

Editor's note: 2014 is Studio Art Quilt Associates' 25th anniversary. In recognition of that landmark, the SAQA Journal will run articles on the history of art quilting in all 2014 issues, including one in each issue by Robert Shaw.

results. Thousands of women and men around the world, including the 3,300-plus members of Studio Art Quilt Associates (SAQA), describe themselves as art quilters, people who use the quilt medium to make art.

While the art quilt movement is a fairly recent development, the art quilt has deep roots in U.S. quilting traditions. Its early practitioners were students of traditional quilts and quilting techniques. The history of quilted art in the United States stretches from before the Revolutionary War to the present day. Although many of the quiltmakers' names are lost to history and their work is inadequately recognized, U.S. quiltmakers of the late 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries created thousands of works that deserve to be considered significant works of art.

That fact has been acknowledged by art critics for decades. In his *New*



Tree of Life

104 x 106 inches 1830

Mrs. Benjamin Mumford, Newport, Rhode Island. Collection of the Detroit Historical Society.



The Elizabeth MacCullough Hervey Album Quilt

110 x 110 inches circa 1848-1852

Maker unknown, Baltimore, Maryland. Private collection, courtesy of Jan Whitlock Interiors.

York Times review of the seminal exhibition *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, mounted by the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City in 1971, Hilton Kramer, the newspaper's chief art critic, reported the "suspicion" that quilts like the ones in the show might represent "the most authentic visual articulation of the American imagination in the last century."

He continued, "For a century or more preceding the self-conscious invention of pictorial abstraction in European painting, the anonymous quilt-makers of the American

provinces created a remarkable succession of visual masterpieces that anticipated many of the forms that were later prized for their originality and courage."

Speaking about quilts made by Amish women in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, art critic Robert Hughes, author of *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (McGraw-Hill, 1990) and *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (Knopf Publishing Group, 1997) said:

"The Lancaster Amish ... assembled blocks of ... uniformly colored wool,

bought by the yard, and from them created America's first major abstract art ... in their complexity, visual intensity, and quality of craftsmanship, [these] works simply dispel the idea that folk art is innocent social birdsong. They are as much a part of the story of high aesthetic achievement in America as any painting or sculpture. They deserve our attention and amply and abundantly repay it."

Both Hilton Kramer and Robert Hughes were responding to geometric pieced quilts, which they recognized as predating and in some ways



My Crazy Dream

74 x 69 inches 1912

Mary M. Hernandez Ricard.

Haverhill, Massachusetts

IQSCM 1997.007.0541

anticipating the later geometric abstract paintings of such masters as Josef Albers, Wassily Kandinsky, Ellsworth Kelly, Piet Mondrian, Barnett Newman, Kenneth Noland, Ad Reinhardt and Victor Vasarely. The same judgment can be made about appliquéd quilts, many of the finest of which date to the early decades of the 19th century, before the era of the pieced quilt.

Quilting for show

Contrary to myth, early U.S. quilts were not creations of necessity. Before the Industrial Revolution turned the United States into a major cotton producer, cotton fabric was imported and affordable only by the well-to-do. Quilts were an elite, aristocratic art, practiced by wealthy, well-educated and skilled women who had time to lavish on handmade quilts. For that reason, relatively few quilts were made in the early years of the nation, and most that were made were elaborate labors of love that employed expensive fabric and time-consuming hand-sewing techniques as there were no sewing machines until the 1850s.

Such quilts were used to decorate beds on special occasions. Like contemporary art quilts, they were made to be seen, not to be practical, warming bedcovers. They were often thinly lined or not batted at all.

During the 1840s and 1850s, the art of appliqué reached levels of sophistication and technical complexity that still astonish. The most refined appliquéd quilts were made in the mid-Atlantic states, especially in Baltimore,



Center Diamond

(Diamond in the Square)

78 x 78 inches circa 1925 Maker unknown, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

Private collection. Photo courtesy of Julie Silber/The Quilt Complex:

www.thequiltcomplex.com.

Maryland, and environs, where a number of skilled seamstresses and pattern designers were concentrated.

What has come to be called the Baltimore album quilt flourished from the mid-1840s through the late 1850s. The best of these quilts have long been considered a pinnacle of U.S. quilting technique and design sophistication. They were most often group efforts, made as presentation pieces. They were not intended for use but for show, and often were made as wedding or coming-of-age quilts or given to departing clergy as going-away presents.

Another clear forerunner of the art quilt is the crazy quilt, a phenomenon of the last quarter of the 19th century. Crazy quilts were usually made from fancy dress silks and velvets and decorated with a variety of fanciful embroidery and pictorial motifs. They were made primarily for fun and show. They were often seen draped over furniture in Victorian parlors. Most were unlined, consisting only of a top and backing, and usually were not quilted. They were made of randomly shaped pieces of fabric and were originally named for their resemblance to crazed pottery glazes that were popular in the late 19th century.

Quilts of necessity

Throughout the 20th century, women in rural areas of the South, Midwest and Southwest and in poor inner-city neighborhoods in the North followed their muses, producing odd, quirky quilts that can be refreshingly unself-conscious in contrast to the carefully planned and executed work favored by mainstream quiltmakers. Economics often limited their fabric choices. Quilting became an art of

necessity as women who were unable to afford store-bought fabric cut up old clothing and other household fabrics to use in their piecework.

Although their materials were humble, and their quilts were often assembled from scraps of varied sizes, the best of these quiltmakers made careful, albeit intuitive, choices. While make-do quilts are commonly associated with African American quiltmakers, many white women made similar quilts. The phenomenon was economic.

Old Order Amish quilting

The Old Order Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, did not take

up quilting until the 1880s, long after it was commonplace among other U.S. women. They only made geometric pieced quilts, using solid-colored commercially produced wools.

The Center Diamond is one of a handful of simple but bold geometric patterns worked by the Lancaster Amish, who cut large pieces of fabric from the same dress-weight wool they used for their clothing. They masterfully hand stitched wide expanses of solid color in non-contrasting thread, a means of retaining the humility and personal modesty central to their faith. The quilting on Lancaster



Iris Garland

87 x 77 inches circa 1935-40

Hannah Haynes Headlee, Topeka, Kansas. Collection of the Kansas Historical Society.

Amish pieces is peerless, but it makes no attempt to draw attention to itself.

Art quilt term emerges

A renewed interest in historic quilts began in 1915 when Marie Webster published the first book on U.S. quilts, *Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them*. In addition to featuring historic quilts, the book included photos of some of Marie Webster's innovative patterns, which *Ladies' Home Journal* had begun publishing in 1911. Demand for her patterns was so great, she founded a mail-order business that offered her patterns, kits that included patterns and fabric, and finished quilts throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

As do-it-yourself interest grew, dozens of newspapers printed patterns for new and old quilts, and national contests were held. Competition grew fierce. By the mid-1930s, academically trained Midwestern artists such as Hannah Haynes Headlee, Rose G. Kretsinger and Bertha Stenge were creating original quilts of astonishing complexity.

Hannah Headlee was an artist who supported herself by teaching private lessons in watercolor and china painting. Her expertise in the subtleties of watercolor is manifest in her masterpiece, *Iris Garland*. Hannah Headlee did not enter her quilts in contests because, her family believed, "she knew exhibiting her quilts at fairs would encourage copies, and she loved being an original."

Unlike Hannah Headlee, Rose G. Kretsinger and Bertha Stenge's designs were often inspired by their research on mid-19th century quilts. In 1935, Rose G. Kretsinger and Carrie A. Hall wrote *The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt in America*. In 1943, the Art Institute of Chicago mounted a show of 20 quilts by Bertha Stenge. A *News-week* review of the exhibition dubbed her quilts "art quilts," but the name did not stick.

Conclusion

The historic quilts discussed and pictured in this article represent the tip of an enormous iceberg. U.S. quiltmakers of all kinds—rich

and poor, young and old, educated and unschooled—have long made remarkable quilts whose artistic merits transcend the genre. Even the most casual look at this country's quilt legacy will reveal masterpiece after masterpiece from every decade and every region of the country. It's a journey well worth taking for anyone interested in the idea that great quilts can and should be considered works of art. ▼

Robert Shaw, an expert on contemporary and antique quilts, is the author of books such as The Art Quilt, Hawaiian Quilt Masterpieces, Quilts: A Living Tradition and Art Quilts: A Celebration. His most recent book is American Quilts: The Democratic Art, 1780-2007 (Sterling Publishing, 2009). Bob was curator at the Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, Vermont, from 1981-1994, and curator of special exhibitions for Quilts Inc./ International Quilt Festival in Houston, Texas, from 1998-2003. He is a dealer in art quilts. His website is www.artofthequilt.com.

Piecework pioneers: Artists embrace quilting

by Robert Shaw

Editor's note: This is the second of four articles on art quilt history written by Robert Shaw for the SAQA Journal in recognition of Studio Art Quilt Associates' 25th anniversary.

It is not surprising that most of the academically trained artists who took up quilting in the 1960s and '70s, including such pioneers as Beth and Jeffrey Gutcheon, Michael James, Nancy Crow, Jean Ray Laury, Radka Donnell, Molly Upton, Susan Hoffman, and Nancy Halpern,

concentrated on pieced quilts. These artists cut their teeth on traditional quilts, then moved away, in most cases step by step, to create work that was distinctly their own. They had to understand and master the tradition first. As Nancy Crow explained when interviewer Jean Robertson asked



Wholeness, 79 x 54 inches, Radka Donnell, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1979. Machine-pieced cottons, machine quilted by Claire Mielke. Private collection.

whether she had been influenced by traditional quilts:

“I definitely bit off the tradition and stuck with it. I think that’s probably how I learn. I have to somehow push through the traditional or classical part and then come out the other end.”

Block-style piecework is the United States’ single greatest contribution to the art and craft of quilting. U.S. quiltmakers began organizing the tops of their quilts in repeated block patterns in the early decades of the 19th century. Organizing geometric shapes into grid patterns offered them a host of design possibilities that could be fleshed out and individualized with colored fabric. It also saved space, since the repeating square blocks could be made one at a time and sewn together when all were completed. By the beginning of World War II, thousands of patterns had been invented. Quilt historian Barbara Brackman’s *Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns* (American Quilter’s Society, 1993) illustrates 4,127 blocks, many of which had been given names and published in newspapers and magazines.

A number of the colorful and often optically challenging geometric patterns of block-style pieced quilts intersected with later abstract paintings by artists such as Josef Albers, Ellsworth Kelly, Piet Mondrian and

(previous page) **Torrid Dwelling**, 110 X 90 inches, Molly Upton, New Bedford, New Hampshire, 1975. Cotton, cotton blends, and wool; hand and machine pieced and machine quilted.



Victor Vasarely, and the striking similarities between them were not lost on students of modern art. Among them were Gail van der Hoof and Jonathan Holstein, who collected quilts they found graphically compelling starting in the mid-1960s. The couple’s 1971 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, and Holstein’s 1973 book *The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition* (McClelland and Stewart) presented pieced quilts as works of visual art. After its run at the Whitney, versions of the exhibition traveled widely in the early 1970s. Many young artists who saw them

were inspired by the aesthetic possibilities inherent in the quilt medium.

Interest in quilting grows

Anyone interested in quilting in the 1960s and ’70s could access and study traditional designs through books like Holstein’s and Patsy and Myron Orlofsky’s comprehensive 1974 study *Quilts In America* (McGraw-Hill Book Company), and through actual quilts, which were plentiful and inexpensive.

As interest grew, classes became popular, and a number of ambitious young quiltmakers found ready audiences as teachers. Beth Gutcheon started teaching quilting in New York City in 1971, a few years before



Crystal Mountain, 43 x 57 inches, Jeffrey Gutcheon, New York City, New York, 1978. Cotton, poly-cotton, rayon, poly-rayon, brushed corduroy and nylon grillcloth; machine and hand pieced, appliquéd and reverse appliquéd, and hand quilted. Collection of the Shelburne Museum. Photo courtesy David Gutcheon.

she published her book *The Perfect Patchwork Primer* (Penguin Handbooks, 1974). Beth's then-husband Jeffrey Gutcheon, who died in 2013, studied architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and designed homes and commercial buildings. Like Beth, he made innovative pieced quilts and wrote and taught his methods, which included what he called "Diamond Patchwork." This method imposed flat patterns on a matrix that appeared to be three-dimensional, creating visual tension and ambiguity.

Michael James, who was making quilts full time by 1975, taught quiltmaking across New England. In 1978, he published his first book, *The Quiltmaker's Handbook: A Guide to Design and Construction* (Prentice

Hall). His story is typical of how artists moved from the media in which they had trained—painting, printmaking, ceramics, weaving, graphic design, architecture—to quiltmaking. In the introduction to *The Quiltmaker's Handbook*, Michael James, who studied painting and printmaking in art school, wrote:

"My initial explorations of the medium revolved around the making of countless copies of traditional blocks as well as several small quilts in traditional patterns and finally two large, traditional quilts. Since that 'apprenticeship,' I have concentrated on working my own images, some quite closely related to traditional forms, others less so."

In a 2003 interview conducted by David Lyon for the Smithsonian

Institution's Archives of American Art, Michael James said:

"Amish quilts... had a big influence at the beginning because they were... the first traditional quilts that I looked at that seemed to me to convey the kind of originality and... visual power that I associated with art.... I did incorporate aspects of Amish quilts and... Amish sort of approaches to color and composition in some of my earlier quilts. So I think that was a very important influence and still remains important in the sense that I still admire and draw some amount of inspiration from Amish quilts."

Nancy Crow, who studied ceramics in art school then moved into weaving, made her first quilt in 1970 while waiting for her son to be born. In a

2002 interview with Jean Robertson for the Archives of American Art, Nancy Crow said:

“It took probably till 1976... for me to realize I loved quilting! It was sort of like I had to get my footing in terms of the technique, and then I started to realize that this was the way. I love shape and line, and I wasn't really able to identify that. It was just the beginning of my being able to identify how important those are to me. And in quilts, I could start to lay this down in a much more direct way than weaving. In weaving, you know, you have a shape here, but you have to build it up with the thread going across. With quilting, I could cut the shape and have that whole shape in front of my eyes.”

West Coast inspiration

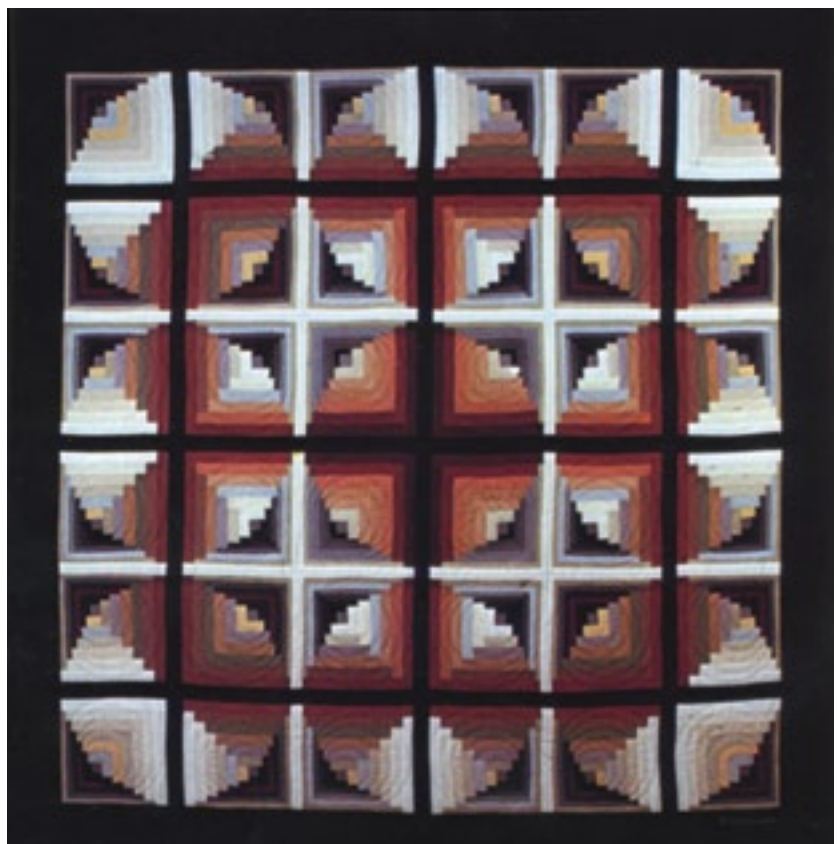
Two of the first and most influential piecework pioneers were graduates of Stanford University and began making quilts for their children. Jean Ray Laury (1928–2011) made her first quilt in 1956 as part of her master's thesis in design, and Radka Donnell (1928–2013) turned from painting to quilts in 1965 when her two daughters were young. Jean Ray Laury made both appliquéd and pieced quilts, but Radka Donnell made only pieced quilts.

Jean Ray Laury's work was extremely influential because it was visually and intellectually accessible and because she published many images and patterns in popular women's magazines in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. Many of her pieced quilts were based on traditional patterns, especially log cabins, but she brought them into the present with design and color concepts drawn from her study of modern art.



Optical Log Cabin, 48 x 48 inches, Jean Ray Laury, Clovis, California, 1978. Cotton, machine pieced and hand quilted. Private collection.

Log Cabin Variation, 73 x 73 inches, Maria McCormick-Snyder, Annapolis, Maryland, 1978. Machine pieced and hand quilted cotton. Private collection.





Bedloe's Island Pavement Quilt, 84 x 76 inches, Michael James, Somerset Village, Massachusetts, 1975. Cottons, woolens and blends; hand and machine pieced and hand quilted. Private collection.

Jean Ray Laury taught widely and recalled her early days as “an exciting time, finding out that there were people who really wanted to know what little I knew.”

Radka Donnell was a maverick from the beginning. She intended her quilts to be functional, and she made them from whatever fabric she had at hand. Unlike most other early artist quiltmakers, she did not rely on a traditional grid structure, a radical departure that Michael James and Nancy Crow would not take until the 1990s. She did not follow patterns but instead pieced intuitively, freely mixing pieces of various sizes and juxtaposing bold prints and vivid solid colors that she found expressive to create overall compositions that conjure moods and elicit strong emotional responses. In her book *Quilts as*

Women's Art: A Quilt Poetics (Gallerie Publications, 1990) she wrote:

“The format of a quilt, sized by its reference to the body, allows me to bring my emotions and body feelings to life size, to create from the body outward, and to focus toward the body through the work of touch necessary to piecing. The intimate connection between my emotions, the materials I use, how I touch them, and how the final product is used—namely, to warm and celebrate others—all this helps me to give my best.”

Another early artist quiltmaker who eschewed the grid structure was Molly Upton. She and her high-school friend and fellow quiltmaker Susan Hoffman were the first quilt artists to be represented by a New York art gallery. The two young women became

friends with Radka Donnell when they were all living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and they collaborated on a 1975 exhibition at Harvard University's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. Works by Molly Upton, Susan Hoffman and Radka Donnell were included in *The New American Quilt* exhibition the following year at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts (now the Museum of Arts and Design) in New York City.

Molly Upton called her work “quilted tapestries.” Because she was not hemmed in by grid structures, her quilts are often suggestively representational, with evocative titles like *Forest Fire*, *Fanfare* and *Portrait Without Mirror*. Her *Watchtower* clearly depicts a largely black-and-white castle-like structure with multiple towers, while her best-known quilt, *Torrid Dwelling*, is a huge and complex pieced picture of a Greek hillside ruin, complete with tiny human figures. Molly Upton committed suicide in 1977 when she was only 23. The 20-plus quilts she completed before her death remain unique and astonishing today.

Art quilting expands

Nancy Halpern, who studied architecture at the Boston Architectural Center, began making quilts in the early 1970s. She soon found herself pressed into teaching. Like her friends and fellow Boston-area artists Rhoda Cohen and Sylvia Einstein, Nancy Halpern's piecework designs are subtle and reductive, suggesting more than they make explicit. She explained:

“From the beginning, my quilts have been inspired by the people, places and things I care about, plus the happy coincidences found in

the colors and patterns of a heap of fabric. Their designs are essences, stripped down and distilled from more complex realities. Their fabrics (begged, bought and stolen) embody and embellish these essences. Their quilting is the calligraphy that tells their stories."

As the 1970s came to an end, Nancy Crow, Françoise Barnes and Virginia Randles co-founded Quilt National, the first ongoing forum for nontraditional quilts. Françoise Barnes recalled, "We were a tiny group of quiltmakers, and we could see the sky was the limit. This was a

totally new art medium that could be pushed and manipulated. We wanted to be accepted as serious artists."

The first Quilt National, exhibited in an unconverted dairy barn, was held in 1979 and included innovative pieced quilts by juror Michael James, Françoise Barnes, Rhoda Cohen, Nancy Crow, Radka Donnell, Beth Gutcheon, Nancy Halpern and Maria McCormick-Snyder. In the decades to come, the tiny group would grow. New artists would help pioneers like these push the boundaries of piece-work into new realms of complexity and creativity. ▼

Robert Shaw, an expert on contemporary and antique quilts, is the author of books such as The Art Quilt, Hawaiian Quilt Masterpieces, Quilts: A Living Tradition and Art Quilts: A Celebration. His most recent book is American Quilts: The Democratic Art, 1780-2007 (Sterling Publishing, 2009). Bob was curator at the Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, Vermont, from 1981-1994, and curator of special exhibitions for Quilts Inc./International Quilt Festival in Houston, Texas, from 1998-2003. He is a dealer in art quilts. His website is www.artofthequilt.com.

Quiltmakers have always created pictorial works. Some of the earliest quilts made in England and the United States were pictorial appliqués that imitated elaborate mordant-dyed and hand-painted Indian palampore bed covers. Appliqué, which lends itself to pictorial work, remains one of the two most common ways of organizing a quilt top to this day. In the 1960s and '70s, pioneering quilt artists experimented with new visual concepts and techniques, revolutionizing the quilt

medium in the process. While a few early quilt artists, including Molly Upton, Rhoda Cohen, Nancy Halpern and Therese May, made pictorial piecework, the majority of artist/quiltmakers who were interested in pictorial imagery pushed traditional appliqué in new directions by bringing contemporary life into their work. Still others trained in studio arts used photo transfer or printed and painted directly on fabric to create entirely new ways of incorporating images into their work.

The godmother of modern pictorial quilting was Jean Ray Laury (1928–2011), who made her first quilt in 1956 as part of her M.F.A. thesis at Stanford University. *Tom's Quilt* was made for her then four-year-old son and featured images of his favorite toys and activities; she later made a similar quilt for her daughter. In her groundbreaking 1970 book *Quilts & Coverlets: A Contemporary Approach*, Jean Laury described it as “based on a patchwork approach [but using] appliqué designs on blocks of all sizes

(previous page) **Tom's Quilt.** Jean Ray Laury. Clovis, California. 1956. Cotton; hand-appliquéd, hand-pieced and hand-quilted. Collection of Tom Laury. Author, designer, and early feminist Jean Ray Laury was arguably the most influential quiltmaker of the second half of the twentieth century and a pioneer of modern pictorial appliqué.

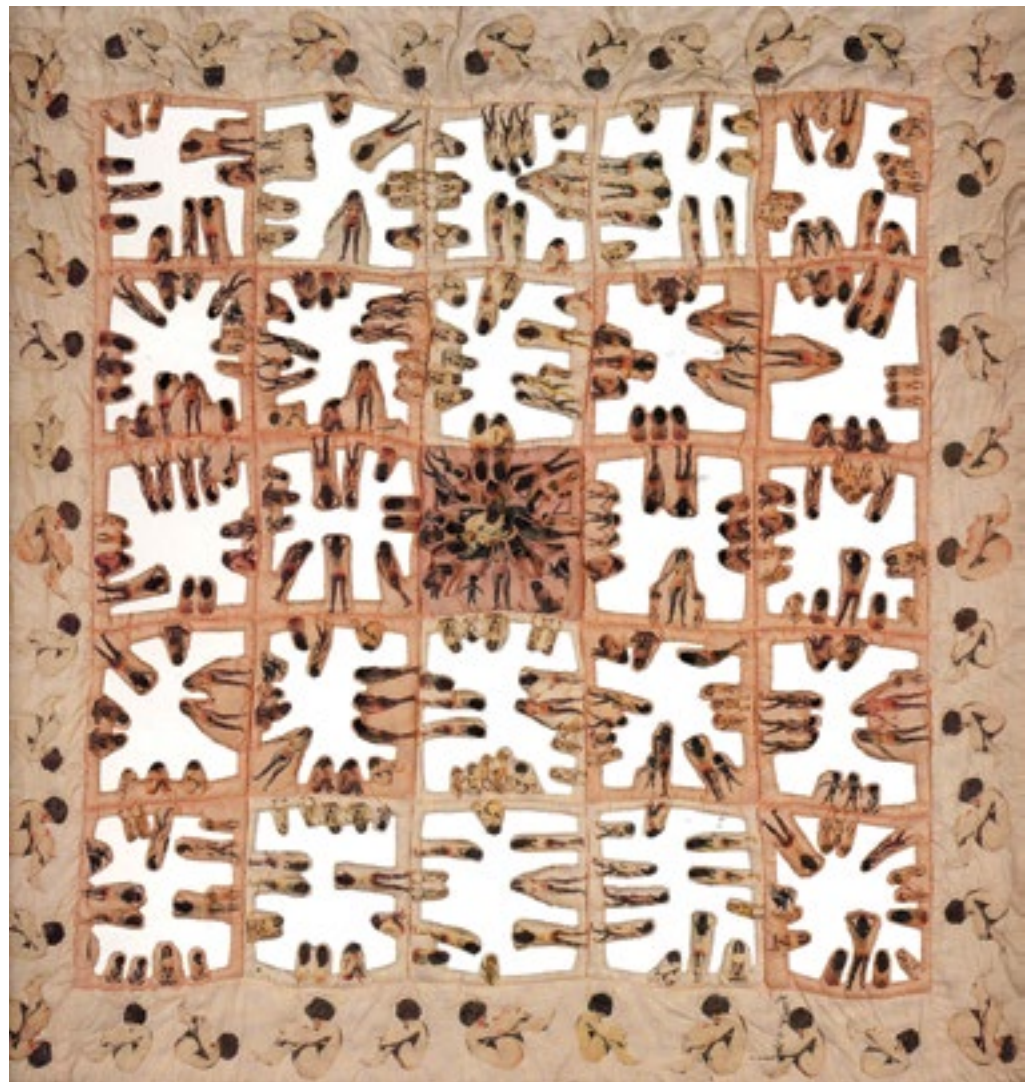
(right) **Therese Quilt.** Therese May. San Jose, California, 1969. Cotton on muslin backing, machine-appliquéd, hand-sewn and hand-tied. 90 x 72 inches. Private collection. This is one of two quilts by Therese May that Jean Laury included in her book *Quilts & Coverlets: A Contemporary Approach*. May is an academically trained painter who began making quilts in the late 1960s. She used a picture of herself as a template for this quilt's 80 blocks, then cut a variety of patterned fabrics into pieces and reassembled them into the fractured portrait blocks, each slightly different.



and shapes." After a showing in a San Francisco art museum, she entered the quilt in the *Eastern States Exposition* in 1958, where it was spotted by Roxa Wright, then the needlework editor of *House Beautiful* magazine. "It was like a fresh breeze," recalled Wright, "the first contemporary quilt I had ever seen that really came off successfully." She contacted Laury and asked her to write for the magazine. Laury's first article appeared in *House Beautiful* in January 1960, and she went on to design dozens of quilts, many of them pictorial appliqués, for Wright's new *Woman's Day* and other magazines for '60s homemakers.

As its title suggests, *Laury's Quilts & Coverlets: A Contemporary Approach* focused on new work and included examples of her own work as well as quilts by such other pioneers as Charles and Rubynelle Counts, Therese May, and M. Joan Lintault. Lintault, who began making quilts in 1965, is, like Jean Laury, a completely original artist whose work is inimitable. She is best known today for her incredibly complex and detailed openwork quilts on nature themes, for which she dyes, prints and paints all of her own images of vegetables, plants, flowers, trees, butterflies, birds, snakes, spiders, bugs and other living things. But before she settled

into creating dense openwork compositions, Joan experimented with a variety of approaches and images. Jean Laury featured Joan's 1966 work *La Chola en La Colcha* (The Woman on the Bed) in *Quilts and Coverlets*, which is an enormous (9 feet, 14 inches tall by 7 feet ½ inch wide) piece that juxtaposes a larger-than-life-sized, stuffed and padded figure on a traditional piecework quilt top. As Laury notes, the quilt uses traditional pieced block designs as a point of departure, and the woman, who wears a patchwork dress, "appears to be both under the quilt and growing out from the surface."



Heavenly Bodies. M. Joan Lintault. Carbondale, Illinois. 1980. Xerox transfers on poly-cottons, machine-pieced and -quilted. 77 x 77 inches. Collection of the Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum, Golden, Colorado. Gift of Marcus and Kristen Lintault. Joan Lintault's "openwork" quilts invite the viewer to look both at and through the piece.

A decade later, two quilts from Joan's *Shroud* series, which features photo-transferred images, were juried into the seminal 1976 exhibition *The New American Quilt* at the Museum of American Craft in New York City (now the Museum of Arts & Design). Her first openwork quilt, *Heavenly Bodies*, was created in 1979 and is made up of 25 blocks of Xerox-transferred photographs of naked women and babies in a variety of poses. The batted and quilted blocks are cut out around the body forms, leaving their centers completely open, and the openwork blocks are surrounded by a wide border punctuated by a repeating image of a child sitting with her arms wrapped around her hunched knees.

Lintault was not the only artist/quiltmaker to experiment with photo transfer as a means of incorporating pictorial imagery in her work. New Hampshire artist Tafi Brown, who studied ceramics in art school, discovered cyanotype, a simple method of using light-sensitive iron to create blue-and-white photographs, while she was building a house in the mid-1970s. Builders have long used iron to create non-fading blueprint duplicates of their drawings, and Brown soon discovered that cyanotypes could be printed on treated fabric as well as on paper. She started to play with cyanotype images printed on cotton and to arrange them in puzzle-like pieced quilts, a method she has continued to explore ever since. She recalls that "long before the advent of personal computers and such programs as Photoshop, I laboriously made Kodalith negatives and positives from my own color slides in my darkroom, mixed my own light-sensitizing chemicals, coated my



The American Wing V. Tafi Brown. Alstead, New Hampshire. 1976. Cyanotype photographic prints on commercial fabrics, machine-pieced and hand-quilted. 99 x 78 inches.

Collection of Beverly Fiske.

Tafi Brown explains: "I made *The American Wing V* for my sister as a visual record of a family project. The 10 cyanotype photographs in this quilt are of my father and brothers building my parent's retirement home. The photos capture the essence of each person and the part they played in the project. That said, when I took each photograph I was conscious of the lighting, I was conscious of how it was composed or framed, because I knew that each individual photograph would form the basis of what would be seen by the viewer, initially, as a simple, graphically strong, repeat pattern."



Artpark View. Gayle Fraas & Duncan Slade. Boothbay, Maine. 1979. Hand-painted dye on cotton, machine- and hand-stitched. 24 x 24 inches.

Private collection.

This small quilt is one of the first examples of what became Gayle Fraas and Duncan Slade's dominant format—a central focal point framed with ornamental elements, painted with fiber reactive dye, and completed with machine and hand quilting. They continue to work this way today.

fabric, exposed the fabric, and made contact-printed cyanotype photographs using only the sun as a source of ultraviolet light and spring water to wash my prints.”

Gayle Fraas and Duncan Slade, who have been making quilts since the mid-1970s, studied painting and screenprinting in art school and then moved to Maine, where they have lived and worked ever since. Unlike most other quilt artists, Fraas and Slade neither piece nor appliqué their work. Instead, they use fiber-reactive dyes to paint detailed realistic images, many of them Maine land and seascapes, on a single piece of cotton broadcloth. Fiber-reactive dyes are widely used in the creation of commercial fabrics, but Fraas and Slade use them differently, dissolving colors in water mixed with a seaweed-derived thickener, which allows them to control the viscosity of the mixture and paint everything a

watercolor painter can achieve, from washes to clean sharp edges. They explain that “an alkaline chemical reaction binds the dye to the fabric; this involves pre-treatment of the fabric, painting and rinsing and repainting two to four times. Each time the fabric is washed, the dye is ‘set,’ allowing us to overlay color for desired effects.” Many of the images that Fraas and Slade paint are framed with what appear to be pieced or printed fabric or dimensional patterns but are actually trompe l’oeil illusions, painted or screen-printed on the same flat piece of broadcloth. One of their first quilts, *42 Boys with the Mona Lisa Smile*, was juried into the aforementioned *New American Quilt* exhibition; in a sly wink to Andy Warhol, it is composed of repeating blocks of the same photo-silkscreened image.

Like Joan Lintault and Fraas and Slade, Nancy Erickson has also made

the natural world the subject of much of her work. But unlike Lintault, Erickson’s focus has been on animals and their relationships with people and the effect we have had on their lives and environment. Erickson earned degrees in zoology and painting, and her fabric constructions, quilts, paintings and drawings all combine those dual interests. She and her husband live in a mountain canyon near Missoula, Montana, where they are surrounded by deer, cougars, bears, rabbits, and other animals.

Her work speaks to the dignity and integrity of individual wild creatures, which she views as our neighbors and equals, and to the problems that human ignorance, arrogance and greed have brought to the natural world and its denizens. But while the themes of her work are serious, Erickson’s images often reflect her own wry sense of humor. “I think humans have gotten a lot of press,



Rabbits Dancing Under Jupiter. Nancy Erickson. Missoula, Montana. 1980. Cotton, velvet, satin, acrylic paint; hand-sewn, appliquéd, quilted, and painted. 43 x 88 inches. Collection of the Museum of Missoula. Nancy Erickson made several “rabbit quilts” in the late ’70s and early ’80s, using her pet bunny as a model. And yes, according to both Erickson and several people who have seen this quilt, wild rabbits do dance on certain occasions.

and so I'm working with animals, who haven't gotten as much," she told the *Missoula Independent*. As a painter, she explains that while "the commonly accepted name now is art quilts, I used to call my pieces 'quilteds' to emphasize my methods. My pieces are painted and stitched as quilts, added to and backed as quilts, but they are really layered, stitched paintings, hence 'quilteds.'"

Humor has also been important to Ed Larson, a Santa Fe-based folk artist, painter and sculptor who works in a shop on Canyon Drive under a handmade entrance sign that reads, "Jesus says buy folk art." Larson started designing what he calls "picture quilts" in the mid-1970s and figures he has "probably done 400 quilt designs" over the years. Because Larson is not a sewer himself, he has always approached quilts as

collaborations and worked closely with quiltmakers who execute his designs. He draws a full-size design on paper, from which the quiltmaker can trace the various pieces needed to make the quilt. Ed's first collaboration, with Missouri quiltmaker Wayne Thomas, resulted in the picture quilt *Daniel Boone Kills a Bear*, and his explanation of how that first quilt happened makes his process clear as well. Larson, who is quite a storyteller, says, "Waynie had three rooms of their small house filled with quilts she had made. I asked her if she would like to sell any of these. 'Oh, no,' she said. 'But I will make you one if you buy the fabric and thread for two quilts. Whatever you want. I'll make one for myself and one for you.' I went to the fabric store in Joplin, Missouri, found the fabrics to match my full-size hand-drawn

pattern, and pinned snips of each fabric to the appropriate patch. She told me to come back in a month. I did and there was this marvelous quilt, tightly quilted, twelve stitches to the inch, and great blind-quilting in the border patches that I had not even considered. I paid her for her work. I honestly can't remember the price. I didn't have much money so it couldn't have been more than \$250. My intention was to pay Wayne 50 percent of what I got for the quilt when it sold. I thought it was a masterpiece."

Unfortunately, Wayne Thomas died in the 1980s, and the quilt was destroyed in a gallery fire in 1987. Among the other quiltmakers Ed has worked with are Fran Soika, with whom he has collaborated on numerous quilts with political themes, and SAQA founder Yvonne Porcella, who crafted Ed's delightful portrait of legendary Negro league baseball pitcher Satchel Paige. ▼

Robert Shaw, an expert on contemporary and antique quilts, is the author of books such as The Art Quilt, Hawaiian Quilt Masterpieces, Quilts: A Living Tradition and Art Quilts: A Celebration. His most recent book is American Quilts: The Democratic Art, 1780-2007 (Sterling Publishing, 2009). Bob was curator at the Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, Vermont, from 1981-1994, and curator of special exhibitions for Quilts Inc./ International Quilt Festival in Houston, Texas, from 1998-2003. He is a dealer in art quilts. His website is www.artofthequilt.com.

Daniel Boone Kills a Bear. Designed by Ed Larson; made by Wayne Thomas. Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Wela Park, Missouri, 1975. Cotton, hand-pieced, hand-appliquéd, hand-quilted, and hand-embroidered, 120 x 120 inches. Destroyed in a gallery fire in 1987. At 10 feet square, this is the largest of Ed Larson's "picture quilts," many of which depict American heroes, myths and events.



You don't need to be a quilt artist to make quilt art

by Robert Shaw

The world of quilts is large, diverse and, in my view, too often compartmentalized into groups that do not seem to intersect or interact. There are traditional quilters, long-arm quilters, art quilters, Japanese quilters, hand quilters, African-American quilters, and dozens of other categories. Rather than focus on differences, however, I think we

would do well to stand back and take a longer, more expansive view.

As a curator, I am far more interested in seeking out what is good, original and authentic than in trying to put objects into mutually exclusive pigeonholes. As a musician with wide-ranging interests, I am always taken aback when someone says, "I don't like jazz, or country, or classical,

or Indian music, or fill in the blank." Really? Are you sure? How do you know? What have you listened to? Duke Ellington, who was insatiably curious about music of all kinds, wisely said, "There are only two kinds of music—good music and the other kind," and I think that approach can be applied to any kind of art or human activity.



Roundness

Emiko Toda Loeb, New York, New York and Tokyo, Japan, ©2011. 83 x 62 inches.

Side 1 (left): Old cotton (aizome), new cotton (includes hand dyed), hand-dyed Indian cotton, new silk. *Side 2 (right):* Old cotton (aizome and kusakizome), new hand-dyed cotton (includes hand painted), commercial cotton. Machine pieced, hand quilted. Collection of the artist.

Roundness is a study in contrasts; side one uses as few colors as possible, while side two employs nearly 80 different colors.



Observatory time, Improved

Joe Cunningham, San Francisco, California, ©2012. 72 x 72 inches. Private collection.

Joe Cunningham describes this quilt as “my take on Man Ray-style lips, with a warning label.” The lips and title come from Ray’s famous 1936 surrealist painting *Observatory Time: The Lovers*, an eight-foot-wide canvas of an enormous pair of red lips floating in a clouded sky, while Joe’s equally surreal label, at lower left, warns that the work is “Not approved for vertical applications,” and “Not to be used with decorative intent.”

As I have argued, quilts are a democratic art form, perhaps THE democratic art form, and people of all stripes—rich and poor, black and white, academically trained and artistically unschooled, rural and urban—have and are making quilts that I believe deserve to be recognized for their aesthetic quality, i.e., their beauty and/or expressive power. And it is these qualities that tie them all together into the story of the quilt.

So, here are introductions to some of the artists whose work and thoughts about quilting I pay closest heed to. Although most of these men and women would not describe themselves as “art quilters,” they are making some of the strongest and most original work being done in the quilt medium today. You probably won’t see their work in *Quilt National* or *Quilt Visions*, but their creations deserve the attention

of anyone seriously interested in the idea that quilts can be art.

Emiko Toda Loeb was born in the ancient city of Kyoto, Japan, and divides her year between her native country and New York City, where she has lived since emigrating to America in 1977 to study piano. Loeb has devised a unique method of making double-sided, “reversible” log cabin quilts, which are her best-known works. Each block in her complex and complementary compositions is made separately, literally piece by piece, and the blocks are not sewn together until all are finished. Each side of each block is different, as are the overall compositions they combine to make up. Her quilts combine Eastern and Western sensibilities, and she often includes pieces of antique Japanese fabric in her blocks, in combination with cloth from the U.S. and other countries

she has visited. She teaches classes in both the U.S. and Japan, traveling back and forth three times a year, and established a quilt group in Japan in 2001 that now includes more than 80 members and presents annual exhibitions in Kyoto and Tokyo.

Joe Cunningham, whose quirky work is equally influenced by traditional quilts and modern art, has been making quilts since the late 1970s, when he met Gwen Marston. She introduced him to hand quilting, which he has studied in depth and still enjoys and employs in his work. He recalls, with typical self-deprecating humor, “I started to sit at the quilt frame with Gwen and quilt. Then I wanted to make my own quilt. Then I had the idea of becoming a professional quiltmaker. You don’t need a license, a diploma, nothing. Just a business card.” He has also spent considerable time in Gee’s Bend, where he sits at quilting frames with local women, several of whom have become close friends.

Cunningham’s pieced quilts usually incorporate bias tape, which he uses to create lines of varying shapes and lengths. He enjoys pushing the



Photo by Stephen Pitkin, Pitkin Studio

Medallion

Loretta Pettway Bennett, Huntsville, Alabama, ©2005. 88 x 63 inches.

Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of the Tinwood Alliance, Atlanta, Georgia.

perceived boundaries between quilts and art. One recent work, which he realized looked like a work of modern art, is titled *Patchwork Quilt* so there would be no mistake, while other works have referenced twentieth-century painters Man Ray and Roy Lichtenstein. He is currently making quilts from paintings that friends have cut up for him—turning around Robert Rauschenberg’s famous combine *Bed*, which the artist made by painting on his bedcovers—including a log cabin quilt.

Slave Ship Henrietta Marie

Michael A. Cummings, New York, New York, ©2007. 120 x 156 inches. Collection of the artist.

An imagined interior view of the *Henrietta Marie* before it was wrecked, its hold crowded with shackled Africans soon to be sold into slavery in Jamaica.



Photo by D. James Dee

Kaleidoscopic XXXV: Service for Eight

Paula Nadelstern, Bronx, New York, ©2012. 49 x 82 inches. Collection of the artist.

Loretta Pettway Bennett is, in my opinion and that of many other observers, the star of the younger generation of quilters from Gee’s Bend, Alabama. The quilts and quilters of the community came to international attention in 2002 when the Houston Museum of Fine Arts presented an exhibition which traveled to other major art museums across the country in following years. Although Bennett’s mother, grandmother and aunts were all

quilters, she did not begin making quilts seriously until she was in her early 40s and her children were grown. Worried that the community’s tradition was dying out, she received a grant from the Alabama State Council on the Arts in 2001 to have her mother teach her the fine points of quilting. A year later, she saw the Gee’s Bend exhibition in Houston and felt challenged to see if she too could make quilts worthy of being hung on museum walls. In



2006, several of her quilts were included in a second national Gee's Bend exhibition, *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*. Bennett pieces her quilts from dresses and other material she buys at thrift shops, and the colors she finds in the shops are often the starting point for her work. At other times, her designs are based on buildings, paintings, or other forms she sees, and colors come later. Whether the colors or the design come first, her spontaneous-looking quilts are not improvised but, rather, carefully planned. She draws studies on paper and then colors the shapes with crayons until they look the way she wants; only then does she begin cutting and sewing pieces of cloth together.

Paula Nadelstern, whose last name translates as needle star, is a native New Yorker who has built an international reputation for her richly colored and patterned fabric designs and her ongoing series of quilts inspired by the bilateral symmetry of kaleidoscopic images. Her unusual block-style appliqué method was informed by necessity; she lives in a two-bedroom Bronx apartment where, for more than 20 years, the only possible workspace was her round, 40-inch kitchen table. "A long-distance view, alternate space, or not making quilts were not options," she explains, "causing me to rely on intricate detail and inherent symmetry, and to invent a pie-slice section that makes the most of limited space." She has long been fascinated by kaleidoscopes, which she collects, and she knows and has exhibited with a number of leading contemporary scope makers. Her *Kaleidoscopic* series, begun in the late 1980s, now numbers 38 quilts, and she is the only contemporary quiltmaker to have had a solo show of her work hosted by the prestigious American Folk Art Museum in New York, which owns one of the country's finest collections of antique American quilts.

Michael Cummings is also based in New York, where he lives in a Harlem brownstone. His narrative pictorial appliqué quilts depict people and images related to his African-American heritage, including jazz men and women; the visionary abolitionist Harriet Tubman; the legendary singer, dancer and civil rights activist Josephine Baker; and the New Orleans missionary and folk artist Sister Gertrude Morgan. Cummings also has made several powerful quilts about the British slave ship *Henrietta Marie*, which



Ram Island, Sheepscot River

Gayle Fraas and Duncan Slade, Boothbay Harbor, Maine, ©2012. 24 x 24 inches. Collection of the artists.

Kells: Magnum Opus

Zena Thorpe. Chatsworth, California. ©2002. 92 x 82 inches. Cottons. Hand appliqué and quilted. The Quilts, Inc. Corporate Collection, Houston.

Photo by Jim Lincoln.





Windows

Jinny Beyer, Great Falls, Virginia, ©2002. 92 x 92 inches. Cottons designed by the artist. Hand pieced and quilted. Collection of the artist.

founded off Key West in 1700, after delivering its cargo: 191 men, women and children who were sold into slavery in Jamaica. Discovered in 1972, the *Henrietta Marie* is the earliest and most studied slave shipwreck in North American waters and has provided substantial information about the realities of the dreaded “Middle Passage,” the second leg of the triangular course that such ships sailed from England and other European countries to the West Coast of Africa and then to the sugar plantations of the New World, with their holds filled with captive, shackled Africans.

Gayle Fraas and Duncan Slade have lived and worked in Boothbay, Maine, a small midcoast resort and fishing town with a beautiful islanded harbor, for nearly 40 years. The couple, who met at art school in Connecticut, trained as painters and printmakers, and their whole-cloth quilts feature hand-painted images of the land and sea that surround them. They paint with fiber-reactive dyes that, instead of sitting on top of the fabric like acrylic or oil paint on

canvas, bind with it. They combine their highly realistic paintings with faux fabric borders or repeated patterns that appear three-dimensional, but are actually painted or printed on the same single piece of cloth as the main image.

In recent years, they also have designed quilts on the computer, using digital technology to reduce the need to paint repeated patterns, and also, on occasion, printing out an entire design directly on cloth. After the composition is complete, they back and batt their quilts, finishing them with hand and machine quilting. They consider a machine-stitched line a “hard” line, while handwork generally serves as a “scrim” to view the painted work through. While they leave some large pieces unframed, they sew most works to stretched linen panels, which they then frame and face with Plexiglas to create an attractive and protective archival “fine art” environment.

Zena Thorpe is an English-born quiltmaker who makes her appliquéd pictorial quilts entirely by hand,

painstakingly cutting and sewing her complex compositions together and focusing on one time-consuming project at a time.

While she did not take up quilt-making until after emigrating to the U.S. in 1967, her quilts typically adhere to the medallion style that English immigrants brought to the United States in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and are made up of images relating to the history of the British Isles. Her *Kells: Magnum Opus*, for example, was based on images from the Book of Kells, an illuminated manuscript produced by Irish monks around 800 AD and generally considered the most beautiful of all early Celtic manuscripts. The calf vellum pages of the original manuscript, which is owned by Trinity College in Dublin and permanently displayed in the College Library, measure approximately 13 x 10 inches and include 10 full-page illustrations. Thorpe took various pictorial elements from the book, including portraits of the apostles Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and put them together in her vastly oversized interpretation of that great work of art. As is typical of her meticulous work, she sewed everything but the binding by hand.

Like Zena Thorpe, Jinny Beyer is renowned for her mastery of hand quilting, though her preferred technique is piecework rather than appliqué. She is also an acclaimed fabric designer who was the first person to create fabric especially for quiltmakers, an influential teacher, and the author of numerous superb books on quilting techniques. Beyer’s quilt *Windows* was made in reaction to the events of 9/11. She explains that she and her husband were scheduled

to leave on a two-week vacation to Italy that day. "Anticipating our trip, I was particularly excited to see the cathedral floors and to gain inspiration for a new quilt. Even though we didn't go to Italy, I was compelled to begin my quilt anyway. I studied a floor plan of Saint Mark's Basilica and selected one of the designs as the inspiration for the central circle. I visualized looking down from the top floors of the towers and the Windows on the World restaurant at the Statue of Liberty standing proudly below. The star in the center and the flags and statues around the outermost

circle represent Liberty's crown. My goal was to have at least one piece for each victim of the attacks. The fabric in the very center is for our neighbor and friend, Barbara Olson, who was in the plane that hit the Pentagon. The quilt contains 4,777 pieces."

This is a necessarily short list. There are many other worthies I could name, including Velda Newman, Terese Agnew, Sharon Schamber, Ted Storm, Diane Gaudynski, and Mary Lee Bendolph. The point here is to keep your eyes open and your mind free of prejudice and to look beyond your own boundaries, over the fence and

out of your comfort zone. You might be surprised at what you discover. ▼

Robert Shaw, an expert on contemporary and antique quilts, is the author of books such as The Art Quilt, Hawaiian Quilt Masterpieces, Quilts: A Living Tradition and Art Quilts: A Celebration. His most recent book is American Quilts: The Democratic Art, 1780-2007 (Sterling Publishing, 2009). Bob was curator at the Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, Vermont, from 1981-1994, and curator of special exhibitions for Quilts Inc./International Quilt Festival in Houston, Texas, from 1998-2003. He is a dealer in art quilts. His website is www.artofthequilt.com.