

# HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ART QUILT MOVEMENT

BY **MARTHA SIELMAN**  
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**A**lthough art quilting draws upon a long history of fiber art, the birth of the Art Quilt Movement is often traced back to a single event. In 1956, Jean Ray Laury created a quilt as part of her master's degree in art at Stanford University. This quilt, titled *Tom's Quilt*, is largely agreed to be the first modern art quilt. It is a quilt designed as art, rather than as a bed covering. Laury began creating a series of quilts designed to be hung on the wall, including *Two Feet* (1959). Her work was spotted by an editor for *House Beautiful* magazine, who hired Laury to write a column for the magazine. These columns and a series of books spread Laury's influence throughout the United States. In 1970, she published *Quilts and Coverlets: A Contemporary Approach*, the first major book on contemporary art quilting. Inclusion in it launched several artists' careers.

One such artist was Therese May, whose works *Bridget Quilt* and *Therese Quilt* were featured in *Quilts and Coverlets*. May developed a method which incorporated projecting photographic slides onto paper and using those images as patterns for fabric. In *Bridget Quilt*, for example, May used a photo of her daughter which was traced onto different fabrics, cut into pieces, and then reassembled into unique portrait blocks.

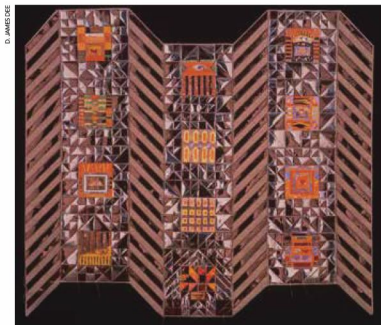
One goal of the art quilt movement in the 1970s was to change the definition of fine art and enter art quilts into that arena. It was a major step in that direction when the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York premiered *Abstract Design in American Quilts*. The exhibition traveled extensively and inspired many of the Art Quilt Movement's early pioneers, such as Michael James who switched from painting to quilting.

In 1975, Molly Upton showed her art quilts alongside the legendary artist Christo in a Boston gallery. Later that year, Upton and Susan Hoffman were the first quiltmakers to be represented by a New York art gallery at the Kornblee Gallery. This exhibition was announced in *Arts Magazine* introducing more of the art world to art quilts.

Nancy Crow, Françoise Barnes, and Virginia Randles organized the first *Quilt National* exhibition at the Dairy Barn in Athens, Ohio, in 1979. The creation of this biennial juried exhibition of contemporary quilt art was a watershed moment. Penny McMorris and Michael Kile coined the term "art quilt" when they organized *The Art Quilt* exhibition in 1986. The exhibition opened at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery and traveled to seven other venues over three years. The exhibition catalog was the first extensive scholarly exposé on the new art form. It declared, "The art quilt has emerged, and it heralds a dramatic and fundamental change in the history of quilts...it is art for walls, not beds, created by artists abandoning media like painting, printmaking, and ceramics



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to express themselves in original designs of cloth and thread."

Art quilts continued to push boundaries. In 1989, Caryl Bryer Fallert-Gentry made headlines when her *Corona* quilt was awarded Best of Show by the American Quilter's Society. *Corona* had been pieced and quilted entirely on a domestic sewing machine, and this was the first major award given to a quilt that was not hand quilted.

In 1989, Yvonne Porcella organized approximately 50 quilt artists to found Studio Art Quilt Associates, Inc. (SAQA) as a professional organization for the growing Art Quilt Movement. The Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum, National Quilt Museum, Virginia Quilt Museum, La Conner Quilt Museum, and International Quilt Study Center were all founded in quick succession in the 1990s. Their existence now provides quilters with a place to

show their work, and the public with the chance to view both traditional and art quilts in an appropriate setting.

As artists continued to experiment with materials and techniques, the definition of the art quilt expanded. Patricia Malarcher turned heads with her use of metallized Mylar, such as in *Iconostasis* from 1996. Malarcher added color to her Mylar quilts with the addition of thread, paint, and other fabrics. Meanwhile on the West Coast, Joan Schulze was beginning to experiment with a variety of quilting techniques. Schulze's early work was based on pieced graphic designs, but over time it developed into a collage aesthetic using alternative photographic processes like Xerox transfer, such as is seen in *Thirteen Bowls*.

The Art Quilt Movement continued to expand in new directions, sometimes at odds with the strict boundaries and rules that defined quilt shows. In 2004, Hollis Chatelain's *Precious Water* won Best of Show at the *International Quilt*

OPPOSITE PAGE:  
Caryl Bryer Fallert-Gentry, *Solar Eclipse*; 1989; cotton, dye; hand dyed and painted, machine pieced and quilted; 94 x 76 in.

THIS PAGE  
TOP: Wen Redmond, *Leaping Point*; 2010; inkjet prepared cotton canvas, dyed perle cotton, UV medium, paint; digitally printed, stitched, hand tied bookbinding method using dyed perle cotton; 32 x 51 in.

BOTTOM:  
Patricia Malarcher, *Iconostasis*; 1996; Mylar, fabric, painted canvas; hand and machine stitched; 54 x 60 in.



*Festival* in Houston. The fact that Chatelain had painted the surface of her quilt, rather than creating pieced or appliqué designs, caused tremendous controversy in the community. People said, "It's very lovely, but it isn't a quilt." It was the first time that the Best of Show quilt was featured above the fold on the front page of the *Houston Chronicle*.

More recently, SAQA has revised its definition of the art quilt to include anything "that is layered and stitched or that references this form of layered and stitched structure." This has allowed the definition of the art quilt to expand to include 3D sculptural works. One such piece is Kate Crossley's *Box of Delights*, a nod to 16<sup>th</sup> century curiosity cabinets. The cabinet itself is made of foam board, card, and papier mâché overlaid with stitched and quilted fabric. It contains found, altered, and made objects (including hundreds of tiny glass bottles) and is embellished with machine-embroidered leaves, vines, charms, beads, and butterflies. Another is *Home is Where the Army Sends Us* by Kristin LaFlamme, which brings together images of home and family within a shopping cart.

As interest in sculptural quilts has grown, so has the size of sculptural fiber installations. One example of this is Ezter Bornemisza's *March*, an installation made in 2012 which filled a gallery with rows of six-foot-tall textile sculptures. Artists have begun experimenting with digital processes and techniques. The advent of the smartphone and its ever-present digital camera has changed the way artists of all mediums approach their art. Artists such as Wen Redmond (*Leaping Point*) and Jennifer Day (*Tibetan Treasure*) use digital imagery to create their work. Along with this trend towards the digitization of the art quilt, there has been a movement in the other direction, with artists, such as Sharon McCartney in *Oasis*, embracing "slow stitching," working by hand. Hand sewing is now being hailed as a form of meditation, a remedy against the fast pace of modern life.



TOP: Michael James, *Allegory*; 2016; cotton, sateen, dye; pieced, digitally developed and printed fabrics; 36 x 48.5 in.

BOTTOM: Joan Schulze, *Thirteen Bowls*; 2002; silk, cotton, paper; direct printed on silk by photocopy process, appliqué, machine quilted; 21 x 24 in.



THANOS BAKIC



TOP: Jennifer Day, **Tibetan Treasure**, 2014; artist's photograph on fabric, thread; digitally printed, intensely covered in thread, free-motion quilted; 39 x 27 in.

BOTTOM: Esther Bornemisza, **March**, 2012; sketch paper, newspaper, paint, dust, nets, cotton, copper pipes, pipe insulation, brick; dyed, painted, glued; each 72 x 40 x 4 in.

around the world. They will be shown in more than 20 museums, as well as in municipal buildings, libraries, art centers, galleries, and major festivals.

The Art Quilt Movement was built by individuals who were passionate about their art and fought for its place in the art world. In the next 50 years, artists will further their legacy by continuing to experiment, redefine, and advocate for the art quilt.

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The many directions that the Art Quilt Movement has taken are exciting. From abstract and geometric designs to representational photorealism and everywhere in between. From the bed to the wall, to the pedestal, wire form, and steel beam, the art quilt and its definition have expanded beyond measure. Whether quilts are made stitch by slow hand stitch or on an industrial-type longarm quilting machine, this art movement has grown far beyond its beginnings. It's impossible to predict what the future will bring, but one thing is for sure: the recognition of art quilts as art has been steadily growing. In 2019, SAQA is mounting 16 global traveling exhibitions and 21 regional traveling exhibitions of art quilts to 11 countries