

## NEWSLETTER

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## QUILTS AND ART: VALUE SYSTEMS IN CONFLICT

Lorre M. Weidlich

*What's art and what isn't? And: Who's an artist and who isn't? The questions trouble all areas of creative endeavor, quilts included. In the 1970s when quilts moved to museum and gallery walls and collectors' homes, and an "art quilt" movement began, the questions became particularly significant. In this article, Lorre Weidlich explores some aspects of the issue, particularly as it relates to our perceptions of quilts made today. – The Quilt Journal Editor's Note*

*Art worlds consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art . . . Art worlds typically devote considerable attention to trying to decide what is and isn't art, what is and isn't their kind of art, and who is and isn't an artist; by observing how an art world makes those distinctions rather than trying to make them ourselves we can understand much of what goes on in that world. – Howard S. Becker, Art Worlds*

It has been three years since Michael James' keynote address to the American Quilters Society Quilt Show and Contest Awards Banquet, and its subsequent publication in *American Quilter*.<sup>1</sup> As any reader of *American Quilter*, attendee at the banquet, or follower of James' career in the quilt world knows, his comments were controversial, as they often are. A proponent of the "quilts as art" school, James' statement that "much of what's being made today and passed off as 'quilt art' is anything but"<sup>2</sup> aroused the animosity of many of those listening to the speech, and led to a series of follow-up letters, pro and con, in *American Quilter*.<sup>3</sup> The controversy over his speech, and over his previous speeches,<sup>4</sup> suggests that the issue of "quilts as art" somehow taps into a level of importance for quilters much deeper than

whether one individual man approves of their quilts. It reflects a conflict of values, and aspirations raised only to be frustrated.

### The Developing Relationship

The history of the current quilt revival is to a large extent the history of the exploration of the question, what is the relationship between quilts and art? The quilts initially welcomed by the art world were those produced without the input or blessing of the art world, but which fit into the paradigm popular in the art world at the time. "It was not until certain developments had taken place in cultural history that these objects (quilts) would be called back from the kitchen, workshop, and rural home for general consideration."<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Holstein's explanation of the ways in which quilts express the design concepts of contemporary, geometrically-based art are sufficiently well known that they need no summarizing here.<sup>6</sup>

The art world embraced quilts. Part of the embrace, however, was a two-way naiveté. Not only were the quilters who made these quilts unaware of the standards of the art world, the art world was equally unaware of the aesthetic standards of quilting.

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## MEMBERSHIP SURVEY RESULTS

Cathy Rasmussen

It really is true – everyone hates to fill out survey forms, and the tally of the SAQA survey bears this out. Only half of one percent responded to the survey while a 1 to 2 percent response is the average. A targeted market such as this one should have had a 3 percent response rate. I was very disappointed in the numbers, but the suggestions and comments were quite helpful, so it's quality over quantity. My sincerest thanks to all of you who did respond. The following is an overview:

- Respondent has been a SAQA member for approximately 2 years.
- You are primarily interested in newsletter articles dealing with professional development and practical "how-to" information.

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## PORTFOLIO ROTATION

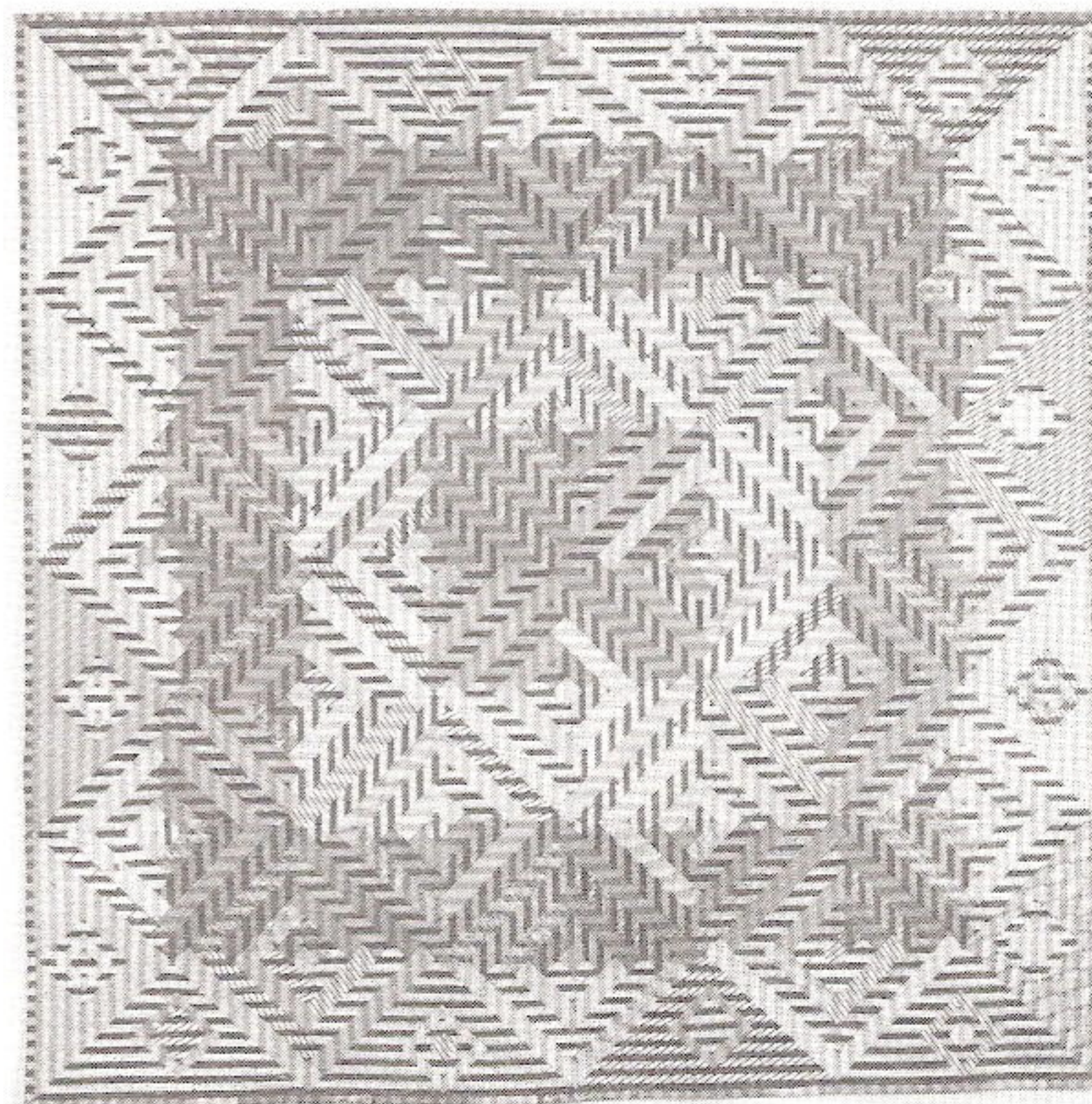
The purpose of the portfolio rotation is to acquaint allied art professionals with the art quilt medium and the depth and range of contemporary quilt and quilt-related artworks available for exhibition and publication. This service, which is limited to the professional artist member membership category, distributes full-color portfolios of member's works to galleries, museums, collectors, and writers.

Many of you who attended IDIA were able to see how wonderful and professional looking this package is. The incredible array of work compiled in this folder impresses everyone who sees it. It is probably the best form of advertising we have as a group and one of the most economical ways for you to reach a large audience. If you have been reluctant to move up to the professional artist member category because of the cost, this alone would be an incentive.

The portfolio has been rotated by Dee Danley-Brown in the past and she has done a wonderful job in keeping the material current and has sent the portfolio out to an incredible number of sources. She has now "retired" from this position and passed the baton to Dominie Nash and Michele Vernon. They are anxious to receive your suggestions as to where to send future portfolios. Contact them in care of Dominie Nash, 8612 Rayburn Road, Bethesda, MD 20817, (202) 722-1407.

This quarter a portfolio was sent to the following:

Sally Kaestle Dunn, Memphis, TN  
Jennifer Sowman, Perkins & Will, New York, NY  
Maude Kerns Art Center, Eugene, OR  
Urban Institute for Contemporary Art, Grand Rapids, MI  
National Patchwork Association, Norfolk, England



*"Log Cabin Maze," 72" x 72", © Ellen Oppenheimer, 1972.  
A recent acquisition of the Renwick Gallery of the National  
Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.*

## MEMBERSHIP SURVEY RESULTS (continued)

- Professional development and more time to interchange information with peers was requested for future conferences or seminars.
- While the conference or seminar topic was paramount in deciding to attend future events, cost and distance still weighed heavily in the decision.
- The majority were interested in holding a SAQA conference in conjunction with another event to reduce costs as well as "spare" time allotment.
- Almost everyone agreed the calendar section of the newsletter is not necessary as this information is available in so many other publications.

Several people made the wonderful suggestion of having a column which would highlight a particular juried show, exhibition, contest, etc., and give the pros and cons of entering, pertinent anecdotal information (i.e., horror stories), and other relevant tidbits. Many of our new members don't have any idea which show is better than another or why they should be submitting work here and not there.

If anyone is interested in sharing her/his experiences with us or has any suggestions, please contact Cathy Rasmussen. I would be delighted if one person would take this on as a column, but if not, we could do it on a rotating basis and it would not have to be limited to exhibitions or shows but could include any professional experience (or nightmare) you have had and feel the information would be beneficial to our members.



## MEMBERS' NEWS

Cathy Rasmussen

- Thanks to all who responded about the "Tactile Architecture '96" exhibition, which will be held in Houston this year. The following additional members are included: Sue Holderway-Heys, Doris Finch, Jeannette DeNicholis Meyer, Elizabeth Hendricks, Michele Duell, Eliza Brewster, Nancy Forrest, Judy House, and Cathy Kleeman.
- Rebecca Rohrkaste had her works exhibited by ThimbleCreek Gallery in Walnut Creek, California, in February and March.
- Bonnie Peterson-Tucker has a piece included in "Calendar Girls: An Invitational Exhibit of Art Quilts from the Midwest" which will have its first venue at Quilt America! in Indianapolis, Indiana, May 30 to June 2, 1996. The exhibition is co-curated by Laura Wasilowski and includes Laura and Bonnie's work along with 18 other artists.
- Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi will have her work included in "Spirit of the Cloth: African-American Story Quilts" which will be at The Wadsworth Atheneum from March 17 to August 4, 1996.
- Linda MacDonald had her work on exhibit at the City Art Gallery in San Francisco from March 11-29.
- Susan Carlson and Debra Kam are part of the "Renegades Contemporary Fiber Art 2nd Annual Show" at the Emporium Art Gallery, in Dover, New Hampshire, from June 21 to September 7.
- Katy Widger had her quilt, "Pressure," juried into the national "Sacred Arts XVI All-Media Art Exhibit" in Wheaton, Illinois, and will be exhibited at the Billy Graham Center Museum from March 1-May 31.
- Judith Trager had her new works exhibited in her show, "Plastic Flowers in a Mexican Graveyard" at the River Road Unitarian Church Gallery in Bethesda, Maryland, during the month of January.
- My apologies to Malka Dubrawsky for omitting her inclusion in "The Art Quilt" exhibition in Rochester as well as her honorable mention in the upcoming FAVA show. Apologies to Violet Cavazos and Stephanie Randall Cooper for not including their work in the FAVA exhibition listing of members in the last newsletter.
- Nancy Erickson and Dana Boussard have an exhibit entitled "Quilted Paintings and Fiber Constructions (and Drawings)" at The Sutton West Gallery, 121 West Broadway, Missoula, MT 59802, from June 7 to July 3, 1996. See photographs on page 4.
- Sandra Sider's telephone number has been changed to (718) 390-7473. Her FAX number is (718) 543-9153.

## REGIONAL UPDATES

### Northwest

Wendy Huhn reports she and Gretchen Echols will have work in "Shoes, Hats, and Gloves" at the Washington State Convention Center in Seattle from April 1 to June 27. Melissa Holzinger and Wendy will have two shows together, one at the Kudos Gallery in Eugene, Oregon, during March and at the Metropolis Gallery in Seattle during April.

Quinn Zander Corum had a piece in "Merged Realities: A Synthesis of Art and Science" at the Central Arts Collective in Tuscon during February.

SAQA members Rachel Brumer, Erika Carter, Gerry Chase, Stephanie Cooper, Gretchen Echols, Elizabeth Hendricks, Ann Johnston, Jean Lutschwager, Karen Perrine, Janet Steadman, Sally Sellers, and Karen Soma, all had work in the "3rd Northwest Contemporary Quilt Invitational."

Linda Steider was included in "Spring Fever," a mixed media show at the Columbia Art Gallery in Washington during February.

Nancy Erickson's work "The Gathering" has been accepted into "Improvisations '96" at The Gallery at Studio B in Lancaster, Ohio, from May 25 to July 6. This exhibition is held in conjunction with the Quilt Surface Design Symposium in Columbus.

Stephanie Cooper had a solo exhibition entitled "Growing Pains" at Gallery One in Yelm Washington during March and April. She will lecture on "Art Quilts: Who Makes Them, How and Why" at the Seattle Center on July 29, 1996.

Nancy Forrest has been commissioned by the Bellevue Art Museum to produce an art quilt to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Pacific Northwest Arts Fair, July, 1996.

### New York

Marilyn Henrion reports "Five Perspective: American Art Quilts in Moscow" were on display at the All-Russia Museum of Decorative & Applied Art in Moscow from April 1 to April 13, 1996. The five artists selected to participate in the exhibition are SAQA members Marilyn Henrion, Patricia Malarcher, Joy Saville, Robin Schwalb, and Yvonne Forman. Supported by a grant from the ArtsLink Partnership, they visited Russia for two weeks in conjunction with the exhibition. Marilyn also had a solo exhibition at the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, DC, from January to March 1, 1996.

Paula Nadelstern and other members of the Manhattan Quilter's Guild have their work on display at the Museum of the American Quilter's Society in Paducah, Kentucky, from January 6 to May 11, 1996, in an exhibition entitled, "Broadway Haiku."

### Central New York (new group)

Mary Ann Scarborough is the contact person for this new SAQA group that meets in Geneva, New York. Members are from the surrounding areas of Syracuse, Ithaca, and Rochester. The group gathers monthly to discuss résumés, artist statements, good shows, jurors, etc., and a show and tell. Mary Ann had her work, "Blue ZigZag," included in the "Traditional Materials/New Expressions" exhibition at the Braithwaite Fine Arts Gallery in Cedar City, Utah, during April.



## TEACHER'S REGISTRY

The purpose of the teacher's registry is to serve as a clearinghouse for guilds, organizations, or agencies looking for workshop teachers, lecturers, or symposia leaders. Sandra Townsend Donabed has been busily maintaining the registry for quite some time now and has done a great job in providing this service to the members.

She recently advertised the list of teachers belonging to SAQA through the free listings available from *Quilter's Newsletter* and *Fiberarts* and received about 25 requests for lists. As of last fall she has gone "on-line" and has sent out the list to program chairs and festival organizers all over the country - about 50 copies - and receives more requests every time she posts the information.

This is an incredible resource for anyone looking to find an appropriate teacher or speaker for an event. Recommend it to your local museums, historical societies, galleries, universities, and adult education courses as all of these institutions need to locate speakers at some point. If we work this as a group, the yield is greater for all of us.

Send Sandra a copy of your personal publicity brochure or a statement with the following types of information: name, address, telephone, FAX, e-mail address, areas of expertise, your experience, credentials, availability, travel limitations, fees, class-size restrictions, arrangements for supplies and equipment, or any other information which would affect your contractual obligations. A copy of your current résumé would be helpful as well.

Sandra can be reached at 130 Washington Street, Wellesley Hills, MA 02181, (617) 237-6390, e-mail SDonabed@aol.com. Please let Sandra know if you receive any teaching or speaking positions as a result of the list. Nobody enjoys working in a vacuum so she does need to get your feedback to see if the system is functioning properly and also to share your good fortune!



"Another Door Opens," 40.5"x 54.5",  
© Nancy Erickson

## SAQA HEADS TO HOUSTON

If you ever thought about heading to Houston, Texas, for the annual International Quilt Festival, this is the year to make your plans for attending. Studio Art Quilt Associates is delighted to announce we will be hosting a one-day professional development seminar at the Festival this year.

The International Quilt Festival opens on the evening of Wednesday, November 6, and runs through Sunday, November 10. The SAQA seminar will take place on Monday, November 11, 1996, at the Hyatt, the Festival headquarters hotel in Houston.

The seminar will explore timely and relevant topics which are of the utmost concern to the membership. It will allow ample time for communication and discussion among the attendees since this seems to be the most frequent request. Many of you felt the professional development sessions at Arrowmont were the highlight of the weekend and were sorry there wasn't more time for interchange among your peers. Hopefully, this seminar will rectify that concern.

The Festival always has an incredible amount of quality exhibitions, and we are proud to say "DIVERSITY!" will be included among them this year. The possibility of a satellite exhibition is currently being explored so we will keep you posted.

More detailed information about the seminar will be available shortly and will include registration and housing information as well. Mark your calendar!



"The Bird Dropped an Orchid at My Feet,"  
© Dana Boussard



## HANGING BY A THREAD

SAQA member Darcy Falk is currently working with Northern Arizona University Art Museum and Galleries to plan "Hanging by a Thread," a juried art quilt exhibit scheduled for the summer of 1997, in Flagstaff, Arizona.

Dr. Joel Eide will jury the exhibit. He has curated some 12 exhibits per year for the past twenty years, including traveling exhibitions from New Zealand, Korea (in cooperation with the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, Korea), Japan, and Russia. Dr. Eide has been a juror for numerous exhibitions including the Texas Craft Exhibition, Arizona Clay, and New Mexico Craftsmen. He earned his professorship in 1982 and in 1992 was named Arizona Museum Educator of the Year.

For the purpose of the exhibit, a quilt will be defined as a layered composition, leaving the final object's "quiltiness" up to the artist. Both two-dimensional and three-dimensional work will be accepted. Artists from outside the United States are also encouraged to submit work.

The deadline to receive slides is March 17, 1997. The exhibit will run from June 12 to August 17, 1997. Flagstaff is a gateway to the Grand Canyon and receives visitors from all over the world, many of them in the summer months. The city is also home to the Flagstaff Festival of the Arts, with summer performances and exhibits attracting numerous art lovers.

For more information, contact Northern Arizona University Art Museum and Galleries, (520) 523-3471 or (520) 523-1424 FAX.

For a prospectus, send a SASE to:

HANGING BY A THREAD  
NAU Art Museum and Galleries  
P. O. Box 6021  
Flagstaff, AZ 86011-6021

## VISUAL AIDS FOR QUILTERS

Marilyn Henrion recommends these sources for postcards and slides:

- Modern Postcards, (800) 959-8365. They are the cheapest postcards around, 500 for \$95. The service is very good.
- Fuji Tricolor Factory Outlet, (800) 283-3686. They provide good quality duplicate slides for \$.29 each regardless of the number.

## FORMER SHELBURNE CURATOR AUTHORS NEW BOOK

Robert Shaw, the former curator of the Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, Vermont, and author of *Quilts: A Living Tradition*, is writing a new book devoted entirely to art quilts. Like *Quilts: A Living Tradition*, this new book will be a beautifully produced large-format coffee table art book with 300 color photographs. Shaw says the text will be "scholarly but engaging" and will trace the history and development of the quilt as art.

He is seeking archival material about the art quilt movement, such as newspaper or magazine articles, exhibition catalogues, etc. He also welcomes SAQA members to share their memories of their early influences and connections, as well as information and opinions about people who have made important contributions to the field. He is especially interested in information and opinions about the origins of the art quilt and pioneer artists who helped shape the movement.

Please write to him at Box 21, Shelburne, VT 05482. The book will be written this summer, so time is of the essence. If you have any questions, he can be reached weekdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at (802) 985-8841.

### WANTED!

Cathy Rasmussen

- Factual accounts of appraisal experiences, that is, your problems in locating someone to appraise your work, requests from festival and show organizers for an appraisal, the fees for the appraisals, differences in opinions over the outcome of the appraisal, etc. Would you be interested in a symposium on this topic?
- The next SAQA juried exhibition will be held in 2000 to celebrate the new millennium. The success of such an event depends on the volunteers involved. If you would be interested in working on the exhibition in any capacity, such as, slide coordination, promotional materials, rules and entry forms, etc., please contact me and I promise I will find you a job!
- Submission of articles for the newsletter is greatly encouraged. Please let me hear from you as I would be very interested to see what topics you prefer. If you come across any articles from other publications you feel are noteworthy, please send them along and we will get permission to reprint them.
- To coincide with the SAQA seminar at the International Quilt Festival in Houston this year, we would like to do a fundraiser. This could lead up to the event and culminate at the seminar. I welcome your suggestions but prefer your experiences as to what has worked for your group and what has not and why. In addition, I would be looking for volunteers for this project as well.



# INTRODUCTIONS

*The announcement of Cathy Rasmussen as the executive director of Studio Art Quilt Associates was well received at the IDIA '95 Conference. Her enthusiasm is contagious and we are delighted, and most fortunate, to have her as part of the SAQA team.*



Let me just get it right out in the open from the beginning – I don't quilt, I never have, and I probably never will. The appreciation of such work has always been my role rather than that of an actual creator. Then how did I get involved with all of this, you must be asking. As many situations in life, quite by accident.

I had been interested in American folk art for many years and had started to collect pieces that appealed to me in some quirky way. My true love, folk painting, was out of my price range so I was drawn towards the visual appeal of antique quilts as well as their buyer-friendly prices. Once you've started to collect something you find yourself reading everything there is about that subject. You start attending all of the antique shows, frequent dealers establishments, and check the tag sale listings. I was hooked.

At the time, this was a welcome relief from the pressures of my position in corporate America. I worked in the business affairs department at Paramount Pictures and then moved to RCA Records when I received an offer I couldn't refuse. (Interesting footnote – neither of these companies exist anymore as is.) My hobby kept me sane and provided the outlet I needed after sixty-hour weeks, eating Chinese take-out at my desk, and missing my stop on the train because I fell asleep. I knew I was in trouble when I started to look forward to getting up at dawn on a weekend to hit an auction and was in a coma-like state come Monday morning when the alarm went off.

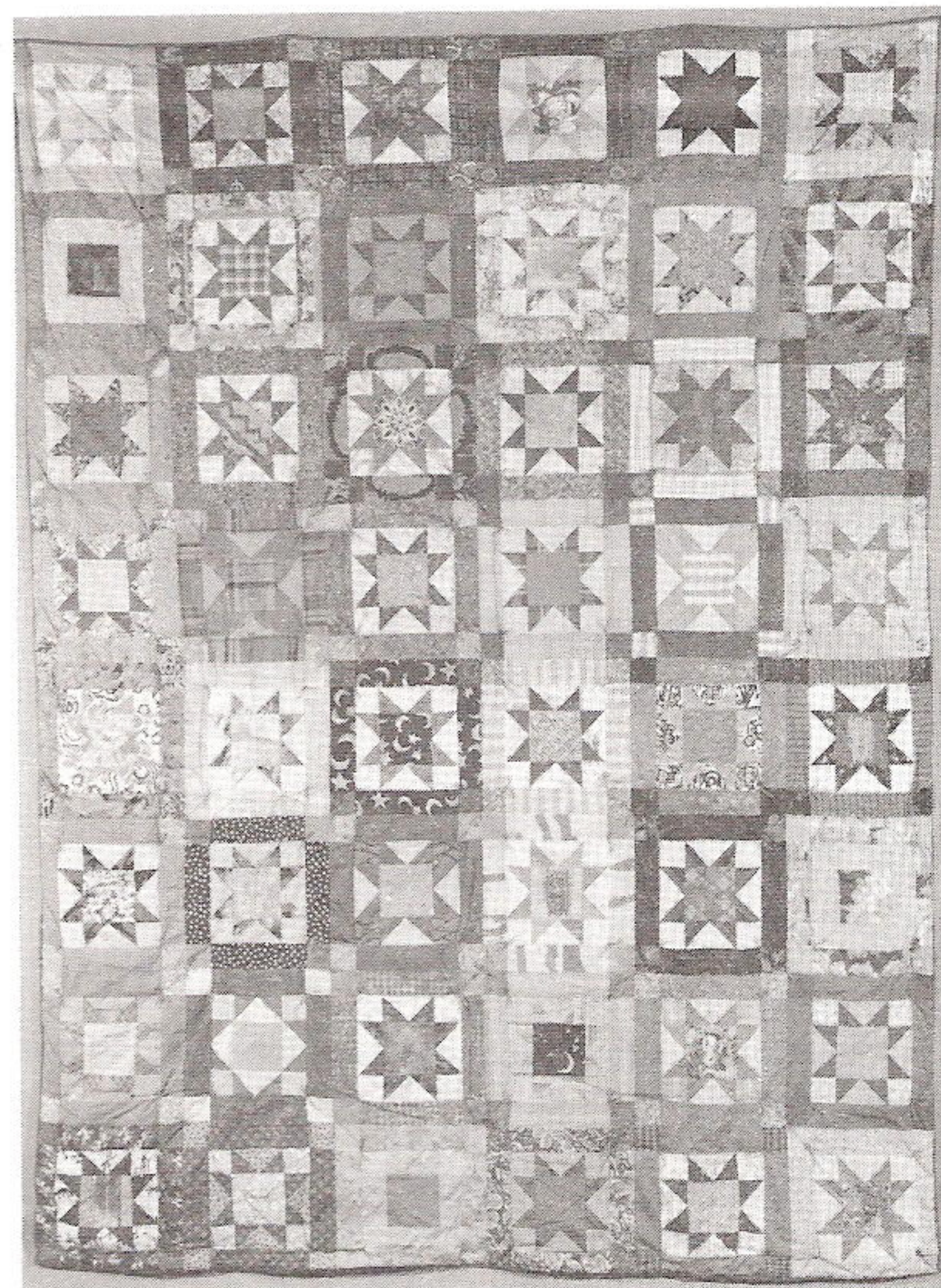
The Museum of American Folk Art offers courses in folk art studies so I signed up to find out more about the "stuff" I was collecting and especially about quilts. It was great fun and I met a lot of wonderful people there, people who were interested in the same thing I was! About this time, RCA was fading fast as the parent company, General Electric, wanted to sell and that meant lay-offs in order to make the company "lean" and more appealing to a buyer. My position was safe (this is a relative term) although half of my department would have to go and the workload would remain the same. I saw the handwriting on the wall and volunteered to take the package myself and I haven't looked back since.

I enrolled full-time in the folk art studies program at the museum which I thought would be a productive thing to do while I decided what to do with the rest of my life. Providence intervened in the form of Bob Bishop, the former director of the Museum of American Folk Art. He knew of my interest in quilts as well as my business background so he asked if I would consider becoming the director of the second Great American Quilt Festival. It sounded good to me so I thought I would give it a try.

This was a huge undertaking, but one I thoroughly enjoyed. The preparation for each festival was incredible, but I will never forget the great joy in seeing it all come together which was usually just before the doors opened to the public. It was a very ambitious effort for such a small museum, but it seemed worthwhile when we saw the finished project and had the opportunity to meet the nicest people. It was great fun while it lasted, but

after the fourth festival in 1993 the museum felt the expense of producing such an event in New York City was becoming too costly and had to access the risk involved. Unfortunately, I found myself out of a job by December of that year.

When I was working on the exhibitions for the festivals, I found while I still appreciated antique quilts, I felt myself drawn more and more to the contemporary quilts I was seeing from various contests and exhibitions as I traveled around the country. I quickly discerned the difference between contemporary and art quilts and discovered I had a new area of interest. Enter Yvonne Porcella – the Bob Bishop of the art quilt movement – who asked if I would be interested in working with Studio Art Quilt Associates on its first juried exhibition and upcoming conference at Arrowmont in 1995. It sounded like a perfect match to me, so here I am. It's funny where life leads us!



*This quilt was presented to me when I was seriously ill in December of 1992. Each block was made by friends and acquaintances in the quilting world. It was done in my favorite colors, purple and green, and was meant to be a "healing" quilt and it worked!*

Photo by Gavin Ashworth.



# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Marcia Johnson

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE: USING GOALS TO PLAN FOR SUCCESS

In the last column, strategies were suggested for determining goals, listing, and refining them. Although the job of refining should be an ongoing routine, once you feel you are on track, it is time to use your goals to develop an action plan.

Many artists suffer writer's block at this point, so I advise you just start writing and remind yourself to go back and revise it later. **It is important to commit this plan to paper**, however, if your intention is to succeed. Just as it has been proven that dieters who chart their results reach their goals more successfully than those who don't, I maintain the same strategy works with career planning. Start with a one-year plan; as time and successes gather, move on to a more long-term plan.

Your one-year goals should be broad enough to require a major amount of effort and time in your daily schedule. An example might be to enter three local shows, complete four major works, teach six classes, and establish a mailing list system.

Under each goal, list all the steps you must take in order to accomplish it. This part of the list should be fairly detailed. For example, in order to successfully enter three shows you might have to research venues, request forms, improve packaging for shipping, send out publicity for each event, update your résumé, etc.

In addition to committing this to paper, the second key to success is setting a date for each step. You now know what you want to do and what needs to be done. If you don't decide when, it probably won't get done. Plan for success!

Use reverse timing to put date lines on your activities. For example, if you know a calendar listing for your local paper must be submitted two weeks in advance, determine a date three weeks ahead to write the listing. Jotting these dates and activities into a personal planner or some other type of calendar proves helpful for keeping you informed on a daily basis of what you should be doing.

Always make time each week to go over what you are doing and have already accomplished. Periodically you should refine your plan and get more detailed with each step. Also do some creative thinking about who or what can help you do some of these steps and make sure the plan fits in with the other parts of your life.

Once you've started to operate and think in this kind of manner, you are ready for major long-term planning.

## THE BUSINESS OF ART

*The following ten titles were assembled by Linda St. Clair for the March, 1996 issue of "The Artist's Magazine" for her column "Strictly Business." SAQA Member Margaret Cusack forwarded this information which she felt would be beneficial to all SAQA members. The title of the article is "Art Business By The Book - 10 titles to help answer your legal questions and guide your sales efforts." We only list the titles here for you while the article gives descriptive information of each book.*

- **Business and Legal Forms for Fine Artists**, by Tad Crawford. Allworth Press, (212) 777-8395, 128 pp., softcover, \$14.95.
- **The Visual Artist's Business and Legal Guide**, compiled and edited by Gregory T. Victoroff, Prentice Hall, 310 pp. softcover, \$35.95.
- **How to Get Hung, A Practical Guide for Emerging Artists**, by Molly Barnes with Pat Hilton, Journey Editions, 145 pp., softcover, \$16.95.
- **The Art Business Encyclopedia for Artists, Collectors, Dealers, Galleries, Museums and their Attorneys**, by Leonard DuBoff, Allworth Press, (212) 777-8395, 320 pp., softcover, \$18.95.
- **The Artist's Resource Handbook**, by Daniel Grant, Allworth Press, (212) 777-8395, co-published with the American Council for the Arts, 176 pp., softcover, \$12.95.
- **Marketing & Self Promoting Your Work**, by Maria Piscopo, North Light Books (800) 289-0963, 117 pp., hardcover, \$27.99.
- **Business Letters for Artists**, by M. Stephen Doherty, Watson-Guptill, (908) 363-4511, 128 pp., softcover, \$12.95.
- **Licensing Art & Design, A Professional's Guide for Understanding and Negotiating Licenses and Royalty Agreements**, by Caryn R. Leland, Allworth Press, (212) 777-8395, 112 pp., softcover, \$12.95.
- **Bulletproof News Releases**, by Kay Borden, Franklin Sarrett, (800) 444-2524, softcover, \$16.95.
- **The Artist's Tax Guide and Financial Planner**, by Carla Messman, Lyons & Burford, 271 pp., softcover, \$16.95.



## QUILTS AND ART (continued)

Naiveté, however, did not stop the quilt world from celebrating recognition by the art world, leading to the often quoted observation made by *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*: "It seems to be official now – quilting is indeed an art."<sup>7</sup> "Official" here apparently means, acknowledged by the art world.

What quilter was going to argue with that? Quilters have always cared about aesthetics; recognition of their aesthetic achievements was welcome. During the late 1970's when the current quilt revival was off and running, I heard numerous quilters proclaim quilting an art. Some were rural, older housewives; others were young, urban professionals. Their quilts ranged from highly traditional to extremely innovative for the time. There was no debate about which quilts were art. Everyone was learning together and the manifesto "quilts are art" was their common ground. I also heard the view expressed, "There's room for everybody."

When many people passionately pursue a creative form, and discover they have an audience for it, innovation occurs. Innovation was not new to quilting; quilters have always been innovative within their frameworks. One result of the plethora of state quilt documentation projects has been the discovery of innumerable quilts innovative by the standards of their places and times. Formally-trained artists, seeing a viable form and a supportive community, were attracted to quilting, and brought to it concepts foreign to its traditional milieu. Gradually, a new genre developed – the art quilt. The book, *The Art Quilt*, by Penny McMorris and Michael Kile, was published in 1986, but the term had been in use before then. Quilters began to talk about "the art quilt," but nobody asked – at least publicly – the obvious question: "If these quilts are art, what are the others?" Until then, quilts had been art, period. Now there was a dichotomy: the art quilts and the others. Presumably, "art quilts" were asking to be judged by the standards of the art world as "art" were made by women unfamiliar with, perhaps even unaware of, those definitions.

Michael James' pronouncements about what kinds of quilts constitute "art," in the context of the history of the use of the term in relation to quilts, plunge quilters into an ambiguous, consequently uncomfortable, state. Initially, quilters pursued their chosen form without concern for its label. When it was called "art," they were happy to embrace that label. Then they were told that in fact very little of it was art. They found themselves on one hand no longer artists, and on the other, not yet artists.

It appears now that only two categories of quilts fit the art world idea of art: Quilts can be uninformed by art world aesthetics but accidentally fit those aesthetic parameters and hence be proclaimed art. Or, they can develop highly sophisticated (self-conscious, self-aware, reflective) aesthetics and so attain the status of art according to the standards of the art world. All the quilts in between are not, by art world standards, art. They are no longer craft-accidentally-proclaimed-art nor consciously-attempted-

art-that-succeeded. The first category, of course, ignores the idea of quilts as quilts, as having their own aesthetic standards. The second is more complex because it fuses quilts-as-quilts with art-as-art, aware of both the properties of the quilt and the aesthetics of the art world. In a sense, recognition by the art world largely destroyed the kind of art that the art world recognized. After the Whitney exhibit, women could be dead folk artists or living fine artists, but that category in between – living popular artists – is left in limbo. Quilters had, in effect, been welcomed into the Garden of Eden by Jonathan Holstein, and then ejected from it by Michael James. The striking thing about quilters' brief sojourn in paradise is that both of the gatekeepers were male.

### A Question of Definition

Definition is the core of the issue. Definitions are, by their very nature, arbitrary. A part of life, of reality, of nature, of human experience, is artificially separated from the whole of life, reality, nature, or experience, and given a name. This leads, of course, to endless debate about just where to draw the line between the part and the whole. "Art" is obviously an example of such a definition. Crucial to the issue is, who controls the definition? Those who control the definition control the category, because the awarding of the label itself bestows a certain value. As Howard Becker points out in *Art Worlds*:

*... The title "art" is a resource that is at once indispensable and unnecessary to the producers of the works in question. It is indispensable because, if you believe art is better, more beautiful, and more expressive than nonart, if you therefore intend to make art and want what you make recognized as art so that you can demand the resources and advantages available to art – then you cannot fulfill your plan if the current aesthetic system and those who explicate and apply it deny you the title. It is unnecessary because even if these people do tell you that what you are doing is not art, you can usually do the same work under a different name and with the support of a different cooperative world.<sup>8</sup>*

Quilters, of course, have done and continue to do the same work regardless of the name, but after the proclamation, "quilts are art," their perspective on what they did changed considerably. Unfortunately, it also, on some level, put a woman's expressive form under the control of a male system of definitions.

Definition of art has always been outside women's control. In *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology*, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock trace the historical relationships between definitions of art and women's pursuit of art. The most striking example of the relationship between the two is revealed by their analysis of history painting – historical, mythological and religious painting based on human figures, popular from the Renaissance to the mid-19th century. To successfully create such paintings, it was necessary to master the depiction of the human figure and hence to study anatomy. Women, however, were



excluded from the study of the nude, and hence from doing history painting. They turned instead to landscapes, portraits, and still lifes – all defined as “inferior” forms.<sup>9</sup> Parker and Pollock’s conclusion?

*Control over access to the nude was but an extension of the exercise of power over what meanings were constructed by an art based on the human body . . . (Women had) no power to determine the language of high art. They were therefore excluded from both the tools and the power to give meanings of their own to themselves and their culture.<sup>10</sup>*

Like female artists throughout the history of art, modern quilters have found themselves excluded from the category “art” because of the way it is defined. Some quilters say, yes, I do or attempt to do what Michael James describes; the majority seem to be saying, I don’t fit his definition, but I still consider myself an artist. What is it about his definition that women find violating?

### Women’s Values, Men’s Definitions

One of the groundbreaking works in the field of women’s psychology was Carol Gilligan’s 1982 book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*. In it, Gilligan pointed out that the male model of psychological development had long been considered the norm. Insofar as women deviated from the model, they, rather than the model, were considered problematic.<sup>11</sup> Gilligan, through extensive interviewing, examined the differences between male and female values and concepts of relationship.

The central images in her analysis are those of hierarchy and network or web. Analyzing the moral understanding of a pre-adolescent boy, she finds a “hierarchical ordering, with its imagery of winning and losing”<sup>12</sup> paralleled, in the moral understanding of a same-age girl, by “a network of connection, a web of relationships that is sustained by a process of communication.”<sup>13</sup> She explores, in these terms, male/female differences in concepts of self-definition, autonomy and intimacy, separation and connection, and violence. The differing male/female values uncovered by Gilligan<sup>14</sup> suggest that definitions of art may differ along the same lines.

Let’s look at Michael James’ definition of art. “The growth of the art of the quilt . . . falls on individuals with subversive natures, with idiosyncratic or even radical viewpoints . . . to push it to limits beyond the known and the familiar.”<sup>15</sup> James’ definition of art and the artist is certainly not limited to him, but neither is it absolute, universal, and timeless. It emerged in the Western world roughly two centuries ago. As Parker and Pollock explain,

*The concept of the artist as a creative individual is a modern one. Before the eighteenth century, the term was applied to an artisan or craftsman, on the one hand, or, on the other, to someone who displayed taste . . . The modern definition is the culmination of a long process of economic, social and ideological transformations by which the word “artist” ceased to mean a kind of workman and came to signify a special kind of person with a whole set of distinctive characteristics: artists came to be thought of as*

*strange, different, exotic, imaginative, eccentric, creative, unconventional, alone. A mixture of supposed genetic factors and social roles distinguish the artist from the mass of ordinary mortals, creating new myths, those of the prophet and above all the genius and new social persona, the Bohemian and the pioneer.<sup>16</sup>*

In a similar vein, Becker, discussing the “romantic myth of the artist” says, “Such a belief does not appear in all, or even most, societies; it may be unique to Western European societies, and those influenced by them, since the Renaissance.”<sup>17</sup>

James’ description of the artist emphasizes the idea of the solitary iconoclast who pushes the boundaries, a concept very much in line with Carol Gilligan’s analysis of male self-definition through separation, as opposed to women’s self-definition through connection:

*Thus the images of hierarchy and web inform different modes of assertion and response: the wish to be alone at the top and the consequent fear that others will get too close; the wish to be at the center of connection and the consequent fear of being too far out on the edge. These disparate fears of being stranded and being caught give rise to different portrayals of achievement and affiliation, leading to different modes of action and different ways of assessing the consequences of choice.<sup>18</sup>*

In short, fitting the solitary iconoclast image of the artist is an ideal way for a man to define himself, while it totally violates women’s modes of self-definition. Part of the appeal to women of quilting is the fact that it provides the opportunity for connection. “It’s kind of comforting that there’s this long line of tradition of quilting, that somewhere I’m in there, I’m in that – I don’t know if it’s a line or a big pool. It’s that feeling that you’re part of something . . . It’s wrapped up with family, with companionship, with artistic sensibilities.”<sup>19</sup>

The male, Jamesian model of “quilt art” violates the very qualities that initially attracted women to quilting and reinforced their continuing pursuit of it. It feels, to a great many of them, alien. The imposition of a male model on a women’s expressive form leaves in a position of discomfort the very people who are the life blood of the expressive form. In the art world of quilting, many of these people are the ones recognized by their peers as artists. At conflict is not simply a personal like or dislike of one kind of quilt. Many quilters say today, just as they did during the early 1970’s, “There’s room for everybody.” Rather, the conflict is between two definitions of art, one intrinsic to the world of quilting, the other imposed from outside.

*Dr. Lorre Weidlich is a folklorist who specializes in the analysis of contemporary quilt culture, while moving in that culture as a quilter, designer, teacher, and judge. After obtaining her Ph.D. in 1986 from the University of Texas at Austin, she pursued a non-academic path for several years. Since moving back into scholarship, she has published in *The Quilt Journal* and *American Quilter* and has had quilt-related research accepted for presentation at American Folklore Society meetings. (This article has been reprinted with permission.)*

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# SAQA NEWSLETTER

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The SAQA newsletter is a quarterly publication of the Studio Art Quilt Associates, a non-profit organization founded to promote the importance of the studio art quilt.

To submit information to the newsletter, write Cathy Rasmussen, Executive Director, 1199 East Broadway, Hewlett, NY 11557, 516-374-5924 (telephone and FAX). (Deadlines for information are December 1, March 1, June 1, and September 1.)

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# QUILTS AND ART (continued)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Michael James, "Quilt Art at Century's End," in *American Quilter*, Vol. VIII, No. 3 (Fall, 1992), pp. 52-74.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>3</sup>*American Quilter*, Vol. VIII, No. 4 (Winter, 1992), pp. 60-61 and Vol. IX, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), pp. 60-61.

<sup>4</sup>Lorre M. Weidlich, *Quilting Transformed: An Anthropological Approach to the Quilt Revival*, unpublished dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1986, pp. 58-63.

<sup>5</sup>Jonathan Holstein, *The Pieced Quilt, An American Design Tradition* (Little, Brown & Co.: Boston, 1973), p. 113.

<sup>6</sup>Anyone unfamiliar with his analysis can find it in chapter 6, "The Skilled Hand, The Practiced Eye," of *The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition*.

<sup>7</sup>*Quilters Newsletter*, no. 23 (September, 1971), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup>Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1982), p. 133.

<sup>9</sup>Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1981), pp. 33-35.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>11</sup>Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1982), pp. 5-23.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Jean Baker Miller, in *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), draws similar conclusions; in addition, sociolinguist Deborah Tannen analyzes speech differences between men and women which closely parallel the psychological difference uncovered by Gilligan in *You Just Don't Understand* (William Morrow and Company, Inc.: New York, 1990).

<sup>15</sup>James, op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>16</sup>Parker and Pollock, op. cit., p. 82.

<sup>17</sup>Becker, op. cit., p. 14-15.

<sup>18</sup>Gilligan, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>19</sup>Personal interview with quilter Rebecca Salinger, February 12, 1994. See also my article, "A Folklorist's Thoughts on Quilting," in *American Quilter*, Vol. XI, no. 3 (Fall, 1995), pp. 6-63, in which I analyze quilters' verbal art to reveal its emphasis on relationship and connection. Jane Przybysz observes in "Quilts and Women's Bodies" that "some quilters have used and continue to use quilts . . . to make visible and sharable the enormous, invisible, and undervalued work of caring for and (re) producing human beings and social relations" (Katherine Young, ed., *Bodylore* (University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville, 1993) pp. 172-173.

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