

Which quilt batting will stand the test of time?

by Diane Howell

Inside every quilt is a mystery, an unseen middle layer transformed by stitch into texture. This layer of non-woven fiber is batting. It is used in almost every traditional or art quilt, and is available in a huge variety of materials, such as cotton, wool, bamboo, silk, or polyester.

What do we really know about batting? A definitive third-party study on batting's archival qualities is still to be written. Collectors as well as artists should be concerned about whether battings will stand the test of time, but is an informed decision possible?

Common sense, manufacturers' notes, and conservators' experiences guide today's wisest choices. The experts agree that less is more when selecting a batt with archival properties. In other words, avoid products with resins; instead choose products produced through thermal bonding or needle punching.

One dependable source in this matter is Spicer Art Conservation, which publishes an online journal, *Inside the Conservator's Studio*. In a 2013 column on storage materials, it offered straightforward advice: "Look for polyester needle-punched batting. This batting is formed mechanically by fiber entanglement using barbed needles. The other commonly found battings are made with resins that bond the fibers. The resins have been found to yellow and then can transfer onto artifacts."

Another respected source is the *Conserve O Gram* from the National Park Service. Its frame of reference regarding fabrics also is on storage



SAQA members' favorite batting choices include wool, polyester

It's not a quilt until it's quilted, and that step requires careful selection of a batt. What are SAQA members' go-to choices?

The answer depends on the desired look and function of the piece. Lines such as Quilters Dream, Hobbs Bonded Fibers, The Warm Company, and Winline Textiles offer a wide range of material choices. But a quick poll made it clear that SAQA members have their favorites.

Cotton

Molly Flowers embraces cotton. She likes The Warm Company's Warm & Natural cotton batting, although she has had success with low-loft polyester batting. Maggie Vanderweit chooses Warm & White from the same manufacturer because she finds that it has a nice texture and holds its shape well.

Jane Londerville looks to the world of machine-embroidery stabilizers for her favorite, Battilizer, a cotton-poly blend made by Hoop Sisters. She likes it for wall hangings because it "lies perfectly flat on the wall."

And Linda Syverson Guild uses cotton flannel for batting if her piece has multiple layers.

Wool

A large number of SAQA members are in love with wool batts, with many citing selections from Matilda's Own and Hobbs Tuscany product lines as their favorites.

Jeanne Marklin usually buys Australian-made Matilda's Own because it shows off quilting stitches and doesn't hold creases if it gets folded. Sarah Ann Smith used to use Matilda's Own wool and poly blend batting until she could no longer source that particular batt within the United States. She now uses two layers of batting, Quilters Dream Cotton Request batting on the bottom and Hobbs Tuscany 100% Wool Batting on top.

Kathy Stuart employs a similar combination for whole-cloth quilts with a layer of Hobbs Heirloom Premium 80/20 Cotton Blend on the bottom and a layer of Hobbs wool batting on top. "[This] makes my feathers look like I've done trapunto without all the

work (best cheater wins!). When I'm doing art quilts, I use a layer of felt and then wool on top. Again, I like to make my quilting show and the wool does this."

For her whole-cloth quilts, Jenny K. Lyon chooses Quilters Select wool batting. Donna Deaver uses a wool or a wool-blend batt too. "I roll my quilts when shipping, but if they come back folded, I like that they don't crease. The brand depends on how much loft I want for the piece. However, I do sometimes double the batting."

Karol Kusmaul also uses wool in her art quilts to gain loft and to show off machine quilting, although she sometimes uses a cotton batt backed by felt.

Katherine Reader is new to wool, and appreciates its resiliency. "Friends also say it makes my quilts look like they have more depth." Kay Liggett has been using Hobbs wool batting for over a decade, and has never been disappointed. She finds that any creasing is quickly erased. "I can press out the folds with a steam iron, iron it flatter while I quilt it, and block it like a sweater when I'm done quilting. It's warm, and it has never bearded on my quilts. It will probably outlast most of the cotton tops."

Bamboo

For quilts that will be used and washed, Bev Haring selects Winline Textiles's bamboo batting, although she uses polyesters or other stiff materials for heavily stitched wall quilts, because she finds that they hold their shape better.

Linda Anderson and your author love Winline's bamboo batting because it is thin, lightweight, and easy to work with. I love the look of this drapery batting in all types of quilts.

Felt

Georgia French and Terry Howard Grant are devotees of polyester felt made from recycled plastic bottles. "It is firm but thin and gives a lot of definition while keeping the piece flat and light. On my last quilt, I used two layers. It quilted like a dream and the stitch definition is a major feature of the work," says French.

Grant notes that the felt comes in two weights. "I like the slightly thicker one. I always use only one layer and it is lovely to stitch."

Sue Siefkin uses polyester felt for those reasons plus one more: "Because I like to skip rod pockets and use heavy-duty Velcro to hang my quilts to the rods, I make sure the hook side of Velcro will grab the eco felt backing firmly before buying it."

Polyester felt is sold under various names. Amanda Snavelly usually opts for a premium felt in medium grey. "I like the premium as I don't feel it stretches as much as some others. Then I use SpunFab fusible to fuse my fabric layers to it."

Ginni Fleck uses Kunin Felt, a division of Foss Performance Materials. It is also made from recycled plastic, and has a premium weight, Kunin Eco-fi Plus Premium Felt.

Susan Callahan opts for acrylic felt. "It is super thin, very flat, and stitches [by hand or machine] beautifully. It never beards."

Others

A mix of human-made and natural products fall into this section.

Katharine Ward selects Hobbs Thermore polyester batt because "it lies flat, is very lightweight, and is easy to maneuver through a sewing machine." Margaret Abramshe chooses a fusible batt, Pellon Thermolam Plus (product number TP971F), because it is thin, light, and "stays super flat even with dense quilting."

Cara Feenstra Gulati's favorite batting is Quilters Dream Puff, a polyester batt with good drape. "It's lofty enough to create some lift."

Finally, there is silk batting to consider. Wendy Greber uses it for wall quilts. Candace Hackett Shively uses Quilters Dream Orient, made from silk, bamboo, botanic Tencel™, and cotton. "I love how fluid it is."

More information about battings can be found on manufacturers' websites.

— Diane Howell

and display. The August 2004 issue states that the “most common and cost-effective natural textiles used in museums are unbleached linen and cotton. Reliable synthetic products include polyester, poly-cotton blends, and acrylic felts.” The flyer cautions against using any fiber with a finishing treatment, such as fire retardant, formaldehyde, phosphate, adhesive, resin, or dye, as these “can emit harmful degradation products similar to those found in plastics.”

Naturally, this advice must be applied for use inside a quilt. To ensure stability over the long term requires evaluation of all of the materials that go into an artwork. Every batt has varying qualities, such as loft and source material, that affect the look and feel of a finished piece.

LuAnn Sarr, owner of Utah-based Winline Textiles, finds batting to be the second most important element in a quilt, “more critical than thread, fabric, and final quilting, and it isn’t

even seen,” she says on her website. “All of our battings are made of hand-selected fibers from certified vendors and adhere to the strictest standards of quality—limiting the use of chemical binders, bleaches, and fillers. Our battings are all needle-punched with scrim to give them added strength and durability,” the Winline site notes. It also offers detailed descriptions of batts of every stripe, from cotton to bamboo to silk.

Another manufacturer that takes great care to offer batts with archival

traits is Fibrix, maker of Mountain Mist products. “We recommend staying away from quilt battings that have resin bonding. The chemicals that make up the resins can contain a higher degree of acid that might be harmful long term,” says Linda Pumphrey, senior account executive for Mountain Mist products. “All the Mountain Mist battings are resin-free, which make them safe for archival purposes. Mountain Mist Quality and Quilt-Light Polyester battings are thermal bonded, and Mountain



Overview of Batting Materials

Cotton—Cotton is an all natural and breathable fiber that is most commonly found in quilts. It wears well with age and washing. Conventionally grown cotton takes a lot of fertilizers, pesticides, and bleaches before it reaches the quilter.

Polyester—Using polycarbon fibers allows any number of loft thicknesses and sizes. This batting is lightweight, warm, non-allergenic, doesn’t shrink, and is completely machine washable. It doesn’t breathe as well as natural fibers and has a greater tendency to beard. It is a nonrenewable, petroleum-based product.

Cotton/Polyester blends—Blending these two materials adds loft to the batt while maintaining some of the good qualities of the cotton, including breathability and softness.

Wool—Wool batting is lightweight, warm, breathable, and naturally flame resistant. It needs careful washing and drying to keep from shrinking. It can cause allergic reactions and must be protected from moths and other insects.

Bamboo—Bamboo and bamboo blend batting are fairly new. Bamboo is a highly sustainable plant that needs no chemical fertilizers or pesticides to grow, is breathable like cotton, has minimal shrinkage, contains no bleaches, glues, or binders, and is naturally antibacterial.

Silk—Silk batting is lightweight and thin, yet still warm and breathable with a beautiful drape. It is a good choice for quilted clothing. It must be washed carefully as it shrinks a good deal.



Mist Ultra Fine polyester batting is needle-punched. The brand's 100 percent cotton battings, White Rose and Cream Rose, are needle punched, (giving) them qualities suitable for archival purposes. The White Rose is a purified cotton [that removes] all the natural cotton oils, making it our top recommendation," Pumphrey says. Mountain Mist battings do not use scrim.

Hobbs Bonded Fibers also makes several batts with archival properties. Options include 100 percent cotton, needle-punched batts sold under the company's Heirloom and Tuscany trademarks. The company offers bleached and unbleached options. For those who prefer a wool batting, the Heirloom Wool Batting is recommended for having the finest super-washed wool available since the wool

undergoes a process that smooths the fibrous scales. Hobbs says that this batting resists migration and bearding—the latter often being a problem with wool batts.

If you are a quilt artist who wants to create permanent works of art, consider the archival properties of your battings. As for art quilt collectors, it would be prudent to inquire about the battings used by artists whose quilts catch your eye. ■

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