

Art Quilts in Perspective

When scientists study the evolution of a species, they often examine selected samples of a population and note the changes that occur over the passage of time. I believe that the size, diversity, and longevity of the Quilt National universe makes it an appropriate population to study. By viewing the works in the eleven Quilt Nationals, we see the introduction and development of trends that not only characterize the art quilt of the '90s but are likely harbingers of the art quilts that we'll see in the next millennium.

1. Today's art quilt hasn't developed in a vacuum. Under the influences of history, technology, and the creative environment, art quilts have evolved to form a diverse body of work. These quilts represent the interaction of natural, social and personal history with a multitude of materials and techniques and an endless depth of energy and imagination.

Before Quilt National, the word "quilt" nearly always referred to a particular kind of bed cover -- a fabric sandwich. The layers were held together with thousands of tiny handmade stitches that complemented the design of the pieced or applied top layer. When displayed on a bed, some of the quilt's surface was hidden, which meant that there was little point in creating a single overall image. The quiltmaker's focus, therefore, tended to be on small-scale motifs that could be appreciated regardless of how much -- or how little -- of the surface could be seen.

Then, in the 1970s, something happened that forever changed the nature of the quilt. Formally trained artists discovered an excitement in the exploration of repetitive patterns and in the technique of combining small bits of this and that. They took a new look at the humble, quilted bed cover and began to view layered and stitched fabric as an attractive alternative to traditional art media. They saw endless possibilities in the colors and visual textures of cloth. They saw the stitched line as another source of design. And, perhaps most importantly, they escaped the tyranny of the quiltmaker's rules. They may not have known what a quilt should be, but they certainly knew what a quilt could be.

The result of this creative energy was a small body of work intended for walls rather than beds. It's not surprising that quilt show organizers and traditional quiltmakers felt threatened by these so-called artist-quiltmakers. Some of this work bore little apparent relationship to the warm, familiar creations people expected to see. "These objects aren't quilts!" the viewers announced. "They're art!"

At the same time, tools, and technologies were being developed that had the potential to create previously impossible effects. The new generation of sewing machines, color xerography, and readily available fabric paint and dyes presented challenges to which this new breed of quilt maker responded with gusto.

Nancy Halpern once noted that she and "her kind" were considered mavericks in their

quilt guilds. We are fortunate that the pioneers of the art quilt movement were not deterred by the disapproval of their early creations and that they courageously worked to produce quilts that differed from the familiar and accepted norms. They also encouraged others, by example, to begin creating highly personal and unique works. Undoubtedly one of the most significant trends in the development of this art form is the use of surface design techniques -- techniques that alter the color, pattern, and/or texture of the cloth. While generations of early quiltmakers selected fabrics on the basis of color or pattern, innovative quiltmakers were not content to limit themselves to the fabrics available in their local quilt shops. They wanted something other than a few solid colors and lots of calicoes, and they explored and employed a variety of techniques to create exactly what they needed.

By looking at works from all of the Quilt National exhibitions, we realize that today's quilts merge continuing traditions with new ones. Generations of quiltmakers, including contemporary artists, have taken advantage of differing visual textures of cloth. They have voiced concern for social and personal issues. Added to these traditions are the relatively recent trends of using surface design techniques, of using materials and techniques that weren't available to earlier quiltmakers, of creating works for walls that may not be rectangular and may not even be solid, of manipulating the surface with something other than hand created stitches, and of producing images that may or may not be beautiful.

Fewer and fewer of today's innovative quilts are updated interpretations of classic quilt formats. The subject matter of the quilt, be it a personal memory or an artist's statement about a political or social issue, appears to be increasingly important. Today's artists view their quilts as a means of expressing their creative energies in ways that are simply not possible with other materials. They are expanding and adding to the rich vocabulary of the heritage quiltmaker and they are transforming color and texture into dynamic patterns that provide new visual experiences.

There is no question that the art form has been enhanced by thousands of quiltmakers making personal journeys through explorations of color, shape, and line. I feel quite confident that through the continued creative efforts of the world's quiltmakers, the art quilt as we know it, will continue to evolve and enrich the lives of an ever widening circle of appreciative viewers.

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