



Quilt collecting

EXHIBITING ANTIQUE QUILTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY - AN INSIDER'S VIEW

It has recently been reported that more than twenty million people are currently involved in the business and creation of quilts. Clearly, the quilt revival that began in the late 1960s is still going strong. Quilt Festivals are happening all over the world and people are flocking to quilting classes. But what does all this activity mean for the collection and exhibition of antique quilts?

Only a few institutions collected quilts in the late 19th century, including The Concord Museum and the Essex Institute of Salem, both in Massachusetts, and The New York Historical Society. The majority of large public collections began in the early 20th century, and in 1910 the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City acquired its first American bedcovering.

Collectors before the 1970s emphasised age, historical association and workmanship. Their quilts were usually kept in families or donated to local historical societies or museums. A few early private collectors included Electra Havemeyer Webb, a pioneering collector of Americana, who founded the Shelburne Museum in 1952. That same year Mrs Webb began planning an exhibit of quilts, textiles, and women's needle arts.

It wasn't until the mid-1970s that quilts became a category of collectable American folk art. 'By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the idea of collecting quilts and coverlets for their genealogical value alone was almost entirely a thing of the past,' says John Howat, then chairman of the Department of American Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 'This was the era of appreciation of the

quilt as graphic art. The overall visual image of the quilt when it is hung on a wall is what collectors came to value most. Quilt collecting became acceptable, even fashionable.' In less than thirty years, thousands of quilts went from the ragbin to the walls of museums and art galleries. Despite the fickle nature of public appreciation – especially for the arts – this escalation is virtually unprecedented. During this period, great public and private collections developed. Even corporations, Philip Morris, Esprit in California, AT&T, Goldman Sachs, Chase-Manhattan Bank, Bank of Boston, and Levi-Strauss began to collect.

When quilts began to be taken seriously as art, specialised dealers emerged. After seeing quilts in magazines and at exhibitions, people started buying them, and the business of quilts took off. Dealers are often the main source of information for collectors at all levels, generously sharing their knowledge. This is certainly true in the area of quilts. Quilt dealers have written some of the best books about antique quilts. Some of them have collected, exhibited and published including America Hurrah, Darwin Bearley and Thomas Woodard. They were there from the beginning of the explosion of interest in quilts and watched the market grow: from the time in the 1960s when one pieced or appliquéd quilt cost five dollars and a Pennsylvania Amish quilt was less than fifty dollars, to the present day, when choice examples can sell for as much as one hundred thousand dollars.

Yet in the 1990s it seemed that collecting quilts had lost its glow. The quilt market was

seriously affected by the downturn in the wider art market at the end of the 80s. Then the antique quilt market encountered another "adjustment" after the market was flooded with reproductions of American antique quilt treasures made in China. This tidal wave of replicas was encouraged by museums, excited to find new markets for their ever-increasing licensing arrangements. At the same time, reproduction quilts appeared in every catalogue from Garnet Hill to Sundance. They were for sale in just about every store's bedding department, and were in abundance at flea markets, for the grand price of around \$39.95. Sales were ▶

The American Museum in Britain, Gift of Mr George G. Frellinghuysen



Hawaiian quilt, red cotton appliqué on a white, the border is also appliqué 211 x 191cm, 20th century

astronomical. Just about anyone could afford a reproduction quilt for their bed. It was no surprise that the interest in original antique quilts took a nosedive. Many dealers went out of the antique quilt business and there were few emerging collectors coming on the scene.

But in the long term there was a positive side to all of the brouhaha about the quilt reproductions. The widespread publicity, in large measure due to an outcry from the quilt world, meant vintage quilts and their reproductions were suddenly topical. Articles appeared everywhere about the reproductions and their negative impact on women who made quilts in small business enterprises around the country. However, the incredible new visibility for quilts would ultimately save the day. Quilts were everywhere. If people owned and lived with quilts and quilt images, no matter how or where they were made or what they paid for them, interest in the "real thing" would accelerate in time due to the constant exposure. In the world of paintings, you can purchase a reproduction from a young artist in the street outside the museum and you can also buy a print of that painting at the gift shop. For some people, liv-

ing with the prints or reproductions at home, school or seeing them in public places, an expansion in interest and resources would propel them to want the "real thing". It was predicted that the cycle would take 10 years and this ended up being right on target.

The August 2003 issue of the *Forbes Collector* featured an article titled "Collectible Quilts: Ripe for Rediscovery" and rediscovered they have been. There is a twist, however: the rediscovery and subsequent acquisitions have been led primarily by institutions, not individuals. The current trend has resulted in the development of a large number of quilt exhibitions and collections, substantially more than were actually taking place at the height of the quilt collecting craze pre 1989.

In the past few years, there has been a resurgence of interest in exhibiting parts of existing historic collections such as the Newark Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Henry Ford Museum, and there is renewed interest in the establishment or enhancement of institutional collections at universities. Both have led to a proliferation of publications, with many accompanying exhibitions from the extensive holdings at the International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska. These exhibitions have included *Wild by Design*, *Modern Marvels: Quilts Made from Kits, 1915-1950*, *Reflections of the Exotic East in American Quilts*, *Fanciful Flowers: Botany and the American Quilt*. The titles of these exhibitions begin to tell the story of what can happen when a university commits to the study of quilts across a range of disciplines.

A small number of collectors and institutions have now defined what the public views as masterpiece quilts. But quilt collections are not being built one by one: rather, they arise through the acquisition or exhibiting of ready-made collections. In the mid-1990s a number of the early revival collectors were beginning to consider the future of their collections. Most passionate collectors would

ideally like to see their collections acquired in their entirety so that their unique collecting vision is maintained. In the early years of the 21st century this has been indeed the case. The Robert James collection, the Holstein collection and the Sara Miller Amish quilt collection have gone to the International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska. The Illinois State Museum acquired the David Pottinger collection of Illinois Amish quilts, The Mint Museum of Craft & Design acquired the Bresler collection and Patricia Smith's collection went to the Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art.

An early example of the "ready-made" collection phenomenon was the 1971 exhibition "Abstract Design in American Quilts" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, comprised of quilts the Holsteins had collected. It was the first of the private collections gone public. The exhibition never would have come to fruition if two young collectors, with art world connections and resources, had not proposed the event to the museum's curators and director. The prospect of a "ready-made" collection certainly made it easy for the Whitney to go forward with the exhibition. And, when it went on display, the collection brought quilts to the attention of a sophisticated art world. In 2002, a stellar group of major art museums restarted that tradition with another "ready-made" collection of quilts that has galvanized the art world. In 2003 they exhibited the collection of African American quilts made by the women of Gee's Bend Alabama that were gathered by Bill Arnett and Tinwood Alliance. The exhibition was organized by the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. Its venues include The Whitney Museum of American Art in N.Y., the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington DC and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Articles about the exhibition have appeared in art magazines, including a remarkable article by Richard Kalina in *Art in America*, October 2003: "The quilts are remarkably powerful ▶



America's Glorious Quilts, Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, New York, 1987





and compelling visual statements. I believe they are entitled, every bit as much as a Frank Stella or a Kenneth Noland painting of that period, ... to participate fully in the aesthetics of modernism."

The Gee's Bend exhibition and its reception by the art world 'blew out of the water' the validity of comments made by Brooks Barnes in a Wall Street Journal article written in August 2002, entitled "Museums Cozy up to Quilts". In what was perceived to be a rather condescending article about quilts and museums, he details 'the significant reasons' why museums exhibit quilts on their walls. He cites lower shipping and insurance costs as significant factors. He also notes "quilts are an easy sell to finicky corporate sponsors who like uncontroversial art". Barnes seemed unwilling at the time to acknowledge the "art of the quilt". In fact, The International Association of Art Critics honored the Gee's Bend exhibition for second best Thematic Museum Show organised nationally in 2002-2003... a far cry from the cheaper insurance and shipping rationale espoused by Barnes.

As public appreciation and awareness increases, institutions will seek more quilt collections. Why? Two reasons: some collectors have invested 30 years or more amassing collections of great variety, with a keen eye for quality and design. Second, for a display of quilts to be effective, institutions must acquire groups of quilts. Unlike the possession of one or two paintings by an artist, a museum cannot simply display one or two quilts. With a collection of quilts - mostly anonymous in provenance - they acquire the vision of the collector.

If an institution chooses to gather individual pieces, the curator becomes the arbiter. This poses some other interesting questions. What is the level of quilt knowledge of the curators? What is the obligation of the institution to seek proper advice? What is proper advice? And who is qualified to give it? Until recently, finding a curator who was both a textile spe-

cialist and familiar with quilts was nearly impossible. Hopefully, as quilts become validated within the academically trained art and museum world, the standards used for acquisition of other forms of art will also be applied to quilts. Yet, while there is this extraordinary interest in quilts, queries to museums actually reveal a decrease in the number of specialised curators in textile departments with quilts. Federal cuts in grants nationwide to art institutions have necessitated staff reductions. Often, these cuts have been within textile departments, which are considered more expensive to maintain.

As institutions continue to play a larger role in quilt acquisition and exhibition, even more questions emerge. How does an art museum deal with requests to see the quilt collection? As there is increasing interest in the study of quilts, how can a scholar gain access to the collections for research? One method institutions have adopted with some success is to publish books on the collection. In that way, the public can learn about the collection without the issues of access, increased staff and handling. Examples of these comprehensive collection catalogues include the Smithsonian's The Smithsonian Treasury of American Quilts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art's American Quilts and Coverlets, the Shelburne's 55 Famous Quilts from the Shelburne Museum, and the American Folk Art Museum's Glorious American Quilts. John Howat, in 1990, said in his introduction to the Metropolitan's book, "The Museum staff is not able to accommodate requests to see the entire collection of 119 bed coverings. Only by prearrangement can we show a small number of them or allow visitors to make use of the catalogued information kept for study purposes." Howat goes on to explain that books will provide greater access to the Museum's collection for people who ordinarily would not be able to view the entire collection.

Quilt Collecting in America is alive and well

in large measure due to the expanding use of the Internet. The Quilt Index (www.center-forthequilt.org) enables information and images to be shared and accessed by all. The ability to cross-search collections is the future for scholarship. The Index is an online resource available to people everywhere, providing unprecedented access to unpublished documentation about quilts and quiltmaking. It is a partnership of The Alliance for American Quilts with MATRIX and the Michigan State University Museum, with funding by The National Endowment for the Humanities.

The Alliance for American Quilts, a not for profit organisation founded in 1993, is the catalyst that links the world of quilts, scholarship and the general public. Its mission is to document, preserve and share American quilt heritage. The Alliance's broad base of board members and supporters develop exciting projects in partnership with museums, universities and grassroots organisations around the country. Never before has there been such interest in quilts on so many different levels: for the greater the accessibility to quilts and the information about them, the more people want to learn and collect them. ●●● Shelly Zegart



Fine Ono Collection