

History of Art Quilting

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Early History

Art quilting, also known as quilt art, mixed media art quilts or fiber art quilts is an art form that combines traditional quilting techniques with techniques borrowed from other fine arts such as painting, stamping, dyeing, collage and other complex cloth processes. Rather than relying on traditional patterns, modern quilt artists' imagery is inspired by experiences and imagination. As opposed to serving as a functional item, art quilts are meant to provoke an emotional response, similar to a painting in a museum.

The profound social changes that occurred after World War II during the 1960s and 70s sparked a renewed interest in handicraft traditions and "old fashioned" art techniques that had been rejected or forgotten. For women, rediscovering traditional crafts such as quilting was a way to reclaim the lost heritage of their foremothers. For feminist historians these forgotten traditions and artworks became noted as important social documents that marked the historical role of women in American society and art. A return to handicraft traditions was also of interest of the back-to-the-land movement, as part of an effort to return to a pre-industrial lifestyle. Because of the rise of feminism and new craft movements, quilting regained popularity and soon became significant in the making of fine arts.

Many of the new quilt artists relied on the use of traditional patterns to learn the craft and reconnect with their heritage. However, as early as the 1950s, artists began to experiment with modern designs that inspired other quilters. Jean Ray Laury, also known as "Mother of the Art Quilt", was tremendously influential. Laury was an academically trained artist and designer, who encouraged women to stray away from traditional patterns and instead create designs based on their own ideas, surroundings and experiences.

In 1959 Laury said, "*Modern designers of quilts are not concerned with reiterating statements made years ago. They have their own comments to make, comments which are relevant to our own times. At last we can look forward to exciting designs. Traditional designs no longer meet our needs.*" Moving away from traditional designs to create quilts with more whimsical, personal and daring designs became the manifesto of the new generation of quilt artists. By the 1960s more artists began to pioneer the field of quilt art. Artists such as Radka Donnel, Charles and Rubynelle Counts, Nancy Crow, Therese May and Joan Lintault were among some of the most influential artists and teachers, because of their unconventional designs and techniques. Artists such as Donnel and Crow became teachers in the field and prompted artists to dismiss preconceptions about the "correct" way to quilt.



Tom's Quilt, Jean Ray Laury, 1956

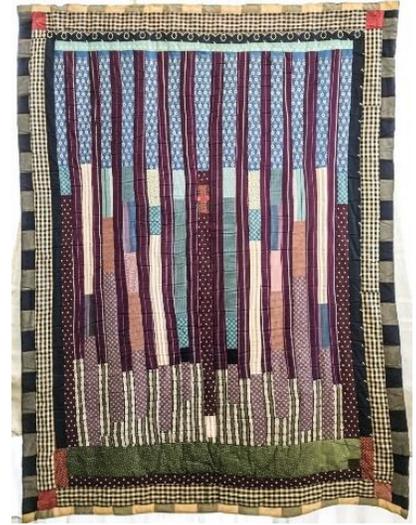


Constructions #84: No!, Nancy Crow, 2007

Quilt Craze of the 1970s

Until the 1970s, quilt making was not widely accepted as a legitimate form of art. Though quilts had commonly been displayed in county fairs and guild shows, it was first recognized by the art establishment in the Whitney Museum of American Art's 1971 exhibition, *Abstract Design in American Quilts*. This exhibition displayed quilts of highly colored,

abstract work similar to the art of Abstract Expressionists Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. The display of quilts by a major metropolitan museum of American art denoted quilts as an important part of American historic tradition and gave the artform an elevated status in the public eye. The show was extremely successful and toured extensively around the United States and Europe. Thanks to the exhibition, the demand for quilts was high, but the art form was still lost in many parts of the country, forcing artists to rely on old how-to books. To spread knowledge and interest for quilting, women banded together to create quilt guilds. These guilds sponsored artists and teachers such as Nancy Crow, Beth Gutcheon, Nancy Halpern and Michael James, allowing them to pursue their own interests as well as pass on their own knowledge and skills to other artists. Gutcheon and James published how-to books for the new generation that promoted contemporary design. These books were widely distributed and highly influential. Most importantly, they opened the world of quilting to anyone wishing to learn.



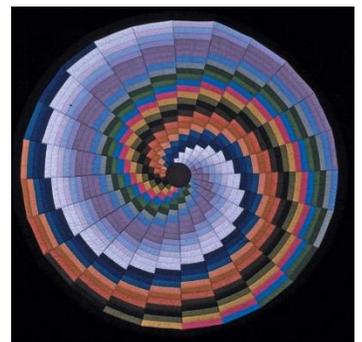
Nocturn Regalis, Molly Upton, 1974

In the 1970s, public exhibitions of this unique style of quilting began to appear, which further bolstered the development of art quilting. The display of quilts by artists Molly Upton and Susan Hoffman was extremely influential. In 1975, the work of both Upton and Hoffman was displayed at the Kornblee Gallery in New York City. The show displayed the wide-ranging, unconventional quilts of artists who had both completely abandoned methods of traditional quilting, revealing the promise and potential of non-traditional quilting. Exhibitions celebrating this new style gave validation to the art form and encouraged more artists to be more innovative and daring with their work.

Though exhibitions of modern quilts became more frequent, the strange and abstract designs remained either sidelined or unwelcome at many traditional quilt shows. Modern quilters needed their own place in the art world. As a result of this need, quilters Nancy Crow, Virginia Randles and Francoise Barnes organized *Quilt National*, the first ongoing juried exhibition of non-traditional quilts in 1979. Gary J. Schwindler, Associate Professor of Art at Ohio University, stated in a flyer for the show that “*American quilt making is now at a stage of experimentation and development as it prepares to take its place as a major form of artistic endeavor.*” The first *Quilt National* displayed 56 quilts by 44 artists, chosen by 196 individuals, and provided an important forum for contemporary quilt artists.

The Quilt Digest, a highly influential journal co-founded by San Francisco quilt dealer Michael Kile in 1983, brought further attention and validation to the art quilt. The works of contemporary quilt artists were presented alongside historical and traditional works, providing modern artists with both publicity and acceptance for their work. In 1985 Kile, along with curator and writer Penny McMorris organized *The Art Quilt*, a travelling exhibition of new works from trailblazing artists in the field. *The Art Quilt* was the first major curated exhibition of contemporary quilts, showcasing 25 artists and providing clarity and organization to modern quilting.

Art quilting has continued to grow and flourish. As countless artists have developed unique styles pushing the boundaries and potential of the craft, art quilting has carved out a space in the world of fine art. Today, numerous solo and group exhibitions appear annually throughout the United States and the world. Modern quilts have made their homes in permanent collections of major public art institutions such as the Newark Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The American Craft Museum and the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery.



Helix II, Virginia Randles, 1984

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