OHIO QUILT ARTISTS AS TEACHERS

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on the teaching methods of some of Ohio’s most respected art quilt teachers. The participants shared their unique approaches to the challenges of the teaching and their insights on changes and challenges shaping the art quilt movement.

Ohio played an important role in the development of the national art quilt movement. Its artists became leaders in this segment of the late-twentieth century quilt revival. They helped explore and develop new approaches to quiltmaking and helped fuel the movement with exhibits, symposiums, educational opportunities, and publications.

The oral history method of research used in this study allowed participants to share their unique approaches to teaching and to express their ideas and concerns. The flexible nature of this method allowed for research findings to extend beyond the parameters of the original interview questions. Participating art quilt teachers included Nancy Crow, Vikki Pignatelli, Elaine Plogman, Susan Shie, and David Walker. Interviews with Ricky Clark and Penny McMorris, who helped shape the art quilt movement, added depth to the research.

The study revealed the nature of the art quilt profession. Participants discussed their daunting schedules, the importance of centering when quilting, the pleasures of teaching, and the ways the profession has evolved in response to the modern abundance of fabric, publications, equipment/technology, Internet access, marketing plans, and
educational symposiums. They also discussed challenges and concerns shared by art quilt professionals. These included the potential stagnation of a teacher’s own creative work as a result of extensive teaching and the problem of art quilters being overly influenced by each others’ work and popular trends. They also mentioned the value of incorporation academic training in both fine art and textile studies into art quilt education.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The rise of interest in quiltmaking after 1970 has had astounding repercussions in the United States. As the marketplace responded to consumers’ interests and needs, the thousands of women making traditional quilts and/or art quilts turned supplying fabric and tools for quilters into a billion-dollar industry. In America, according to the study conducted in 2003 by Quilter’s Newsletter Magazine, quilters numbered in excess of twenty one million. This is a 50 percent increase from the fourteen million quilters reported in 1997. The estimated total dollar value of the quilting industry was found to be a whopping $2.27 billion.¹

Since America’s interest in modern forms of quiltmaking shows little sign of abating, and has even spread around the globe, it seemed timely to investigate the challenges and complexities related to teaching and learning in the art quilt world. I am a textile technologist, with a Bachelor of Science degree (1989) in textile development and marketing, who discovered art quilting when I first learned to sew in the early 1990s. While I was being taught to make traditional quilts, I found my work almost always took a turn toward the unconventional. Eventually, I joined an Internet group called Quiltart. It is a forum where art quilters post questions and concerns to the group online. It was these quilters who taught me how to delve into art quilting. In addition to taking the traditional quilt classes, I began taking classes from art quilting teachers. Today, I
continue to explore both traditional and modern techniques of quilt construction as a student and a teacher, with a deep appreciation for both.

Fiber Arts Education

For centuries, needlework in this country has been taught by mothers to daughters, or grandmothers to granddaughters. The skills acquired by learning to piece or quilt would directly translate into the skills needed to produce a family’s clothing, and were taught to children by assigning a specific amount of work to be done each day. This process of designating an amount of work to be done, rather than an arbitrary amount of time to work at it, was known as a “stint” and thought to be the most encouraging method. Interest in quilting was enhanced by quilting bee affiliations (and still is) where women gathered to work together to finish quilts and enjoy a social time together.

Construction skills continue to be passed down in this manner. Today, however, more and more quilting students are learning skills from nontraditional sources, including structured workshops offered in the private sector, television programs on the subject, and in lessons offered by respected quilters. This is especially true for those who want to produce art quilts rather than traditional quilts. In fact, art quilters, whose work has garnered national attention in juried exhibitions, are especially valued as teachers. They often find themselves teaching, as well as producing works of art.

These are the findings of a research study I conducted over a two-year period. It is a look at some of Ohio’s nationally-recognized art quilt makers and the methods of teaching they employ. In addition to creating fine works of art, these artists also teach their craft for reasons of personal gratification and financial compensation. The purpose
of the research was to explore the characteristics of these teachers that have led to their success.

**Art Quilts**

Art quilts are different from traditional quilts in that they are typically not created for use on a bed, but for display. Art quilts were introduced in this country in the early part of the 1970s. They had a group of creators and appreciators from the beginning, and that group has been expanding ever since. Today for example, there are over one thousand members worldwide in the online community known as *Quiltart*.

American tastes for quilting come and go in the cycles of fashion, but it has been documented that during those periods of time when quilts went out of fashion in most other parts of the country, the Midwest was one of the pockets that maintained its appreciation of the quilt, and quilting remained a valued art. Ohio’s reputation for a strong, unbroken history of quilmaking continues today. Ohio’s innovation and success from 1979 through to the present, with the biennial international art quilt exhibition, *Quilt National*, begat the state’s reputation as the birthplace and key area for what is going on in the Art Quilt Movement today. These are the factors that combine to make Ohio an ideal state in which to perform a study like this one.

I set out to find out how people teaching art quilting in the private sector filled their classes with eager, high-paying students when fiber arts education in academia often seems to limp along. As a fiber arts instructor at the University of Akron, I wanted to identify the characteristics and qualities that make these artists successful teachers. Based on my own experience, I entered the research expecting to find that students enrolled in these private sector lessons because they found art quilt making to be self-
fulfilling in nature, with the textile medium offering unique advantages not found in paints or clay. Of particular interest to me was the notion of fiber arts as a form of spiritual expression. In my experience as an art quilter myself, I was aware that the process is used by some artists as a tool for combining aesthetically-pleasing creations with exercises in meditation and relaxation.

I was also interested in determining the personal teaching idiosyncrasies of these art quilt teachers so as to emulate them in my own work with students. I wanted to find out how these teachers attract their students and how they keep them coming back for further instruction. *Quilt Surface Design Symposium*, one of the private sector venues offered in Ohio for learning to make art quilts, boasts that an impressive 60 percent of its students are return customers.\(^5\) I was particularly interested in keeping the subject alive at the university so that it could be shared with future generations.

**Methods**

I used an oral-history method of investigation for this research because speaking directly with these teachers was decidedly the best way to understand their methods and philosophies. It was feasible for this project as well, because there are several successful art quilt teachers, as well as art quilt historians, living within the state of Ohio. These artists and historians were close, willing to participate, and knowledgeable of art quilting both historically and currently, with many being credited with the advancement of the national movement.

Oral history is the recording of peoples’ memories.\(^6\) In this study, potential narrators were contacted by email or telephone, and asked to participate. Each candidate
was asked for written permission to disclose his or her name, and for the sake of producing the best research possible, all participants agreed to be identified.

The quilters included in the study are Vikki Pignatelli (interview date January 24, 2004), Susan Shie (interview date February 6, 2004), David Walker (interview date March 25, 2004), Elaine Plogman (interview date March 27, 2004), and Nancy Crow (interview date May 15, 2004). Although they are not famous for their quilts, I also interviewed Penny McMorris (interview date September 22, 2004) and Ricky Clark (interview date November 5, 2004) for the large part they have played in the national advancement of quilt appreciation.

The oral-history method of data collection is a process often employed to investigate women, or others, whose influences are not otherwise included in the written, public records of a community. As has been seen in other research projects that used the method of oral history, the scope of the project broadened as the research progressed.

I devised a series of questions for the interviews, and they can be found in Appendix A. Although I used a standard set of questions for each interview, I adjusted the list as deemed necessary by the unique direction each interview took as it progressed. I added or deleted questions for the different perspectives offered by the art quilt historians that I interviewed.

Questioning began by establishing the personal profile of each narrator. Participants were asked questions such as how long they have been working in the field, and how they learned their trade. From there, the questions went to an experiential profile. These questions were concerned with things such as feelings experienced while sewing, and from where inspiration is drawn. Upon establishing this groundwork,
questions typically turned toward the interests of their students, and the motivations
behind their teaching. After that, I was able to personalize the rest of the interview
depending upon the pertinent points presented by the artist or historian. This technique
lent both a standardization and adaptability to the data collection process. It proved to be
quite flexible.

Before developing my questions and getting ready for the interviews, it was
necessary to study the history of the Art Quilt Movement and Ohio’s role in it. Only with
an understanding of how events progressed could I appreciate the role of the key players
in the movement. The background and history of fiber arts is explored in Chapter II.


2 Pat Ferrero, Elaine Hedges, and Julie Silber, *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of

3 Robert Shaw, *Quilts: A Living Tradition* (Hong Kong: Hugh Lauter Levin

4 In *Unraveling the Stories: Quilts as a Reflection of Our Lives*, prod. and dir. by
videocassette.


8 Ibid, 560.
CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The art quilt did not suddenly appear in 1970 from the conditions of a vacuum; its roots have formed over centuries of influences that were cultural, artistic, and technological in nature. In order to fully appreciate the art quilt, and the art quilt culture of today, it is useful to take a brief look at the history of traditional American bed quilts, and the evolution of the art quilt movement.

Because this evolution has been so long in the making, even the methods by which quilting techniques are taught have changed over time. For instance, fiber art skills used to be handed down from mother to daughter. Today, this is not always true, and many people turn to professional art quilters for their training and education. This is a dramatic change in the educational process, and a chronological look at the progression of American quilting will illuminate how art quilts came to be, and the role Ohio has played in their existence.

History of American Quilts

The “American Quilt” is considered by some to be one of the United States’ most powerful symbols. Quilting and patchwork, however, did not originate in the United States; these techniques have in fact been used by several cultures for millennia. There are long traditions of the practice found among the ancient Chinese, Australian Aborigines, and Egyptians. Medieval Europeans are known to have worn quilted
garments as well. Patchwork continues to play an important role in Eastern cultures to the present day.\textsuperscript{2} It is with the emergence of the colonization of North America, however, that the progression of patchwork becomes more easily followed.\textsuperscript{3} Americans may not have \textit{invented} quilting, but they did help to propel it to the worldwide prominence and position that it enjoys today in popular culture.

The steps in American history that moved quiltmaking to the position it enjoys today are worth examining. The Industrial Revolution, for one, spurred the growth of quiltmaking in the nineteenth century, by making the materials for quiltmaking affordable and accessible to the masses. Indeed, almost every aspect of textile production and manufacture had already begun to improve in the United States and in Ohio shortly after 1800.\textsuperscript{4}

In addition, the introduction of the cotton gin at the turn of the nineteenth century greatly eased the processing and costs of cotton fabric production. The gin removed seeds from the cotton boll at speeds previously unimagined. The mechanization of almost all textile production procedures, including processes such as spinning and weaving, at about this same time, directly led to a marked increase in quiltmaking because fabrics were produced much faster in a factory by machine than they had been at home by hand.\textsuperscript{5} New finishing technology, such as cylinder printing, and synthetic-dye production, led to the bountiful supply of beautiful and colorful fabrics at lower costs.\textsuperscript{6} Additionally, improvements in transportation modes made it possible to dramatically improve the distribution of textile goods to all parts of the country.\textsuperscript{7} For all these reasons, consumers saw an increase in the quantity, quality, and variety of available textiles, while simultaneously enjoying a decrease in the costs of materials.
Since textile prices were falling, people could afford to discard clothes before they were completely worn out. A wide group of consumers could now afford to follow fashionable trends in clothing, and their old, but not deteriorated, pieces of clothing became a new supply of fabric for quilts. Fashion silhouettes in the mid-nineteenth century also worked toward the advancement of quiltmaking. The fashionable styles of dress at the time dictated that clothing become more form fitting, thereby creating the need for more intricate pattern pieces. These pattern pieces created greater waste when making clothes than those styles where basic parts were based on squares and rectangles. The resultant left-over scraps of new fabric were well-suited to the needs of quilters.

In terms of artistic expression, British and American style was one and the same for the first fifty years of United States history. American quilt making would not break free of the European tradition until sometime between 1825 and 1861. Andrew Jackson, born in Waxhaw, South Carolina, to Irish immigrant parents in 1767, would be the personification of this break. His election as the seventh President of the United States in 1829 made him the first common man to attain the prestigious position. This event has come to be recognized as the historical marker for America’s appreciation of itself, and its’ distinguishing democratic system of government. The proven success of the experimental government gave rise to American national pride, and reduced the nation’s reliance upon European tradition. Artistic expression in the United States increasingly honored American uniqueness, instead of being embarrassed by it.

The introduction of the sewing machine in the 1850s also influenced quilt production in the United States. Sewing machines helped to democratize quiltmaking by making it possible for virtually anyone to sew fabrics together with some precision and in
much less time.\textsuperscript{11} Sewing machines also led to the development of factory-manufactured hard-twist cotton thread.\textsuperscript{12} This machine that could lock stitches quickly and easily met with favor, and by the end of the nineteenth century, twenty dollars was enough to purchase a sewing machine and cabinet.\textsuperscript{13}

Menswear was mass-produced in factories with sewing machines by 1860, while women’s dresses, which require more intricate fittings, would be later. When the Civil War broke out, there were menswear producers that could meet the demand for men’s uniforms because they had men’s clothing already in production.\textsuperscript{14} After the Civil War, ready-to-wear clothing gradually became more socially acceptable, and consequently freed up even more time for quilt making.\textsuperscript{15}

Early Americans were fond of quilts, and they were used by women in the Northern States as effective tools in raising money for causes such as abolition, Civil War relief, and temperance, to name a few. The needlework presented at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, boosted the popularity of women’s handcrafts. The fair served as a venue for millions of Americans to gather, and appreciate needlework from around the world on a grand scale.\textsuperscript{16}

Ohio, because it is geographically situated south of the Great Lakes and north of the Appalachian Mountains, was a natural intercept to travelers moving further West across the United States in the antebellum era of the nineteenth century. People from a variety of cultural backgrounds either passed through the area, or stayed and lived there, each contributing parts of their identity to Ohio’s developing textile heritage. Ohio historian George Knepper described early Ohio as being “more like a salad bowl than a melting pot.”\textsuperscript{17} About the same time fabric and thread were becoming more widely
available, Ohio towns had become more settled, the clearing of trees for farm land was largely completed, and people began to have the time and energy to devote to home arts like sewing. Quilting, like doing regular chores, eventually became an important activity to Ohio’s pioneers, and quilts were valued in communities all across the state.

Ohio has a rich mixture of nationalities and cultures of those who settled there. Among these diverse immigrants are the Amish, who brought a distinct quiltmaking style with them. Amish migrants set off for the New World during the eighteenth century and settled mostly in Pennsylvania in search of freedom from the religious persecution they suffered in Germany and Switzerland. Slowly, during the nineteenth century, they spread westward to Ohio and Indiana coming mostly from Pennsylvania, with only a few directly from Europe. The first settlement was established in 1807 in Tuscarawas County, and by the middle of the nineteenth century, large congregations had been founded. These populations still exist, and today Ohio has a larger Amish population than any other state. The influences of the simple Amish style reach all the way into the contemporary art quilts of Ohio.

Ever since the time to devote to home arts became available, quilting has been included in the everyday activities of numerous Ohioans. Nineteenth-century women in Ohio produced quilts as a means of warmth, but they also served to accommodate the creative and social needs of their makers. Women gathered around the quilt frame for hours of socialization and friendship that was frequently missing in their agrarian lives. Ohio’s first state-wide quilt style was the red and green floral appliqué (with a white background) in the early 1840s.
Quilts created as visual art, not for warmth, have been produced throughout the country’s history. One example of a quilt designed for a function other than warmth is the “signature quilt.” Similar to an autograph album, and of particular prominence from 1840 to 1860, the signature quilt is comprised of squares or rectangles of fabric onto which community members inked their names and/or good wishes for the recipient of the finished quilt. They were often given as farewell gifts to those who moved away as a gesture of remembrance rather than as functional bedcovers.

“Crazy quilts” of the 1876 through 1900 era are also known to be creations of artistic expression, rather than destined for usable bedding. Crazy quilts were made up of odd-shaped and sized pieces of fabric in a range of colors. The Victorians who made crazy quilts preferred silk fabrics when making these quilts, and typically covered the seams between the patches of these quilts with decorative embroidery stitches. The result is a pieced creation unsuitable for the stresses of use on a bed. These predecessors were observed and built upon in the development of a distinctive quilt design style known today as the “art quilt.” Today’s art quilts, like signature and crazy quilts, are not intended for use on beds. They are created as a means of artistic expression by those who make them.

In 1908 the *Ladies Home Journal* officially recognized women’s long history of quiltmaking art, publishing a story titled “When Patchwork Becomes Art.” Quilts continued to enjoy eras of popularity in the twentieth century, especially during the decorative periods of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the Colonial Revival, as well as during the Great Depression. There were also periods however, when American tastemakers declared that quilts were old-fashioned and unappealing. The popularity of
quilts during the Great Depression may have helped fuel the post-World War II quilt
revival. In some people’s minds, quilts became associated with the hard times of the Great
Depression, when piecing scraps together was not only artistic expression, but often born
of economic necessity. While women continued to make quilts during the trying years of
the Second World War, they turned to new interests and new products when the war
ended. These new interests and products led to a decline in American quilting that would
last almost thirty years.

History of Art Quilts

There have been a few American quilt revivals over the years, but the late-
twentieth century quilt revival would be the most extensive quilt revival in American
history.\textsuperscript{27} Begun during the 1970s, this long-standing quilt revival can be traced to a
variety of influences, inspirations, and contributors.

Sometimes referred to as the “Mother of the art quilt,” Jean Ray Laury is
considered by many to be instrumental in the development of the contemporary art quilt.
Academically trained in art at Stanford University, she pioneered the modern exploration
of quilts as an expressive medium.\textsuperscript{28} She inspired quilters of the early 1970s to make
quilts, and contributed to the development of the art quilt because she encouraged these
quilters to add personal and graphic depictions of life events into their quilts. Laury
wrote craft articles for numerous women’s magazines, and discussed the new spin that
could be given to the old craft. Laury also wrote a book titled \textit{Quilts \& Coverlets, a
Contemporary Approach} (1970) that was inspirational to many. Her teaching and her
books led other women toward today’s quilt aesthetic.\textsuperscript{29}
One reason Ohio’s contributions have advanced quilting is because of its arts council. Unlike the arts councils of other states that are run by volunteers, Ohio’s is staffed by salaried professionals. Begun in 1965, the Ohio Arts Council is committed to the “economic, educational, and cultural development of the state.” The Ohio Arts Council has generously provided grants and fellowships that make it possible for quiltmakers to pursue their craft.  

Bonnie Leman also provided inspiration for quiltmakers. In 1969 she began to publish *Quilters Newsletter Magazine* with the help of her husband and seven children. This important publication provided quilters across the country with patterns, articles, and a network in which they could connect with one another. Leman wrote in her inaugural issue, “Geography prevents us from having a real old-fashioned quilting bee, but we can all get together through this magazine, chat, and exchange our ideas and news in a modern quilting bee.” Her magazine featured both traditional and art quilts, and has many times been the forum in which quilting controversies were battled. Leman was inducted into the Quilters Hall of Fame in 1982, and *Quilters Newsletter Magazine* continues to be important today with an international circulation. Though Bonnie Leman retired as editor in 1996, her daughter Mary Leman Austin is Executive Director of the magazine. This publication did much for the exposure and cohesion of the late-twentieth-century quilt revival.

Because quilts are often created by sewing geometric shapes of fabric together, they naturally enjoy the visual effects of graphic designs. It is this play of “space and movement” that produces an effective expression of art. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Jonathan Holstein and his partner Gail van der Hoof were living in Manhattan.
On weekends, they enjoyed trips into rural sections of Pennsylvania, and shopping the antique markets they saw there. They found many quilts, and began to collect those that looked to them like examples of modern art. By 1971, their collection was extensive, and they decided to create an exhibition. On July second of that same year, their quilts were on display at the renowned Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. The show, titled *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, featured a collection of sixty antique American quilts. The show’s significance to the development of the art quilt lies in the fact that the antique quilts were presented for the first time (in one of the country’s most prestigious museums) as fine art.

When selecting quilts for the exhibition, Holstein and van der Hoof did not consider construction or condition of a quilt, only its visual impact. This show shed new light on quilts, and Americans viewed their familiar creations with a fresh perspective. Rather than examining a quilt in terms of its craftsmanship with a high value being placed on the number of stitches per inch, the exhibit encouraged viewers to see the works for their visual impact only. This shift of quilt perspective from the bed to the wall, significantly changed America’s view of its quilts, and they were indeed appreciated as the works of graphic art that they are. The show was a tremendous success, extended three weeks by popular demand, and it also traveled the world on a tour sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Services, which would last the next several years. The show provided an instrumental exposure of quilts as an expressive, tactile, and three-dimensional medium. Contemporary artists began to appreciate the artistic potential quilts have, and began to explore them in their own work.
In 1973, Ohio was directly influenced by the ground-breaking Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition of *Abstract Design in American Quilts*. Akron became the first stop of the traveling version of the exhibition of works that had been hung in New York City.\(^3^7\) The exhibition was called *American Pieced Quilts II* (the show was divided into two parts so that twice as many cities could be included with half as much wear and tear on the quilts) and ran in Akron from February 10 through March 18, 1973.\(^3^8\) A review of the show was printed in the February 24, 1973 edition of the *Akron Beacon Journal*, where reviewer Frances Murphey wrote that the show was “well worth a looksee . . . whether you want to see it for artistry in design or craftsmanship in sewing or just plain nostalgia.” Alfred Radloff, Akron Art Institute curator, was quoted in the article as saying he booked the show because he wanted “something to relate to the community.”\(^3^9\) This was certainly a reference to Ohio’s longstanding and still strong bonds with quiltmaking.

Also influential in the late-twentieth-century American quilt revival and its offspring, the art quilt, was the Bicentennial celebration of the United States in 1976. This event, much like the Centennial celebration one hundred years before, inspired a look into the history of America, of which quilts were a significant part. The festivities associated with the two hundredth birthday of the nation gave Americans a reason and a venue to lionize the history of its many achievements, including its art forms.\(^4^0\) Along with other Americana, antique quilts were on display across the country, and once again, they were well received. Quilts came to be valued as cultural documents capable of revealing some of values of the community in which they were made.
As the 1970s progressed, American society suffered political and social turbulence. There were civil rights movements, women’s liberation demonstrations, assassinations, a sexual revolution, and an unpopular war being fought in Vietnam all at the same time. In addition, the country was reeling from an economic recession that affected nearly every American home. In addition, more people were staying home out of economic necessity and joblessness. People began to seek an escape from the harsh realities of the times with sentimental memories of yesteryear, and those icons associated with it, such as quilts.

The feminist movement in particular was a significant national contributor in promoting art quilting among artists, with Ohio being no exception. Susan Shie of Wooster is one such artist who explored quilting because of its connections to female culture. The women’s movement also kindled the start of scholarly quilt study because researchers became interested in filling in the blanks of women’s history. By examining the artifacts left behind by this under-represented voice of a historically marginalized segment of population, valuable, previously unknown, cultural facts came to light. Two such researchers in Ohio are Virginia Gunn of Wooster, and Ricky Clark of Oberlin.

Ohio was not immune to the political turbulence of the 1970s either. Ohio suffered one of the worst episodes of domestic violence in reaction to the Vietnam War when four students were killed by National Guardsmen on the Kent State College campus in 1970. These conditions combined to create an atmosphere conducive to the creation of artistic expression, and in Ohio, the ever-present quilt would serve as the canvas.

The relevance of Amish quilts to contemporary Ohio art quilts has been important, and in 1978, the Akron Art Museum featured these distinctive quilts in an
exhibition titled *Ohio Amish Quilts: the Darwin Bearley Collection* which ran from July 1 through September 3, 1978. Akronite Darwin D. Bearley’s prized collection, also presented in a gallery setting, was significant because it offered Ohioans a chance to see Ohio-Amish quilts, which are decidedly different from the Pennsylvania-Amish quilts displayed in the eastern Whitney show. According to the July 23, 1978 edition of the *Akron Beacon Journal*, the collection included “spectacular examples” of quilts from all over the state, including a Holmes County “Pin Wheel” quilt circa 1925, and a 1920 Tuscarawas County “Log Cabin Lemoyne Star” quilt. Ohio-Amish quilts are significant to Ohio’s historic quilt collection because the outstanding workmanship that went into the quilts has helped to preserve them, and provides modern day researchers with wonderful examples of the quilters’ priorities and culture. The Amish quilts are also important for the artistic inspiration they have provided for contemporary quilters. It is the pattern elements typically found in these quilts that demonstrate a keen sense of design that serves to inspire quilters then and now.44

In 1979, the Dairy Barn Southeastern Ohio Cultural Arts Center of Athens, Ohio, sponsored *Quilt National*, the first juried national show of art quilts, (which at the time were commonly referred to as “new” or “contemporary” quilts.) The exhibition was developed by Nancy Crow, Françoise Barnes, and Virginia Randles.45 The exhibition was developed because these new art quilters were experiencing difficulty in finding venues that appreciated their new techniques in quilting and design. They decided to create their own venue, and held the exhibition in a renovated barn which is now simply known as “The Dairy Barn.”
The now iconic Dairy Barn was chosen because it was seen as a chance to fill the needs of both the artists (who needed a space to display their work) and of area residents (worried that the lovely example of twentieth-century architecture would be razed if a suitable use for the building could not be found.) The first exhibition featured a veritable “who’s who” of the quilt artists of the day, including Françoise Barnes, Nancy Crow, Beth Gutcheon, Nancy Halpern, Terrie Hancock Mangat, and Elaine Plogman, just to name a few. Jurors Michael James, Gary Schwindler, and Renee Seidel selected fifty-six quilts by forty-three artists. The show was so successful that Quilt National continues to be held on a biennial basis today, with works submitted by artists from all over the world. This ground-breaking exhibition did much to advance art quilting in Ohio and in America in general, and helped establish Ohio’s central role in the Art Quilt Movement.

The annual research journal Uncoverings, offered by the American Quilt Study Group, provided a scholarly examination of quilts in both an historical and contemporary context. Founded in 1980 by Sally Garoutte, the American Quilt Study Group was established to “sustain and promote the highest standards for quilt-related studies.” The journal continues to provide a source of quilt research today with over one thousand supporters worldwide.

The late Michael Kile made his contribution to the art quilt movement by setting a new standard for quilt books with his glossy, colorful publications. Together with Roderick Kiracofe, the two produced a ground-breaking journal for the art of quilting. The annual journal Quilt Digest, first produced in 1983, helped promote the art quilt by featuring the new quilts that were being made directly alongside the highly-desirable
antique quilts. Kile and Kiracofe envisioned “a journal where quilt lovers can offer their thoughts and discoveries.” It was this juxtaposition of old and new quilts that gave the contemporary quilts exposure to the masses. Though the journal was short lived, with only five editions printed, its effects were widespread. It established high expectations in both photography and writing for subsequent quilt publications.

The American Quilter’s Society (AQS) has also done its part in the advancement of contemporary quilting as well. The group was formed in 1983 by Meredith and Bill Schroeder, who saw a need for an organization that would cater to the explosion in quilting popularity of the day. Headquartered in Paducah, Kentucky, the international organization publishes quilting books, a magazine titled American Quilter Magazine, and also hosts an annual quilt show so popular that it has been known to fetch an impressive 37,000 attendees for the four-day show. The AQS Quilt Show and Contest was the first to award cash prizes for chosen juried quilts. At the first show in 1985, the society awarded $10,000 for the Best of Show award. Since then the Schroeders have added a second annual show, known as the AQS Quilt Exposition, in Nashville, Tennessee, that draws an additional 25,000 people each year itself. Between the two shows, AQS has awarded 1.5 million dollars in cash prizes to quilters. Adding this financial element to quilting has had its own profound effect on this most recent quilt revival.

The Firelands Association of the Visual Arts (FAVA) has also met with success as a venue for displaying the work of contemporary quilt artists as well. In 1984, FAVA held its first biennial art quilt show Artist as Quiltmaker, in Oberlin, Ohio. It is hung on the years that Quilt National in Athens is not, resulting in a major art quilt exhibition
every year in the state of Ohio. Curated by Gayle Pritchard and Ricky Clark, the show has worked to perpetuate and support the art quilt movement of Ohio.

Quilts have a history of being used by their creators to offset the emotional distresses of difficult events. For example, mourning quilts have been made for generations by the bereaved. Through the creation of the quilt, the mourner is endowed with a feeling of connectedness to the deceased, and typically, these quilts use fabrics associated with the one who died. This current quilt revival, of which art quilting is a part, continues to inspire quilters to create quilts in reaction to overwhelming social problems. The NAMES project quilt is an example of one. Started in 1987, the NAMES project is a quilt comprised of individual blocks, each honoring loved ones who have died from Auto Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Its purpose is to illustrate of the enormity of the AIDS epidemic. With the number of panels now totaling over forty-four thousand, it is effective in its statement.

In 1989, Susan Shie of Wooster, Ohio initiated a project called Green Quilts in which artists were encouraged to create art quilts with messages of hope and healing for the earth. The Green Quilts project purpose was “to create healing energy for the Earth and all its life forms” and the quilts that were made in this genre were photographed for the archives, but kept by the creating artists. This use of quilts as a forum for expressing overwhelming social concerns is not new in Ohio. Quilts and other fiber art forms have been used as forums for political expression for hundreds of years, including the 1876 Ohio Crusade Quilt, which was made in an effort to reform society by ending alcohol abuse.
It becomes evident as we examine the history of quilting in the United States in general, and in Ohio specifically, that the Art Quilt Movement of the late-twentieth century was a natural progression of events in American history. It was prompted by technological advancements, societal advancements for women, and varied cultural influences. It is for these reasons that the desire to meet key people in today’s art quilting environment arose in me. I had the motive, means, and opportunity to personally interact with key Art Quilt Movement participants, and I took it. The next step of the process was to assemble a group of people to interview that would provide me with insights to the art quilt world. Those people are presented in Chapter III.

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1 Robert Shaw, Quilts: A Living Tradition (Hong Kong: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1995), 7.


5 Ibid, 52.


7 Clark, Knepper and Ronsheim, 52.

8 Ibid, 60.

9 Ibid, 60.

11 Ibid, 52.


13 Clark, Knepper and Ronsheim, 61.


15 Clark, Knepper and Ronsheim, 62.


17 Clark, Knepper, and Ronsheim, 161.


20 Ibid, 28.

21 Ibid, 10.

22 Clark, Knepper and Ronsheim, 81.


27 Clark, Knepper and Ronsheim, 162.


30 http://www.oac.state.oh.us/aboutOAC/default.asp, April 1, 2005.

31 Albacete, D’Atri and Reeves, 42.


35 Albacete, D’Atri and Reeves, 10.


41 McMorris and Kile, 49.


51 Clark, Knepper and Ronsheim, 131.


53 Clark, Knepper and Ronsheim, 156.

CHAPTER III

PARTICIPATING ART QUILTERS AND QUILT HISTORIANS

Ohio is an ideal place to conduct research on the subject of art quilting. In Ohio, we find some of the most influential people in the quilt revival of the 1970s, and people who continue to make significant contributions to today’s quilting world. The fabric artists of Ohio have explored old techniques in new ways, making them trailblazers in the field. Because the state is so rich in art quilters, both historically and currently, this research project is well suited to my Ohio location.

I approached this research with particular questions in mind. As an art quilt teacher myself, I wanted to know what I could do to reach students. At the time this research was begun, I was teaching fiber arts at the University of Akron. Because I knew that adults were readily registering for fiber arts classes in Ohio’s private sector, I wanted to know what was done to generate such interest in the subject, hoping that it would prove useful in a university setting. A look at the enrollment figures of just two of the fiber arts educational venues available in Ohio illustrates the point.

The *Crow Timber Frame Barn* offers two, five-day workshops each week of each teaching session. A student can only enroll in only one class per week. Nancy Crow’s class is always one of the options. For spring 2005, the workshops were scheduled from April 18 through May 27. The fee for each of the five-day classes is...
$625 for tuition and meals. It is exclusive of accommodations and transportation. By March 1, 2005, three of the eight classes offered were already full.²

*Quilt Surface Design Symposium*, founded by Nancy Crow, is another venue in Ohio that offers classes to art quilters. The summer set of symposium classes is divided into four sessions which will run from June 11 through June 24, 2005. Sessions one and three offer two-day classes, and each costs $200. Sessions two and four are five-day long classes, and each costs $450. These registration fees are exclusive of any student, class, or lab fees that an individual teacher may charge, as well as accommodations, meals, and transportation. A student may register for any number of classes. As of March 1, 2005, seven of the twenty-nine classes were already full.³

I set out to find the reasons why these classes are so popular in the private sector. Questions that initially ran through my mind included “What are the processes by which fiber arts are taught successfully?” “How do these art quilt teachers make the slow, laborious subject of fiber arts attractive to students in a culture predominated by slick special effects, and immediate gratification?” “How are these teachers so successful at attracting students?” “What are the reasons people continue to make art quilts?”

I live in Hudson, Ohio, which is situated between the cities of Cleveland and Akron. I found it to be a convenient location from which to spearhead an investigation of the teaching strategies used by Ohio’s most famous and successful contemporary art quilters. I devised a list of potential art quilt teachers. It was not difficult to identify the artists who might be interviewed, because one has only to open an art-quilt journal or magazine to see their names over and over again. The list included: Françoise Barnes,

All these quilters are generally well regarded not only in Ohio, but on a national level. I contacted most of them by email, and I was able to arrange interviews with five of the renowned quilt artists who still live in Ohio and also teach fiber arts. Presented in the order in which they were interviewed they are: Vikki Pignatelli, Susan Shie, David Walker, Elaine Plogman, and Nancy Crow. The participants, all of whom agreed to be identified, have credentials that speak for themselves, and will illustrate how rich Ohio is in contemporary quilting.

**Vikki Pignatelli**

Vikki Pignatelli learned to quilt as an adult, but before that, while she was a stay-at-home mother, portrait painter, bread dough sculptor, and doll maker. One day, her sister convinced her to take a traditional quilting class, and she began to quilt. Soon afterwards, her husband was diagnosed with kidney cancer. The trauma that came with that diagnosis took her work into the realm of art quilts. From then on, the focus of her work shifted from making pretty quilts, to making inspirational quilts. Her work now possesses an expressive, emotional quality that has been appreciated by many. Her husband was successful in his battle with cancer, but her work continues to possess an intimate, spiritual inclination.4

Pignatelli’s work, most appreciated for her layered curves, has been featured in *Quilters Newsletter Magazine* several times, and has been awarded eighteen prizes from national and international shows. Two of these awards include first place in the Art
Large category from the prestigious *International Quilt Festival /Houston* in Houston, Texas, and the Best Color and Design award from the 33rd *Annual National Quilting Association Quilt Show*. She authored a book in 2001 titled *Quilting Curves* that illustrates her trademark layered curves technique.⁵

One of Pignatelli’s greatest contributions to quilting comes from her founding of the *Sacred Threads Quilt Exhibition* in 2001. The idea for the show was born from the disappointment of receiving a rejection letter from the *International Quilt Festival/Houston* for one of her favorite quilts. The design for the quilt had come to her as an inspiration, and she believed that the judges had failed to understand it. It seemed to her that the judges had treated the work so clinically, that they failed to see its message.

This experience led Pignatelli to examine existing quilt shows. It was her belief that no show existed for quilters to show work of a spiritual, healing, or grieving nature. She had herself started making art quilts because of the pain she suffered during her husband’s battle with cancer, and she knew other quilters that were making quilts as a release for emotionally difficult life experiences as well. The process of making quilts for the purposes of finding solace, comfort and emotional healing, classified as “emollient quilting,” is a starting point for many quilters.⁶

Pignatelli believed that traditional quilt shows are too concerned with workmanship for such quilts, and that art quilt shows are too concerned with the technical aspects of composition for such work. She wanted *Sacred Threads* to be a safe, non-judgmental forum for people to show the quilts they have created for reasons of
emotional expression and release, with themes of spirituality, inspiration, healing, and grief. For these reasons, the works are not judged, and concerns of negativity and disapproval have been deliberately removed. It is a show that values expression without imposing external judgments. *Sacred Threads* is held every other year in Reynoldsburg, Ohio, with the 2005 exhibition scheduled for *June 11-24.*

Pignatelli teaches all over the country, and even in remote parts of the world, but creates her own work in the studio inside her home. I interviewed her at her home in Reynoldsburg, Ohio, on January 24, 2004.

**Susan Shie**

Susan Shie was born in the small town of Orrville, Ohio, and moved to the also-small town of Smithville at the age of five years old. Shie is unique in her approach to art quilting for a few different reasons. For one, she was born with Albinism, and because of that, is legally blind. This poor eyesight resulted in her being enrolled as a child into a specialized school in the relatively large city of Akron, Ohio. Every day, she was driven to this racially integrated school, the sort of place that was virtually non-existent in Smithville. The result of that experience is that she grew up with a hybrid of small-town and big-city experiences, with a unique social conceptualization.

A lack of depth perception, which might be perceived as an obstacle for an artist to overcome, is actually considered by Shie to be one of the reasons she has been so successful at creating art. While other aspiring artists have had to be taught to see convergent lines and shadow when seeking to portray perspective, Shie was already acutely aware of these phenomena, and used them for the purposes of getting around, or
riding a bike. It was naturally included into her art even at a very young age. She believes this “deficiency” has actually served to advance her work as an artist.

When she was a painting major in graduate school at Kent State University, she made the decision to take her painting in a different direction. For the purposes of convenience, she stopped stretching her canvas to a frame. Once the canvas was released from the frame and was in her hand, she immediately saw the canvas as fabric. That association led her to the desire to sew the fabric, and so she switched to painting on muslin, and then sewing on those paintings. She called her master’s thesis work “Diary Quilt Paintings,” and graduated with a master of fine arts degree from Kent State University in 1986, placing her at the forefront of the Art Quilt Movement. She has been awarded countless prizes, awards, and fellowships over the years, both domestically and internationally. A complete list of these awards is available on her website.8

Shie’s mother taught her to sew when she was a child. She is an accomplished seamstress, and worked for a while with her husband James Acord to make custom leather clothing. At first, she sewed perfect stitches on her paintings, but found that the technique resulted in the stitching not showing. Because she wanted it to show, and because she wanted her work to be more expressive, she altered her sewing technique to a larger, more primitive stitch. She knew this technique would lead observers to think that she could not sew, but she made the conscious decision to let that go, and do what the work needed, rather than what strangers might prefer. After a work is painted and stitched, it is then typically adorned with beading, and inked phrases and drawings. Her
husband often collaborates on her work with his own contributions to the heavily-embellished pieces.

Shie’s influence does not end with her art work. She is a member of several quilt associations, and founder of both the “Green Quilts” and the “Wayne Artists Group Effort.” She teaches at locations all over the country, but also offers five-day workshops at the home-based Turtle Moon Studios that she and her husband share. I interviewed her at her home in Wooster, Ohio, on February 6, 2004.

David Walker

Art quilting is a second career for David Walker. He started out on the path of a seminarian, but left that route to become a language arts and religion teacher. He taught seventh-grade children for twenty-two years.\textsuperscript{9}

Walker was thirty-nine years old when he made his first quilt. It started out as a hobby, but it quickly took over his life, and in 1981 he made the decision to become a full-time quilt artist and teacher. Walker has worked with some famous art quilt teachers, such as Nancy Crow and Jan Myers-Newberry, but is a self-taught quilt artist and photographer. He describes his art as “personal narrative abstractions” that are created when designs and themes emerge from his inner self and resultantly flow into the fabric.\textsuperscript{10}

His work is typified by machine-appliqué, circles, and vivid colors. His work has been exhibited in museums and galleries all over the world, and is widely admired. It can be found in the collections of the Kroger Company, Cincinnati Bell, and Fidelity Investment Corporation. His work is also included in the permanent collection of the
Ohio Craft Museum, Columbus, Ohio.\textsuperscript{11} He has published articles in both \textit{Fiberarts} and \textit{Art/Quilt} magazines. He hosts a webpage that is “one of the most elegant quilt-related web sites on the net” and sells both his quilts and photographs from there.\textsuperscript{12} He even provides a website design service from his homepage to visual artists looking to establish an internet presence for themselves and their work.\textsuperscript{13}

Walker is a philosophical man, and offers meditations to both his students, and visitors to his homepage. His webpage is ripe with reflective thoughts from both himself, and great thinkers that he admires. He even addresses points of contention he does not particularly enjoy, such as the age-old art versus craft debate.

He is probably most respected, however, as an art quilt \textit{teacher}. He has taught classes all over the world that focus on machine appliqué and surface embellishment techniques, as well as on the spiritual aspects of creating art. His teaching method is all about creating an atmosphere in which students can think about their work, and form a community within the classroom. He arranges the tables to allow for the formation of groups, and the tables never face him. He uses music conducive to instilling an atmosphere of creativity and safety.

Walker’s teaching style has made him one of the most sought after art quilt teachers in the country, and he maintained a famously heavy teaching and traveling schedule for years. Walker recently retired from teaching for health reasons, but is still actively pursuing his own artistic creations. I interviewed him at his home in Cincinnati, Ohio, on March 25, 2004.
Elaine Plogman

Elaine Plogman is an academically-trained artist with a Bachelor of Arts degree in art from Edgecliff College (now part of the University of Cincinnati.) She worked with all different media in college, but did not pursue fiber until after graduation. Weaving was her first fiber medium, and she always had an interest in sewing and working with fabric. Eventually, she found weaving to be too tedious and demanding, in that weaving requires a long-term commitment to one design.14

Plogman has been a part of the Ohio art quilt movement from the outset. As early as the mid 1970s, she was experimenting with non-representational, non-traditional fabric pieces. When Penny McMorris put out a call for entries for her 1976 contemporary quilt show called Ohio Patchwork ’76, Plogman submitted her work and it was included in the exhibition. Other now famous, groundbreaking quilt artists included in that show were Françoise Barnes, Nancy Crow, Wenda von Wiese, and Judi Warren (Blaydon). Plogman only attended the show because she had a few pieces in it, but once she got there she was surprised at what she saw. She had been unaware that this sort of work was going on until she attended the show herself in Bowling Green, Ohio. She was shocked to see other people working in this new approach that she had been experimenting with herself.

Her quilts have been accepted into national and international competitions for as long as she has been sewing them. She was included in the first ever Quilt National in 1979, and she has won first prize in the internationally acclaimed American Quilter’s Society Quilt Show and Contest in Paducah, Kentucky, twice, in the years 1994 and 2001.
In 2003 she was featured in a show presented by Ohio State University titled *Ohio Pioneers of the Art Quilt*. She teaches both design and technique classes, although she has not done much teaching as of late. I interviewed her at her home in Montgomery, Ohio, on March 27, 2004.

**Nancy Crow**

Nancy Crow was born in Loudonville, Ohio, the youngest of eight children. She was exposed to art as a young child, and remembers an appreciation for color and pattern from an early age. She earned a bachelor’s degree in Fine Arts in 1965, and a master’s degree in Ceramics and Weaving in 1969, both from The Ohio State University. In 1974, she and her husband moved to Athens, Ohio, and she did some weaving with a textile guild that she joined there. At some point, a few of the members decided to start making quilts for no particular reason. By 1976 Crow realized that she loved quiltmaking, and that she much preferred designing with quilt piecing rather than weaving.\(^1\) She was a driving force behind the landmark *Quilt National* show held biennially in Athens, Ohio, since 1979. The show has grown since its inception to now include art quilts from all over the world.

Crow entered her work in Penny McMorris’s art quilt show *Ohio Patchwork ’76*, and her work was appreciated as being extraordinary from the start. Today, Crow is one of the most famous American art quilters there is. Her work is included in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian Institution, the American Craft Museum, and the Museum of American Folk Art, just to name a few. Certainly the art quilts she made,
and continues to make, are some of the most innovative ever produced, but her contribution to the quilt world however, goes well beyond that.

In 1986, Crow founded the Art Quilters’ Network. The association today consists of sixty members who meet twice a year for a three-day retreat in Columbus, Ohio. The group provides a non-competitive, supportive environment for new ideas, information, and sharing of most recent works.16

In addition to this, Crow founded the Quilt Surface Design Symposium in 1990. This program is an educational one in which teachers from all over the world give two- and/or five-day workshops in Columbus, Ohio. The symposium includes lectures, exhibits, design lessons, sewing techniques, surface design of fabric instruction, and the professional development of art quilt makers interested in advancing their careers.

Crow has also authored or co-authored four books pertaining to art quilts. Her books include Nancy Crow: Quilts and Influences, 1990; Nancy Crow: Work in Transition, 1992; Gradations: From the Studio of Nancy Crow, 1995; and Nancy Crow: Improvisational Quilts, 1995.17 In addition to these, she is currently working on a fifth book.

Crow has a 2400 square foot studio attached to her house on a ninety acre farm east of Columbus, Ohio, in which she offers classes to students. These classes are offered twice a year for a week at a time. Other teachers are also invited to teach, resulting in extensive workshops in several techniques of quilting, composition, and surface design. I interviewed her at her studio in Baltimore, Ohio, on May 15, 2004.
These are the five art quilt teachers I included in my research. As the study progressed, however, I thought it necessary to fill in some of the information from others who are intimately familiar with beginnings of the Art Quilt Movement in Ohio in the early 1970s. In the interviews with the quilt artists, two names kept coming up: Penny McMorris and Ricky Clark. Both of these women live in Ohio and were available for an interview. It was with great enthusiasm that I included their input and expertise into this research.

**Penny McMorris**

Penny McMorris, while not famous for her art quilts, is credited for the work she has done in promoting art quilting. In 1976, she organized a quilt show called *Ohio Patchwork ’76*. The show, which focused on contemporary quilts, exposed people all over Ohio to the work of a new generation of quilters. The show proved to be instrumental in kindling interest in modern quilts, and the quilting techniques that are widely used today.¹⁸

In 1981, McMorris hosted quilting television shows for the Public Broadcasting Service titled “Quilting I” and “Quilting II.” Each of these shows contained thirteen, thirty-minute episodes, and featured the work of many quilters, the history of quilting, quilting as art, and demonstrations of techniques. In 1992, McMorris produced and hosted the television series “The Great American Quilt,” also for PBS. Again there were thirteen, thirty-minute episodes in this series which focused on new looks at old quilt designs, interviews with experts, and appraising quilts.¹⁹
Also important in Penny’s contribution to quilting are the books she wrote. Her two books, *Crazy Quilts* and *The Art Quilt*, published in 1984 and 1986 respectively, are interesting and informative compilations of data regarding each quilt type. *Crazy Quilts* is a comprehensive look at the quilt style very popular with the Victorians of the late-nineteenth century. Quiltmakers of that time were known for their quilts made from random, irregularly-shaped pieces of (typically) silk fabric. These pieces were sewn together in unpredictable arrangements, with seams running in all different directions. Elaborate embroidery would then be stitched over top of the seams. This trend broke harshly with the traditional, cotton, geometrically-patterned quilts that came before, and was the reason they were dubbed “crazy.” They are sometimes referred to as the first art quilts.

McMorris’s book *The Art Quilt*, is another comprehensive analysis of its title subject. Together with Michael Kile, McMorris co-authored this book in 1986, which makes it one of the first books to appear on the subject. In this book, the authors thoroughly examined the cultural influences that set the stage for the quilt revival of the late-twentieth century, and it firmly established McMorris as an authority on the Art Quilt Movement.

In 1991, McMorris collaborated with her computer-programmer husband, Dean Neumann, to create the *Electric Quilt* computer program that is used to electronically design quilts. It was the first such program for designing quilts with the aid of computer software, and continues to be well regarded in the field, though there are now many market competitors. The program has been through two major upgrades since its
inception, and is now offered as version 3.0. *EQ3* has more quilt blocks, color palettes, and fabric selections than any of its competitors, and is the leading choice for computer-quilt design. The company is based in Bowling Green, Ohio, and I interviewed McMorris in her Electronic Quilt office on September 22, 2004.

**Ricky Clark**

I also had the pleasure of meeting with quilt historian Ricky Clark. She is not an art quilter, but her research and writings on the subject of quilting have contributed significantly to the strong Ohio continuing tradition of quiltmaking. At the symposium of the Tenth Annual Firelands Association of the Visual Arts, Gayle Pritchard introduced Clark as a “highly-respected quilt historian interested in quilts as cultural documents” and she quoted Cleveland’s newspaper, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, which called Clark “one of the forces behind a major quilt revival.”

In 1979, Clark was instrumental in the creation of the Firelands Association for the Visual Arts (FAVA) in Oberlin, Ohio. FAVA is an independent, non-profit art organization dedicated to the visual arts. Exhibits are open to a wide variety of styles and media, including quilts. Clark was also pivotal in the creation of FAVA’s biennial show of art quilts called *Artist as Quiltmaker*. The exhibition is held on the alternate years of the *Quilt National* show so that there is a venue for people to see the latest art quilts every year in Ohio. Clark continues to serve as its Curatorial Consultant, and she also works as an Affiliate Scholar at Oberlin College.

In addition to these achievements, Clark was instrumental in the Ohio state quilt documentation project. As has been done in several states, the organization hosted a
series of Quilt Discovery Days throughout the state. The public was invited to bring quilts to be examined, recorded, and photographed.\textsuperscript{23} This arduous task resulted in the documentation of over seven thousand quilts and the resulting data was housed at the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus, which makes information on privately-owned quilts available to researchers. Books that resulted form the project include \textit{Quilts in Community: Ohio’s Traditions}, published in 1991.\textsuperscript{24}

Clark is a prolific author. Her exhibition catalog \textit{Quilts and Carousels: Folk Art in the Firelands}, appeared in 1983, and her book \textit{Quilted Gardens: Floral Quilts of the Nineteenth Century} in 1994.\textsuperscript{25} She has also published numerous articles for scholarly journals, and an important chapter on quilts in \textit{Making the American Home: Middle-Class Women & Domestic Material Culture 1840-1940} in 1988.\textsuperscript{26} All this has resulted in her reputation as a leading quilt historian in Ohio. I interviewed her at her home in Oberlin, Ohio, on November 5, 2004.

Judging from the experiences of this group of people, it was clear to me that they offered an enlightened view of the Art Quilt Movement. What an extraordinary group of people to have willing and able to meet with me. I knew the information they could offer would be plentiful, and enrich my interest in art quilts so I proceeded to interview them. Each of these people offered a unique perspective to art quilting in Ohio, and even more information than I had hoped for was uncovered. The results of those interviews are presented in Chapter IV.

\textsuperscript{1}M.J. Albacete and Sharon D’Atri and Jane Reeves, \textit{Ohio Quilts: A Living Tradition} (Canton: Lowry Lithograph, 1981), 41.


4 All un-cited information was taken from my interview with Vikki Pignatelli on January 24, 2004.


7 All un-cited information was taken from my interview with Susan Shie on February 6, 2004.


9 All un-cited information was taken from my interview with David Walker on March 25, 2004.


11 Artist’s biography at:


14 All un-cited information was taken from my interview with Elaine Plogman on March 27, 2004.


17 Video of FAVA quilt symposium, 1994.

18 All un-cited information was taken from my interview with Penny McMorris on September 22, 2004.

19 This information was provided by Penny McMorris in written correspondence on February 22, 2005.


22 Video of FAVA quilt symposium, 1994.


24 Ricky Clark, George W. Knepper and Ellice Ronsheim, Quilts in Community: Ohio’s Traditions 19th and 20th Century Quilts, Quiltmakers & Traditions (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991).


CHAPTER IV

ART QUILT PROFESSIONALS

I approached this research looking to find the key to each quilter’s success as a teacher. I wanted to find out what methods Ohio’s art quilt teachers use in order to successfully convey the techniques and concepts of art quilting to students, so that I could better my own teaching.

The questions I asked began by establishing biographical information, but from there, the questions allowed for flexibility in information gathering. Because of this, I garnered answers to my questions that I did not expect, and uncovered concerns and issues involved in art quilt teaching of which I was not even aware.

The participants of this study provided insights to the art quilt profession that are valuable. They shared with me the complexities of a seemingly stress-free occupation. Although each art quilt teacher has his or her own methods of dealing with the challenges of the job, the challenges themselves come with the territory, and are common to all the art quilt teachers with whom I spoke.

The Nature of the Art Quilt Profession

Each of these art quilt teachers has developed a system for dealing with the challenges of the profession, and it is these techniques that lend themselves to each artist’s success as a teacher, thus illuminating the keys of a successful art quilt teacher.
One topic that resounded throughout every interview was the demands made on each artist’s time. Artists not only create art, but also enter competitive shows, maintain websites, sell their art, teach, and give presentations. One of the things they all agreed upon was the desire for more creative time in their schedules. Each quilter with whom I spoke disliked the time they need to spend scheduling, responding to correspondence, and tackling the mound of paperwork that comes with entering shows. Many of them are faced with the tasks associated with maintaining a website to stay connected to students and buyers as well. It seems the more famous you become for creating art, the less time you have to make it. This is a frustration for many, and each works to strike a balance. The new job of business executive that is flung upon each successful artist is an unwelcome one, and considered to be contrary to the job of artist each quilter already holds.

The dichotomy of these two jobs was expressed by several quilters. To demonstrate this conflict of jobs, the artists explained the nature of each. First, the job of creating of art was described by everyone with whom I spoke to be a centering process. By that they mean that while they create art, they find a focusing of the mind and a release of emotional stress that settles over them. Susan Shie told me that “when I sew, I feel my body centering . . . and its coming into a very relaxed state.” Nancy Crow put it this way, “Centering means that you have come into your workspace and you’ve been able to relax and you’re able to reach deep. That to me is centering.”

To the contrary, paperwork and administrative duties are de-centering for these artists, that is, disruptive, uncomfortable, distracting, or unpleasant. As these artists become more acknowledged in the field, they are obligated to deal with a tremendous
amount of paperwork. Doing so seems to erode those qualities and activities that made
the artist successful in the first place. It seems that once the artist has successfully
balanced colors, he or she is faced with the challenge of balancing creative and business
time.

One of the sources of administrivia that faces quilt artists is the task of filling
out quilt show applications. This is time-consuming work, but it is through these shows
that an artist’s work is noticed and potentially sold. Some feel it is imperative to enter
quilt shows, and others do not. For example, Vikki Pignatelli finds them invaluable to
pursuing her career, whereas David Walker, a more firmly-established art quilt
professional, finds that competing in quilt shows detracts from his work.3 Elaine
Plogman enjoys entering quilt shows, but admits that is most likely true because her work
is accepted.4 She went on to say that the critique sheets used by the judges of these
shows are “ridiculous,” and they annoy her. She says judges have an inadequate amount
of time for the kinds of analyses they are expected to make, resulting in uniformed
comments.

Balancing these busy schedules then becomes one of the most important skills
each artist learns, and each has developed a personal formula for portioning out their
time. For example, in order to accomplish all the work with which Vikki Pignatelli is
faced, she keeps to a schedule. January, February, and March each year are dedicated to
creating new work. The months of April through November are filled with teaching,
traveling, and entering her work into quilt shows. December is reserved as a month of
rest.5
Nancy Crow has found it best to schedule her work daily. She makes it a point to start her day in the studio. This is when she is most fresh, and the work energizes her still more. She finds that if she works first at administrative duties, it takes away all her energy, and then she cannot find the drive to do the studio work. She also addressed the question of entering competitions. Entering competitions can forward a career, but Crow sees what she says are too many people who let it affect the resultant work. She believes that the work should be created to the best of one’s ability, and that trying to imagine what judges may think takes an artist outside of him/herself. It detracts from the work.

**Evolution of the Art Quilt Profession**

How nice it was to have the privilege of speaking with so many innovators of the art quilting movement of the 1970s. I was privileged to hear the stories of the early art quilt movement from several of the participants themselves. Each one of these pioneers has fond memories of the early days. Nancy Crow says the early days were a “very pure period of the movement because all the money aspects had not entered into it. Almost everyone was self-taught.” Indeed, many participants in the movement had college degrees in fine arts, but were trained in other media.6

The interviewees also commented frequently on the significant differences in the art quilt world of today, and that of the 1970s. These changes include availability of materials, knowledge, and communication among quilters. When asked to discuss the changes between then and now, invariably the narrator responded with a resounding “Fabric choices!” One of the biggest challenges for quilt artists of the 1970s was finding fabric that was suitable for their art. Fabric producers of the day were catering to traditional quilters who predominately used small-print calicos, resulting in very little
range of pattern or color. In order to make bolder, more modern statements, the new quilt artists often preferred to work with solids and dark colors which were very difficult to find. They often resorted to dyeing their own fabrics, or using the technical backs (wrong sides) of those produced commercially.

Equally important are the changes we have noted taking place in quilting books, magazines, and scholarly journals. In the early seventies, only a few current books on quiltmaking existed. The quality of these books was often low with crude, matte, black-and-white illustrations. Today’s publications on the other hand are abundant, slick, and colorful.

Equipment and supplies have also changed dramatically. Sewing machines of the 1970s were primitive by today’s standards. Modern machines by comparison are more versatile and easier to use. Contemporary sewing threads are also much different than those available thirty years ago. Today’s threads come in variegated, metallic, fluorescent, and invisible varieties. Other modern products such as Wonder Under® (an adhesive that has made appliqué a simple matter even for beginners) have transformed quiltmaking dramatically. Even the batting used between the layers of the quilt has improved tremendously over the years.

The internet and email have also shaped quilting art by putting quilters in touch with each other in a way they have never enjoyed before. Early art quilters were isolated, and often did not even know other people were working with fabric in that same ways that they were. Today, one can post a technique question or problem on an internet bulletin board, and potentially receive several solutions to the dilemma from all over the world.

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Another interesting observation for how quilt art is different today from the early days is how the artists have merged with the industry. For example, Michael James, Nancy Crow, and Terrie Mangat all have developed their own fabric lines. Many of them have published books. In the early days, artists disassociated themselves from the business side of things. Penny McMorris felt a pang of guilt when she and her husband started up their company, Electric Quilt®. She was worried that she had sacrificed a portion of the purity she had enjoyed as a curator and proponent in the early days, and traded it for a source of income. This difficulty in getting used to the new art quilt world was a feeling expressed by all of Ohio’s pioneers of the art quilt movement with whom I spoke. There is a nostalgia coming from these artists and art proponents for the days when art quilting was not the dollar-driven enterprise that it is today.

There were no teachers or symposiums on the subject back in the 1970s either. Today’s quilting world has all these things, and even has researchers dedicated to this field. Ohio quilt researchers such as Virginia Gunn and Ricky Clark today provide us with scholarly articles and books, and publish in quilt-research journals such as Uncoverings.

As McMorris told me, “Back then [during the 1970s] it was a new frontier, and it was really exciting, welcoming, and inviting, and now, it’s all about taking classes. To me, so much of it [today] is about shopping and community, and it isn’t so much about the end product.” She is referring to how “incredibly fun” it is to fabric shop. The community created by quilters getting together and sharing is a large part of the reason people have always enjoyed quilting. In addition, today’s craft-supplying corporations spend billions of advertising dollars on quilters annually to encourage this
shopping. To McMorris, this phenomenon has taken the “art” out of the art quilt movement, and she would like to see emerging quilt artists pursue fewer market-driven ideals, and more classical arts education.

Art Quilters as Teachers

While artists would love to spend all of their work time creating, they often teach, especially if they are self-supporting. Developing a steady source of income from the creation of art can be elusive. It is helpful therefore, to create a source of income that is reliable. Each of the teachers with whom I met added teaching to their occupation which, among other things, served to supplement their income.

Each of the quilters with whom I spoke said that teaching can be a greatly enjoyable experience despite the rigors of the teaching-circuit life. “I love watching people get it,” said Vikki Pignatelli. All these quilters expressed a great satisfaction and inspiration from working with students, and noted that it is a personally beneficial experience to teach art quilting.

I was frequently told how eager their students are. Vikki Pignatelli said, “If you go into a school as a teacher, you have kids that don’t want to be there, but when you’re a quilt teacher, they are there because they want to be there.” These students fit into a general category for all of the teachers. Typically, they are women. “In fourteen years, I’ve had [about] fifteen men; never two at a time,” said Walker. They are often people who discovered a passion for this type of work later in life, with ages ranging anywhere from early forties to late sixties. The family circumstances of these students have changed, and time for creative exploration is more available to them now. Sometimes students are highly educated in other fields, and often they have had successful careers in
other fields. Some of these women have always wanted to be artists, but were not able to be by their family context. They are motivated, and a pleasure to teach. Several of the teachers told me that the students who come into the class with preconceived ideas of how to quilt are more difficult to teach than those students whose minds are open to new ideas.

In order to ensure a successful teaching experience, it is important that students connect with the teacher that offers the specific lessons important to him or her. Students and teachers find each other through competitions that the teachers enter, by word of mouth, and on the websites these teachers maintain. Some of the quilters I interviewed are sought out for their design expertise, some have popular teaching methods, and some are noted for their construction methods.

Nancy Crow is typically sought after by students wishing to learn design. She described herself as “a tough teacher” with students who come to class prepared to work hard. She assigns work to her students in such a way as to keep their work as personal, and original as possible, and is adamant about presenting the material to students in a professional, organized manner. She believes the best design exercises are timed, because without time limits, she says, people tend never to get the work done.

Susan Shie says her students are typically looking for a teacher to help them loosen up, both artistically and emotionally. Aware of this, she creates a safe environment for her students by playing music, having dance contests to break down personal barriers, and making efforts to convince students that they are safe. With safety, she says, comes the self-permission to create. She believes this sense of safety is one of the appeals of creating art quilts, and is important to the physical health of the quilter.
She told me that there is a “healing energy to sewing . . . and that is why so many people quilt; because it is one place in their lives where they can unwind, and they can feel safe . . . The state where you feel contented is when you’re healing. It is such an oversimplified concept, and yet how many people can say they’re contented?”

Shie encourages her students to incorporate meaningful objects into their work to be used as metaphors. In many of her own pieces, she has used kitchen tools (colanders, wooden spoons, etcetera) as representations for nurturing and loving. She believes there are aspects of emotional well-being associated with the creating of fiber art, and is “adamant” about discussing them with her students.

Vikki Pignatelli’s students, on the other hand, come specifically to learn a technique for sewing curves. Sewing a curved edge is significantly more challenging than sewing a straight line for many amateurs. Pignatelli is known for the process she developed for sewing curves that is easier to perform than traditional methods. This method for sewing curves is presented in her book *Quilting Curves.* Therefore her students are not looking for emotional guidance, but rather technical instruction, and she deliberately keeps her classes trained toward the mechanical. “I try to be very careful in how I word things so that I don’t come off as preachy,” she said.

All the teachers remarked on the importance of finding one’s center before being successful at the creation of art. In order to teach students the skills of creative expression, these teachers express to their students the necessity of centering, and eliminating the outside world from their thoughts as they work. Focus and concentration are lessons they teach their students. When teaching her students, Susan Shie encourages each of them to become a young child again, and to create art as they did when they were
five or six years old. She believes this allows her students to be more intuitive in their work. She wants them to let go of the self-judging, and to make something because they want to have that thing, (she provided the example of a child drawing a dog because she wants a dog.) David Walker creates an atmosphere that is conducive to going inside oneself. He fosters the formation of small groups within the class, selects music that sets a mood, and starts each class with a meditation. I asked Nancy Crow what a teacher can do to help a student find his or her center, and she told me that it is up to the student to find his or her center. She said that different students have different issues, and if they fail to compartmentalize distractions and worries, and keep them out of the workspace, these distractions can kill artistic ability, and the work will die.

Even with all the inspiration and learning that enriches the lives of teachers, there are frequently downsides to instructing students. For one thing, art quilt teaching commonly requires a teacher to travel to where the students are. All the teachers with whom I spoke teach in cities other than their own, and travel becomes a large part of their time obligations. This further muddles the artists’ already-busy schedules. Just devising a plan for transporting one’s supplies and quilts to each class can be difficult. Vikki Pignatelli often drives to distant teaching venues as she has found it to be the least cumbersome way to transport her “trunk show.”

This issue of traveling the country in order to connect with students is associated with other problems as well. One such obstacle that traveling teachers encounter is the challenge of establishing an environment that is conducive to teaching and learning in each and every facility they visit. Sometimes the rooms with which teachers are provided are uncomfortable, as well as inadequate, in terms of electrical
outlets, suitable lighting, and appropriate table heights. This makes the job of teaching even more taxing. These non-conducive environments led Susan Shie and Nancy Crow to devise classrooms in their home studios. This gives them back the time they lose traveling, as well as removes the problems of potentially unsuitable teaching conditions when traveling to a new city to teach. Nancy Crow also took this a step further by establishing the Quilt Surface Design Symposium, an art quilt teaching facility which was created in part to guarantee both teachers and students with a venue known for its satisfactory facilities.

David Walker has wrestled with the teaching stresses dilemma for years as well, and has come to a difficult decision. He recently found it necessary to remove himself from his famously busy teaching schedule altogether. He has jumped off the teaching circuit to make time for himself, and to pay more attention to his own physical and mental health.

There is yet another aspect of art quilt teaching that was uncovered during the research. It seems that when a person teaches the same thing over and over again, his/her own work may cease to advance. Students are learning new processes and techniques, but the artists are not. When I asked David Walker if teaching helped him creatively, he answered “Yes and no. It did because it gave me a lot of inspiration from the students, but no, it didn’t allow the work to expand very much . . . . I find that when you teach a workshop twenty-five times per year with those same techniques, that you’re not really moving out.” Susan Shie sees this balance of teaching and stagnating differently: “I have these students working in my style, so another thing that is actually good for me, is that I am challenged to constantly keep my work fresh, and keep evolving, so that I don’t
become the person left behind.” So it seems expanding one’s repertoire is another issue with which successful art quilt teachers are faced.

Concerns for the Future of the Art Quilt

The training of emerging art quilters was brought up several times during the course of this research, and Penny McMorris added a unique perspective to this topic. She is not coming at it as a professional quiltmaker, but as a curator. McMorris was the curator for Owens-Corning Fiberglass Corporation’s art collection when she became interested in art quilts in the early 1970s. Consequently, she has an expert eye for the work that is shown, and offers quilt artists an objective opinion.

I asked Penny McMorris if she thinks that quilts are not taken seriously in the museum world because they are typically made by women in a craft medium traditionally predominated by women. She answered with an emphatic “No.” Rather, she attributes this occurrence to a lack of formal art training among art quilters. She says that the artists who win prizes at quilt shows are often not acknowledged by museums because their work is not fine art, it is decorative art, and the two are not comparable. “I don’t think it’s the medium, and I don’t think it is because we are women,” she said.

McMorris explained that the people today who are making a good living at quiltmaking, and winning lots of prizes, typically have no formal training in the arts. She attributes this circumstance to being the biggest reason art quilts are so often excluded from the collections of serious art collectors. She would like to see more formal training for today’s art quilters, and for them to be removed from studying other quilts entirely. She said; “I’d like to see them [contemporary art quilters] not looking at quilts at all. They wonder ‘Who is winning prizes at this show? What are they doing? What
techniques are they using? What are the judges looking for? Maybe I should be doing that.
I think it is so intimidating to see all these other quilts; it’s just got to be.” She
advises today’s art quilters to “Keep your vision clear, have blinders on, and concentrate
on your own work rather than everybody else’s.”

All of the participants in the early years of the art quilt movement with whom I
spoke said that the excessive exposure to other people’s art quilts has been harmful to
many of the art quilts currently being produced. As a result, a significant percentage of
the work is derivative in style, and lacking in originality. They believe this situation
damages the art quilt’s potential longevity, and its place in the world of art.

Nancy Crow has concerns that stem from what she sees happening from an
educational standpoint as well. She sees a very small percentage of art quilt teachers
today who thoughtfully develop their coursework and present the subject like a professor
in a collegiate textile department would. By that she means that teachers need to go
through all the experiences themselves, learn from their experiences, and then draw
lessons out of that. She believes the lessons of figure/ground relationships, contrast, and
complementary color relationships are needed in the education of today’s artists, just as
they were in the educations of the first art quilters, yet she knows of very few practicing
art quilt teachers who approach a class in this manner. Crow explains; “The rest of the
whole contemporary quilt world is basically women and men caught up in what I call
gimmick teaching . . . [which] is almost always grounded in product. What am I going
to sell? I’m going to teach something that will help me sell something.”

Crow’s concern for educating students in classical design fundamentals comes
from observing the challenges with which her students struggle, and from the
overwhelming requests she receives for this information from her students. Susan Shie also mentioned student requests for technical art lessons on topics such as receding and approaching colors, and line and form. She says when she offers this information to her students, they take copious notes; “they love it, so I give it to them.” Shie notes that some students do not feel satisfied with a class, or that they have not gotten their money’s worth, if she does not give them the technical training of traditional art theory.

It seems an evening spent in a church basement is not an adequate forum for such an education. Even the five days offered at venues such as Quilt Surface Design Symposium may not be enough time to thoroughly explore the subject. Crow told me she wishes she could have more time with her students. “I would love to have a whole quarter or semester with a group, and see what I could get out of them,” she said.

Nancy Crow and Susan Shie both expressed further concerns regarding education. These concerns were based on teaching students to adequately see the world around them. Shie asked, “How does one teach a generation of people who have never seen a black and white television to see in gray scale?” Crow’s concerns went beyond that. She is bothered by a lack of ideas among her students. Many of her students struggle with what they are going to do; they cannot think of anything to make. This comes as a surprise to her because she told me she could never create all the ideas in her head if she lived to a ripe old age. (David Walker said the same thing.)

In 1994, The Firelands Association of the Visual Arts (FAVA) held their biennial art quilt show. In celebration of its tenth such show, FAVA organized a symposium for the discussion of art quilting. The symposium, moderated by Gayle Pritchard, included a discussion among some of the most respected quilt authorities on
the subject of art quilting, and encompassed its past, present, and future. Ricky Clark, Affiliate Scholar at Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, and renowned Ohio quilt scholar, was among the quilt authorities, and she made an important point on the subject of quilting education. When Pritchard asked participants to speculate on where the art quilt will be in twenty years, Clark said “I hope it’s going to academic training in quilting.” She believed that with “a graduate school in quilts, we’d get better.” She said that teachers need to incorporate the study of textiles into their lessons because it is not just art we are looking to teach, it is quilting art. To illustrate this, she pointed out that a wood sculptor must be thoroughly familiar with wood in order to be successful. To her that means that a textile artist should be thoroughly familiar with textiles in order to successful. Without a working knowledge of textiles, no one will be able to intelligently discuss the work. Glendora Hutson, a quilter who works in a traditionally-patterned manner, recently agreed with this sentiment when she said in a Quilters’ Newsletter Magazine article that she “still believes in teaching the basics [of traditional quilting] so students will have the skills, background, and respect for the tradition that fosters the independence to depart from the tradition with validity.”

This discussion at the FAVA symposium also illuminated another concern of art quilt professionals. Risë Nagen, an art quilter, expressed her feeling that the term “art quilt” is killing the field. She said the term is too limiting and exclusive, and because of that people are showing their quilts in mixed media forums rather than in quilt shows, even art quilt shows. She believed that what we are left with is a field that is shrinking in upon itself; getting smaller and smaller, resulting in the same-looking work being shown year after year in quilt shows.
When art quilts first appeared on the scene in the early 1970s, they were referred to as “contemporary” or “new.” Eventually, these terms were found to be lacking, as they did not distinguish the quilts from traditionally stitched contemporary quilts. The term “art quilt” was coined in 1989 in a discussion of Art Quilt Network members in Columbus, Ohio. The term was intended to differentiate the quilts of this new style, from the traditional quilts of yesteryear, in both form and function. It was used to create a sphere for these new works that are viewed vertically rather than laid on beds. The participants wanted a term that effectively removed their work from the realm of craft, and placed it into the world of fine art.

The term seemed to work for a while, but if there is one thing on which all the artists I spoke with can agree, it is that the term no longer serves. The term art quilt has not elevated the quilt so much as it has estranged those who make them from each other. Numerous people are put off by the term, and think it suggests a snobbish superiority on the part of art quilters toward traditional quilters. I did not, however, hear a single contemporary quilt artist I interviewed express this opinion. Clearly, quilters are failing to communicate among themselves, exactly the problem that arises with a lack of academic training in textile studies that Ricky Clark predicted back in 1994. This failure to communicate effectively renders quilters ineffectual as they present themselves to each other, and to the world at large.

From its inception in the early 1970s, the art quilt has endured its fair share of growing pains. While development can be painful at times, it is change that keeps it vibrant, interesting, and alive. Normally a study of art quilters would revolve around art,
but this report has made an effort to present an in-depth look at the *vocation*. Clearly, the occupation is more complex than it appears at first glance.

This study showed what is entailed in the lives of these quilts artists. Among the most important aspects of the job were excellent time management skills, as there are many obligations that come with the territory. The ability to monitor change in materials, techniques, and communication was also found to be important, so that one does not get left behind. In addition to these things, adequate art training for the artists was found to be important. This training specifically refers to an education in classical art theory. It was found to be beneficial by most of the artists in the study, not only in the art they create, but also in the teaching of the subject to their students.

Teaching is an integral part of the occupation because of the dependable income it provides that works of art do not. This exploration into the teaching aspects of the field provides a tool by which other aspiring art quilt teachers can direct their own lessons. The quilt artists represented here have proffered their informed perceptions of the needs of today’s students, and the quilt historians contributed their knowledge of what the field needs as a whole. These needs include connecting with appropriate teachers, more traditional art training, and the addition of textile studies into the classes for a firmer grasp of the medium. From here, other art quilt teachers can proceed; from here, we can fill in the gaps of art quilt students’ educations.

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1 All un-cited information was taken from my interview with Susan Shie on February 6, 2004.

2 All un-cited information was taken from my interview with Nancy Crow on May 15, 2004.
3 Taken from my interview with Vikki Pignatelli on January 24, 2004, and with David Walker on March 25, 2004.

4 All un-cited information was taken from my interview with Elaine Plogman on March 27, 2004.

5 All un-cited information was taken from my interview with Vikki Pignatelli on January 24, 2004.


7 All un-cited information was taken from my interview with Penny McMorris on September 22, 2004.


CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

In the early 1970s, an extensive quilt revival began in the United States that continues to exist today. This revival, fueled by the social conditions, political happenings, and popular culture of the day had important consequences. One such consequence was the beginning of the art quilt movement. Art quilts were considered separate from the quilts with which Americans were already familiar, because they were made with the intention of being hung on walls, and not used as functional bedcovers. The movement is important because it enlarged the scope of the quilt to include pieces that would be incorporated into the realm of fine art.

Ohio played an important role in the development of the national art quilt movement. Its artists, working in other media, were equipped with a formal education in fine arts, as well as an already-existing appreciation for the quilt. Consequently, they became leaders in this segment of the quilt revival. They began to explore, develop, and even re-invent some aspects of quiltmaking. These experiments led to the creation of important art quilt shows such as *Patchwork ’76*, *Quilt National*, and *Artist as Quiltmaker*, that infused the movement with life. They continued to fuel the movement with symposiums, educational opportunities, and publications.

As the movement progressed, more people became interested in the field and wanted to learn it themselves. Historically, quilting had been taught by mothers to
daughters. During the quilt revival of the 1970s however, that changed. Shops that sold fabric, and other quilting supplies, began to offer classes in the art quilt genre. The adult men and women, who desired to create art quilts, also sought out those artists whose work they had seen in art quilt shows, and asked them to teach their techniques. The artists obliged, and students were taught the process by the artists themselves. Eventually, classes would be organized in conjunction with the art quilt shows. As a result of these occurrences, teaching the process came to be a significant aspect of the field.

Ohio art quilters as teachers became the object of this study because they are of importance to the art quilt community. The insights they offer shed light on the reasons for this unusually long-lived revival. Art quilt teacher responsiveness to student needs has contributed to the flourishing of the art quilt movement, and is valuable to quilt teachers on the whole. Their contribution to the quilt world has been significant, and deserved to be addressed directly.

An oral history method of investigation proved useful and appropriate for this study because it allows one to codify information gathered from living people. In Ohio, influential art quilters who are recognized teachers were close by, and willing to participate. The fact that cooperative quilt scholars lived in Ohio as well, contributed to the research’s depth. Participating art quilt teachers included Nancy Crow, Vikki Pignatelli, Elaine Plogman, Susan Shie, and David Walker. Ricky Clark and Penny McMorris, also important to the art quilt movement, contributed to this research.

Many of the key findings of the research arose from the initial set of questions composed for the interviews. Some characteristics of art quilt teachers were unique, and
some were common to all. For example, some artists’ beginnings were in formal, academic art training, and some of the artists were self-taught. Conversely, all of the artists reported severe time constraints. These differences and commonalities resulted in thorough insights into the field.

Virtually all of the art quilters found teaching to benefit them personally, even though teaching added considerably to their workloads. The student populations among the participating art quilt teachers were similar as well. They were made up of mostly women, in mid-life, with new-found time to explore their creative capabilities. The difficulties associated with adding teaching to their busy lives was troublesome for some of the artists, and invigorating for others.

All of the artists described the creating of art quilts to be a “centering” process. They reported the process as important to their own emotional well-being. There was a consistent response of “meditative-like” feelings associated with the process of quilting among the participants. Interestingly, this aspect of the process was varyingly presented to their students. Some of the teachers always included discussions of calming the mind in the creation of fiber art, some presented it primarily to advanced students, and some did not discuss it with students at all.

The flexible nature of the oral history method allowed the research findings to extend beyond the parameters of the original interview questions. Additional information regarding the art quilt profession surfaced as each interview took a personal direction. The concerns and issues of the participants that emerged from the open-ended nature of the oral history research method added depth to the study.
One emergent issue was the difficulty teaching added to the lives of fiber artists. Teaching necessitated the reduction of precious creative time for the artist with demands for travel, preparation, and the class time itself. Along with this, teaching potentially stifled an artist’s own creative work with its repetitive nature. Students benefited from the system, but teachers sometimes did not.

The open-ended research format also uncovered the significant amount of change that has occurred in the field since its inception in the early 1970s. The evolution of equipment available to quilt artists is dramatic. It included striking differences in available materials, including those of fabrics, sewing machines, and adhesives. Substantial advances in communication included better and more abundant written publications, as well as rapid correspondence among art quilters vis-à-vis the Internet. The interviewees also stressed the importance of sophisticated marketing knowledge, as well as teaching forums.

Another issue brought up during the research was their concern for the future of the art quilt field. Several suggested that up-and-coming art quilters are overly-influenced by each others’ work, and insufficiently educated in the nuances of a classical fine arts education. The lack of textile studies in an art quilters’ education was also discussed. This occurrence was perceived to contribute to a derivation of style among emerging art quilters. Consequently, these participants offered their own thoughts and ideas for the betterment of an art quilter’s education.

In summary, this report presented the characteristics of some of Ohio’s most successful art quilt teachers. These teachers shared their unique approaches to the challenges of the art quilt professional, and expounded the value of incorporating
academic training in both classical art and textile studies into art quilt education.

Hopefully, this study will help other art quilt teachers glean useful information from the informed methods of proven teachers, so they can preserve and propel a healthy, vibrant art quilt movement into the twenty-first century.
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City Club Speech, as presented at the Cleveland City Club, Friday, September 3, 2004 by Michael Bloom.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Interviews with Art Quiltmakers/Teachers/Historians:
Ricky Clark       Elaine Plogman
Nancy Crow        Susan Shie
Penny McMorris    David Walker
Vikki Pignatelli
APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

Personal Profile

How long have you been in the field?

Why did you start curating art quilt shows?
  When?
  Where?
  Did you start quilting to commemorate some special event in your life?
  Does quilting provide for you a feeling of connection to your ancestry, or to your peers?

How did you learn?

When it was taught to you, were the emotional well-being aspects of the process presented to you as well as the techniques?

Did you ever receive formal training in quilting? In art?

How does your family feel about your choice of profession?
  Supportive?
  Not?
  Explain.

Do you pursue other interests?
  Physical fitness?
  Reading?
  Music?

Do you have a personal motto that you try to stick to?

Experiential Profile

Do you quilt?
How do you feel about the quilt-making process?
  Relaxing?
  Exciting?
  Therapeutic?
  Cathartic?
  Explain.

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Are you ever frustrated with your work?
   How often?
Do you have a favorite part of the process?
   Designing?
   Piecing?
   Quilting?
   Why?

Can you describe your feelings as you quilt?

Do you lose track of time when you quilt?

Do you forget about personal problems while you are quilting?
   Body pain?

From where do you draw your inspiration?

Do you enjoy entering competitions?

   Student Profile

Do you teach? If so, what do you teach?
What do you think is attractive about quilting to your students?
   Tactile nature of the medium?
   Color availability?
   Flexibility of the medium?

Do you or your students associate a spiritual fulfillment with quilting?

What kinds of people go to these classes?
   Are some students just looking to push a button?

What is it about your teaching method that is attractive to students?

How do you find your students? Any paying apprentices?

   Teaching Profile

When did you start teaching?
   Why?

What do your students teach you, if anything?

If you could financially afford to quit teaching, would you?

Have you always taught quilting?

Where do you teach?
Do you have a specific planning process when you teach a class?

On what do you put the emphasis of your lessons?
   On product?
   On process?
   Both?

Do you believe there to be benefits in the act of quilting?
   Of teaching?
   Explain.

Can you describe any benefits you associate with the act of quilting/ teaching?
   Have they changed over time?
   How?

Do you discuss any emotional well-being aspects of the creation of fiber arts with your students?
   Is it intuitive or presented as a philosophy?

How do you convey creative expression to your students?

Has your teaching method changed over time?
   How?

What impact does teaching have on your own work?
   Does it disrupt your own creative time?

Additional

What is your title?

Can you think of anyone else I should be talking to about this subject?

May I come back with new questions as I think of them? (email, phone, etc.)

Is there anything I have not asked that you would like to address?

How has the field changed since the early 1970s?
   What is better about it now, and what is worse?

Who are the people that made this a successful movement?

Why is art quilting not taught in academia? Should it be?

Is there a demand for art quilt education? If so, what is it that these students would like to learn?

Is quilt research applicable to a women’s studies curriculum? In what way?

How can an artist survive without entering shows?
Is art quilting rising or falling in popularity?

Is machine piecing going to become obsolete?

Do quilts speak exclusively to female society?

Can comparisons be drawn between art quilts and the society that produces them?

Tell me about material culture studies and how studying the mundane activities of the average person can lead to scholarly insight.
APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL
November 13, 2003

Mary Donatelli Schmitt
6015 Eastham Way
Hudson, Ohio 44236

Dear Ms. Donatelli Schmitt:

The University of Akron’s Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) completed a review of the protocol entitled “Art Quilters as Quiltmaking Teachers”. The IRB application number assigned to this project is 20031017.

The protocol qualified for Expedited Review and was approved on October 29, 2003. The protocol represented minimal risk to subjects. Additionally, the protocol matched the following federal category for expedited review:

- research on individual or group characteristics or behavior or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

This approval is valid until October 29, 2004 or until modifications are proposed to the project protocol, whichever may occur first. In either instance, an Application for Continuing Review must be completed and submitted to the IRB.

Please note that within one month of the expiration date of this approval, the IRB will forward an annual review reminder notice to you by email, as a courtesy. Nevertheless, please note that it is your responsibility as principal investigator to remember the renewal date of your protocol’s review. If your project is funded, failure to comply with IRB requirements could jeopardize your continued funding.

Please retain this letter for your files. If the research is being conducted for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, you must file a copy of this letter with the thesis or dissertation.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Sharon McWhorter
Associate Director Research Services & Sponsored Programs

Cc: Richard Glotzer, Department Chair
Virginia Gunn, Advisor
Nikki Wingerson, IRB Vice Chair
Phyllis Allen, IRB Chair

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