

2020 Governor's Awards in the Arts: Folk Heritage Award

Shelly Zegart
Jefferson County



Shelly Zegart is an internationally recognized expert on American quilts and a community leader in Louisville. She is an avid collector, exhibition curator, author, lecturer and appraiser of fine quilts. Her curated quilt exhibits have been shown across the United States and abroad. Her lectures cover all aspects of quilts, from history to aesthetics.

For more than 30 years, Zegart led the Kentucky Quilt Project (KQP), the first-ever state documentation project and built private and corporate quilt collections around the world. Her work with the KQP inspired other states, regions and countries to do their own documentation of their unique quilt traditions.

Zegart created, directed and hosted the nine-part documentary series “Why Quilts Matter: History, Art & Politics,” which has

aired on more than 250 PBS stations and streams on KET. She continues to be involved in a number of community organizations especially the nonprofit Kentucky to the World, which she founded in 2013 with the singular mission to elevate the cultural and intellectual reputation of Kentucky.

What does this distinction mean to you?

This recognition is one to which any artist, arts advocate or arts presenter of significance in Kentucky aspires to. My Governor's Awards in the Arts Folk Heritage Award brings the extraordinary vision and aesthetic achievements of Kentucky quilt making to the attention of the public and respects and celebrates the medium of quilting as a form of artistic expression. The focus of my work with quilts is to continue to demolish the divisions that inhibit the reception of the quilt as art—both in the minds of makers and viewers and my recognition with this award is validation of that effort.

How did you become interested in Kentucky-made quilts and quilting traditions?

First, I come from a "collecting" family and have always been a collector of sorts – from Bakelite jewelry to "outsider art" to contemporary art and beyond. In addition, I have always been curious as to why people collect. Reared in quilt-rich western Pennsylvania, we settled in Louisville in 1968, another area where quilting has long been practiced with skill and passion. My love of Kentucky quilts began in the mid-1970s when I discovered quilts to use as art on the walls of my newly built contemporary home. From the first night I was shown a large group of quilts for sale, an intense and ever-expanding passion for quilts, their history and the stories they tell was born.

What makes Kentucky quilt making unique?

We are fortunate that quilts and quilt making flourish in Kentucky. As a small state, mostly rural and quite isolated, Kentucky's quilt making has been preserved and passed on through community traditions. The amount of world-recognized quilt making activity here far exceeds the small population of the state. Kentucky quilts are a phenomenon, major commercial quilting enterprises are based here, such as Eleanor Beard's Studio in Hardinsburg. Membership at the Paducah-based American Quilter's Society exceeds 80,000 and contemporary fiber artists contribute daily to university and civic activities. Indeed, the first quilt documentation project was The Kentucky Quilt Project. Our varied and extensive quilt activity speaks to the accomplishments of all Kentuckians who are part of the state's quilting tradition.

Source:

<http://artscouncil.ky.gov/KAC/Showcasing/gov-awards-2020-x-folk-heritage.htm>