

A QUILT COLLECTOR'S VIEW: *Shelly Zegart*

By Karen Back

Years ago, I pulled the cellophane off a new shirt and took out the cardboard inside. There was the following message written on it: "Name: Mrs. Shirley Emmert, #1, Gamaliel, KY 42140. Ever who buys this shirt should write to me."

That's how one late 20th century Kentucky woman reached out. Others have chosen more traditional routes—picking up the phone, writing letters, sending messages in bottles or, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries, by making quilts—historical documents that give us a graphic peek into history.

During the Civil War, one woman in Paducah, Ky., ran to the barn and hid her quilt in the haystack to protect it from the battling soldiers. This stuffed berry quilt, along with a gold coin and a photograph of the woman holding the quilt on her front porch, was discovered years later by the Kentucky Quilt Project.

A member of that project, Kentucky quilt dealer Shelly Zegart, has many interesting quilts in her personal collection—like the signed *Album* quilt from New Jersey which is dated 1844–1852. The 101 x 88-inch quilt was made of 30 applique and pieced blocks worked in red and green cotton prints and was assembled by Francina Stout Van Dyke, the great-great-granddaughter of John Hart, a man who signed the Declaration of Independence. The quilt was signed by 13 women including Mary Williamson Smith, Maria Thomas, Kate, Rebecca and Margaretta B. Van Dyke.

Zegart's three-story contemporary



Quilt collector Shelly Zegart, sitting beneath her *Star Quilt*.

house is filled with quilts. Hanging over the living room fireplace is the first quilt she ever bought: a large burgundy-bordered Mennonite *Log Cabin* quilt, made around 1870.

The framed quilts on the walls are mixed with contemporary art. Across from a painting by Robert Motherwell is a *Star* quilt, made in eastern Pennsylvania in 1910, with multicolored calicos—red, green, gray, blue and yellow—on a white field with a broken bar inner border.

A pastel *Flower Garden* quilt graces the bed in the master bedroom. Next to

the bed, "Ma's Quilts" is scrawled on a 19th century three-drawer chest hand-painted with tulips.

Other quilts in Zegart's collection include the *Curiosity Bedspread* which was made in Duckhill, Miss., by Mrs. Avery Burton when she was 68 years old. Created for the Sears and Roebuck Quilt Contest in 1935, Mrs. Burton illustrated the quilt with cows, horses, pigs and chickens.

Zegart likes figurative designs and is primarily interested in "strong graphics and the originality of quilts." Another quilt in her collection portrays a giant saddlebred horse in computer-graphic blocks that looks like it's running across the quilt. On its back is a black and white fabric that looks like the perspiration caused by its exertion.

One of Zegart's favorite quilts, an *Old Maid Album* quilt with the center block illustrating a tight-lipped spinster knitting, was made in 1871 for the 30th birthday of Susan Daggett, a Canandaigua, N.Y., woman who

swore she'd never marry. There are tongue-in-cheek pokes at being single; phrases such as "Like a ring without a finger," and "Like a bell without a ringer," stitched on the quilt by Daggett's friends, members of the Young Ladies Sewing Society.

Through the years, quilts have been created for many reasons—as gifts, to keep the family warm, as a form of expression and as a forum for political protest or awareness. Recently, we saw the *AIDS Quilt* on national television. In the past, quilts were made to mark safe houses that

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were part of the underground railroad, to publicize the Suffragettes and to raise money for temperance.

Quilts have been a traditional form of expression for women over the years and now, according to Zegart, "There's a heightened awareness in families for their needlework because it really is a track of women's history that, for the most part, is not in the books."

But it is a history that survives in women's hearts and minds. California collector Ruby Adams says, "All my family on both sides made quilts and used them. I am old enough now to be sharing the ones that are left with the next generations. Quilts with a bit of history are on the Christmas gift list."

She continues, "I've never sewn a quilt. Others design and make them. I enjoy them. If all of us were actors, there could be no audience." ♦

The Curiosity Bedspread, made by Mrs. Avery Burton from Duckhill, Miss., in 1935 for the Sears and Roebuck Quilt Contest.

