

ARTS



STAFF PHOTO BY PAM SPAULDING

Shelly Zegart's interest in quilts began with a casual conversation. Now she's among the nation's leading experts.

A GUIDING LIGHT

*To understand
the quilt craze,
you need only
meet Shelly Zegart*

By DIANE HEILENMAN, Staff Writer

IF YOU COULD bottle Shelly Zegart, you'd make a fortune. She is a tonic, one of those high-energy people who hum and vibrate if asked to sit still too long. During an interview, she rocks and fidgets, changing position as often as she switches mental gears.

She talks the way you suspect her mind works, rapidly and seemingly in several directions at once. Yet on one topic — quilts — she clearly is as focused as a laser.

The petite, dark-haired Zegart has a dramatic flair in her gestures and clothes — and a one-line delivery to match Joan Rivers'.

Ask the quilt expert if she sews, and she'll say, "I don't make anything, not even dinner anymore."

But the truth is that Shelly Zegart is a make-it-happen person, a self-taught quilt scholar who lives in Louisville but enjoys an international reputation as a quilt critic, historian, consultant, collector and dealer. She is the irresistible force behind the current celebration of quilts in Louisville, a giddy confluence of exhibits, books, lectures and special programs through March that is bringing hundreds of the nation's top quilts and quilt experts to town.

"Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt"

opened last fall with a restaging of "Abstract Design in American Quilts," the landmark 1971 exhibit from the Whitney Museum of American Art, at Louisville's Museum of History and Science. The exhibit, which continues through March 31, is a 20-year birthday party for this show, widely credited with starting the phenomenon of quilts as art. It features the private quilt collection of Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof, which was displayed as art rather than domestics.

The Louisville event will also bring focus to a movement that has spun in many directions.

The second major element of "Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt" is the "Celebration Weekend" Feb. 6-8. It will feature five other quilt exhibition openings, nine conferences, lectures and workshops, as well as gallery walks, all designed to bring attention to the next level of the quilt movement.

Now that the initial frenzy of quilt buying — set off by the now legendary flea-market finds of van der Hoof and Holstein — has damped to a dull roar, Zegart thinks it's time for a calm and objective appraisal of quilt scholarship.

It's no different from art history, says Zegart, who lists contemporary art among her other interests. Quilts are like art. Many are made. Few are great. However, quilts are not so well-documented or protected by cultural sanctions, and there's a need to assess their heritage and know if any great ones are in danger of being cut up to make sofa pillows.

Just as serious, Zegart says, is the need to set straight some erroneous assumptions about quilts that stem from the rapid assimilation of the new field into arenas of social history, art, folklore and women's studies.

For instance, the exhibit "Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts" opening Feb. 7 at Louisville's Museum of History and Science disputes the notion that slave-made or African-American-made quilts are examples of a migrating visual tradition or continuations of African design rather than a piece of the mainstream. "There's a subtle racism (in the premise), isn't there?" Zegart asks.

The "Celebration Weekend" also features

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conferences and lectures that cover "Directions in Quilt Scholarship," quilt documentation and an accessible bibliography, Amish quilts, contemporary quilts and quilt spinoff designs. (For a list of exhibits and events, see story below.)

"This has been such an enormous project, more enormous than the time allowed," Zegart says. The six exhibitions and two catalogs, the three-day conference and gallery, sightseeing and antiquing tours with shuttle buses and a hospitality center at the Galt House were organized in about a year.

The event is expected to attract 100,000 of the estimated 14 million American quilters and quilt fans.

"Louisville Celebrates" started when a casual comment in a 1990 telephone conversation between Zegart and Holstein crystallized into action. Such rapid response is a hall-mark of the movement that Zegart describes as a "total explosion."

She says that perhaps the most phenomenal part of the past 20 years in quilts is that there now are people making a living teaching quilting, selling quilt supplies, selling quilts or studying them.

A former second-grade school-teacher, real-estate agent and volunteer, Zegart pauses to say that she knows her take-charge style and her success as a private quilt dealer are daunting to some people.

She analyzes the problem in two parts. She is a doctor's wife, and a doctor's wife who works is not always taken seriously, she says. Also, a quilt scholar who buys and sells and makes money at it can hear the whispers of conflict of interest miles away.

Zegart asks rhetorically, "Could I live on my business? Yes, I could live on my business." But she says, the business has "done a lot for me" besides just the financial rewards, and she ticks off such benefits as independence, confidence, individuality, purpose and a sense of continuity with the past and with countless, nameless women.

And Zegart brings up the issue of personal gain from sponsoring an event like "Louisville Celebrates":

"Is this going to help me? Yes, this is going to help me. Is this killing me? Yes, this is killing me."

The principal benefit, she says, is the chance to "immerse myself again in a significant event." Zegart says she has almost had to give up buying and selling quilts in the past

year to get ready for "Louisville Celebrates."

But that's OK. She says the business side has never attracted her as much as the research side.

Zegart, who has commandeered the entire lower level of her house for a private office and space for two employees — and a few hundred quilts folded in piles on the floors and couches and tables — says her buying and selling simply provide hands-on looking and money to pursue her quest for the "few great quilts" that are out there.

Born in Pennsylvania quilt country, in Monessen, south of Pittsburgh, Zegart does not recall any revelations about quilts early in life, even though she comes from an "antiquing, junking, look-at-everything family." In fact, she says, she kicks herself for not buying quilts on early shopping junkets.

But she points out that quilts had to be discovered by people for whom they were exotic rather than familiar. That's how New Yorkers Holstein and van der Hoof were able to see the painterly qualities of quilts others perhaps saw as eccentric deviations from traditional "good" pattern quilts.

Zegart recalls that the scales were lifted from her eyes when she

was looking for art to hang on the two-story expanses of white walls in her house. Small art didn't look right, and large, minimalist contemporary art didn't sit well with her husband, Kenneth Zegart.

That's where quilts came in.

It began with Bruce Mann, a Louisville-based quilt dealer who sold on the East and West coasts. "People here inherit quilts. They don't buy them," Zegart says.

But "I fell in love with quilts." There was drama, scale and color, and, she recalls thinking, "They're cheap. My God. What's going on here? I want them all."

Zegart, the perennial student, struck a deal with Mann. She would trade him "networking," which meant dinners and meetings with prospective quilt buyers, for a chance to train under him.

"It was addictive instantly. . . . I know from my other interest (contemporary art) that you've got to get in there and study. . . . There's only so much you can do from books. You've got to feel it, see it."

When Mann died in an automobile accident in 1980 at age 34, Zegart says, people started asking her why didn't she carry on. At the same time, she and Louisville quilt collector Eleanor Miller joined

forces to see through one of Mann's notions: a statewide documentation of quilts.

This was the beginning of the Kentucky Quilt Project, which became the model for 48 other states. (Zegart, Miller and Holstein are directors of the project.)

The Kentucky Quilt Project was "like a two-year Ph.D.," Zegart says. She spent months in communities handling quilts and hearing their stories. It put her in touch with the small but growing group of quilt scholars, and it gave her access to major museums.

Zegart, who says she is "around 50," is a consultant for a New York state quilt-documentation project and has helped several other states put theirs together.

She says she has no regrets

when she looks back and sees how consuming quilts have been for her. "It wasn't fun selling real estate," she recalls and adds, "You don't leave a legacy selling real estate."

However, she says she realizes it was mistake to limit her focus to traditional or historic quilts. Like the historic-art market, it has become a market of recycling rather than discovery. (A quilt-auction record was set this year when a Civil War pictorial quilt brought \$264,000 at Sotheby's.)

She hopes to jump sideways into the contemporary-quilt field and has settled on four or five quilters whose work she may pursue.

Old or new, Zegart is sure that quilts are no flash in the pan.

"I don't think there's any end to it. I think it's just beginning."