

PEOPLE

The Queen of Quilts

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT QUILTS, YOU TALK TO SHELLY ZEGART. That holds true whether you're from St. Matthews or Sydney, Australia. Zegart, co-founder and executive director of the Kentucky Quilt Project, is an internationally known quilt researcher, collector, curator and seller. She's written scholarly articles about quilts and quilt collections, and has lectured about this long-lived craft throughout America and abroad.



Louisville quilt connoisseur Shelly Zegart is bedspreading the word: Coverlets are covetable.

So when Zegart tells you that a renowned 1971 Whitney Museum of American Art quilt exhibition that was recently resurrected at the Louisville Museum of History and Science is the seminal collection of modern quilts — the one that transformed the perception of quilts from simple bedcovers into revered works of art — you wonder why the show hasn't been more heavily publicized.

The exhibition, available for public viewing through March, is part of 'Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt,' a multi-event, gala tribute to the growth of quilt-related activities. This mammoth affair — which kicked off last November and has attracted quilt scholars from all over the world — features exhibits, lectures and celebrations in various locations around town.

It's been a real tour de force for the Kentucky Quilt Project, which Zegart and co-founder Eleanor Bingham Miller formed in 1981 to document and survey the state's quilts. There was the first such endeavor ever initiated in the United States; Zegart is particularly proud that the Kentucky Project has since spawned similar undertakings in 48 other states, Canada, England and Australia. "In just 10 years, all of these projects have documented over 150,000 quilts," she reveals with obvious glee.

The growth in quilt-collecting has bred a few masterpieces — highly desired quilts purchased by aficionados for six-figure sums. As is often the case with fiercely

sought-after pieces of art, most of these quilts are valued more for the unique personal statements they contain than for their technical accomplishments. Indeed, it is the personal expression of the artist that is, to Zegart, the essence of quilting. "Quilt history is really important to the telling of women's history," she says. "Quilts summarize the major themes in a woman's life — birth, marriage, and death."

Zegart, who has nurtured a longtime interest in all the visual arts, originally found herself drawn to quilts as wall decorations for her East End home. "My husband wasn't too happy with the traditional art pieces I was selecting," she explains. "I was introduced to quilts and I thought, 'Wouldn't these look good on the wall.'" That initial attraction quickly escalated into a full-time professional involvement with every aspect of quilting, save one — the actual creation of a quilt. "I don't," she admits, "have the patience to sit down and make one myself."

by Steve Weingarten