

QUILT TALK

A CONVERSATION WITH SHELLY ZEGART

Shelly Zegart of Louisville, Kentucky, is an internationally recognized authority on antique quilts. Since 1981, she has served as a founding director of The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., the landmark grassroots organization to document nineteenth century Kentucky quilts. She has a background in art history and a continuing involvement in the Louisville art community, including fifteen years' service as a board member of the Louisville Visual Art Association. More recently, she has served as Executive Director for Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt, (November 22, 1991- May 3, 1992) the highly successful multi-media celebration of the quiltmaker's art. As part of that event, Zegart co-curated Quilts Now, a major exhibition of contemporary work, together with Jonathan Holstein (also a director of the Kentucky Quilt Project). The reinstallation of Holstein's 1971 blockbuster at the Whitney Museum, Abstract Design in American Quilts, was part of the celebration. The following is an excerpted telephone conversation with SDJ Editor Charles Talley.

Are you optimistic about the way the contemporary art quilt movement is developing?

Yes, there's so much interest worldwide. The larger the body of interest and the more publicity there is, the more people become energized to take a further look at it all. Collectors are bound to discover quilts in the same way that they have already "discovered" photography, for example. It will be an evolutionary process—a slower one, given the nature of the medium and the status of quilting as minor art.

Who are the "greats" in the world of art quilts, according to your judgment?

I feel qualified to speak only about work I have seen in person. Of the pieces in the Louisville show, for example, I was really impressed with those by artists such as Linda Levin, Merrill Mason, Ann Adams, Risë Nagin, and Joan Schulze.

What strikes you as significant about their work?

I see their work as being on the creative cutting edge of experimentation in the medium. It is thoughtful and intelligent, and they are not afraid to reach. So much of today's work resembles too closely for my taste, the work of one artist or another. For example, Matisse figures being taken forward into 1992 textiles, or a piece of art pottery mimicking a form from a Michael Graves building.

Do you think a lot of quilt artists are naive about the marketplace?

A lot of quilt artists look at their own work only in the context of other art being produced in their medium. As Penny McMorris said, as soon as a price is put on a work, it must compete with every piece of art which is offered at that price,

regardless of medium. Some quilters might say "I make only four pieces a year, so I'll price them according to how much time each has taken", instead of taking the accepted price levels of other emerging or mid-range artists. Neither Stella nor Lichtenstein priced their beginning work at \$10,000 each. Why should beginning quilt artists price their work at \$10,000 each? The artist has to be realistic. She can't simply look at the prices listed in shows such as the *Quilt National* and use them as the basis for pricing her own work, either. Where is the quilt artist's own price history? sales history? Is the quilt artist known?

Is there a going rate for contemporary art quilts?

My sources tell me that there is no real going rate for contemporary quilts, but they seem to range from between \$2,000 and \$15,000.

What is your advice to artists about marketing, then?

Go to the galleries and encourage them to show quilts alongside their other work. Get a representative, if you can.

But we hear textile artists complaining that there are so few collectors of their work. Why is there so much resistance on the part of collectors, curators, and galleries?

It is important to say that textiles have always been considered a minor art in traditional museums. Additional resistance on the part of museums stems from some curatorial problems of the medium itself, from storage and display to the actual materials being used.

I've spoken with Penny McMorris about this resistance and was interested in her comment that quilts are seen by more people than any other fiber art, and yet they are collected less. People love to go to shows, but they go to look, not to buy. For museums which generate ticket sales through a great deal of traffic, this is fine. For a gallery, getting viewers and not collectors is not as desirable.

I understand that from all the quilts featured in the Louisville events, only one contemporary art quilt was sold. What's happening?

To understand what is happening now, one must have a sense of history. Again, textiles have always been considered a minor art. They will never have the same level of attraction as painting and sculpture. The current economic situation is depressed and this also affects quilt makers in the same way it affects all media and all artists.

Do you see value in artist-support groups and organizations?

Because making art quilts is lonely, especially when your work isn't selling and you don't have much peer support in your home area, these groups can be especially valuable. Quilters can't just pick themselves up and move to a center of quilt activity in the way that another artist might move to SoHo. Organizations encourage a positive sense of identify. They help provide validation for the work and encourage creativity.



ZEGART (Continued from page 35) It works if they are actively involved in supporting the work, in placing it and encouraging the artist. It doesn't work when the focus of the group is to say, "Look at me, I'm an artist." In reality, it's a matter of "acts and facts", not just feelings and intentions.

Interest in quilting has exploded over the past twenty years. Has it gone too far? Are there too many quilters now?

Are there too many photographers? Or painters? Of all those quilters working in the medium, most are making bedcovers. Only a small number are making art quilts, only a very few are making truly great ones. The market will ultimately make the distinctions. There is a growing market internationally and this type of activity increases the dialogue and interest. It will also help to improve the quality of the work and the sales.

How do you see things developing?

It will be a slow evolution. The art quilt movement will grow and grow until there are several superstars. Will it be met by a commensurate interest on the part of curators and collectors? Look at 1971, the time of the first quilt show at the Whitney Museum. There was almost no market for antique quilts at that time, in spite of the fact that they had been visible for many years. It took a catalyst like that show to bring about significant market activity.

Are quilt artists "crossing over" into the art mainstream?

I feel so strongly about mainstreaming. If we restrict ourselves to quilt shows with quilters judging the work of other quilters, the evolution will be very slow. But the crossover is starting to happen. The group that Bernice Steinbaum represents is certainly part of that crossover. The women's movement may have an impact. More women may collect work by women artists. All of it helps. It is a fact that progress is difficult for individuals or groups of artists in any medium who are isolated from the mainstream.

What about your own plans for the near future?

I plan to work extremely hard for the next year at the projects that have emanated from the Louisville project: the publication of the conference monographs, the startup of a scholarly journal for the field, and the development of a comprehensive index for the field. Each of these efforts will help to put quilt scholarship more into the mainstream of intellectual dialogue in all disciplines. The journal will be interdisciplinary and international and will focus on all scholars interested in quilts, not just quilt scholars. Anyone interested in getting involved in any of these projects, by the way, can write to the Kentucky Quilt Project, PO Box 6251 Louisville, KY 42026. Tel. 502/587-6721.≈