

A wall, a dealer, a passion . . . and a collection is born

By Thomas Connors

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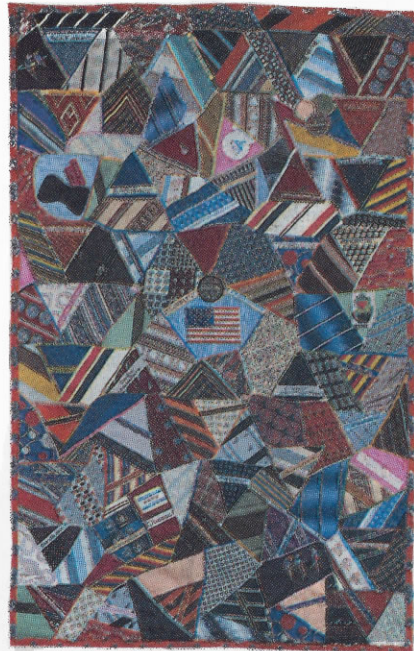
To a homeowner, a bare wall can be as troubling as a blank sheet of paper is to a writer. That was the case for Shelly Zegart when she moved into a newly built contemporary house 30 years ago. Although already an art-lover, she wasn't sure how to handle the large expanses of white in her new home. But once she was introduced to a quilt dealer, Zegart not only solved her decorating challenge, but also discovered a passion that would lead her to become a noted expert herself.

Today, 24 of Zegart's prized quilts have found a new home in the Art Institute of Chicago, 21 of which form the core of "Exploring Quilts: Art, History and Craftsmanship," on view through Sept. 12.

Seeing quilts as art, rather than as purely functional objects, is nothing new. In 1971, the Whitney Museum of American Art presented "Abstract Design in American Quilts." Since then, innumerable shows have celebrated the artistry in quilts, most notably the wildly successful "The Quilts of Gee's Bend," which has toured the coun-

try since 2002. The Department of Textiles of the Art Institute has shown quilts over the years, but the Zegart material, along with other recent acquisitions, have greatly enhanced the museum's holdings in this area. As curator Christa C. Mayer Thurman explains, "The purpose of this exhibition is to introduce to the public the latest gifts, bequests and purchases that have come in since 2001, all of which are of major significance as additions to the quilt collection." ("Exploring Quilts" comprises 37 items and includes samples of Amish work, WPA material and a piece from 1888 celebrating the renowned bare-knuckle boxer John L. Sullivan)

Back in the 18th and 19th Centuries, quilts may not have been framed and appreciated as art the way they are today, but, as Zegart notes, not every quilt was a ragtag piece thrown over a bed. "Not everybody was making quilts out of worn-out clothes. People who had money were buying fabric. When you look at some of the bed hangings and room accouterments of the period, you see very clearly that women were decorating their



Grace C. Wagner gathered ties from celebrities in the early 1980s, cut them up and put them back together to create this 45-by-72-inch crazy quilt.

Photo from The Art Institute of Chicago

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Photo from the Art Institute of Chicago

"Dorothy's Quilt" was designed and executed by Barbara Palzewicz of Michigan for the Gauthier Family Reunion.

QUILTS: Documenting domestic lives

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homes, and that they were making these quilts for company, a lot of them, not for everyday use. Chintzes and prints that were printed in England and France were used, and these quilts were all about lush fabric, not the woman's ability to quilt a quilt or make a pattern."

And as viewers of PBS' "The Antiques Roadshow" know, age and condition alone aren't what make an object collectible.

It's pleasing your eye that counts and when it comes to quilts, Zegart says the same applies. "The two things that people judge a quilt by the most are the things that are least important, and that's the name of the pattern and the number of the stitches. You should look at a quilt the same way you look at any other great art object. You look at it aesthetically, first."

Zegart's own eye led her to acquire a diverse collection of material.

A small quilt made in Kentucky in the 1860s featuring a basket of flowers displays the simple, sober beauty one encounters in portraits painted by the itinerant artists of the period. A work christened "Wood Lines" (circa 1900) is an almost feverish composition in which strips of navy and earth-toned fabric pack the energy and structural power of a painting by Kandinsky or Mondrian. Then there's "Celebrity Ties," designed and executed in the 1980s by Belleville, Ill., Illinois resident Mrs. Grace C. Wagner. The quilter wrote to various well-known figures asking for ties—Bob Hope, Johnny Carson, Cary Grant, and Art Linkletter—then cut and assembled the neckware into a jazzy arrangement in which the disparate pat-



Above: Made in 1888, this piece celebrating the renowned bare-knuckle boxer John L. Sullivan is one of the 37 quilts in "Exploring Quilts: Art, History and Craftsmanship," which will be on view through Sept. 12 at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Left: Pieced cotton quilt (maker unknown) honors Michigan's Honeycomb Centre, 1877.



an interviewer made me think about my collecting and I realized I collected quilts that made me want to have met the person who made them."

No matter how inventive or abstract, for the most part, quilts remain documents of domestic life. But when the handiwork of one generation becomes the artwork of another, house-keeping takes on a whole new dimension.

"There are quilts for everyday use and quilts for collecting," explains Zegart. "Stuff we put on the bed, things my kids took off to college, though we loved them dearly, we weren't going to be at our wit's end if they got torn or the dog jumped on them. The things that are for collecting I use in a much more restrained manner. But I have had clients who have chosen to put a \$20,000 quilt on their bed. I recommended against it, but for them, it was an everyday quilt."

terns seem like so many pinwheels gone wild.

Although Zegart never met any of the quilters whose work is on view at the Art Institute, the Louisville resident says, "For years, I just bought what I loved. When my heart went pitter-pat, that was my main thing. Then one day,