

A rich tapestry of history

Mockingbird Valley author's DVD series shows significance of quilts

By Martha Elson

melson@courier-journal.com
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Shelly Zegart has long believed that quilts have an importance and artistic value that go far beyond their utilitarian uses.

Zegart, a quilt specialist, appraiser, author and lecturer who lives in the Mockingbird Valley area, set out three years ago to explore and explain how quilts and quilt-making have played a central role in American culture since Colonial days.

The result is a nine-part independent film documentary that's been airing on PBS stations around the country — including on KET-2 in Kentucky — since September.

Titled "Why Quilts Matter: History, Art & Politics," it's presented under the auspices of The Kentucky Quilt Project, of which Zegart was a founding director in 1981. It looks at all aspects of quilt-making and its history, including the current market for quilts and a discussion of the question "What is Art?" as it pertains to quilts.

The series starts from the beginning again at 7 p.m. Monday on KET-2 and runs every Monday through its conclusion.

Although Zegart is not a quilt-maker, she has had an interest in minimalist art and other art and artifacts and developed a "real passion" for quilts after seeing a local collector's holdings of 19th century quilts at a tea in the 1970s, she said at her home recently.

She hung them in her former contemporary home in Indian Hills and has a few quilts displayed



Shelly Zegart's series "Why Quilts Matter: History, Art & Politics" has been airing on PBS stations. SAM UPSHAW JR./THE C-J

at her current home, along with photos, books and other collectible objects. Quilts have a special "warmth" and may tell stories about what women were doing, thinking and feeling at the time they were made, she said.

Her husband, Kenneth Zegart, a retired obstetrician and gynecologist, works in a home office processing orders for the documentary series, which also is sold at area businesses. He hung quilts in his medical office while he was still practicing, his wife said.

The two-DVD set is being bought by many quilters and is "making them proud," Shelly Zegart

said. It's also being stocked by libraries, and her biggest hope is that it will be shown widely in schools and universities and that quilts and quilt-making will be studied as a standard part of American history and civics courses.

Zegart serves as executive producer and host for the series, which features about 1,000 images of quilts and other subjects and interviews with a wide range of quilt experts, dealers, museum curators and artists from around the country and beyond.

Locally, they include artist and independent curator Kay Polson Grubola; James Grubola, former

chairman of the Department of Fine Arts and director of the Hite Art Institute at the University of Louisville; Kathleen Loomis, a quilter and fiber artist and retired journalist, writer and editor whose quilt "Memorial Day" depicts 4,083 tiny America flags representing military dead in Iraq; and artist Tom Pfannerstill.

Pfannerstill comments on two "quilts" shown in the documentary, one that he made from cigarette packs and another from strips of aluminum cans. "It's not what you think it is," he said.

While quilts were once sold out the back door for

grocery money or even burned once they had served their purpose, the modern "quilt market took off like a rocket" after a 1971 exhibit of quilts at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, Zegart says in her narration.

By the mid-1980s, quilts could sell for \$20,000, she said, and a Civil War-era quilt known as the "Reconciliation Quilt" brought \$264,000 in 1991 at a Sotheby's auction.

Nowadays, there are "art quilts" that "were never meant to cover a bed," Zegart says.

The writer for the documentary was Ann E. Ber-

'WHY QUILTS MATTER: HISTORY, ART & POLITICS'

What: A nine-part documentary series presented by The Kentucky Quilt Project
Cost: \$39.95

To order:
www.whyquiltsmatter.org
Also available at: Among Friends Quilt Shop, 9537 Taylorsville Road; Carmichael's Bookstore, 2720 Frankfort Ave.; Forget-Me-Not Quilt Shoppe, 1250 Bardstown Road in the Mid City Mall; Celebrations, 3632 Brownsboro Road; Locust Grove, 561 Blankenbaker Lane; Kentucky Museum of Art & Craft, 715 W. Main St.; and elsewhere.

Phyllis George book "Living with Quilts," published in 1998. Zegart, a consultant for "Living with Quilts," also is the author of "American Quilt Collections: Antique Quilt Masterpieces," published by Nihon Vogue in 1997.

The producer and editor of the series is Doug Jefferson, with Focal Point Productions in Louisville.

Zegart soon will be leaving to serve as a curator for an exhibit of antique quilts at the Tokyo International Great Quilt Festival 2012 on Jan. 20-28. She was interviewed in November by a writer and translator for a Japanese newspaper who came to Louisville to do a story.

Zegart has been asked whether she would consider doing a second part to her documentary series. "There's always more to say," she said.

Reporter Martha Elson can be reached at (502) 582-7061.