

Zegart quilts at heart of Chicago Art Institute

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Courier-Journal Critic

Keeping up with internationally known quilt expert Shelly Zegart of Louisville is not always

easy because so much of what she does as a dealer, curator, author, broker, speaker and appraiser is done out of town.

"My life is jammed with good things right now," she said, when reached by telephone and e-mail.

Zegart was honored as a Woman of Distinction Thursday in Louisville by the Center for Women and Families as part of its 17th annual "Celebration of Service," which recognizes women who have made significant contributions to Kentuckiana.



Zegart

The event, which is also a fundraiser for the center's programs on domestic violence, rape crisis and achieving economic success, taps women who have given a lifetime of professional and volunteer service. Zegart has been at the forefront of the Quilt Movement, which has seen

handmade "domestics" once moldering in flea markets become high-end art objects over the last 30 years.

Marketplace performance aside, Zegart said, quilts are "memory objects" that allow women a "voice to express feelings of love, anger, loss and remembrances."

Zegart is preparing to attend the opening of an exhibition of 21 of her quilts acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago. "Exploring Quilts: Art, History, and Craftsmanship" opens Wednesday.

It is, in one way, a show-off moment, the first display of the collection the museum acquired partially by donation and by acquisition, noting the Zegart pieces represent the best examples of quilts made between 1820 and 1982. Among the quilts on display through Sept. 12 is "Celebrity Ties," composed of 44 pieces of neckties from such famous figures as Johnny Carson and Kermit the Frog.

"Exploring Quilts" includes gifts



This

Florida pictorial quilt was made around 1930 in Tampa.

A Honeycomb Centre quilt is from 1877.

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and purchases from other collectors, but the Zegart quilts are, said the museum's press office, an "important" addition that puts the Art Institute on the front line of museums with such holdings.

Also on view are three quilts by the women of Gee's Bend, Ala., a poor and geographically isolated African-American community with a tradition of using worn-out work clothes in bold, abstract designs.

In 1998, Bill Arnett of Atlanta-based Tinwood Alliance, a foundation that

supports African-American folk art, visited the women of Gee's Bend and told them their work had artistic and probably monetary value. Arnett asked Zegart to be a consultant for his landmark exhibition, "The Quilts of Gee's Bend," which included selecting quilts, writing about them and negotiating exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

Zegart is the exclusive dealer of Gee's Bend quilts. (Gee's Bend was named after Joseph Gee, whose family sold the plantation to Mark Pettway in 1845. Most of the approximately 750 people who live in Gee's Bend today are descendants of slaves on the former Pettway plantation.)

A lot of things happening at once is all in a day's work for Zegart, a native of Pennsylvania who has lived in Louisville since the 1960s with her husband, Kenneth Zegart. A former second-grade schoolteacher and real-estate agent, Zegart for the past 25 years has been shaping the American Quilt Movement that began with a pioneering quilt show at the Whitney.

Zegart, whose interest in quilts as art began when they were still considered flea-market finds, worked under Bruce Mann, a Louisville-based quilt dealer who sold quilts on the East and West coasts. After Mann's death at age 34 in an automobile accident in 1980, Zegart joined forces with Louisville quilt collector Eleanor Miller to follow up one of Mann's visions: a state-by-state documentation of quilts

Thus was born the Kentucky Quilt Project, which became the model for 48 other states. In steady, spiraling work, Zegart led the field in quilt shows, scholarship and vision, forming the Alliance for American Quilts in 1993. She is president of the board of directors of the nonprofit organization that documents, preserves and shares quilt heritage and history. The Alliance's projects include "Quilters S.O.S. — Save Our Stories" and The Quilt Index, a Web-based database of quilts in partnership with regional centers at the University of Delaware, Michigan State University and the University of Texas.

Zegart said the quilts she sold and donated to the Art Institute were special quilts, but that it was time for her to figure out a good home for them. "I won't be around forever," she said.

She will give a short talk at the Art Institute at the opening. She said she is pleased her collection has become part of such a venerable art museum. And, Zegart noted, the placement is "a tribute" to the vision of Art Institute textile curator Christa Thurman.

"For almost four decades Christa has built, curated and guided this textile collection to its highly recognized status in the world of international textile collections.

"I am quite pleased, and now I can go on to building other collections — always curious and looking, you know."

OPENINGS

FRIDAY

B. Deemer Gallery, 2650 Frankfort Ave., Louisville, 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday. Opening Friday, recent paintings by Tony Saladino; ends April 14.

Submissions must be received by mail and include street address, opening and closing dates and days and hours of operation. Due the Monday prior to publication. Send to Openings, The Courier-Journal, 525 W. Broadway, P.O. Box 740031, Louisville, KY 40201-7431.

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