

What Is a Quilt?

Blankets wrap you in warmth,
quilts wrap you in love.

—ANONYMOUS

You may have grown up with quilts around your house. Perhaps your grandmothers or aunts made them. Maybe they were inherited, or found in an old trunk in the attic. If you grew up in the United States, there was probably at least one quilt in your household. It may have been basic or elaborate, pristine or in tatters, but I'm sure it was well loved and well used.

A soft, warm quilt is the perfect thing to snuggle under on a cold night, but quilts can be more than mere utilitarian objects. They can be heirlooms, passed down from generation to generation with great reverence paid to their care. They can be fun, dramatic, and beautiful multimedia artworks incorporating beads, paint, crystals, found objects, and exquisite hand or machine stitching.

They can also be more than just a bedcover. All sorts of items can be quilted, from clothing and fashion accessories (jackets,

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purses, tote bags, and vests) to home decor items (table runners, wall hangings, and pillows) to artwork and public memorials like the AIDS quilt and the 9/11 quilt.

There are whole museums devoted to quilts, such as MAQS, the Museum of the American Quilter's Society in Paducah, Kentucky. There are quilts hanging in traditional museums that are considered fine art in their own right, such as those on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and those of historical importance like those at the Smithsonian. All of these things are quilts, and each inspires the quilt maker and the quilt viewer in different ways.

This chapter will discuss all the different kinds of quilts and will discuss why different types of quilts are made. People use the art of quilting to connect with family and community (through giving quilts as gifts or donating them to a cause), to carry on traditions of the past and leave a legacy for future generations, to help heal from illness or grief by depicting their sorrows and pains in a visual way, or to celebrate milestones in life such as birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, and graduations.

Some people create devotional quilts or quilted banners for religious and spiritual groups. The methodic acts of cutting, piecing, and quilting lend themselves easily to meditation and prayer.

Quilting can help you to explore your creativity by diverging from published patterns and creating something unique. If a pattern or technique is very novel, it could even win you fame and fortune if you have the energy and personality to write and publish quilt patterns and books, or teach quilting classes.

First though, let's define *quilt* as I am using the word. Merriam-Webster defines a quilt as:

- 1 a:** a bed coverlet of two layers of cloth filled with padding (as down or batting) held in place by ties or stitched designs.
- b:** Patchwork quilt (a quilt made of patchwork)



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2: something that is quilted or resembles a quilt (a quilt of houses and parks)

I personally think the authors are limiting themselves by referring only to bedcovers, but that *is* the most common type of quilt in the United States, so that's where we'll start our exploration. After that, we'll take a look at the other kinds of quilts and quilted items that are popular, and touch on some of the reasons why people make each kind of quilt.

One who sleeps under a quilt is comforted by love.

—ANONYMOUS

Bedcovers

Bed quilts may range from small quilts made for cribs all the way up to quilts that fit king-sized beds. The top layer of a quilt is normally pieced of many different fabrics. Historically in the United States, these pieces were leftover scraps from sewing projects, or from worn-out clothing or other household textiles, including feed sacks and linens. These quilts (often called “patchwork” quilts) usually followed a published pattern, and many American newspapers carried regular quilting columns, some that included quite intricate patterns.

But in many cases, no commercial pattern was followed, and pieces of cloth were just sewn together without following any set pattern. Despite the apparent randomness of their design, some of these “rustic” quilts are now seen as works of art all on their own because of their dramatic use of color and the modern look that resulted from this method.

An example of this rustic technique can be seen in the quilts made by a group of former slaves in a town called Gee's Bend,

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Alabama. Six generations of former slaves passed down the quilting tradition and, in 2002, books, exhibits, and documentaries were made based on the women and their quilts. These quilts have even been featured on postage stamps from the U.S. Postal Service. This method is similar to the “crazy quilts” that were popular during the Victorian era, but they were much more utilitarian and did not feature the elaborate hand embroidery and embellishment that made crazy quilts the original art quilts.

In most modern quilts the fabrics are selected not out of necessity or frugality, but for their color, value, or visual texture. They are then cut and sewn together to make a particular pattern. Thousands of quilt patterns exist, and many of them have colorful names and histories.

Some quilt blocks are named after historical figures, such as the block Burgoyne Surrounded (named after Major General Burgoyne, defeated by George Washington). Some are named after events, such as the World’s

Every quilt pattern is a collection of one or more quilt blocks. Quilt blocks are the basic shapes used in a quilt design. Like miniature mosaics they can be made of many smaller shapes sometimes called patches.

Fair block, and some are named after what they resemble, such as the Mariner’s Compass or the Log Cabin.

Some blocks and patterns were purportedly used as secret clues to aid runaway slaves. Houses displaying quilts with certain designs were considered safe, and sometimes quilts were designed and hung in such a way as to point out a safe route. There is much debate about this theory and many in the quilt world no longer believe that this is historically accurate; in any case, it’s a well-known story, and many popular books have been written about it.

Some bed quilts are whole-cloth quilts, where two large sheets of fabric are sewn together with decorative stitching. In these



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quilts, the stitching itself forms the design. In some of them, sections of quilt between the stitching are stuffed with threads, fibers, or batting so that they puff out, forming a raised pattern called *trapunto*. According to quilt.com, this style of quilt “originated in Italy in the early 16th century. It appeared in the United States in the late 1700s and remained popular until the Civil War.”

Other quilts use a technique called *appliqué*, in which shaped pieces of fabric are sewn onto a plain background to create a scene. *Appliqué* is a French word that means “to put on.” This method allows for a huge range of unique designs and is often used in art quilts because it allows the quilter to depict on the quilt anything he or she can draw in two dimensions, or shape from fabric and other objects. *Appliqué* quilts may be very traditional and precise like Baltimore Album quilts, or can be naive looking with raw-edge *appliqué* and simple design.

Bed quilts can be made sturdy enough for everyday use and modern washing machines, or they may be used only for special occasions (such as for company or at Christmastime). They can be made by hand or machine, or a combination of both, and can be absolutely any color, size, or style. That’s the great thing about quilts—they are limited only by your imagination!

Art Quilts

Art reveals one’s soul . . . It cracks open the solid way we go about our daily lives, gives a glimmer into transcendence.

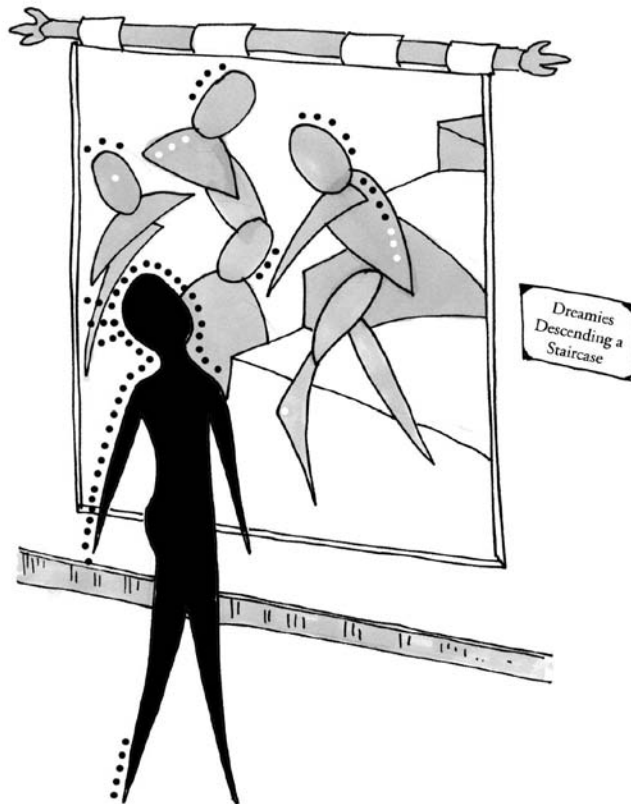
—MARY ANN TITUS

Art quilts are quilts that are made purely for their aesthetic beauty. They may be functional—as bedcovers, table runners, or clothing—but they generally do not follow a published pattern.

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Many art quilts are not pieced at all, relying instead on appliqué, thread painting, hand dyeing, painting, beading, and other embellishment techniques to create the pattern. Normally the artist drafts his or her own design, and often has to invent novel methods for achieving the desired look. These innovations sometimes move into the “traditional” quilting world and become the common method, especially when they make things faster or easier!

Gayle Pritchard, in *Uncommon Threads: Ohio’s Art Quilt Revolution*, discusses the resurgence of interest in art after the end of World War II and how the concept of art expanded to include





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textiles. Many quilters of that period were weavers first, and the movement from art to quilting was well underway by the 1970s.

That's how Caryl Bryer Fallert got into quilting. Caryl is an award-winning artist known for her beautiful, vivid, and expressive art quilts. She says, "An artist is something you are born to be, in my case at least. Artists have a certain way of looking at things and curiosity about things and often look at things from a slightly different point of view than everyone else. All my life I can't remember not drawing or painting, and I've been sewing since I was ten years old. When I discovered I could make art from cloth, that is when I found the medium that best expressed my artistic vision. No one actually warned me that it was addictive! For the images that I'm creating I found quilting to be the most expressive medium."

Quilter and host of HGTV's *Simply Quilts* Alex Anderson tells a similar story. "I have always been intrigued with sewing and fiber arts since a very young age. In college I thought I was going to be a weaver for life (it was an acceptable form of art)—however, when I saw a quilt show in Oakland, I realized that quilting could be viewed as art and at that moment I was hooked for life."

Journal quilts are a type of art quilt that tell a story. They often consist of several blocks or panels that depict an event or situation in the maker's life. Journal quilts can be any size and they use whatever techniques are necessary to illustrate the story. Some artists use journal quilts to depict a struggle with illness or the loss of a loved one. Some of them reflect the artist's love of nature or a favorite pet or family member. Quilt shows often have journal quilt displays where artists answer a challenge—like creating a journal block for each month in order to visually document a year of one's life. These quilts can provide an interesting glimpse into the life of the artist and a vivid representation of his or her feelings on a variety of subjects.

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Quilted **postcards** and trading cards can also be considered art quilts. They have gained popularity in recent years and are often made by quilters as fun gifts or to trade with other quilters. They are often quite personal and, like any art quilt, can reflect the values and beliefs of the quilt maker. These items are purely decorative and are made from a variety of materials. They borrow a lot from scrapbooking and use all kinds of found objects, charms, buttons, beads, lace, jewels, feathers, and whatever the artist needs to express his or her thoughts. Quilted postcards are generally made from fabric bonded or glued to a stiff interfacing material. They can be hand cancelled and sent through the normal postal mail, and many online quilt groups swap postcards as a way to get to know one another.





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Clothing and Fashion Quilts

In the past, quilts were often made from worn-out, discarded clothing. Nowadays many quilters buy fresh yardage specifically to create quilted clothing.

There are practical as well as artistic reasons to make quilted clothing. Quilted clothing is warm, and many cultures have used it historically for just that reason. Quilted clothing can also be decorated in unlimited ways, making something as simple as a jacket outrageously beautiful. Most large quilt shows feature quilted fashions and give prizes for these interesting and beautiful creations.

Often it is a quilter's passion for fabrics that inspires her to make clothing in the first place. I know that when I see gorgeous batiks in a quilt shop I picture full, flowing skirts and funky sundresses just as often as I picture quilts. Some quilt shops sell rayon batik in addition to cotton batik specifically for use in clothing since it is softer and has a nicer drape. But quilters are drawn to anything with a beautiful color or sheen and use all sorts of fabrics in their wearable art creations.

Any quilter who wants something unique that also signifies her passion for fabrics will eventually make a piece of quilted clothing. Some quilters make several items (jackets, vests, hats, handbags, or totes) and get addicted to the versatile beauty of these pieces. They make wonderful gifts, and the choice of fabric and color can personalize them for any given recipient.

There are entire quilt shows devoted to quilted clothing, and many of these shows present very generous prizes to the winners. The creations are always interesting, although most of them are not outfits you'd wear on a daily basis! Some of them are pretty wild . . . and why not? The whole point of creating art is to free yourself from the petty constraints of the world and create

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something that speaks to your soul. If you think you would like to show off your own wearable art, visit quilts.com/home/contests and sign up for the next show.

Some quilters have never sewn garments. As quilter Leslie Organ writes, “When I was finally ready to try making my first art garment, I chose to start with a simple sweatshirt covered with stitch and flip strips. I selected a number of navy and white recycled garments and cut one-, two-, three-, and five-inch strips from them, which I then seamed together and cut again crosswise. I ended up with strips that covered a space of about three by six feet. I decided they would make a fine wall hanging. But once they were pinned up on my design wall, I began to envision them as a lined, quilted vest and proceeded to laboriously and painstakingly create it without benefit of a pattern. This project proved to me that, despite my fears, I really could sew garments.”

Home Accessory Quilts

Many home accessories can be quilted, including table runners, placemats, curtains, wall hangings, and pillows. They make excellent projects for a new quilter—they’re small and offer almost immediate gratification. They can also be used to practice techniques and try out experimental methods that you might not want to try on a large piece.

While you can easily buy quilted home accessories, making your own allows you to be creative and also achieve exactly the look you want. You can easily coordinate a whole room or house by making the accessories yourself. They also make wonderful gifts.



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Quilts with a Purpose

Many quilts are designed for specific purposes. Some of these quilts serve as memorials; others are auctioned or displayed to raise money for a cause or to help a certain group. When a quilter participates in making a memorial or charity quilt, he or she is giving time, materials, and creative energy to support the cause.

People who have been directly affected by a tragic event, illness, or misfortune often find that creating the quilt or quilt blocks helps ease their pain. Quilt making is a very personal way to memorialize a loved one, and the practice of going through the familiar motions while thinking fondly of that person (or of the stranger who will be helped by your creation) gives a quilter a deep sense of purpose.

One of the most famous memorial quilts is the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. It was started in 1987 by Cleve Jones; a group of volunteers and quilters from around the world has been adding to it ever since. Each block is in memory of someone who has died of the disease.

According to the aidsquilt.org website, there are more than 46,000 panels on the quilt and more than 91,000 names recorded. The quilt is shown (normally in pieces because of its enormous size, which is currently about 1,293,300 square feet) at fund-raisers and events designed to raise awareness of the illness.

This quilt has even found a home in the virtual world "Second Life," where in June 2007 it was recreated to celebrate Pride Month. The virtual quilt took up several private islands in the three-dimensional world.

The AIDS quilt is not unique among quilts (except perhaps for its sheer size). Several memorial quilts were created after September 11, 2001. These include the WTC Quilt and the 9/11 Memorial Quilt. After Hurricane Katrina, thousands of quilters

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around the world made quilts to donate to the survivors and to be auctioned off to raise money.

I was one of them.

I read in *American Quilter* magazine that people were collecting quilts, especially baby quilts, for survivors who were suddenly homeless. I looked through my books for just the right pattern and I found one called Bright Hopes. This is a simple square-in-a-square block. For the centers, I chose bright, cheerful prints I'd been given by a friend. Around that square I put a dark brown fabric. Normally the block is just two colors, but my blocks were too small to make anything, and I had run out of the brown fabric. So I decided to add more borders, a bright sunny yellow on half the blocks, and assorted blues on the other half. Finally they were big enough to piece together into a quilt.

As I worked on the quilt, I listened to the news reports of the hurricane and many times wet the fabric with my tears as I heard story after story of people who could not be rescued and died in their attics, and of helpless animals abandoned by panicked owners, left to starve and drown as the waters continued to rise day after day.

After I had the blocks all completed I realized what I had created: out of the blue water and the dark brown mud left by the hurricane, the brilliant yellow sun would come out, and the bright, cheerful flowers would grow again.

I was very pleased with this little quilt and planned to donate it. But time slipped by as I worked on it and as I tried (in vain) to finish quilting it, and by the time it was done, the deadline for donations had passed. It is still in my stash of unfinished work and one day I will complete the quilt and donate it to some other baby who needs some bright hopes.

Quilters are widely known for their generosity, and some quilters do nothing but make charity quilts. This kind of selfless



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activity serves two purposes: it helps those in need, and it gives the quilter a sense that he or she is helping, in some small way, to make the world a better, more comfortable place for someone in distress.

Charity quilts are often made en masse by quilt bees or guilds and donated to local police or fire departments, to neonatal units of hospitals, to homeless shelters, to disabled war veterans, or to auctions that raise money for charities.

A guild is defined by Merriam-Webster as “an association of people with similar interests or pursuits.” A quilt guild is a group of quilters who meet periodically to discuss quilt-related topics and to share their knowledge with one another. Guilds are generally larger than bees (they can have hundreds of members) and the main activity at their meetings is typically listening to a lecture on a given quilting topic and socializing with other quilters. Guilds often sponsor quilt shows and charity quilt-making efforts so that their members can share their quilts with the community.

Members of the guild to which I belong, Berrien Towne and Country Quilters, recently began making quilts for a local charity called Well of GRACE (Girls Restored and Christ Exalted). This organization provides a safe place for teenage girls to stay when they are experiencing chaos in their lives. One girl wrote the following heartfelt letter to our guild in thanks for a quilt she had received:

Dear Quilting Ladies,

There really are NO words to describe just how grateful I am for having a quilt made just for me. All of your hard work, dedication, and love sure flows through each and every patch and stitch.

When I was told that I could choose a quilt to have as my very

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own, I was in complete awe. I didn't feel like I was deserving of such a thing after I have hurt myself and refused to let love in. Once I entered Well of GRACE and saw the quilt that I had picked on my bed, I knew it was really mine.

For so long, I have had things given to me, only for them to be taken away because my feelings didn't matter. To have you ladies piece together a quilt that I can call my very own, and to know that it won't be taken or given away truly means the world to me. It's like you all know my favorite color and my style and I know that all the other quilts that have yet to be made will also have other girls feeling just as special and loved as I do.

So I just want to thank each and every one of you for any time you spend on making a quilt, and for all the love that you put into it. You will never know all of the warmth, comfort, and the fears that will be taken away by your love and generosity in making quilts for hurting young women like myself."



M'Liss Rae Hawley tells me that, to her, sharing the items you quilt is like coming full circle in the process of creation. She points out that the quilter goes through all the steps of making the quilt, from selecting or designing the pattern, choosing the fabric, washing it, cutting it, piecing it together, layering, quilting, embellishing and embroidering it—and then gives it away. All the steps of creating the quilt are “selfish” steps—we do them because we love to buy and fondle fabric, we love to design quilts, we love to piece them, and some people even love the process of quilting them.

But the very last step, which makes a quilt complete, is giving it away—sharing all the creative energy with the recipient. I've given away most of the quilts I've finished and keep very few for



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myself. I always take a picture of my quilt, because I know I may never see it again, and if you are giving the quilt to strangers (as when guilds give away hundreds of baby quilts or quilts for charity) the quilter usually loses all track of that work of art . . . that piece of her soul. It goes off into the world and shares the quilter's love and dedication with its eventual owner.

Each quilt, especially one that you designed yourself or even one made from a commercial pattern modified in some way to be your own, contains a part of you. Your choices of color and fabrics, as well as your workmanship, make each quilt special. It can be hard to part with a quilt sometimes, especially if it has deep meaning for you. Some winners of the American Quilter's Society (AQS) Show have been known to refuse the prize money because they did not want to surrender their quilt to the AQS museum. (I'd have to love my quilt a *lot* to refuse ten thousand dollars in prize money! But having seen some of the first-place winners up close and in person, I can fully understand why their creators found it hard to let go.)

Some quilters don't feel this sense of attachment. To them, the creative process is more important than the quilt itself. Caryl Bryer Fallert acknowledges this when she says, "The great adventure of quilting is having the idea and going through the creative journey. When the quilt is finished, it's just stuff. I hope it will go find a home for itself, like adult children do. It is all about making the quilt; it is not about having the finished project."

For many people, knowing that their quilt has found a home where it is loved and cherished is reward enough for all their time and effort. The West Michigan Quilters' Guild, to which I used to belong, typically donates about four hundred baby quilts to the neonatal unit at the local hospital every Christmas. Many of these quilts are wrapped around dolls and stuffed animals. The parents of premature newborns choose from among dozens

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of lovingly handmade quilts in which to take their baby home. None of the guild members *has* to do this, and they all have their own projects to work on, but each year many of them make multiple quilts to donate just so they will have the experience of sharing their love and creativity with others.

M'Liss says that giving quilts to those who are ill (or to orphans or others in misfortune) is like giving them hope. To her, making the quilt is joy, but sharing it with the world is even better.

In addition to local groups, there are many national groups that coordinate the donation of quilts. One of the best known is Project Linus (named after the *Peanuts* character), a nonprofit volunteer organization. According to its website, its mission is "to provide love, a sense of security, warmth, and comfort to children who are seriously ill, traumatized, or otherwise in need through the gifts of new, handmade blankets and afghans, lovingly created by volunteer 'blanketeers' . . . to provide a rewarding and fun service opportunity for interested individuals and groups in local communities, for the benefit of children." As of September 2007, Project Linus had donated 2,293,340 blankets and quilts!

My friend Joyce DenBleyker has made quilts for Project Linus. She is teaching her daughter and stepchildren how to quilt and each of them has participated in making a quilt for the charity. The kids chose the fabrics and Joyce did most of the finishing work. I think this is a great way to not only pass on the love of quilting, but also to get young people involved in good causes and let them see that helping the less fortunate does not have to be a chore, but can actually be a fun experience.

Quilts for Kids is another nonprofit group that collects quilts (as well as quilting fabrics and supplies) and "transforms discontinued designer fabrics into quilts that comfort children with cancer, AIDS, and other life-threatening illnesses as well as battered and abused children." Their goal is to "link design centers



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nationwide to their communities, so that children in need in those regions may be served.”

Most quilters are women, and many have either been stricken with breast cancer or know someone who has. When a friend tells you she has found a lump, all you can do is wish her well and hope that it is something minor that can be cured with surgery and therapy. It’s a helpless feeling, because nothing you can do will make her situation any better. All you can do is be a friend and be there for her. But quilters can help find a cure for breast cancer by participating in Quilt Pink.

Quilt Pink is a charity quilt auction sponsored by *American Patchwork and Quilting* magazine, Moda Fabrics, Husqvarna Viking, AccuCut, and Handi Quilter. In May 2007 the organization auctioned off more than four thousand quilts, with proceeds going to Susan G. Komen for the Cure, a foundation established in 1982 by Nancy Brinker to honor the memory of her sister who died of breast cancer at the age of thirty-six. Quilt Pink is an annual event; every September, quilt shops around the world sponsor Quilt Pink stitch-ins where quilters make blocks that are sewn together to make the auction quilts. Many of the quilts feature pink fabrics and the familiar pink ribbon symbol. Many quilt supply manufacturers also make pink cutting mats, rotary cutters, and other quilting notions with part of the proceeds from the sale of these items going to the Quilt for a Cure charity.

Quilts of Valor is a group dedicated to making quilts for members of the armed forces. Many guilds collect fabric and blocks and donate quilts, including lap quilts for veterans who are restricted to wheelchairs. Individuals can also take part. My fellow guild member Cindy Shepherd says, “I love to quilt for a good cause. Quilting for Quilts of Valor is a way of expressing my sincere thank-you for their service and giving us the freedom to quilt whenever we want to . . . I find it important to share the

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items we make from the talents God has given us. After all, aren't we here to blanket each other in warmth and love? Some of us just do it with quilts!"

Quilts with Unconscious Meaning

Sometimes I'll sit back and say, "Wow, that's inspired!
Look what I did with those fabrics!"

—M'LISS RAE HAWLEY

The style of the quilt can sometimes be used as another means by which the quilter expresses his or her emotions; but, really, any kind of quilt can convey the thoughts and feelings of the quilter if she takes some time to decide how to express them. Sometimes the real meaning behind the quilt is not apparent—even to the quilter—until the quilt is completed.

Caryl Bryer Fallert tells me how she had made a quilt almost by accident after a very trying time. Her mother had recently passed away and her husband had almost died of a stroke. She had won best of show at the American Quilter's Society Show in Paducah, Kentucky, had written her first book, and had a traveling exhibition—all at the same time. On the last day of the year she went to her studio at seven in the morning to clear up paperwork, and found an address label with a little bird on it. She liked the design and decided to scan it before throwing the label away. But something about the little bird intrigued her. She started to doodle and put things together . . . and twelve hours later had used the bird motif to create a quilt.

As she worked on it, she began to see human forms in the quilt, so she added faces. She ended up with two faces looking in opposite directions with the bird between them. Caryl often includes birds in her quilts when the theme is healing or spiritu-



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ality. She saw the bird in this quilt as a messenger of hope for a new beginning after a trying roller coaster of a year.

Her quilt, Messenger #2, came straight out of her unconscious mind with no conscious thought of what it was about. The meaning of the quilt only came out after several hours of working on it.

Milestone Quilts

Milestones in life are usually marked with celebrations and often with gifts. Most quilters have made quilts to mark milestones in the lives of their loved ones. Wedding quilts were traditionally made by the prospective bride herself, as part of her hope chest. In earlier days when nearly every girl was taught needlework, making your own wedding quilt was expected of you. These quilts often featured exquisite workmanship and, because they were special, they were rarely used and were handed down through generations. Many of the antique quilts in collections today were originally wedding quilts because the everyday quilts were worn out from use and did not survive.

Many grandmothers and even expectant moms and dads make baby quilts in anticipation of a birth. These quilts run the gamut from frilly pastel confections to bright and cheerful crib quilts or wall hangings. Birthdays, graduations, anniversaries, and retirements are often marked by a memory quilt. Modern memory quilts use computer technology to print photographs or letters directly on fabric. These digital artifacts are then sewn into the quilt top. Graduation quilts often feature blocks made from T-shirts and sweatshirts owned by the recipient. They make wonderful mementos of one's school years by incorporating the individual's interests directly into the quilt.

Even milestones such as retirement can inspire quilts. Farewell

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to the Silver Bird is a quilt made by Caryl Bryer Fallert when she retired from United Airlines after twenty-eight years as a flight attendant. On her website, Caryl says, "This quilt represents my taking leave of the corporation to fly solo in my own career. The silver bird, naturally, represents the airline. The globe represents the areas where I flew professionally in my twenty-eight-year career: from Alaska to Venezuela and from Montreal to Hawaii. The red, orange, and blue stripes in the border are the logo stripes found on every United airplane. The bird flying away is made from the spectral colors of light that I often use in my quilts to represent life and energy."

Spiritual Quilts

. . . expressing my creativity provides a way for me
to mirror the creative activity of the divine.

—BETH ANN WILLIAMS

There are many books devoted to spirituality and quilting. Some are devotional texts that provide prayers and meditations for the quilter to contemplate while working on a quilt, while others feature quilt block designs with a spiritual theme. But one can combine quilting and spirituality in other ways. An interested quilter could use themes from a religious conference or sermon to design a banner or wall hanging for his or her sacred meeting place, or use religious symbols from history or other cultures such as mandalas and labyrinths to express her spirituality in quilt form.

My fellow bee member Phyllis Jackson is a retired school-teacher. She is married to a church minister and is active in a number of church groups for which she makes banners.

Recently she made a banner based on a conference theme of



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Quilt bees are groups of people who come together periodically to sew and quilt. They may all work on the same quilt, or each member may work on his or her own project. A quilt bee can mean the members of such a group collectively, or it can mean an old-fashioned quilting bee, which is a group that comes together for the purpose of completing one or more quilts, usually all working on the same quilt at the same time.

Resurrection Women. The theme was intended to celebrate the women who discovered that Jesus had risen from the tomb, but Phyllis thought a tomb would be too depressing to put on a quilt. After some thought, she decided to feature butterflies in the piece. They emerge from the cocoon in a blaze of color and fly off into the sky, and Phyllis saw it as a great metaphor for the resurrection of Jesus. She created a delightful pieced and appliquéd wall hanging that depicts two women, arms outstretched, releasing a bevy of colorful butterflies.

She says, "It's always a great honor for me to be asked to create a quilted banner for a specific theme or occasion. It means that I really need to dig into my creative talents and come up with something fitting and appropriate. I take great pride in doing this. I feel that God has given me some special talents, and I need to share them with others. At the moment that I present my finished project, I feel so proud and very blessed."

Sally Zehrung agrees. "I believe there is definitely a spiritual side to art. Often what I create is an expression of something meaningful to me. The piece I just finished is called Oregon Rainforest (I'm a native Oregonian). It's very different from other things I've done. It's pictorial. I strove to create the feeling of being in an old-growth forest just after a rain, with the sun just coming out. The wet plants sparkle. It would be an awesome

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place to be. I was told by one person that she could almost smell the trees. There is a feeling of reverence in a forest like that.”

My own attempt at a spiritual quilt was more along the lines of Sally’s effort than Phyllis’s. My beliefs tend more toward those of a worshipper of nature and the female divine. The result was a (still unfinished) wall hanging. It features a goddess figure, hands upraised to the moon. Her body is in dark purple shadows and the sky is a deep, rich blue with a pale, fat full moon centered between her outstretched hands. I wanted her attitude to be one of sheer joy and wonder, as I always feel when I look up at the moon.

The border (when and if I ever finish it) will feature small Celtic symbols and other sacred shapes on brightly colored backgrounds bordered in black. I gave up on completing the quilt because I didn’t like how the head on the figure looked. I may have to try again. I think my moon-worshipping goddess form would feel right at home in Sally’s forest!

Quilter Marlene Brown Woodfield creates wall hangings, altar cloths, and pulpit and lectern covers for her church. She says, “I feel that I should tithe with these since it is a gift to be able to create beauty.”

Sally and Marlene were both quilters featured at the Sacred Threads show I attended in June of 2007. A group of quilters who made spiritual or sacred quilts joined forces in 1999 and founded the show, which runs biannually near Columbus, Ohio. According to their website, the committee members “wanted to share the experiences of quilters whose stories would be a source of healing and strength for others by allowing the artist to submit a statement that would be exhibited with the artwork that described the meaning or inspiration for the piece . . . The show does not emphasize any particular religion or theology but con-



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veys the spirituality, healing and inspirational messages that transcend all religions and races.”

The sheer variety of quilts I saw at the show was astounding, from very simple wall hangings to very elaborate rope bridges made of fibers and textiles, from traditional pieced quilts to wildly imaginative art quilts.

The quilts that struck me the most were those created by people who were grieving the loss of a loved one. Halfway through viewing the grief section, I had to stop and take a break. My fiancé and I walked out into the lobby for a breath of fresh air. One of the ladies at the admission desk asked if we were done already, and I told her we just needed a break from the grief quilts. She said she understood perfectly and offered me a bottle of water and box of tissues. Participating quilters had seen the impact of their quilts on visitors before, and every table and bench had its own box of tissues. These ladies were definitely prepared for the effect their art has on people. The pain poured out in these quilts was stunning, but the amount of healing that the act of putting emotion into art produced was equally stunning.

Grief Quilts

Many quilters create quilts to commemorate deceased friends or relatives, or to help themselves heal from the grief of losing a loved one. Sometimes these quilts are anonymous—kept by the quilter and her family as treasured heirlooms of remembrance. Sometimes the work is so extraordinary that it becomes well known and wins awards.

One such quilt is known as the 1776 quilt. The 1776 quilt’s creator, Pam Holland, started it while her twenty-four-year-old daughter was dying from cancer. She says in her book *The 1776*

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Quilt: Heartache, Heritage, and Happiness, "It was my therapy as I watched my beautiful daughter struggle with her disease. My emotions were hidden in every stitch." Her labor of love went on to win best-in-show at four major American shows.

Although I have never made a grief quilt, I can see how having something to focus on, something that one has control over, could help when coping with grief. The repetitive nature of cutting, piecing, and stitching a quilt can become meditative and calming and allow you to be "busy" while at the same time letting your brain focus on something besides the pain.

Sometimes grief can only be processed after the fact. At the time of a loved one's death, you are often shocked and dumbstruck, going through the motions that get you through the day, but not able to really sit and sort out all the feelings surging inside of you. This was the case for Mary Beedlow, about whom I read in *Quilter's Home* magazine, when her husband Joe died suddenly in the midst of building their dream home, a log cabin. Mary was left in midwinter with "a house with no roof, no heat, no windows, and no doors." She was also left with two young teenage sons who needed her more than ever.

Together, they finished building the house: they got on with doing what needed to be done, and there was little time for tears or grief. After the house was completed, a woman Mary knew asked her to make her a quilt. At first she was disinclined to take on the task, but then decided to do it anyway. Mary says, "I discovered in pulling out my machine and getting to work that I had found my therapy. While I was piecing, I didn't have to worry about anything else. Once I discovered this breakthrough, other barriers melted."

Mary took on other quilting projects and eventually opened her own home-based business, Orchard's Edge Machine Quilting. Working on these projects for others has helped Mary to grieve and



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heal. She says, "I'm not quite ready to make a memorial quilt, yet. When I do, the quilt will hang in a private area of our home."

Sally Zerhung wrote to me about a grief quilt she made that was featured in the Sacred Threads show. "I created a quilt while healing . . . from the loss of my brother. That was *The Light at the End of the Tunnel*, which was at the Sacred Threads exhibit . . . the *Tunnel* quilt was by far the most meaningful to me. My brother and I had always been close. He was four years older than I. He was always there. He had cancer that was supposedly all removed. Then suddenly it was back. That, along with some other serious health issues, was just too much. His last days were very short. I wasn't able to see him. It broke my heart. So the old saying about the light at the end of the tunnel came to my mind. I knew things wouldn't look so dark and gloomy forever, but at the time I needed to see a little light, so I made the quilt. It's still my favorite one. I call it my therapy quilt."

Angie Crosson says that while creating a quilt for a sick loved one, "I felt like I was saying everything in my heart; get well, you're in my prayers, sorry you're not better, and ultimately, good-bye."

One of the most touching grief quilts I have seen was created by members of my guild for a member who was dying of a very swift-moving cancer. Members traced their hands and appliquéd them to quilt blocks. Antique handkerchiefs were tucked into the hands. When the quilt was shown during show-and-tell, the lady who had organized it cried through the whole presentation. The recipient said that she got her first good night's sleep in months under the quilt. Instead of flowers, she wants the quilt to cover her casket and she wants the quilt tucked around her when she is buried. Our usually boisterous group was in tears. It is events like this that makes you know that your quilting has some meaning beyond mere necessity.

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Recovery Quilts

Quilting as therapy is a theme I heard over and over again as I spoke to quilters about why they quilt. One quilter, Debbie Krueger, actually titled her quilt My Therapy Quilt.

Debbie says, "My Therapy Quilt definitely helped me to heal. Though the story is long, I'll share it here. I love the pattern Grandmother's Flower Garden. It's probably the only traditional pattern that I willingly choose to make. I had a beautiful batik fabric that I was going to make into this pattern. I had taken care of my mother for a long time, and after her death I suffered from the 'What do I do now?' syndrome.

"One night, in the middle of a bout of tears, I started laying the hexagons on the living room floor, wondering if I could make little question marks rather than flowers. One thing led to another and the little question marks became a huge one symbolic of my mind screaming, 'Why do I exist?' and I decided the question mark would be the centerpiece of my quilt. I decided to put a lot of small question marks around the big one.

"In the midst of this, I moved out of my childhood house and into an apartment and started looking at my life in a new way. One day, as I started to lay out the question marks, I thought they looked like the petals of flowers. The flowers became the symbol of my growth even though there were still questions. I purposely made the stems of the flowers free form, which for me was a departure from the anal-retentive methods I would have used in the past! For the first time I allowed the quilt to speak to me and it nearly designed itself."

Physical illness can also hamper creativity. Another Sacred Threads artist, JoAnn Perkins, writes that she was in a creative slump while recovering from breast cancer. She just could not get motivated to do anything. Then one day she walked into a quilt



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shop and “the perfect” fabric was staring her in the face. (This happens to me all the time; hence my enormous stash . . .)

JoAnn used this perfect fabric to create a bargello quilt, a style she had long wanted to learn. She writes, “Just as the bargello design is made up of many small pieces with fluctuating highs and lows and darks and lights, so was my life affected by moments of darkness, but faith, family, and friends were there to support and lift my spirit. I wanted to show that even though it was a difficult time for me and there were many highs and lows and moments of darkness, there was much positive energy and goodness during that time as well. And it can be that way for anyone, should they choose that path.”

Bargello is a sharply pointed pattern that resembles flames. It can also be modified into graceful curves and other designs. The name comes from the Bargello Palace in Florence, which had furnishings featuring needlework in this pattern. Quilted bargello patterns use strategically placed pieces of fabric to mimic the look of bargello stitching.

My friend Beth Ann Williams says, “Quilt making has also been an important factor in allowing me to define my own identity. Any chronic, debilitating disease such as multiple sclerosis potentially has the power to dominate one’s sense of self, or control how one is perceived in the world. Developing my creative self, in large part through my quilt making, has given me a wonderful arena in which I can feel whole and free.”

She adds, “I don’t struggle with loss of motivation so much as I do loss of physical capabilities. Diseases like multiple sclerosis can be quite capricious. You never know from day to day what your body will do. It takes concentration to focus on accepting each ‘good’ day for the grace that it is, and not drowning in an abyss of despair and fear during the ‘bad’ days, weeks, or months.

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“I know that when I’m ill, quilting is the last thing I want to do! I just don’t have the energy to stand and cut fabric or sit and sew at a time like that. But if I’m laid up in bed and have run out of books to read, I do love to doodle new quilt designs. I keep graph paper and colored pencils in my nightstand to capture late-night inspirations. My pencil sketches out patterns I will probably never have the skills to master. But thinking up the designs is the best part for me, even if they never turn into creations of fabric and thread.”

So if you are ever in a place where you can’t sew or are too ill to handle the physical aspects of quilting, you can always fall back on designing your next masterpiece on paper. You might even turn your doodles into commercial patterns and a whole new career could be born!

Quilts of Joy and Love

Other quilts in the Sacred Threads show represent joy and love. Debbie Krueger created a quilt based on love letters between her parents. “When my brother and I were cleaning out my parents’ house after my mom’s death, we found a box of love letters my dad had written to my mother over about two years, when they were in college and while they were engaged,” Debbie explains. “After I moved and had some time, I spent a day putting the letters in order by date and reading them. What you have to understand is that though Mom always talked about her love for my dad, I had never really heard Dad talk about his love for Mom.”

She continues, “The letters were filled with wonderful insight to my parents’ youth and how much my dad loved my mother. I also learned that they were very human (something we never credit our parents with)—including pregnancy scares (contrary to the ‘don’t do anything ‘til you’re married’ teachings of my



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mom) and hopes and dreams for their future (my favorite comment is when my dad says that even if they someday have a daughter, she will never have the ‘old man’ feel about her the way he did about Mom). Somewhere in the midst of the reading session, I knew a quilt was in the making.”

And that quilt became special. “So this new knowledge of my parents’ love gave me such a feeling of comfort and joy that the quilt became an expression of my love for them. Filled with photos of them during their courtship days, their wedding, and their twenty-fifth anniversary as well as portions of the letters, the quilt has yellow silk roses (my dad’s fraternity flower which he always gave my mother on special occasions) and their fraternity and sorority pins in a gold heart (gold to symbolize that this year would have been their fiftieth anniversary). I named the quilt *All My Love, Doug*, because I never knew Dad to sign his letters, cards, flower cards—anything, really—in any other way than ‘All my love, Doug.’ It’s a small quilt, but the love and joy behind it are huge!”

Let this be a lesson! Be careful what you leave lying around—your children might one day share it with the whole world! Quilters find inspiration in all sorts of places. If Debbie were a writer, or a poet, or a lyricist, these love letters may have found expression in some other form. This just shows that quilters can take inspiration from the same sources as any other artist. If you are stuck for an idea, look around. Not only nature and current events, but family history can provide a creative spark that will make your quilts even more meaningful to your heirs as they will contain a piece of their own past.

Cindy Shepherd writes that “every quilt I make is a celebration that I lived another day to complete the project. When I look at the quilts I made, some make me laugh, some bring back memories of the vacation that inspired me or that I took it with to

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work on. Some bring me joy because I can't believe I won a ribbon on it. I am thankful for some quilts because God gave me the knowledge and strength to finish the project. Whew, some patterns are doozies!"

Quilts That are Meant to Be

Sometimes a quilt just evolves from a series of seemingly random ideas. You'll be quilting along and all of a sudden some little detail hits you—it could be from a song or a book you're reading, something someone says, or something you see on TV. Some little idea will ignite a spark and then another and another and before you know it, you have incorporated all these disparate elements into your quilt.

Roslyn Besterman relates a story of how a trail of serendipitous events helped her design her quilt *Order out of Chaos*. It all started when Roslyn won a drawing for patriotic fabrics at a guild meeting in June 2002. Although she was very busy she says she felt compelled to design a quilt, maybe for Flag Day or Fourth of July. Circumstances seemed to be against her from the start though.

She envisioned a flag fluttering in the wind so she started with a tessellating pattern but the pieces on her design wall were chaotic, not fluttering. She felt a little down because the quilt was not turning out as planned and almost stopped right there. But when she ran out of red fabric and found that her local quilt shop only had one yard left she took it as a sign that she should finish her quilt now, so she bought the red and continued on.

In August, her guild mates showed off their flag and patriotic-themed quilts, but hers was not ready for prime time. Even when they announced that the following month's meeting would take place on September 11, Roslyn says, "It still didn't hit me."



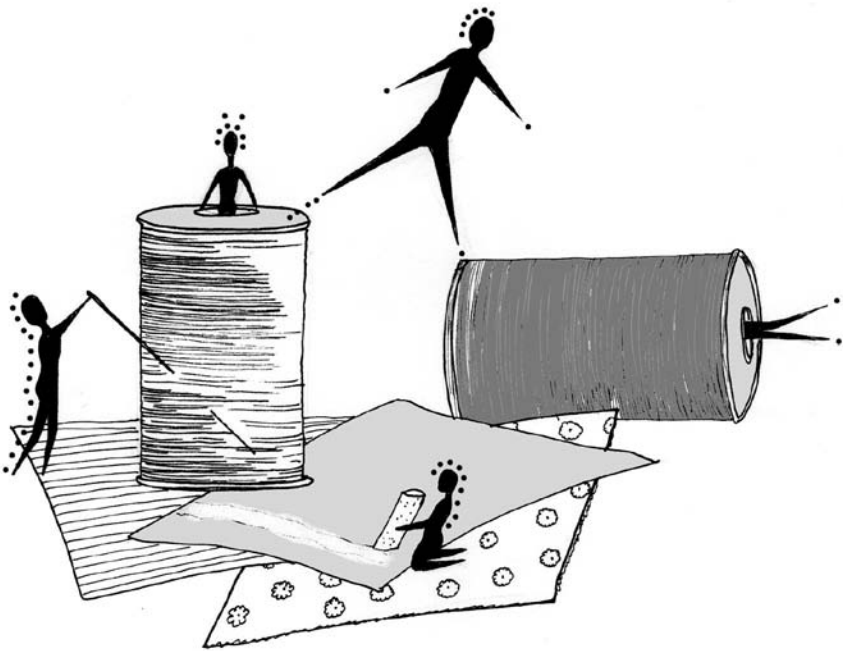
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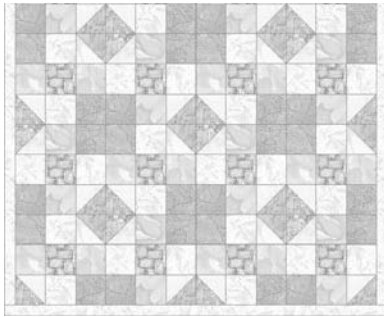
While assembling the border, Roslyn tried again to achieve that elusive fluttering look, using scraps given her by a friend. But it didn't look right until she had bordered her tessellated flag with a tidy border of smaller flags. She says, "It hit me right in the face. Order out of Chaos. This flag was meant for September 11."

Some suggestions from friends in her quilt group led to a red border with white cornerstones. Roslyn decided on red stars: red for blood and the four planes. While looking for the name of the pattern she had used, Roslyn realized it was called propellers, so she quilted a propeller design in the white spaces. The propellers reminded Roslyn of a dream she'd had of spider-like creatures with hundreds of legs spinning on the floor. Someone in her dream called them anacondas, which made no sense to her at the time. Later she heard a newscast that showed helicopters spinning around in Afghanistan. They were calling it Operation Anaconda.

All these disparate events seemed to be conspiring to become part of Roslyn's quilt. On September 11, 2002, Roslyn heard the mayor of New York use the phrase, "order out of chaos," and she knew then that her quilt wanted and needed to be completed for September 11, and it was.

This kind of synchronicity may seem rare and random, but when you are open to the universe surprising things can happen. Roslyn's heart was open enough to see the little signs and coincidences and somehow they all converged to create this quilt that perfectly expressed her feelings about the events of September 11.





About the Author

Photo by Eric Johnson.



Kelly Smith is a writer and IT consultant who has been quilting for more than ten years. She has taught friends and their children how to machine appliqué and make small quilting projects like tote bags and pillows. Twice a year she attends a four-day quilt retreat with more than thirty other women, where they share ideas and inspiration. She regularly

attends classes to learn new techniques and to network, and she enjoys designing quilts from scratch, or using a published pattern as a jumping off point to create her own masterpieces.

You can visit Kelly's website at www.redheadedquilter.com.