

Shelly Zegart: Why Quilts Matter

by Deborah Quinn Hensel



As Shelly Zegart was developing the nine-part documentary, “Why Quilts Matter: History, Art and Politics,” quilting as art was a key concept. “The very first time I looked at quilts, I saw them as art,” Shelly said. Episode 4, entitled “What Is Art?” discusses questions familiar to quilt artists:

- What constitutes art?
- How is art defined?
- What is the role of folk art?
- What elevates craft to art?

“Quilts started out as craft, made for useful purposes, but they now line the walls of galleries and art museums,” Shelly says in the beginning of Episode 4. “On the other hand, no matter how beautifully presented, quilts carry so much domestic, historical baggage that there will always be some who can perceive them only as women’s work.”

Other episodes of the documentary, which has become one of the touchstone references for the world of quilting, include a basic primer on antique and contemporary quilts, a discussion of the quilt marketplace, how quilts empower women, and how quilts bring history to life.

Shelly, who has a long and impressive resume as a friend to the world of quilting—traditional and artistic—is more than qualified to speak on the



Roman Square, 86 x 63 inches, maker unknown, possibly made in Vermont, circa 1930-1950. Jonathan Holstein Collection IQSCM 2003.003.0012. www.quiltstudy.org.

role of quilting in U.S. history and culture. She has built a career as an author, lecturer, dealer, appraiser, collector, and curator and builder of collections and exhibitions around the world.

In 1993, she was a founder of The Alliance for American Quilts (now the Quilt Alliance) and has been a driving force behind its projects to work with museums and universities to preserve quilt heritage. She is a co-founder of

the Kentucky Quilt Project, the sponsoring organization for the documentary series. She served as executive producer and host of the documentary, which is being used in museums, universities and public schools as a teaching tool. The documentary has also been shown on select PBS stations around the United States.

The documentary informed a lecture Shelly gave at the University of Louisville’s IdeaFestival in June 2013,

Zig Zag, 77 x 76 inches, maker unknown, possibly made in Pennsylvania, circa 1880-1900. Jonathan Holstein Collection IQSCM 2003.003.0016. www.quiltstudy.org.

called “Demystifying Quilts: Why Quilts Matter.”

“Quilts are a window into the history, art and politics of the United States,” she said. “However, the subject of quilts and the people who make them is frequently misunderstood as they have long been relegated to discussions of patterns and fabrics.”

There are many myths surrounding quilts and quilting, and people don’t like to let go of them, Shelly said. In her presentation, she debunked some of these misconceptions, including the notion that cotton seeds in the batting of a quilt prove it is an antique. Other myths she debunked include:

- The belief that quilts are a purely U.S. craft.
- The idea that some quiltmakers purposely left mistakes in their work to demonstrate humility.

- The misperception that all antique quilts were made at quilting bees by multiple hands.

This last myth is a notion that came out of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1859 historical novel, *The Minister’s Wooing*, Shelly said.

“When I look at an antique quilt, it’s like a painting,” she said. “You can tell whether one person made it. You can see the style, technique and hand of the artist. People love the myth of multiple makers. It’s what they want to believe.

“Every time I’m able to demystify quilts and let people know how important they were to the culture of our history, that legitimizes quilts,” she said. “I often hear that quilters like the DVD series because it gives quilting respect.”

The business of quilting

Episode 8 of the documentary, called “Quilt Nation: 20 Million and

Counting,” explains quilting is more than an activity from the past. It is a thriving enterprise.

“I don’t think the public has a clue about how big quilting is or the power and money surrounding the business of quilts,” Shelly said. “The documentary looks at the quilt world as if it were a small country with lobbies, fiercely protected agendas and a business side. Within the business side of quilt shows lurks another myth: the implication that every little white-haired lady in a pinafore is an honest, reputable quilt dealer. Because the public has a really positive feeling about quilts—they’re Mother, home and country—the public tends to transfer that feeling to the people dealing in quilts. You have to be careful about what’s being said to you or sold to you.”

With regard to myths that have sprung up about art quilts, she said the public continues to ponder the question of whether a quilt is better if made by hand or machine.

“With the art quilt, that’s changing,” she said. “There’s increasing respect for the studio art quilt. My concern is, who deems it art? Who deems it okay to call it an art quilt? Is it the buyer, the gallery or the maker?”

The studio art quilt movement is still a small subset of the larger world of quilting, she said. The statistics she gathered indicate 95 percent of quilts made today are made for everyday use or as gifts.

“The legitimizing of studio art quilts increases as there are more exhibitions in known galleries, museums and publications and on the Internet,” Shelly said. “I think Studio Art Quilt Associates (SAQA) is doing an excellent job in that area. Most



Nine Patch, 85 x 68 inches, maker unknown, possibly made in Pennsylvania, circa 1880-1900. Jonathan Holstein Collection IQSCM 2003.003.0020. www.quiltstudy.org.

Bars, 79 x 75 inches, maker unknown, possibly made Pennsylvania, circa 1890-1910. Jonathan Holstein Collection IQSCM 2003.003.0058. www.quiltstudy.org.

museums don't have quilt exhibitions repeatedly, and they don't really have people with knowledge to put together content for those exhibitions. I think that's really difficult for the art quilt movement. If people are just walking into the museum and seeing them and saying, 'Oh, aren't these nice quilts,' the art quilt movement is not getting anywhere. People need to be educated about what they're seeing on the wall. They need to understand how art quilts are made. These are educational areas SAQA and other organizations can tackle."

As one step in educating the public, Shelly offers loops from the documentary series to museums to run alongside exhibitions.

Working in fiber

Shelly's long association with quilts and quiltmakers has led her to think about what is it about fiber that draws artists who have backgrounds in other media.

"Many artists from other disciplines were first exposed to quilts as art at the 1971 exhibition *Abstract Design in American Quilts* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. When they saw quilts on the wall as art, that legitimized their moving in that direction.

"I think quilt artists are trying to break through, and one of the things that is different is in the feeling of working with textiles as opposed to a non-flexible medium. It could be that they've already explored other media, and they see this as a fresh avenue for them to explore. I do think it always

comes back to the warmth of the textile and the reflection of it back to history and family."

When it comes to quilting competitions, Shelly said she thinks traditional quilts and art quilts should be judged in separate categories.

"The reality is that if these judges have no art history background, if they don't know that a particular quilt artist is making an homage to German Expressionism, how can they judge that quilt effectively for the kind of art that it is?" she asked. "It's the aesthetic that matters in the art quilt; it's not the precision of the stitching. So it's like you're judging apples and oranges in the same basket. They're not the same thing.

"Art quilters have to aim high. They have to look at their quilts as if they are going to hang in a museum next to a Picasso. An art quilter must

ask, 'How do I get there? What do I call myself? How do I decide what I'll send to *Quilt National*?'

"The art quilt movement, which engages people in the art of quilting, whatever form that takes, is very positive," Shelly said.

"Why Quilts Matter: History, Art and Politics" is available from the SAQA store, www.saqa.com/store-detail.php?scat=21&ID=6. A discussion guide is available in print and can be downloaded from the Why Quilts Matter website, www.whyquiltsmatter.org. ▼

Deborah Quinn Hensel, a writer based in Houston, Texas, is an avid fiber artist who has been inspired by other quilters in her family. She was associate producer of "Stitched," a 2011 documentary about three art quilters' roads to enter the International Quilt Festival in Houston.

