

## **Susan McCraw – Highlighted Artist article for SAQA Journal**

I made my first art quilt in 1996. The inspiration was a fashion writer's descriptive term, "carwash skirt." Aha, I thought! I know what she means – those swifty vertical strips of fabric that swish across the windshield in the automatic carwash. That image had been fixed in my memory for twenty years, because of my toddler son's endless pleas to "go again" through the sudsy gauntlet. He'd scream all the way, in feigned terror at the noise and action. We had the cleanest car in Texas. I don't believe he understood that the trips had any more practical objective than a roller coaster ride.

When I began making art quilts, I had been reading books about quilting for several years. My first exposure to quilts had been a visit to an exhibition at the Museum of American Textile History, now located in Lowell, Massachusetts. The pieces on show belonged to a New York collector, and although I couldn't appreciate it at the time, they were superb examples of the medium. Most of them had traditional patterns, but some were from Japan and other countries as well as the United States. All of their makers had sophisticated tastes. I wondered whether I might actually be able to do something like they had done.

I knew I had three skills that might serve me well as an art quilter. First, I could sew. I had made many of our children's clothes, and curtains for our houses. Second, I knew a lot about the indigenous cultures of Africa and Asia, from my days as a graduate student in history. The textiles of these cultures would become one of the main inspirations for my quilts. And third, I had plenty of experience in organizing tasks. I had coordinated five long-distance moves of our academic household. Then, after graduating from Harvard Law School in 1978, I had been practicing law in a downtown Boston firm.

After 15 years I resigned my partnership and began to disengage from my law practice. By 1995, when I performed my last billable hour of legal work, I had begun to collect a supply of fabrics. With the "carwash skirt" in the back of my mind, I was accumulating prints of autos and traffic. But I had no idea how I would build the design for a representational quilt, or indicate the frenetic activity of the carwash machines. As interim steps, I made two small patchwork quilts with "artsy" touches in value gradation and palette. Then I created an original scene, hand appliquéd, of five geese flying across the night sky. I learned a lot from that time-consuming process, but the result was not as successful as I had hoped. I modified the design and colors and tried again. When the second version also proved disappointing, I knew that it was time to look for help.

Help came from three sources. First, I joined a group of quilters who met once a week with an instructor in an organization called Harvard Neighbors. The 20 quilters in this group were from five or six countries. Some were rank beginners,

others quite experienced. In their company I learned how to draft patterns, how to make and use templates, and how to piece, applique and quilt by hand. We worked with a large number of traditional quilt designs, most of them adapted in various ways to suit personal tastes. Although I seldom use those patterns and processes now, the experience gave me a solid grounding in the fundamentals of construction. It also taught me a standard of care best expressed as “ ‘almost right’ is wrong.” I stayed in the Harvard Neighbors group for four years, the last three as an instructor.

My second source of help was the school of the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts. There I completed two courses in color and design taught by Linda S. Perry, an accomplished professional art quilter and a meticulous teacher who used fabric, rather than paint or pastels, as the medium for our exercises and projects. That’s where I learned to look to all kinds of art for examples of composition, palette, and presentation that I could use in my quilts. It was also in those courses that I first encountered a goal described by the wonderful phrase “economy of means” – that is, finding the smallest possible number of forms and lines to make the artistic statement that you want a particular work to convey. For me, it has meant learning to persist on a project until I have eliminated all of the design alternatives except for the one best suited to my artistic purpose.

The third source of help came in another Aha! moment: I realized that I was not thinking like an artist. I had been going through life describing and narrating scenes and events in words, rather than picturing them. Aside from visual impressions of some of my family’s experiences, the only ones that I could readily call to mind were roadside scenes glimpsed while driving to and from work, or views of the tops of my feet as I ran up and down the stairs at my house or law firm, always hurrying. I needed a mental vocabulary of images that would engender what I wanted to do in my quilts.

As it turned out, much of that vocabulary came from HALI, an elegant magazine directed to collectors of antique Oriental rugs. I first saw an issue of HALI at the home of a friend. It was gorgeous, full of color photos on heavy, slick paper. There were fascinating articles about the parts of the globe where carpets have been produced by hand for centuries – the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and the Orient. These were the very realms that had filled my imagination ever since my study of African and Asian history. Seeing news and pictures of the peoples who lived there, and their works, was like greeting old friends.

My first sight of HALI’s “auction prices report” quickly told me that I couldn’t afford to become a collector myself, but I decided I could spare \$200 a year to subscribe to the magazine. Along with its hundreds of images, HALI directed me to even more resources – books to buy or to borrow from a library, dealers to visit, exhibitions and conferences to attend. These became the wellsprings of

my working stock of motifs and compositions. As an unanticipated bonus, my friend gave me his entire collection of the magazine, perhaps fifty issues published before my subscription began.

The layout for my “Carwash” quilt developed in my mind from the mixture of inputs from HALI, the hand quilting group, and my DeCordova museum school courses. It would be a “double medallion” rug arrangement. Two central squares, on point, would contain appliqued images of cars entering and exiting the carwash, and along the two vertical sides would be rows of smaller squares of images conveying impressions from the carwash corridor. Shapes and lines in the background would indicate water spraying and draining away, and the motions of the washing machines.

When “Carwash” received awards from the judges at a couple of regional shows, I realized that I was becoming a legitimate art quilter. I joined Quilters’ Connection (QC), the grandma of New England guilds. There I gained access to the wisdom of 200 member-quilters of all ages, backgrounds, and styles, as well as to speakers and workshop presenters of national stature. All the while, I kept expanding my visions of ethnic textiles.

Through contacts in QC and the DeCordova museum school I helped to form a critique group, New Wrinkle, which has been going strong now for nearly seven years. Our six members work individually in a variety of styles, and we meet once a month to give and get advice on techniques, products, pieces in progress, and opportunities for shows and sales. Since 2004 we have mounted more than a dozen shows in Massachusetts and Connecticut.

From the beginning, my primary goal as an art quilter was to develop a coherent body of work that would be admired by people whose judgment and taste I respect. As I progressed, I needed to learn to construct quilts in a way that would satisfy my standards of execution *and* be completed in a reasonable time. I took the major step toward that second goal in 2000, when I turned from hand quilting to machine quilting, and from hand applique to a fabric collage technique. Typically, I fuse fabric shapes, backed with iron-on interfacing, onto pieced or fused backgrounds, and finish the edges of the appliquéd shapes with satin stitch or open zigzag stitching.

The inspiration for most of my quilts has come from carpets and other weavings made and used in traditional societies around the world. The pieces that appeal to me most are not the classic “Oriental rugs” from mansions and museums, but items used daily by ordinary people. In the desert regions of Turkey and Central Asia, a rug may serve as a floor covering, an interior partition, or a tent dwelling’s outside door. A stack of rugs may form a bed, a table or a seat. Members of carpet-making nomadic tribes pack their belongings in rug-like saddlebags,

carried on the backs of camels and donkeys. In India, Africa, and Indonesia, a large rectangle of cotton, silk or bark cloth may be a skirt, a table cover, a baby carrier or a man's principal garment.

The makers of these textiles, many of whom are women, decorate their work with an immense variety of shapes and symbols that have survived among their people since "time out of mind." My vision of a new quilt sometimes arises from a woven or embroidered motif, sometimes from a combination of colors and patterns, and other times from the way that the forms on a tribal fabric are organized. Often I mix elements from three or four sources.

The skills of analysis and categorization that I brought from my days of lawyering have helped me organize my large archive of sketches, photos and doodles according to a list of major design elements – zigzags, grids, lines, mandalas, calligraphy and so forth. These are my raw materials for beginning a new composition. Many of the results appear in the works pictured on my website.

When I began as an art quilter, in some years I made only one or two large pieces, in others three or four. But over time I began working smaller so that I could bring more of my design ideas to completion. I had no thought of making money from my work. I consciously reminded myself that I was not pursuing art as a career; for me career meant "been there, done that." I was working hard, but my schedule was shaped only by my creative drive. I showed my work at the annual exhibits of Quilters' Connection and in juried New England shows such as "A Quilters' Gathering" and "Images." I presented a free Quilters' Connection workshop on construction techniques with fusing.

The year 2004 was particularly rewarding for me – a real watershed. I was invited to participate in a two-person gallery show with a painter friend; my quilt "Regalia" was selected for Art Quilts at the Sedgwick; and my New Wrinkle critique group scheduled four exhibitions to occur within the year. I needed 15 to 20 pieces for the two-person show, and in the fall of 2003 I had only half a dozen on hand. I planned and executed nine by April, and during those six months I probably learned more about making art quilts than I had in the previous decade. By the end of 2004, I had sold six quilts and had contributed an illustrated article about my work to the New England Rug Society's monthly publication. I had sold an image of another quilt to a U. S. Senator to use on the cover of his family's Christmas card. At this point I was emboldened to present myself as an "artist" as well as a quilter.

Through jury processes, I became a member of the Cambridge (Massachusetts) Art Association and a Professional Artist Member of SAQA. I started my website. I put together a presentation with images and actual quilts, called "Ethnic Textiles as Design Inspirations," which I was pleased to present as a SAQA Lecture at the

Houston International Quilt Festival in 2007, as well as to guilds. I conducted a workshop on color for quilters who had no formal art training. I began to compile a mailing list for invitations to openings. I successfully submitted entries to juried shows farther afield, and to shows for all media. My work was exhibited in art galleries at Brandeis University and at private preparatory schools, as well as in public libraries and commercial locations. Several of my quilts were juried into “The Creative Force” at the Houston IQF in 2006, the SAQA regional show “Unbound,” and exhibits sponsored by Cambridge Art Association. With a fellow member of New Wrinkle and Cambridge Art, I curated and participated in an all-textile exhibit at the Association’s premier gallery in Harvard Square.

My recent work reflects a shift in my approach to design, away from ethnic models and toward the fundamental components of pattern: zigzags, grids, stripes and circles. Most of my recent quilts now present concentrated and simplified variations on these elements. I’ve begun to work with additional techniques – machine embroidery, layering, and designing with cut paper; and new materials – paints, wax pastels, and sheer fabrics. At the same time, I’m planning some compositions that are riffs on themes in some of my earlier quilts. Although I’ve made only a handful of representational quilts, in my future work I’d like to make better use of the photographs that I take of natural and manmade forms.

I’m not a marketing role model. Many of the quilts I’ve made have never been for sale – I’ve kept them to decorate our house or presented them as gifts. After practicing law for so long “on the clock,” I have an aversion to placing aspects of my art life on a deadline. I take delight in the processes of planning and execution. Even when I’m very pleased with a product, it’s a satisfaction secondary to the ongoing joy of bringing a projected design to fruition. Of course I treasure the thrill of knowing that someone likes my work well enough to pay me for it, but I haven’t pursued commissions or commercial representation. This year, for the first time, I’m sending to guilds in the Northeast a brochure about my “ethnic inspirations” program and my color workshop. After start-up costs for equipment and supplies, my current annual investment in my art is about \$3,000. I have a roomy studio space in my house, and I try nowadays not to buy fabric unless it’s for a particular spot in a quilt in progress (I cheat on this).

Joining SAQA and becoming a PAM have generated strong impulses to become more active as a professional, and the institution of SAQA U has been perfectly timed for me. Individual SAQA members have generously helped me get acclimated to resizing digital images, burning CDs, constructing Power Point presentations, participating in a wiki and criticizing my own work. Cambridge Art Association has given me opportunities to work not only with artists in many media, but also with jurors, journalists and administrators in the art world.

From the vantage point of my sixties, I recognize that I have lived, in sequence, several different work lives. Only in the most recent one have I realized that I can enjoy challenge and gratification without having to climb all the steps of a career ladder. I find that I'm more comfortable with who I am and what I do as an artist than I was as an academic-in-training, a stay-at-home mom and volunteer, or a lawyer. In many ways, the present is proving to be the most satisfying part of my life. I look forward to every day, and to all the work to come.

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