

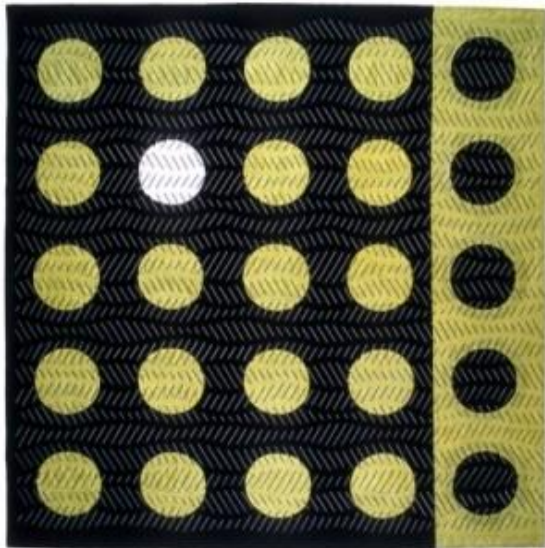
# ARTES MAGAZINE

*A Fine Art Magazine: Passionate for Fine Art, Architecture & Design*

## Edsel & Eleanor Ford House, Grosse Pointe Shores, Michigan and Art of Quilting

### *Quilt Art: International Expressions*

Posted on 20 March 2012 | By Sara Impey



The words 'innovative' and 'groundbreaking' may seem out of place when situated next to the word 'quilt,' but the exhibiting group Quilt Art is forcing the art world to sit back and take notice of a burgeoning art form. These are definitely not your great-grandmother's quilts.

The 1970s saw a so-called 'quilt revival' in the US, spurring a growing number of quilt makers to emerge around the world. However, the display of quilts on art gallery walls was a novelty until after the 1971 exhibition *Abstract Design in American Quilts* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, which invited viewers to consider the quilt as abstract art rather than as a domestic and functional object.

*Sara Impey, Positivity (2004). Silks, hand and machine pieced, quilted by machine. Photo: Bluebridge Farm Studio.*

The exhibition, which travelled to Europe in 1975, inspired prominent British quilt artists Pauline Burbidge, Michele Walker and Deirdre Amsden, all of whom had art or fashion backgrounds but who had turned to quilt-making as a means of expression. All three were members of *The Quilters' Guild*, an organization which was then, and continues to be, the main patchwork and quilting group in Britain. With the vast majority of its members being traditional quilters, by the 1980s it became clear that innovative professional artists needed an outlet to showcase work that was unconventional, expressive, experimental, and challenging.



Installation of Quilt Art: International Expressions, Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, Virginia (2/10/11 – 4/24/11).

## Quilt Art

This need was acknowledged by *The Quilters' Guild*, under whose auspices *Quilt Art* was launched in 1985, initially with just eight members. Among these founding members, German artist Inge Hueber was instrumental in encouraging other European quilt artists to join, establishing the international prominence of the group. From the outset, membership of *Quilt Art* has been selective. As well as high standards of design and technique, applicants are asked to show evidence of a genuine and evolving personal artistic language and to demonstrate a commitment to the group.



Ann Fahy, *Continuum* (2004). Art quilt. Photo: Keady of Galway.

For the first few years, *Quilt Art* remained affiliated with *The Quilters' Guild*, but later became independent, and now has the status of an educational charity. In 1987 the group held its first exhibition in Barnsley in the north of England. The second exhibition the following year was larger and more ambitious, opening at Nottingham Castle Museum in 1988, and touring to the Barbican Art Gallery in London. The notion of a quilt as a work of art was still sufficiently unusual to attract a lot of media interest, including a review on *BBCnational* radio.



Bethan Ash, *Cutting the Carbs—Shedding the Pounds* (2004). Improvisational art quilt.

The textile scene in Europe today has many exhibiting quilt groups, but *Quilt Art* remains distinctive for three reasons: founded in Britain in 1985, it is the oldest group of its kind in Europe; it maintains a rigorous selection process to ensure a consistently high standard of work; and its nineteen members are widely spread across the globe, coming from Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Ireland, and the United States.

Individual members have their works exhibited in private and public collections around the world, including the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, the International Quilt Study Center in Nebraska, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Other *Quilt Art* members have won prestigious awards and been juried into major exhibitions, most notably *Quilt National* in the US.

## International Exhibitions

Separate from the individual successes of its members, group exhibitions are the lifeblood of the organization. *Quilt Art* has staged major touring exhibitions periodically so since its establishment, each one accompanied by a book which the members compile and publish themselves. The group has toured many European countries, as well as Japan and Canada, and recently made its debut in the US in 2010 with the tour of *Quilt Art: International Expressions*, organized with International Arts & Artists based in Washington, DC.



Linda Colsh, *Grace of God* (2007). Art quilt.

While the public at large has not generally demonstrated a great appreciation of craftwork, the popularity of this dynamic exhibition proves that the tide is turning. People who have long regarded quilting as an old-fashioned pastime are encountering quilts as art for the first time, and being awakened to the expressive quality of this medium.



Fenella Davies, *Sun-Venezia* (2004). Art quilt.

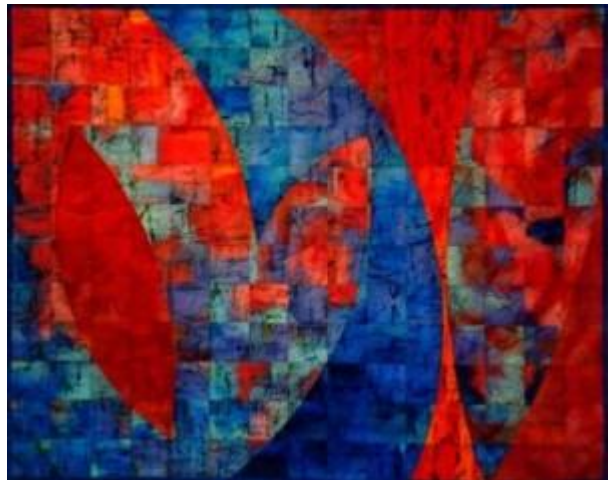
### Conservative or Ground-Breaking?

It could be argued that the word quilt has indeed exerted a conservative influence. Unlike other textile arts such as contemporary embroidery, lace and knitting which have become overtly experimental, many quilt artists continue to make square or rectangular artworks displayed flat against the wall. Within the *Quilt Art* group there are practical reasons for this, as international touring exhibitions require easily transportable works. However, many members are using the unique textural and flexible properties of the quilt as a starting point to venture into other media. For example, the Dutch artist Mirjam Pet-Jacobs, won a major award in Heidelberg in 2010 for *Timeless in Time*, a textile piece that incorporates video projection and sound.

Within the medium, individual members of *Quilt Art* have always been pushing the boundaries of what constitutes a quilt. Sandra Meech, a Canadian living in Britain, transfers photographic images on to fabric, Cherilyn Martin, who is British but lives in Holland, uses paper and Allie Kay, who is British but lives in Ireland, works with plastic. Both Karina Thompson (UK) and Charlotte Yde from Denmark are exploring the potential of digitally programmed embroidery. Janet Twinn (UK) draws on her background as a painter to experiment with color, pattern and light.

There is an awareness, however, that innovation for its own sake can lead to a dead end and that if quilt art strays too far from its craft roots it might lose its cultural significance and much of its impact. There is also a feeling that the undervalued heritage of women's skills should be celebrated rather than hidden and that quilt art should not be afraid of playing to its strengths as a decorative medium.

Some *Quilt Art* members whose work is widely admired, such as that of Elizabeth Brimelow (UK), are happy confining themselves to fabric and stitch, finding in them alone a wealth of expressive potential and have no problem with the label 'quilter.' Others want to distance themselves from the word quilt, preferring to describe themselves as 'textile artists' or 'mixed media artists.'



Janet Twinn, *Curve* (2004). Quilt of painted, printed and stenciled cotton.

Aware of all these contradictions, and united by a passion for the medium, *Quilt Art* is actively discussing the challenges it faces today: how to remain distinctive, how to keep the work fresh and relevant, and how to bring it to a wider audience. Entering the second quarter-century of its existence, *Quilt Art* remains a strong, self-confident and forward-looking group of artists.

**By Sara Impey, Exhibiting Artist**

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*Quilt Art: International Expressions* was organized by International Arts & Artists, Washington, DC, in conjunction with *Quilt Art*, and is presently on view at the Edsel & Eleanor Ford House in Grosse Pointe Shores, Michigan until March 25, 2012.

For information on future tour dates, please  
visit: <http://artsandartists.org/exhibitions/quiltart20.html>.

For more information about *Quilt Art*, please visit [www.quiltart.eu](http://www.quiltart.eu)

**International Arts & Artists** in Washington, DC, is a non-profit arts service organization dedicated to increasing cross-cultural understanding and exposure to the arts internationally, through exhibitions, programs and services to artists, arts institutions and the public. Visit [www.artsandartists.org](http://www.artsandartists.org).

