



Taking our province's treasures off the bed and into the galleries

by Berenice Gargus

# Art Quilters

The old patchwork quilt our great grandmother made from durable scraps of worn clothing may be cherished, but we don't ordinarily consider it a work of art.

Quilting doesn't fit our definition of art. We think that art must endure, whereas fabric doesn't last. A well-constructed quilt is fortunate to survive a century, and fades long before that. Art is rare, made for beauty, not usefulness. Quilts are common and evolved from necessity and practicality. But perhaps the real reason quilts aren't valued as art is that quilting is a medium created and perfected primarily by women, and historically women have not been the smiths that forged the masterpieces of art.

But what about the quilt created not

with the bed in mind, but the wall?

That question is vital to the many artists who build their art from fabric. So often, even if the technique is exceptional, the images striking, colours and textures painstakingly rendered, the humble medium betrays the work. Since we see quilts all around us, we assume they are easy to construct—we don't see the years of stitching and study it took not only to learn how to put fabric together properly, but to do it with creative freedom. Though it's taken centuries for quilt-making to evolve from a useful way to pass time beside the wood stove or as a collective project to raise funds for the local charity, quilt-making still struggles to shake the derogatory label of "craft" and prove itself as art.





*Magpie Messages* by Judy Villett

But many outstanding Alberta women—especially Calgary artist Wendy Toogood, Hinton’s Deb Tilley, and Edmonton fibre artists Judy Villett, Jayne Willoughby Scott and Mary Sullivan Holdgrafer—are doing just that. They all resist being called quilters. Even if making and selling beautiful wall quilts is the primary focus of their work, they prefer to avoid the connotations. After all, they’re not just interested in changing the semantics of a single word. They’re out to revolutionize an artistic medium.

### **JUDY VILLETT, Edmonton**

The biggest change in quilting these days is the art quilt movement, affirms Judy Villett, a tall woman whose rich cascades of silver and stone-gray hair give her an air of playful vibrancy. “More people are moving away from bed quilts and functional quilts into wall hangings. They’re still called quilts because they have three layers, a top, a backing and a batting, [but they’re] totally non-functional. They often use unusual techniques and fabrics—and there’s a lot of excitement, lots of competitions and exhibitions. Really wonderful work is being done,” she says.

Beside Judy in her Edmonton studio stands a table equipped with a rotary cutter, clear plastic rulers and a thick green cutting mat. Behind is a thermolam design wall, where unexpected patterns emerge through the combination of two-inch blocks of fabric. The thermolam, a type of cotton batting, creates a tacky surface on the wall, where material can be placed and removed without being damaged.

“A lot of my painting and art friends question working in fabric because it’s not a permanent thing like stone or steel or even oil paint,” Judy says, smoothing a bright floral square into the piece she’s designing. “But to me, 200 years is long enough! I guess it’s like working in ice or something. But I’m a little more durable than ice,” she laughs.

Judy’s art studio, which takes up most of the second floor of her renovated, heritage-style house, has banks of windows which pour light into her workspace. An example of her extraordinary work hangs over the staircase that opens down to the main floor. The quilt, *Magpie Messages*, took two years of courses and practice to complete, mostly because she had to master embroidering the stark grass details with her 23-year-old Bernina sewing machine. Normally, a quilt—even one done in the intricate colourwash design Judy’s been perfecting these past six years—will take her only a few weeks. Having taught quilting since the early ’70s and practiced longer, Judy is surprised that the piece took so much time to evolve, but confesses that even at this stage in her career, there are new techniques to master. Hidden in the snowy backdrop of the portrait-style piece, stitched in white words, are the expressive bird’s thoughts: “Eat Anything,” “King,” “Survive.”

One of the current pieces on her design wall consists of panels constructed in bright, floral-patterned squares that graduate from dark to light and feature Judy’s signature appliqué butterfly. She says this colourwash technique, also known as watercolour quilting, is like building a puzzle. To find just the right piece, she rummages through her extensive storage drawers, searching through palettes of two-inch squares she’s pre-cut and grouped according to tone, pattern or theme. Colourwash is an impressionistic blending of these carefully selected squares, which work together to build a landscape or image, or simply an



*Rose Garden* by Judy Villett



expression of tonal values.

Judy regularly travels across western Canada to teach this technique and colour theory at weekend seminars. She's also program co-ordinator for Earthly Goods, an Edmonton store that offers over 60 courses from 20 or more instructors.

"Our two classrooms are wearing out," Judy says, "we had to reorder chairs."

Six hundred people are currently enrolled in the store's Quilting by Degree program, which begins with a foundation of 11 basic courses such as rotary cutting, hand and machine quilting, patchwork, appliqué, and binding. The program boasts 80 graduates, some of whom are working on a "master's degree." For that, they design an original quilt to be presented to a committee.

"Women have always quilted," Judy says, "and often for the same reasons we're making the art quilts: personal expression. I think it's more accepted now there's a market, there are people who collect these. For a long time it was considered just another form of women's work, like baking bread or something. So it took a while to be accepted and it's still struggling. Certain galleries [still] won't look at textiles."

### DEB TILLEY, Hinton

"I've always considered quilts as art," says Hinton artist Deb Tilley. "Some of the antique quilts are wonderful to look at—they're very graphic. But practical use is secondary [to me]. A lot of quilters would disagree with that, but I think art quilters are interested in having the public-at-large appreciate quilts as another medium."

Like Judy's, Deb's work is based in the careful construction of visual patterns, and her

approach is informed by a specific contemporary American design. For the last two and a half years she's focused on this technique, in which circular images float on a



ABOVE: Detail of *Peppermint Mojos* by Deb Tilley

LEFT: *Winter Magic* by Deb Tilley



ABOVE: *Rose Window* by Deb Tilley  
 LEFT: Detail of *Rose Window*  
 BELOW: *Round Peg in Square Whole*  
 by Jayne Willoughby Scott

dark, rectangular background, mirroring the types of patterns that infinitely repeat in a glass kaleidoscope. Some of the quilts are comprised of many mandalas, and might have two to four hundred pieces in each one, six or seven hundred pieces in a quilt approximately 36 inches square.

She laughs, “There’s not a lot going on here in Hinton. I’ve got time on my hands.” Deb glances balefully at her vintage Singer Featherweight sewing machine, temporarily out of commission while waiting for a part to come in from Edmonton.

“Besides, more is better. It just makes the whole thing more interesting. I don’t like simplistic things.”

The quilt artist is also a lover of jewellery and glassware. Her dining room table supports a silver tray filled with colourful, hand-blown paperweights both contemporary and antique. Deb’s transformed her own body into something of an art work as well. Her straight, extra-red hair is cropped short, a bracelet is permanently inked on one wrist and colourful oval jewels are tattooed on the other. World music pours out of her studio’s boom box, which is permanently set to CKUA.

Deb resisted quilting until she moved to Hinton nine years ago and found herself with a 20x22-foot wall that needed art. She joined the Rocky Mountain Quilters Guild and began to explore her personal vision. “My quilts always had a hanging sleeve,” she says, “because I view quilts as art.” This sleeve, a thin pocket of material at the back and sometimes the bottom of a quilt makes the definitive distinction between a bed quilt and an art quilt. Rods are slipped through the sleeves and used to mount the piece smoothly and evenly. She speaks as fast as the freight trains which surge through the edge of town. “I do like to make the distinction between myself and somebody who makes bed quilts and sells them at a farmers’ market.”

Deb’s quilts now sell for anywhere between \$100 and \$2,500, depending on the size and degree of intricacy. Last November, she sold *The Heat of the Night* to the Alberta Foundation for the Arts permanent collection.

While galleries have been more accepting in the past few years, she says, they still resist showing a fibre artist if they’ve recently had one, a restriction they would never consider with another medium, like painting. “A lot of quilters have felt disappointed and discouraged after talking to the major galleries. People have to be educated about it. Even people in the art world just have no idea.

“A lot of people who are buying art have no opportunities to see art quilts. I think that’s unfair,” says Deb.

#### JAYNE WILLOUGHBY SCOTT, Edmonton

Edmonton artist Jayne Willoughby Scott is a good example of the dedication it takes to express an inspiration in cloth. Her second-floor home studio overlooks the high-ceilinged living room, and the railing is piled with years’ worth of quilts, which she pulls up one by one to reveal an eclectic and vivid collection.

“I’d had a number of rejections for different shows in one year and I thought, ‘You know, I’m doing something wrong here.’ So I went back. I spent a year working on my technique



and trying to make traditional quilts.” Jayne’s eldest daughter, Elizabeth, practises flute in a distant room. “At the end of that year, I still had a stack of quilts unfinished. I wasn’t that excited about [them], so I started working on this one because I was upset about what some of my friends were going through.” She holds up a three-foot-square quilt. A three-dimensional carnation consumes the diameter of a text-stitched square. On closer



Detail of *Respect Me?... Respect Me Not...* by Jayne Willoughby Scott

observation, the petals reveal themselves as tiny stuffed breasts attached in circular rings: black ones, reddish ones, beige, pink, even stuffed plastic breasts, all representing the range of women who have suffered breast cancer.

“This one got finished,” she says quietly. Her frameless glasses and yellow curls complement her kind expression. Then the seriousness washes away in

a big smile. “But I was afraid to show it to anybody because, you know—it was a bunch of breasts! I decided to enter it for a show and it got in, and I was surprised, and then it won an award, and I was surprised. There was lots of feedback, people coming up to me, crying and telling me their stories. It was unbelievable, the response.”

Another, more painterly work, *How I Wonder What You Are*, is a star block quilt. This type of quilt, which features hand-sewn beads, spirals stitched over glittering, pointy stars and other surface embellishments, sells for about \$150 per square foot.

Her 1994 work, *Last Night I Heard the Screaming*, is inspired by violence against women and children. A nude figure, locked in sorrow, pours tiny South American worry dolls from her open hand. Hiding in the background are the chilling outlines of a man about to viciously attack a hunched child. It’s puzzling how such potent and startling images come from this mild and amiable person.

“I like to play with that figure/ground relationship,” Jayne says, holding up another, a patchwork of circles, gleaming squares and swirls that envelop each other in an interplay of three dimensions. This is *Round Peg in a Square Whole*, the piece that won her the coveted Best of

Show prize from the Pacific Northwest Quilt Guild in 1998.

She agrees with Deb that the fine arts professors at U of A—where she’s currently taking a BFA in painting, sculpture and drawing—don’t seem very well versed in the fibre arts medium. Even though Jayne’s works have also earned her distinguished awards and cash prizes from associations such as the Canadian Quilters and the Canadian Contemporary Quilt Exhibition, she generally keeps her habit quiet at school.

“People talk about how tedious craft is, and there’s sort of an arrogance about it—the traditional. Plus, you know, all the other art has been male-dominated, and that goes way back in history.”

Jayne’s BFA will join her BSc in nursing and a Master’s in Human Ecology—things she undertook while keeping up her artistic interests.

“[We’re] actually like a quilt when you think about it. [What one does] makes up the whole person,” she says. “You add little parts of your life, being a mother, being a nurse, helping people cope with death and deal with abuse. All the stuff that makes up who you are makes you decide what colours or image you want to use in a quilt. It’s all there.”



*Last Night I Heard the Screaming* by Jayne Willoughby Scott



**MARY SULLIVAN HOLDGRAFER, Edmonton**

Afflicted with breast cancer nine years ago, Edmonton textile artist Mary Sullivan Holdgrafer's work reflects her experiences as a woman. With the new perspective the illness imposed, she found her textiles shifted towards the contemporary, and her inspiration took a new form: that of her desire to live.

"I had been quite a traditional quilter. Since I had breast cancer and started exploring my experience, little by little, I've just shifted and continued and shifted and continued. My work is about to shift again."

Her first gallery-style showing was two years ago, when she talked a friend into letting her hang her breast cancer quilts at his hair salon. Mary had nothing more than design ideas that January when she talked herself into the exhibition, but by October she had 13 finished pieces. As she speaks, she pulls stray green fibres off the pile of quilts beside the two Pfaff sewing machines and serger in her basement studio.

"I started out with one design that I dreamed over and over. But I couldn't make it, I couldn't put it onto paper and I couldn't put it into fabric. But it continued." She lays the top quilt—a series of contrasting bars restraining a pair of ghostly, detached eyes and an outstretched

palm—over the back of a chair. She smooths an older Christmas quilt, and moves it too. "I have a rule: Do what you know. When I get stuck, I say, 'What do I know I can do? A whole bunch of other quilts.' So I just started making them," she says. "And the process involved lots of tears, lots of reflection and lots of journaling. Ultimately, I made two versions of the quilt I dreamed." Those quilts became *Another in a Million I* and *Another in a Million II*. The second is a portrait of repeating female silhouettes, the primary figure in black but cut with a bright red slash where the right breast once was.

Mary looks at the walls of her studio space, where sketches for commissioned quilts, blocks of fabric and the beginnings of an abstract work loosely based on a log cabin design cover the walls.

"I do this all day long," she says, "And it's a lovely time. Even when it's frustrating and hard. I consider it going to work. Some days I don't produce anything, but I try to keep myself here because if I'm in this environment, then something happens."

**WENDY TOOGOOD, Calgary**

"When I went to art school 30 years ago, there were hardly any female artists in galleries or in museums across Canada," says artist Wendy Toogood, sitting at her kitchen table, a small hallway's length from her studio at the back of her Calgary house. "I felt that as students we were

ABOVE: *Another in a Million I* by Mary Sullivan Holdgrafer

almost led to believe you had to imitate what the male artists were doing, and I thought, 'Enough of that nonsense! I want people who see my work to realize it comes from a female point of view, and to celebrate that a bit.'

The faint chatter of CBC radio drifts out of her minimalist workspace, where two walls bear large works-in-progress. Wendy does all her work by hand, so there's no sewing machine to be seen.

Wendy leans back from the table, letting her thought drift out slowly. "I've always found I needed to express myself in some sort of way. Working with collage suits my temperament really well. I can try colours back and forth. If I like it, I can leave it; if I don't, I can really easily change it, or shift it, or do something else." Wendy's hazel eyes reflect her green speckled sweater, and glitter with the enthusiasm of a child playing an adored game. "I think it's endless, all the possibilities. Every time you try a new work, there's something you're learning or discovering."

Besides building her vibrant and distinct cloth constructions, Wendy teaches at the Alberta College of Art and Design. Primarily in the fibre department, she also handles foundation year, covering 2D design, and design in fibre, print, and papermaking.

"Before teaching I would just focus on things that interest me. As a teacher, you can't have that luxury. I think you have to try and understand different ways of working, different possibilities, deal with things that don't necessarily appeal to you but might be helpful to a student. You bring back that information to your own work. You can become more critical about what you can do, and what your work is about," she says.

Wendy's cloth constructions are more geometrical than the other artists', and slightly more moody and abstract. The artist herself is animated and lives in a work of art: brightly painted masks made from coconut husks cover the warm orange and teal painted walls of her house, while wooden Mexican skeletons and Day of the Dead dolls adorn the white and black brush-stroked mantel. Every wall brims with art, many of the pieces crafted by former students.

Wendy lays one hand atop the other on the table, next to a black plate stacked with a pyramid of 13 mandarin oranges. "I think sometimes it's a habit that we have as artists—to somehow find ways to continue doing what is necessary for us to do."

She explains that her current works are inspired by an object she found in the dirt at a B.C. site that once housed a commune. As she speaks, her hands surge before her like sparrows. "It was a cloth-bodied doll, and the cloth part had all disintegrated, but the plastic head was

still intact—the paint, everything. At first I thought, 'Oh dammit, more garbage,' but then sometimes you become intrigued by something, and it sort of fascinated me. I thought, 'Maybe I want to explore the issues of the waste in our environment.'"

Unless it's a commissioned piece, Wendy sells her work by size, and usually she'll get \$7,000 or \$8,000 per quilt. Recently, she was commissioned to build a piece for the Harry Hays government building in Calgary, as well as a large, ten-panel history of Edmonton for its new city hall. In 1996, Calgary's Muttart Gallery held a retrospective of her art in recognition of her achievements over the past quarter century.



*Articulated Doll With Devil* by Wendy Toogood

Call them art quilters, fibre artists or just artists, these women are making a valuable contribution to the treasury of Alberta art. They invest enormous amounts of time, money and creative effort into sewing quilts that delight the spirit and the senses—works born from the flash of inspiration in finding a fabulous piece of material, or experiencing a winter snowscape, or feeling a need to express compassion. Quilt art is about representing some part of life's many experiences, about creating beauty in a way the world has never seen it—and most of all, it's about play.

Berenice Gargus is a Calgary writer and producer of an arts interview show on community television.