

The first quilt

By Lynne Davis

Just as the creative process is different for each artist, the process of collecting art quilts is a little different for each collector.

I asked a group of collectors about the first art quilt they acquired — what drew them to that piece and how that acquisition inspired them to collect other art quilts, how they find art quilts for their collection, and what other types of fiber art they collect.

Nancy and Warren Brakensiek purchased their first three art quilts at the same time when they attended an exhibition at American Art Gallery in Tacoma, Washington. They were *Intertidal Wilderness* by Erika Carter, *Compose* by Stephanie Cooper, and *Night Flight over a City* by Jean Littswager. It was the colors and design components of these pieces that attracted them. Nancy says, "Gallery owner Rick Gottas did a great job of educating us about the medium and introducing us to other artists in the show." Thus their eyes were opened to previously unknown possibilities.

The Brakensieks continued to attend Gottas's art quilt shows, held every other year. They would buy from those shows and also from artists and gallery owners who sent them cards and slides.

Although they own other types of art — including indoor and outdoor metal sculpture, framed oils, charcoals, lithographs, and glass — they say that their quilts are the only artworks that "rise to the level of a collection."

Del Thomas had acquired about a dozen antique quilts before she purchased her first art quilt directly from the artist in 1994. It was Ruth B. McDowell's *Conversation on the Porch*, created in 1993. Thomas already admired McDowell's artwork. In this particular piece she liked the image of

five rocking chairs on a porch as well as the motion, the color, and the integration of small bits of patchwork into the design.

She enjoyed *Conversation* so much that she wanted more art quilts on her walls, and she has since discovered that it gives her great pleasure to share their beauty with others.

In the last few years, she has found quilts mostly on the Internet, but says she has also acquired them at major quilt shows, from lecturers at meetings, by contacting artists after reading an article about their artwork,

"It was like potato chips. We couldn't stop at one."

—Carolyn Lee and Peter Vehslage

and occasionally at galleries. The Thomas Contemporary Quilt Collection contains multiple pieces by some of the artists who are "always nice enough to keep me informed about their current artwork."

The first art quilt acquired by Jeri Riggs was by Faye Merrill Geller, whose artwork she had always loved. "The color, design, technique, and knowing the artist made the connection for me."

With this purchase, Riggs realized that she could afford smaller works, so she began looking for such pieces by her favorite artists and mentors. She finds art quilts at workshops, where teachers often sell works that are class samples in affordable sizes. She also attends Houston or other big

shows and contacts artists afterward, or looks on their web sites. She has traded for some of her favorite pieces. Riggs also collects crocheted doilies, beadwork, and fabric.

When John M. Walsh III decided to start a collection of art quilts, he teamed up with Penny McMorris. They obtained a catalog for an exhibition of Rebecca Shore's quilts at the Carl Hammer Gallery in Chicago and chose one for Walsh to purchase. But when he arrived, the quilt was not there. He looked over all the available quilts and chose one that had not been in the catalog, *Night Light*.

Before he met McMorris and decided to work with her, Walsh had owned quilts made by his grandmother and had acquired a number of other quilts — Amish, Mennonite, Native American, and crazy quilts. His initial inspiration for collecting art quilts came from seeing Michael James's art quilts on TV.

Two years after he started collecting, he bought one of James's quilts. "That was a great moment for me," he says. Besides taking McMorris' advice, he also finds quilts for his collection in catalogs, at shows, on the Internet, and through communications from artists and friends.

His other collection is elephants, which has grown from about fifty that his grandfather passed on to him when he was a boy to about two hundred now.

For Carolyn Lee and Peter Vehslage, their quirky collection of frogs provided the impetus for their first art quilt purchase. Carolyn Lee had been creating art quilts for about two years when she and her husband went to Michelle Scott's gallery exhibition. They bought their first art quilt, *Leaping Frogs*, because it was a theme they loved. The colorful machine-quilted frogs just naturally jumped out at them — so to speak.

Once they had the first, "It was like potato chips. We couldn't stop at one." Their collection now numbers about fifty, which they rotate, having run out of places to hang them all. At this time, art quilts are the only types of fiber art they collect. They find them by meeting the artists, going to exhibitions, and visiting web sites.

Ardis and Robert James had already decided to collect art quilts when they attended a workshop by Michael James. Impressed with his artistic ability, they purchased six of his pieces, *Elaborated Tangram* and five others. They have maintained their friendship with James for the last twenty years, as well as their admiration for his artwork.

They began attending a variety of exhibitions and met many of the artists on exhibit. They retained two consultants. Trips to the Dairy Barn and to exhibitions in England, France, and Japan led to more acquisitions. Art quilts are the only fiber arts they collect.

When Maureen Hendricks started collecting, she did so because she herself is a quilter. "When I gaze upon one of my quilts," she says, "I value the artistry, workmanship, and time that went into the particular piece."

She especially wanted pieces by quilters she really admired and teachers she studied under. At the end of a Katie Pasquini Masopust *Fractured Landscapes* class at the Pennsylvania Quilt Show, Katie showed the class some of her pieces. Maureen fell in love with *Rio Hondo*, but it had already been sold to John M. Walsh III. She went home still thinking about Katie's beautiful quilt. She and her husband had moved into a new house with lots of wall space. When she told him she wanted to collect art quilts and suggested decorating with them, he was enthusiastic.

She arranged for them to meet

Katie on a trip to Santa Fe and acquired her first quilt, Katie Pasquini Masopust's *Grand Canyon*.

Karey Bresenhan's first art quilt was *Paris '76* by Dianne Miller, and she is quite clear about what drew her to it: "The slightly rebellious look of the three sisters, the just barely concealed arrogance of their beauty and youth, the brilliant colors, the beautiful faces, and the feeling that there's quite a story behind this quilt!" That was in the early 90s.

As president and CEO of Quilts, Inc., Bresenhan, with executive vice-president Nancy O'Bryant Puentes, started with an antique quilt collection. After they broke ground with their first art quilt, it was easy to keep going.

They'd always wanted a piece by Yvonne Porcella, so they commissioned a piece in early 1995, *Heavenly Days in Angel's Camp*. Then they moved to the "mysterious piece": *Ancient Stories II*, by Charlotte Patera, and by the time they acquired *In the*

Beginning, by Barbara Olson, they were hooked.

They find most of their art quilts at their own shows — the International Quilt Festivals in Houston and Chicago and, beginning in 2008, in Long Beach. Sometimes they will make an online purchase of an artist they know, respect, and want to have represented in their collection. But the incredible assemblage of art quilts at the shows is hard to resist. Thanks to this infinite variety in art quilts, they see no reason to move into collecting other fibers.

These are some of the unique, personal, and infinitely varied ways in which art quilt collectors create their collections. ▼

Lynne Davis lives in Southern Illinois, where she enjoys doing needlework as a pastime and writing about those who make it an art.



In the Beginning

59" x 59"

© 1994 Barbara Olson