

# Textile Perspectives

Issue 50 Winter 2010



The  
Quilters' Guild

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The opinions expressed in *Textile Perspectives* are the writers'. The editors' aim is to provide a range of interesting ideas and opinions, not necessarily ones which mirror their own. Please address all correspondence and requests for additional copies to: Sara Impey, 26 Church Street, Coggeshall, Colchester CO6 1TX. Telephone enquiries to: June Freeman, 01206 262 645.

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# expressive potential



## **Sara Impey** looks back at the first twenty-five years of Quilt Art

The years since Quilt Art was founded have seen an enormous expansion in the popularity of patchwork and quilting and a subsequent raising of their profile in the public mind. In this final issue of *Textile Perspectives*, and as the group celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary with two exhibitions and a book, it is timely to look back and see what Quilt Art has achieved and what challenges the members still face.

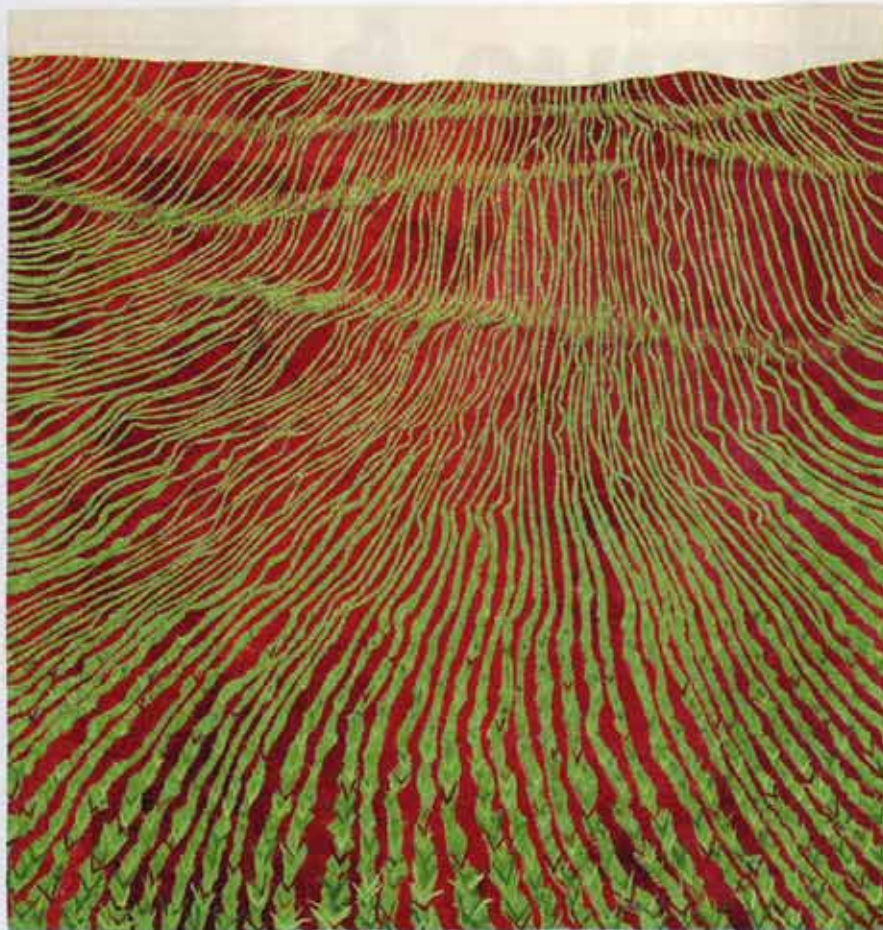
The notion of a quilt as a work of art is much more widely accepted today. Quilt Art has benefitted from the upsurge of interest in the textile arts. Many galleries and museums are willing to exhibit its work. Over the years, the group has held exhibitions in the Barbican Concourse Gallery, London, Nottingham Castle Museum, the Collins Gallery, Glasgow, the Shipley Gallery, Gateshead and the Bankfield Museum, Halifax among many others.

Back in 1985, however, there were few platforms for professional quilters whose work was experimental, innovative and sometimes challenging and who wanted to exhibit within a more demanding critical framework than the existing quilting scene could provide. The Quilters' Guild recognised this need. A steering committee was set up, and eight artists were selected as the founder members, including Pauline Burbidge, Mary Fogg, Michele Walker and Dinah Prentice, all of whom had art or textile backgrounds. Among them was Inge Hueber from Germany, who was later instrumental in attracting other European members. Its international membership continues to make Quilt Art distinctive. Today more than half the twenty members come from outside the UK, bringing a diversity of approach from their different textile backgrounds.

The founding of Quilt Art was not without controversy. Some quilters were concerned that 'elitist' Quilt Art members wished to distance themselves from other makers to further their own careers. The work typified by Quilt Art was seen to attract an unfair share of attention.<sup>1</sup> There were also fears that the label 'professional' revealed a commercial imperative at odds with the ethos of most quilters and of The Guild as an all-embracing membership organisation. After a few years, Quilt Art left The Guild to become independent and self-supporting. The two groups have maintained a good relationship, however, and

**Half Light** by Janet Twinn, 2009. 120 x 120 cm.  
Photo © Michael Wicks, UK.

**Cover: Broadstairs, Kent** by Inge Hueber, 2010. 123 x 226 cm.  
Photo © Roland Hueber, Germany.



**Devon Red** by Elizabeth Brimelow, 2009. 167 x 160 cm. Photo © Michael Wicks, UK.

**Right: Venice Light** by Fenella Davies, 2009. 89 x 137 cm. Photo © Tim Baker, UK.

the anniversary exhibition 'Quilt Art at 25' opens at The Quilt Museum, York, in February.

Achieving wider recognition for the quilt as an art form and the desire to sell their work were primary motives behind the group's foundation. Many members were trying to make a living from quilting and wished to share the time-consuming burden of finding venues, mounting exhibitions and publicising themselves among commissioning bodies, collectors and the general public. Selling, however, proved a challenge. Deirdre Amsden, another early member, described the situation in the 1980s as 'abysmal': 'Americans and Europeans will come to buy British quilts while the home audience will ask how to clean them.'<sup>2</sup>

Selling one's work remains a struggle, though it is a struggle quilters share with the overwhelming majority of fine artists, only a tiny number of whom ever make a living from their work. What galleries know today, however, is that textile exhibitions, including exhibitions of quilts, attract far larger audiences than most fine art exhibitions. Huge numbers also visit quilt shows, but they tend to be makers and enthusiasts rather than potential purchasers of an art form that remains labour-intensive and therefore costly.

But even if quilts don't sell readily, Quilt Art can be proud of its many successes. Exhibitions are the group's lifeblood and every two or three years it has mounted a major touring exhibition, accompanied by a book. This in itself represents an enormous collective achievement which depends on members pooling their various skills and committing time and energy. The group has held exhibitions in many parts of Europe as well as Japan and Canada and a tour of the United States started last summer. As individuals, they have exhibited in prestigious

institutions, won major national and international awards, secured commissions, published books and had their work purchased by private individuals and public collections.

Inge Hueber recalls that 1985, when Quilt Art was founded, was an exciting time. Artists were going in many different directions and the new quilt artists were buoyant and 'expected the world to change very soon.' Today, however, many Quilt Art members feel that the group is still failing to attract enough of the kind of serious critical attention that would reflect the acceptance of quilting as an art form within the art world generally.

Quilts do not yet carry a strong enough resonance in a contemporary art world where 'conceptual' art dominates and the sensual possibilities of the visual arts are frequently dismissed as mere decoration. One could counter, of course, that conceptual art's downgrading of traditional skills and dismissal of the decorative is frequently highly problematic, leading, at their worst, to exhibitions that are vacuous, drab and boring. But a misunderstanding of the quilt medium also continues to persist. 'When the word "quilt" is mentioned to curators they can't see beyond fluffy bedspreads – it's so frustrating!' said one member recently.

Many quilt artists continue to make square or rectangular pieces displayed flat against the wall, feeling that this form is far from exhausted. But just as a number of contemporary embroiderers are mixing embroidery with new media, sculpture and installation, some quilt artists now use the unique textural and flexible properties of the quilt more as a starting point. This year Mirjam Pet-Jacobs, a Quilt Art member from Holland, won the major award at the 4th European Triennial for 'Timeless in Time', a textile piece that incorporates video projection



and sound. Describing this work, Dr Jennifer Harris, one of the jurors, said '... it is only in this way – by pushing at the boundaries of the genre – that quilt making will begin to engage in the broader debates of the art world.'<sup>3</sup>

Individual artists in the group have from the start experimented with the medium. Sandra Meech, transfers photographic images on to fabric, Cheryl Martin uses paper, Allie Kay works with plastic, Ann Fahy dyes and pleats pieces of cloth and Val Jackson covers garments with elaborate machine embroidery. Janet Twinn draws on her background as a painter to explore the intricate interplay of colour, pattern and light and Fenella Davies uses textured and torn fabrics with an overlay of dyes and paints to create collaged images inspired by crumbling urban walls. Both Karina Thompson and Charlotte Yde are exploring the potential of digitally programmed embroidery using the new generation of sewing machines. The exhibition 'A Slice of Quilt Art' at the Festival of Quilts in August was an opportunity for all members to experiment with transparency, three-dimensional work and unusual methods of display.

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, are happy confining themselves to fabric and stitch, finding in them alone a wealth of expressive potential, and have no problem with the label 'quiltmaker', whereas others, in their drive for recognition,

feel forced to describe themselves as 'textile' or 'mixed media' artists. Aware of all these issues and united by a passion for the creative possibilities quilting still affords, 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.

For many members, belonging to Quilt Art is about much more than an opportunity to exhibit. The international friendships members have forged over the last twenty-five years have provided them with support and encouragement. Quilt Art has also helped them develop and mature their thinking about the social and cultural possibilities of quilting. Now entering the second twenty-five years of its existence, Quilt Art represents a strong, self-confident and forward-looking group of artists. ●

'Quilt Art at 25', The Quilt Museum, York, 4 February – 2 May 2011 and touring the UK and Europe.

'A Slice of Quilt Art' tours Europe in 2011, visiting Germany, Spain, the Czech Republic, Ireland and Hungary.

'Quilt Art 20' tours the United States in 2011–12, including galleries in Roanoke, Virginia, Portland, Oregon and Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

For further exhibition details and to order the book 'Quilt Art at 25', please visit: [www.quiltart.eu](http://www.quiltart.eu)

1 Letter to Quilters' Newsletter (predecessor of *The Quilter*), Spring 1987.

2 Introduction in catalogue for 'Quilt Art', Nottingham Castle Museum, 1988, page 22.

3 Dr Jennifer Harris, Deputy Director and Curator of *Textiles at the Whitworth Art Gallery*, Manchester, jury member at the 4th European Triennial, *Textilsammlung Max Berk*, Heidelberg, 2010.