



REAL MEN DON'T QUILT

Or do they? A guy tries
his hand at women's work

BY KENT WILLIAMS

Whenever I enter a quilt store for the first time, there's this moment where the woman behind the counter — and it's always a woman — sizes me up. Am I somebody's husband, tired of waiting in the car while the wife spends the whole damn day at Itchin' to Stitch? Am I the boyfriend? The son? The nephew? Am I lost? Am I supposed to be three doors down, at the hardware store? Four doors down, at the barbershop? Am I going to hit her up for a donation? Rob the place? Pull out an AK-47 and start shooting? Or am I one of those exotic creatures, rarely seen in the wild unless flushed from the brush by a colorful bolt of fabric? Is that what I am, a male quilter?

Actually, I prefer just "quilter." Or quilt-maker. Or quilt artist. Or — move over, Picasso — artist. Somebody once suggested I refer to myself as "An Artist Who Works in the Quilt Medium." Try squeezing *that* on your calling card. Not only is it unwieldy, it fails to indicate that I'm working with both



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X and Y chromosomes here. For better or worse, I'm a man. I need something to go with when that guy at the gym, the one who pumps a mountain of iron, asks what I do in my spare time — something short and not so sweet. Seamster? Hmm, not bad. I could even join together with other seamsters and form a Seamsters Union.

Look, I played flute in my junior high band. So it's not like I haven't spent my whole life getting in touch with my feminine side. But when I took up quilting five years ago, I entered a world that I hadn't really encountered before, a world where men are a bit of an afterthought. There are an estimated 20 million quiltmakers in the United States alone. That's twice the population of, say, Sweden. And like the Swedes, they have their own laws, their own language, their own customs. They have their own books, their own magazines, their own Web sites. In short, they have their own culture, one that's as foreign to the average male as sumo wrestling is to the average female.

When I first slipped across the border, under cover of darkness, I didn't know the difference between selvage and salvage, a backstitch and a side stitch. I thought appliqué was something the French did, involving job interviews. And basting was something Americans did, to turkeys. Many quilts and countless hours later, I'm starting to get a feel for the place, the lay of the land. And I thought you might like to see what it looks like to someone who once thought of it as a foreign country but now thinks of it as something resembling home.

Quilting has a long, rich history stretching back thousands of years, much of which I know absolutely nothing about. In my defense, nobody else knows very much about it either, except for the last two or three centuries. There's a line in *Gulliver's Travels* where Gulliver describes what he's wearing as looking "like the patchwork done by the ladies in England," and we Americans have those ladies in England to thank for showing us how

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to keep warm during some very rough winters. There may well have been some quilts on the Mayflower. If not, they arrived soon thereafter. And it wasn't long before we were sewing our own. Among the quilts at Mount Vernon is one supposedly done by Martha Washington herself.

Few quilts survive from Martha's day. And it wasn't until the latter half of the 19th century that quilting really took off, both as a necessity and as a luxury. We all have this image in our minds of a pioneer woman sitting next to the fire, sewing scraps of fabric together. And although she isn't above arranging the red patches just so, that isn't what this is all about. This is about survival, protecting her family from the elements. But alongside this make-do tradition was a make-pretty tradition in which quilts literally blossomed into works of art — elaborate floral displays, for example, in which time was not a consideration. The decorative stitchwork alone could take dozens, if not hundreds, of hours.

From the beginning (whenever that was), there's been a tension between make-do quilts and make-pretty quilts, those that are meant to keep us warm at night and those that are meant to brighten our days. There's been a further tension between pretty quilts and interesting quilts, those that brighten our days and those that, to one degree or another, rock our world. Sometimes a make-do quilt is pretty. Sometimes a make-pretty quilt is interesting. And sometimes a make-do quilt is both pretty and interesting. That's what makes quilting such a vital endeavor. Encompassing both art and craft, higher calling and hobby, it makes room for everyone, even a guy who'd never threaded a needle until he was in his 40s.

I came to quilting by way of my friend Nancy, a now-retired textiles professor who's also a fiber artist. What brought us together was piano, an artistic pursuit we intend to keep right on artistically pursuing until we finally stop playing so damn many wrong notes. But to know Nancy is to enter Nancy World, a worker's paradise where all the work is done by Nancy herself. Nancy cooks. Nancy gardens. Nancy weaves. Nancy knits. Nancy quilts. Nancy even sews her own underwear. And over time her domestic skills have rubbed off on me. I now cook, garden and quilt. And if I weren't particularly fond of my Calvin Klein's, I would probably sew my own underwear.

I don't remember ever asking Nancy to teach me how to do these things. It just kind of happened by osmosis. And the quilting instruction has been especially osmotic. It all started when I saw a picture of a quilt that I instantly fell in love with. The pattern, I soon learned, is called Chinese Coins — stacks of differently colored rectangles separated by long rows of, in this case, the most

beautifully faded brown fabric. The quilt was elegantly draped over a wagon, as if by the hand of Martha Stewart herself. And it was so simple, yet so stunning. "I'll take two of those," I said, imagining a toll-free number you could call to order them. But this was a genuine artifact, a 100-year-old Amish quilt, an heirloom. I was out of luck. Or was I?

"We could make one," Nancy said. "We could make one."

And thus began a deviously clever process by which I learned how to quilt without realizing I was being taught how to quilt. Nancy made the Chinese Coins quilts herself. I helped choose the fabrics, helped arrange the colors, but she sewed them together. She must have known that I wasn't going to settle for a couple of quilts out of some book, however. Using a pattern called Roman Stripes, which consists of square blocks divided into three adjacent rectangles, the blocks alternating between a vertical orientation and a horizontal orientation, I came up with a Halloween-themed quilt that fades from the lush foliage of late fall, in the bottom right corner, to the pitch-black terror of Hallow's Eve, in the top left. And I just assumed Nancy would sew it for me.

She assumed otherwise.

So I not only chose the fabrics, I also cut them, arranged them and sewed them together. The sewing, once I got over the idea that a guy should really be sawing something instead of sewing something, was a kick. I don't think most guys realize that the sewing machine is one hell of a power tool, far more sophisticated than a saw and capable of inflicting all sorts of pain. There's also this thing called a rotary cutter, which is like a pizza cutter, only for fabric instead of for pizza. If you happen to nick your finger with one of these babies, you'll soon be admiring your doctor's own skills with a needle and thread. Many a quilt, mine included, bear the traces of the blood, sweat and tears that went into them.

Quilters can be divided into those who follow tradition and those who couldn't follow tradition if their lives depended on it. I'm one of the latter. I have a deep respect for all the old patterns, the names of which form a cornucopia of America's past — Corn and Beans, Melon Patch, Log Cabin, Barn Raising, Bear's Paw, Spider's Web, Jacob's Ladder, Job's Tears, Whig's Defeat, Lincoln's Platform, Lone Star, Leap Frog. And I have an even deeper respect for appliqué, which is forever renewing itself while holding on to what made it so pleasing in the first place, an almost unimaginable ornateness that can require enormous skill. But I've never been one to follow recipes. And I'm never going to have that kind of skill.

You'd be surprised how much leeway that leaves me with, though. "I think a person could spend his whole life just sewing squares," a quilter once said to me. "I'm counting on it," I told her. And although I've added a few skill sets since then, I've been impressed with how much bang you can get for your buck, artistically speaking, with just some basic sewing techniques. In my own designs, I've been drawn to geometric abstraction, one of quilting's many overlaps with modern art, which owes a largely unacknowledged debt to women who made the mistake of titling their work "Sunshine and Shadows" instead of "Homage to the Square." For what did Josef Albers reveal about color that Amish women hadn't revealed a half-century earlier?

It was the Amish quilt, in all its confounding simplicity, that first made the leap from bed to wall, craft to art, when New York's Whitney Museum gave its imprimatur to an exhibition called "Abstract Design in American Quilts." This was in 1971, a very interesting time to be a quilter. As part of the back-to-the-land ethos of the '60s, people had started working with their hands again. They were crocheting. They were knitting. They were weaving. They were embroidering their jeans. And they were quilting, many of them for the first time. Quilting had faded in popularity since World War II, when Rosie the Riveter got drafted into the war effort. Now it was back, just in time for the Bicentennial, which sent the country into a tizzy of colonial-era crafting.

Out of this tie-dyed salute to the needle arts grew a quilting movement that, three decades later, shows no signs of abating. Today, there are quilt shops on every corner, or so it seems. And there are enough quilting guilds, whose members regularly get together to show and tell, stitch and bitch, that you have to wonder whether that guy who wrote *Bowling Alone* might not want to rethink his thesis. Finally, there are trade shows and exhibitions, annual gatherings of the clans that rack up some astounding numbers. The turnout for the Paducah Quilt Show, which features the crème de la crème of traditionally oriented quilting, makes the turnout for the nearby Kentucky Derby look like a pasture in Wyoming.

Given my inclinations, I'm more likely to show up at Quilt National or Quilt Visions, alternating exhibitions (in Athens, Ohio, and San Diego, Calif.) that feature the best of what has come to be known as the contemporary art quilt. Emerging out of that '60s/'70s revival, the contemporary art quilt is for those who, like me, have trouble following recipes, but boy do these people know their way around a kitchen. For ingredients, they

use everything from hand-dyed fabric to dried banana peels. And they may paint on fabric or sprinkle it with bleach, leave it out in the sun or run it through a photocopy machine. Many contemporary art quilters have MFAs, with all the surface-design techniques that implies, and a surprising number of them are men.

I suppose any number higher than, say, three would be surprising, but there appears to be many more than that. And some of them have built names for themselves — Michael James, who's done with stripes what I was hoping to do with squares, creates a world unto itself, using only light and color. On the traditional side, John Flynn has done some beautiful work. But I sense a larger male presence, proportionally speaking, among the art quilters, who seem as connected to the male-dominated art world as they do to the female-dominated quilting world. Whether the male-dominated art world feels connected to them is another matter. Among the "fine" arts, quilting remains a tough sell.

That's a pity, because quilts have qualities that fine art might benefit from — tactility, for one. There's no good reason to run your hand across a Rembrandt unless you're trying to get arrested. But the average quilt all but begs to be touched. I literally sleep with mine. In fact, that's one of the reasons I don't use all those surface-design techniques; I always want to be able to cop a feel. Fabric has its own sensuality, which is why most men shy away from it. If it was up to them, we'd still be wearing armor made by the local (male) blacksmith. But one of the things that quilting has taught me is the miracle of fabric. From the time we're swaddled in it until the time we're shrouded in it, it enriches our lives.

Another thing that quilting has taught me is patience. I used to be in a hurry to get there, wherever "there" was, but quilting forces you to slow down. You've heard that a stitch in time saves nine? Well, I'm here to tell you, it saves at least a hundred and nine. And there's the added benefit of knowing you haven't cut corners, you've given the task exactly what it required. Oh, and one last thing I've learned from quilting: community. I'm not really much of a joiner. And after five years, I still feel like a man in a woman's world. But the women themselves have been so friendly and supportive that they've just kind of worn down my defenses. You have to wonder whether a woman in a man's world would be treated as well.

"Home," Robert Frost wrote, "is that place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." If that's true, then quilting must be even better than home. I didn't have to go there. They didn't have to take me in. And yet here we all are. ♦

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