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## Birds in the cornfield quilt

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Quilts UK 2012 Malvern  
Anne Williams headed for the hills to visit this long-established event on the quilting calendar

**PLUS** Indian summer • Why Quilts Matter documentary  
Sew a sampler part 4 • Christmas stash preview



# Why Quilts Matter

After watching this American documentary, Ian Jackson learns that quilts do indeed matter



Eight ladies tying a comforter on a frame at Lula Corbet's regular old-fashioned quilting bee, 1875, Fulton County, Indiana. From *Quilts in Everyday Life, 1855–1955: A 100-Year Photographic History*, Janet E. Finley. Schiffer Publishing, Atglen, Pennsylvania; late 2012. Collection of Janet E. Finley

There's something in the finished product. A completed work represents discipline, vision, expertise and time spent. There is the pleasure of function for those items made to be used and of aesthetics for those made simply to be looked at. But is there something intrinsically special about quilting?

Quilts transcend the gulf between art and function far more easily than other crafts but they do so only because of the rich tradition of quilting that came before. To those of us who love quilting, it may seem obvious that they represent far more than the sum of their parts, but what is less easy to articulate is why. That's the question that the nine-part

documentary series *Why Quilts Matter: History, Art, Politics* attempts to answer. Made in 2011 by The Kentucky Quilt project and narrated by veteran quilter Shelly Zegart – a renowned and passionate collector, curator, author and lecturer on both contemporary and antique quilts – this documentary takes a fresh look at the craft and attempts to spread the word about its unique position at the centre of a startlingly broad grid of topics.

### What's it all about?

'Quilts are bigger than you think', the cover of the DVD proudly exclaims, and just a few episodes in, you begin to see why. The series starts by answering a very basic question: what exactly is a quilt? How do we define the quilt that is an amalgamation of fabric, photography, printmaking

**“A quilt is about family, it's about history, it's about community”**

and other media? To Artist Tom Pfannerstil, 'A quilt is about family, it's about history, it's about community. It's about work, it's about patience, and, yes, it's about beauty.' To Professor Hermna the sheer varieties of quilts out there defy attempts



Reception at a Tuley Park exhibition, 1930s, Tuley Park Quilt Club. Photo by Chicago Park District, Chicago, Illinois. Courtesy of Susan Salser

to place them into neat little pigeonholes: 'As soon as you say a quilt is about piece work or appliqué ... what do you do with alternative media, what do you do with an art quilt made of metal?'

After the basic introduction, the series picks up a gear, covering aspects of quilting that you may not have considered before. We learn of their role as an historical window into the lives of women. The quintessential American story has oft been told, though most usually from the male perspective. But quilts made not by artisans but by ordinary women (kept illiterate for most of history) trace their story in ways that are both vivid and profound. We follow the positioning of quilts in the growth of feminism, as a sly medium of social and political opinion, and as a 'building block for the



Shelly Zegart



*Blocks, Strips, Strings and Half Squares* by Mary Lee Bendolph, 2005. Cotton 84 x 81in  
From *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*  
Paul Arnett, Tinwood Books, 2006

financial security of women'. We explore and learn some valuable tips about the often confusing world of the quilt marketplace and discover why one 19th century quilt was worth over a quarter of a million dollars and how a quilt can go from US\$150 to US\$20,000 as it passes from picker to dealer and up the ladder of expertise.

We get a bird's eye view of festivals, meeting their participants, attending their events and watching as we are introduced to the artists struggling for the hearts and souls of a quilting nation. An entire episode is devoted to the famous Gee's Bend abstract quilts made by African Americans from an obscure hamlet in southern Alabama, so beloved that people used to line up round the block just to see them.

### STARS OF THE SHOW

And, of course, along the way we get to appreciate the real stars of the show: some truly stunning

**“Halfway through, we might to start to fancy ourselves as something of a connoisseur”**

quilts. From Michael James' dramatic *Terminus of One Path* quilt to the growth in popularity of quilting favourites such as Grandma's flower garden, we learn to place the quilt in its contemporaneous context. Quilts made from cigar ribbons are indicative of a period of history when America's love of smoking coincided with its rise to affluence; bright colours abounded in the bleak days of the great depression, when other cheer was hard to find. We are shown studio quilts (or art quilts if you prefer), which made for the wall can be so encrusted with decoration that you couldn't possibly use them on a bed. Halfway through, we might start to fancy ourselves as something of a connoisseur.

And through it all, as we delve into the inner workings of the art world, explore behind the scenes in the marketplace and journey into the complicated, kaleidoscopic world of quilts, we are joined by people from its world, people who share our passion for the craft. Episode after episode, even those most



*The Terminus of One Path*, Michael James, 2008. Cotton, dyes 53 ¼ x 43in. Photo by Larry Gawel  
Courtesy of Modern Arts Midwest [www.unl.edu/mjames\\_quilts](http://www.unl.edu/mjames_quilts)



*Cigar Band Quilt*, Maker unknown  
c. 1880–1890. Silk 35 x 36in. Photo by Geoffrey Carr. Formerly in the collection of Shelly Zegart. Collection of The Art Institute of Chicago

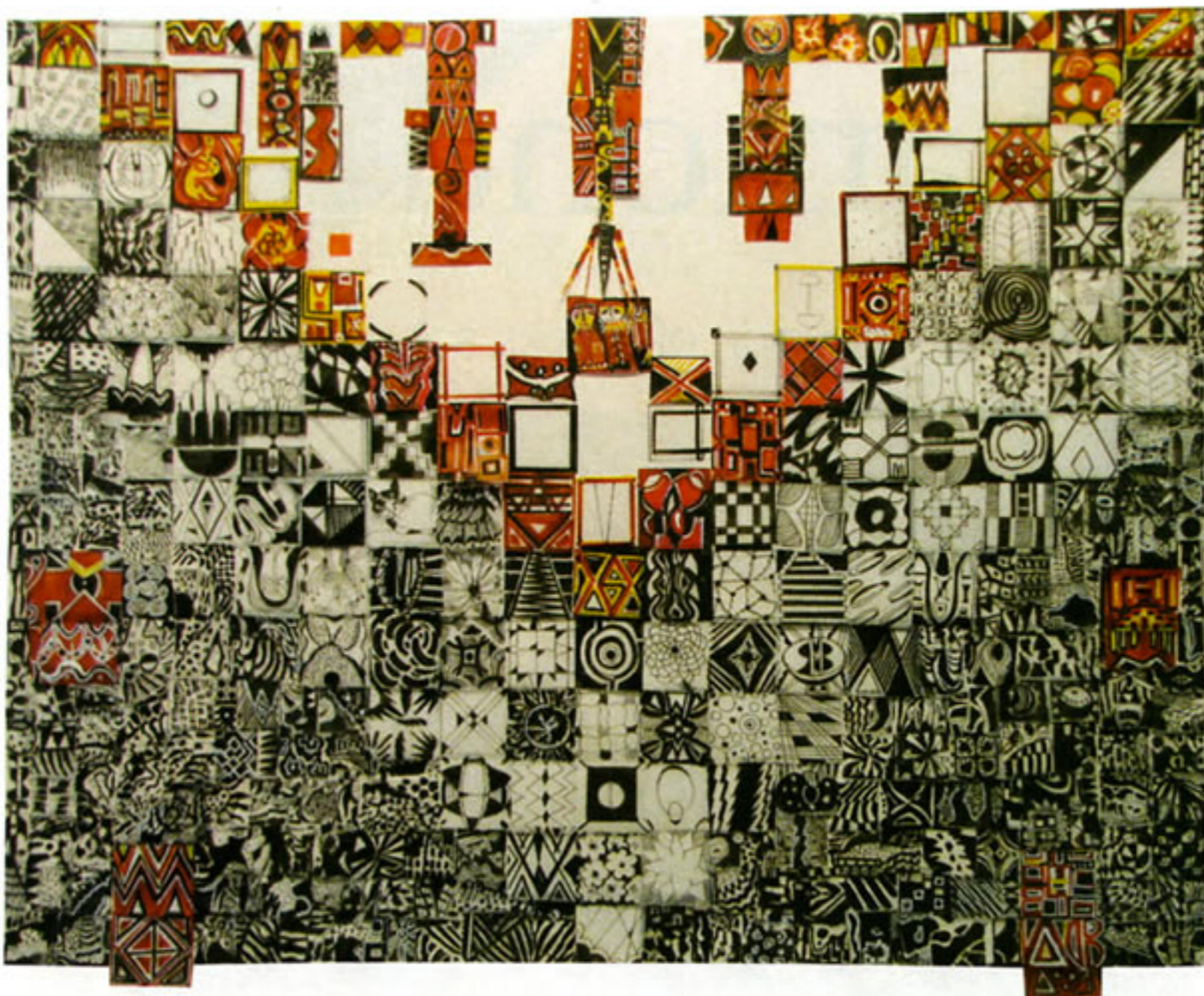


Copperplate-printed wholecloth quilt, Maker unknown 1785–1790. Linen, cotton 96x 93in  
Item number 1995.13.3, American Folk Art Museum, New York, New York  
[www.folkartmuseum.org](http://www.folkartmuseum.org)

immersed in the culture of quilting learn something new – the DVD opens our eyes to vistas unseen and gives us a nudge towards new avenues for exploration. We learn that that quilts do indeed matter.

There are 21 million quilters in the USA alone, a population that exceeds many smaller countries. The industry is worth four billion dollars and quilters, knowingly or unknowingly, are part of the 'Largest mass movement that most people don't know exists'. By learning of the centrality of quilts to American consciousness we enable ourselves to reflect on the impact that they've had upon our own culture.

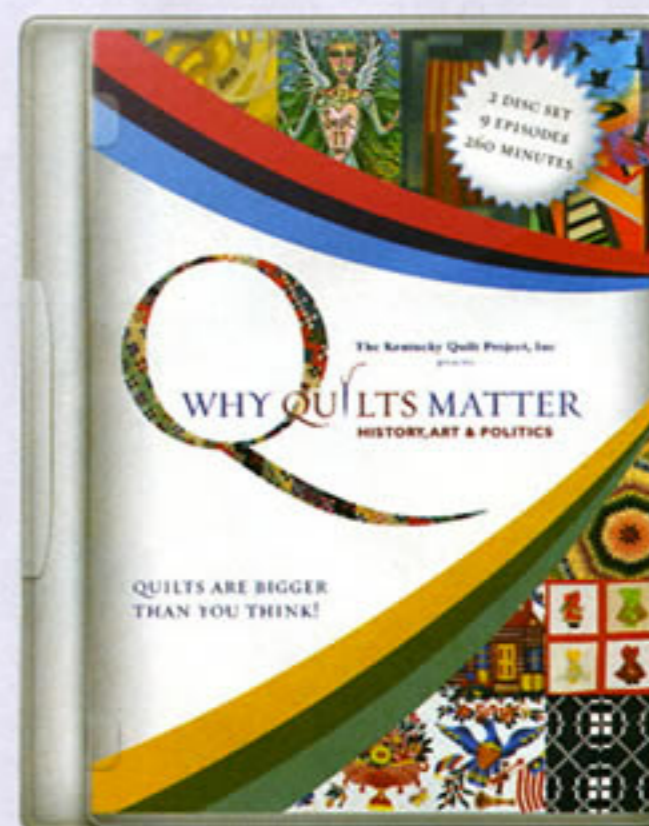
The documentary may lack the 'spit and polish' of a Hollywood production but it more than makes up for that in its sheer enthusiasm for quilting. The experts called upon are not dry academics: they are fellow enthusiasts, artists, professors of history and culture, traders and museum curators. They share their opinions but also their stories of quilts passed down from generation to generation, of tactile connections to loved ones no longer with them or even those that passed years before their birth. The vast number of arresting and memorable images of quilts from such an expansive range of time periods and traditions is reason enough to watch these films. But the opportunity to connect with the deep and rich history of our hobby, that's a much, much better one. ♦



*Desert Wrap* Brigitte Rutenbergn 2010. Ink on mylar 30 x 24in. [www.rutenbergart.com](http://www.rutenbergart.com)



*Hand Tools* B. J. Adams. Hand-dyed and commercial cotton, silk and wool, cotton poly and metallic threads, acrylic paint, 46 x 75in. Collection of John M. Walsh, III. [www.bjadamsart.com](http://www.bjadamsart.com)



For more information and to buy the DVD visit [www.whyquiltsmatter.org](http://www.whyquiltsmatter.org)



Collage of quilts from the series