

# DANCING

# QUILTS

By Rachael Guadagni



“Why do I have to learn this?” Virtually every teacher and parent has been on the receiving end of this incredulous question, and many have struggled to provide a meaningful answer. But it takes only a moment with Shelly Zegart for the meaning and value of her work to become apparent to anyone wondering, “Why quilts?”

Known affectionately as the “Quilt Lady,” Zegart has spent more than three decades researching, documenting and showcasing the rich heritage of quilting in America. Garnering national and international recognition, her work transcends stereotype and myth, combining rigorous academic scholarship with a deep respect and personal connection to the craft. The trail of quilting in America is a fascinating and challenging path but one Zegart makes well worth the effort.

A Pennsylvania native, Zegart moved with her family to Louisville in 1968. Though her academic background centered more on education and art history, a love of all things artistic and creative was cultivated early. “My mother was a collector of all kinds of things, and there was just always a lot of curiosity,” Zegart recalled. When her own children were small and her husband, Dr. Kenneth Zegart, was in his medical residency in Philadelphia, she would walk along Pine Street, admiring the quilts hanging in the store windows. Later, when building a contemporary home, Zegart planned to decorate with the modern, minimalist art she loved when her husband made a request. “As an ob/gyn, most of his work was happy, but sometimes it wasn’t, and he wanted to come home to art that wasn’t edgy in theme. So we just made a deal: The big stuff would be things he felt really good about. I needed big art for big walls, and I just stumbled into quilts.” Not long after came the chance encounter that would change the course of Zegart’s life and

lead to a paradigm shift in quilt research and documentation.

While shopping at a local flea market, Zegart ran into a friend who invited her to a tea where Bruce Mann, a well-known Louisville dealer who bought quilts in Kentucky and sold them in New York, would be displaying some of his merchandise. “That was it,” said Zegart. “He was flinging these things out, and I was thinking—because I’m on the board of the Water Tower at this point, which is the umbrella organization for the Louisville Visual Art Association—this is art, it’s cheap, it’s anonymous ... what’s wrong?” Nothing, it turns out, could have been more right as Zegart’s vision of a relationship between art and quilting came rapidly into focus. “That was really it. I converged those worlds from the very first moment.”

Not wishing to appear too eager, Zegart kept to herself her desire to purchase virtually every quilt Mann had shown. But the images from that evening never left her mind. “Quilts were dancing in my head all night, and what’s so amazing to me is that was 35 years ago, and if I close my eyes, I can picture that day and seeing those quilts for the first time as though it were yesterday.”

Zegart made Mann an offer he couldn’t refuse: trading dinners for instruction on assessing and buying quilts. Her husband commented that he needed women’s artwork for his practice, and Zegart’s first official foray into the quilt world was to purchase items for his office walls. Ultimately, Kentucky venues such as The Seelbach



Hotel, the University of Louisville's Ekstrom Library and the Louisville International Airport displayed quilts sold by Zegart, as did several New York skyscrapers, museums and hospitals.

Mann was killed in a car accident in 1980. But he left behind a single piece of paper outlining his idea for documenting quilts that eventually would become The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., and it was brought to Zegart's attention by mutual friend Eleanor Bingham Miller. Initially a modest concept of cataloging Kentucky quilts, the KQP quickly evolved into a comprehensive body of research, documentation and education that would serve as a model for similar programs across the country.

Zegart informed Miller that she wouldn't be satisfied with just a simple memorial exhibit for Mann at the Louisville Museum of Natural History and Science (now the Kentucky Science Center) but instead wanted to "really document Kentucky quilts and try to trace the different characteristics—who had them, what the patterns were that were prevalent in Kentucky ... whatever we could find out." She gathered friends and associates with experience in business, marketing and nonprofit work around her kitchen table, and the KQP soon emerged as the gold standard quilt research and documentation program. "There were no other large-scale documentation projects like this that had ever been done," said Zegart, and only a handful of local "documentation efforts" in other states. The KQP conducted itself as a professional organization from the beginning, incorporating public relations, business acumen and extensive research that not only established a comprehensive quilt index and information wellspring but also nurtured a connection between quilting and the art world.



The tiny African-American



Shelly Zegart

community of Gee's Bend, Ala., had already influenced the American art aesthetic when, in 1965, a local clergyman sent quilts made by the women of the community to New York department stores. Pop-culture icons such as *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland and interior designer Sister Parish gave

quilts new cultural cachet with their Gee's Bend purchases, and quilts solidified their status as an authentic American art form.

The initial notoriety of Gee's Bend began to fade as demands for custom-ordered quilts shifted the focus from an authentic reflection of local culture and custom to a more symmetrical, commercial appeal, and the community returned to its quiet existence. In 1998, William Arnett, an art dealer, collector and scholar of Southern, African-American vernacular art, and his sons became enamored with the quilts they found at Gee's Bend and collaborated with the Museum of Fine Arts of Houston to produce the exhibition *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* in 2002. This exhibit was featured in museums around the country, including the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, where hundreds of thousands came to view the quilts. Images of the Gee's Bend quilts also have appeared on postage stamps, helping to give these textiles the label "the most viewed quilts in America."

From 2001-08, Zegart served as a consultant and/or curator for various

## LOVE QUILTS, QUILTERS, QUILTING?

Then head to Paducah April 24-27 for the American Quilter's Society QuiltWeek 2013 and share in the dozens of activities and events that bring upwards of 30,000 visitors to the area.

"QuiltWeek is on many quilters' bucket list," said Laura Schaumburg, marketing director for the Paducah Convention & Visitors Bureau. "[It's] the show they must attend!"

So check this one off the list and make plans to enjoy any or all of the QuiltWeek festivities.

- Beautiful quilt displays
- Workshops
- 400-booth vendor mall
- National Quilt Museum
- Rotary Antique Quilt Show and Contest
- International Juried Fiber Art exhibit *Fantastic Fibers* at the Yeiser Art Center
- "Quilt in a Day" with Eleanor Burns, the queen of strip quilting
- Quilt shops

For more information about QuiltWeek, visit [aqsshows.com/AQSPaducah/](http://aqsshows.com/AQSPaducah/) or [paducah.travel](http://paducah.travel).

Gee's Bend publications and exhibits. She has worked tirelessly to enhance the academic credibility of these and other quilt genres. Her article "Myth and Methodology: Shelly Zegart Unpicks African-American Quilt Scholarship" in the February 2008 issue of British textile magazine *Selvedge* tackled the controversial topic of authentic quilt scholarship. "People hold on to their tightly held beliefs ... and you fight this all the time," said Zegart, who believes it to be a great disservice if the true history and cultural context of the quilts are conveyed inaccurately—a cultural context, she maintains, that yields information and insight valuable to any number of academic disciplines.

Zegart champions the cause of quilt scholarship and is encouraged by the steady increase in the number of people pursuing quilting from an academic perspective. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln offers a master's program in history with an emphasis on quilt studies and, Zegart said, "There are more [academics] interested in writing papers, interested in being there ... It really is changing." UNL also has an International Quilt Study Center, of which Zegart was named an associate fellow in 2004. Her



documentary *Why Quilts Matter: History, Art & Politics*, produced by The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc. and shown on PBS, is a nine-part series covering virtually every aspect of quilting. Designed as an interactive educational tool, the video provides an extensive image resource guide for each quilt featured and is accompanied by a discussion guide providing detailed questions, suggestions for discussion and space for notes.

Approaching the field from an academic and economic standpoint emphasizes the historical and cultural importance of quilts in American

society. "Quilts in America ... we always think they started at the folk level and went to high, but it was the other way around," said Zegart. A source of economic and emotional empowerment for women, quilts were first made or purchased by those of means who could afford them and had the space to get the job done. Later, quilts were made by the lower socioeconomic classes, using less-expensive materials and often creating a strong social network within the community. In recent decades, quilt production, purchases and large-scale events have generated millions of dollars in revenue for cities across the United States. QuiltWeek, an annual Paducah event, brings 30,000 U.S. and international visitors and roughly \$17 million to the city and region.

"I feel really proud to claim Kentucky," said Zegart, "not only for its quilt traditions but everything else it stands for ... and letting people understand more about the real Kentucky, the incredible people and traditions." 🍄

For more information about The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., visit [whyquiltsmatter.org](http://whyquiltsmatter.org).