

Suggestions for Collectors

(Adapted from *Contemporary Quilt Art: An Introduction and Guide* by Kate Lenkowsky, Indiana University Press, 2008)

How can a buyer, particularly one who is not familiar with textile art, be sure a contemporary quilt is worth the price? Will it continue to be of interest in the months to come? Will it hold its value? How does one build a collection?

Collectors approach the market differently from people interested in buying one or two quilts. If you want something nice for the bare wall in your family room, or something cheerful for a child's room, size and color might be your primary considerations. Collectors, on the other hand, might be interested in the work of a particular artist or region of the country, or art which represents groundbreaking work. For some, looking for emerging artists gives the most pleasure. But whatever your reasons for buying, or the specific focus of your collecting, you want the quilts you purchase to have lasting value.

In *Contemporary Quilt Art: An Introduction and Guide*, I share with readers what I learned from museum curators, art consultants, professors, collectors, and gallery directors about the criteria *they* use in evaluating textile art and studio quilts and about the market in which they are sold.

Regarding composition, for example. Does the artist show mastery of color, line, pattern, texture, and scale? Also important are originality, the power of expression, and the soundness of the idea underlying the art. Does the artist's use of a quilt as an art medium and the techniques she employs support that idea?

Do you trust yourself to answer these questions? Do they really matter? The making of a collector often begins when he or she sees and instantly falls in love with a single work of art. Yet it is undeniable that knowledge about art will increase both your appreciation and improve your "eye." With knowledge comes confidence.

Learning is one of the joys of collecting. A well known craft collector told me that he has learned much just talking with people about art – artists, gallery owners, other collectors. If you go to exhibits on opening night, many times the artists are there. They are often happy to talk with visitors and answer questions about their work. Gallery owners, too, can be important to your education. Ask them why they represent particular artists and not others. Always be wary if they try to rush you into a purchase.

We do not all have art degrees, but by reading widely about the visual arts and attending as many exhibits as you can – major and minor ones – in museums, art centers, galleries, and colleges, you will not only become educated, but you will begin to refine your interests. Museums and art centers offer the eager learner more opportunities than is sometimes realized. Take advantage of them – lectures, study- and behind-the-scene tours. Find out what is in the museum's collection and which artists are represented there. When a museum accepts an artist's quilt into its collection, it is saying that it believes in the value of the artwork. Ask to see these pieces if they are not on display. Spend time with them. Ask the curator why they are important. Many curators are willing to make at least a brief appointment to answer the specific questions of museum goers.

Visit the website of the International Quilt Study Center. Every quilt in its collection is pictured online and dated, including the contemporary ones. There you will see important quilts dating from the early beginnings of this art form. Two other internet sites, the Smithsonian Archives the Alliance for American Quilts, post interviews well known artists in the field.

The internet also provides a great overview of the field and the market. Many artists have their own websites or are represented by an online gallery. A computer monitor can never convey the essence of textile art, so be sure to get a written guarantee that quilts you purchase online can be returned if the colors or level of craftsmanship are not what you expected.

Venues for the exhibition of quilts range from church halls and school gymnasiums to museums. Contemporary pieces are mixed with traditional ones at guild shows and are hung by volunteers, not skilled museum curators. When viewing a quilt in this kind of setting, your perception is

likely to be affected by the setting itself, the attention given to hanging the quilts, and the quality and colors of quilts hanging nearby. A lesser work of art might be enhanced by its neighbors, or a very good quilt might be diminished. Keep this in mind as you stroll through. Many emerging artists get started in small, local shows. You might discover a talented, local artist who would be greatly encouraged by your support. Sometimes, the quilts at these exhibits are not for sale. If you see one that interests you, ask the volunteer staff how you can get in touch with the maker.

One important distinction between the professional artist who makes studio quilts and the traditional quiltmaker is their approach to their work. The culture of traditional quiltmaking includes sharing designs. It is not uncommon for quilts, made from a pattern or according to the specifications of a workshop teacher, to be hung at guild exhibitions. This, of course, is not original design, although the maker will have used her own fabric. It underscores the importance of the collector's knowledge. There is nothing, of course, to prevent you from asking the quiltmaker directly about the source of her design.

Prices for studio quilts depend on many factors. These include the prominence of the artist (determined in part by the presence of work in important museum and private collections), acceptance of the artist's work into major competitions, and size. Prices are also influenced by trends in color, style, and aesthetics and by the popularity of other art forms, all of which tend to change over time. If you find a quilt which you love but cannot afford, ask the gallery director or artist if you can make monthly payments. One reason private gallery prices tend to be high is that many perform functions for the artists they represent such as advertising, renting space for and talking with customers about their work, assisting buyers with installation, and funding opening night receptions. How much should one pay? One long-time fiber art collector, when asked this question, said she thinks people should initially set a yearly cap on their spending. Over time, as their eye improves, they can spend a higher amount with greater confidence.

One final note. As the secondary market for contemporary quilt art begins to grow, we can expect that quilts made by artists in the 1970s and 1980s will become available. When buying studio quilts from someone other than the artist, always ask about its provenance and find out if it has ever been repaired. If it has, find out who made the repair. This will affect its value.

These suggestions are a few of those shared with me by people closely involved with contemporary quilt art. Perhaps the most important advice, though, is to have fun! Collecting is not only, or even primarily, about getting something for your money and value does not refer only to price. Collecting is an adventure. “I’ve met an incredible group of people,” collector Robert Pfannebecker told an interviewer for the Smithsonian Institution Archives. “I still find it an exhilarating thing to do.”

Note from the author: In addition to the chapters on buying and collecting, *Contemporary Quilt Art* includes a history of the emergence of the studio quilt as an art form; essays about nineteen of the most prominent artists with illustrations; and a discussion about educational resources for buyers, appraisal, commissioning work, and working with an art consultant. There is also a chapter on care and installation of studio quilts, and a glossary of terms.