

How I became a quilt collector

by Necia Wallace

I never thought I would become a quilt collector. Quilt collectors are millionaires, with lots of money to spend and acres of blank wall space in their mansions waiting to be filled with beautiful quilts. Aren't they? I live in a small condo, with walls cluttered with things I love, and have only a Social Security/pension income.

But one day when I was at a quilt show, I saw a quilt that attracted me. It had a price tag less than the cost of the fabric. I liked the quilt, so I decided that if the quilter was going to give it away, she might as well "give" it to me. That got me started. I became enchanted with the idea of owning beautiful, colorful works of art that I could hang in my home and live with every day.

My local newspaper art critic has made the distinction that there are collectors and then there are accumulators. According to him, a collector is

serious, knowledgeable, scholarly, and (I presume) has great taste and is a connoisseur. I am serious, somewhat knowledgeable, but I lay no claim to being a quilt scholar. I think I have taste, but how do you measure that?

What kinds of quilts do I collect? The ones that catch my eye or attract me for some reason. Or I look for artwork by those artists whose art I may never have the opportunity of finding again at a reasonable price. My collected quilts must be small, since I have such limited room. I have limited income, and thus, a price maximum of about \$300-\$400.

Where do I find the quilts that end up in my collection? An early one came from Quilt Surface Design Symposium, when Caryl Bryer Fallert preferred to sell her class sample rather than haul it back home again. So I became the proud owner of a real (if small) *High Tech Tucks*, at a price within my budget. At a later QSDS, I found an Elizabeth Busch that was not typical of her artwork. But when could I ever find art of hers again, at

such a price? Her pieces, published in magazines, were huge.

I am fortunate to belong to the Professional Art Quilt Alliance that meets in the west Chicago area and has many talented and famous members. I have purchased some artworks immediately after the artist has displayed them during "show and tell." Jan Rickman, fresh from having her piece on the cover of the catalog of *Quilt National*, brought some small pieces in the same style and colors. When Ann Fahl showed a beautifully quilted and beaded work in yellow, orange, and purple — not Ann's usual colors — I snapped it up.

Ellen Ann Eddy was one of the earlier artists to do small art quilts. When she first began displaying small and affordable pieces, I fell in love with her crab in *Crabby Days*.

Some of my friends honor me with their artwork as gifts. Suzanne Riggio designed a small piece featuring my front door, and called it Necia's Beacon. Former Milwaukee Art Quilters member Jean Smith made me

High Tech Tucks sample

© Caryl Bryer Fallert



Untitled Houses

© Elizabeth Busch





Crabby Days, © Ellen Ann Eddy

a gorgeous piece with her signature rich color and texture for giving her an afternoon of information on grant writing.

When I met Cynthia England and saw her artwork “in the flesh,” her detailed pictorial quilts intrigued me. I wanted a one-of-a-kind piece, not a sample made from a design that she sells. I commissioned her to choose whatever scene or design she wished to make. I sent her a dozen 8 x 10 prints of pictures that I have taken on my travels. Cynthia chose one from Zion National Park. It is a wonderful reminder of my many family camping trips.

My walls of art give me daily joy and inspiration. My collection certainly isn't completed, as I can make more space by rearranging things a bit, and I haven't had to file for bankruptcy. I am sure that there are other art quilts out there somewhere, just waiting for me.

If I can build a quilt collection, anyone can. If you admire a particular artist's artwork, ask if they make small pieces. If the price seems steep, perhaps they will accept partial payments until it is paid for. Most artists are happy to make arrangements so that you can own their artwork. There are always spaces to hang small works: corners, hallways, and stairways. You can display quilts in a



Red Rock Landscape, © Cynthia England

bathroom or kitchen if the artwork is appropriate.

If you don't have room to hang your collection all at once, rotate your quilts, just as you may do with furniture slipcovers or bed quilts, from season to season. Quilts that you like do not need to be made by famous artists; local, less known quilters are pleased, and often flattered, to sell their artwork to someone who appreciates it. Just acquire what appeals to *you!*

If you do start a collection, you also need to think about insuring it and conserving it. Keep the artwork out of direct sunlight. Dust it regularly, with a double nylon stocking over the end of your vacuum cleaner wand to prevent loosening beads or embellishments on the face of the quilt. Periodically I take my larger pieces and run them through the dryer on “air only” as a means of dusting them.

My living room faces south, so I keep my blinds tilted slightly upward to keep the sun from coming directly in, while allowing most of the light to filter into the room. I have put a clear

plastic shield over the window glass in my living room to block much of the ultra violet rays. I have also sprayed the artwork closest to the windows with Quiltgard™, a product that is supposed to protect against sun fading.

A friend owns artworks that include some black-and-white commercial fabrics. She has fade-proof ultraviolet-blocking glass in all her windows. In spite of the glass, some of the black fabrics have faded badly. Hand-dyed fabrics seem to stand up much better to sunlight than do many commercial ones.

So, go for it! Start your own quilt collection. Begin with a few pieces that “speak” to you. Keep on acquiring fabric works of art as long as your interest and money holds. A collection of other artists' artwork can be a constant source of inspiration and delight! ▼

SAQA Active Member Necia Wallace is a retired civil servant who has been sewing all her life. She is an enthusiastic quilter who collects the works of others for inspiration. She lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.