

The McMinn collection of contemporary quilt art

by Sandra Sider

Ted McMinn began purchasing studio quilts in 2000. He first learned about contemporary quilt art around 1979 as an undergraduate at Iowa State University, when he accompanied a friend to a fiber exhibition at Brunnier Art Museum in Ames, Iowa. The show left a lasting impression, but McMinn did not see art quilts again until more than a decade later, after moving to St. Louis. It was then that McMinn read a newspaper notice announcing that the touring exhibition of *Quilt National 1991* would be displayed nearby. McMinn explains, "Seeing the *Quilt National* exhibition allowed me

to reconnect with how much I loved this art form. Going to see the *Quilt National* exhibitions every few years, when its tour included St. Louis, became a regular and anticipated event for me."

McMinn credits Hilary Fletcher, former director of *Quilt National*, as the greatest influence on his vision as a quilt collector, since she was the force behind the pivotal show reconnecting him with his passion.

Between 2001 and 2006, McMinn also worked extensively with Jennifer Moore and Janice Johnson of Thirteen Moons Gallery in Santa Fe to source potential acquisitions.

McMinn collects art glass as well as studio quilts, appreciative of the abstract and decorative aspects of both genres. Today, he usually looks at gallery collections online to determine if there is a piece of particular interest. However, he continues to identify special artwork by going to the *Quilt National* exhibition when it stops in St. Louis. He also attends the annual AQS show in Paducah,

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Wanderlust III

46 x 41 inches ©1998 Libby Lehman



Cymbalism

95 x 48 inches ©2001 Carol Taylor



The Red Pagoda
72 x 50 inches ©2002 Sue Gilgren



Feather Study #14
56 x 56 inches ©2000 Caryl Bryer Fallert

Kentucky, and peruses *SAQA Journals* and fiber art books.

The McMinn collection currently includes 84 quilts by 32 artists. The collector is in the process of renovating his home to create additional exhibition space, including one large room with a high ceiling and professional lighting. One unique challenge McMinn faces in the renovation is to create display options that will discourage his two cats from interacting with the quilts. With such a large collection, rotating pieces for display can be an effort. "Rotating pieces is a project that can take a few days' time between taking down and cleaning (light vacuuming) the pieces before storage, and then figuring out what new pieces to put up where," he says. While the renovation is underway, McMinn has found it difficult to identify locations for each quilt. However, he plans to return to his system of logging the measurement for each hanging location, along with

a list of which pieces might fit in that space, into a spreadsheet. When not on display, his quilts are stored on polypropylene tubes.

The works of nine artists make up nearly half of Ted McMinn's collection. Included in the collection are four or more studio quilts by Elizabeth Busch, Erika Carter, Judith Content, Caryl Bryer Fallert, Michele Hardy, Libby Lehman, Jean Neblett, Emily Richardson, and Carol Taylor. Since 2004, McMinn has purchased single quilts by several artists, rather than focusing on an individual artist.

McMinn is drawn to a piece for a variety of reasons, including color palette, a technique not currently represented in the collection, or a good example of an artist's particular style. "The main thing," McMinn says, "is just aesthetic, which is a hard thing to define." And although McMinn says he has an affinity for bright, saturated colors, he also has many pieces with more muted colors. Regardless

of style, technique, or color, all the quilts in the collection "demonstrate different parts of the quilt universe."

Price per square foot is one factor McMinn considers prior to purchasing a piece. McMinn has collected artwork in a wide range of sizes from a small piece just over one square foot to large pieces measuring more than 40 square feet. Approximately 25 of the pieces in the collection are small to medium (less than 10 square feet), though McMinn acknowledges he prefers larger quilts because of their dramatic impact. Because of this wide range in size, McMinn considers the price per square foot as a metric that enables him to compare artwork of different sizes. The average cost per square foot for the entire collection is currently in the neighborhood of \$250 per square foot. However, a more detailed analysis of the price per square foot data shows two pricing peaks, one at \$180 and another at \$300 per square foot, within a broad



Lace
25 x 55 inches
©2001 Jane Kenyon



Nest II
62 x 62 inches
©2002 Sue Benner

range of purchase prices. To date, no quilt in the collection has cost more than \$500 per square foot, although McMinn does not expect that record to stand as the collection grows.

There have been occasions when price has deterred McMinn from purchasing a piece. "The collection would be two or three times larger right now if I had limitless resources," he says. Economics is the limiting

factor in making a decision, so when McMinn visits a large show, he pares his possible purchase choices down to no more than four pieces. That approach forces thoughtful consideration of every piece. There have been times when a piece he has been interested in has already been sold, but McMinn is reluctant to commission an artist to make a replica. "As Joni Mitchell commented, it's kind of

like asking Van Gogh to paint *Starry Night* again," McMinn explains. However, he expects that some day he will engage an artist on commission, either to make a piece similar to one already made or one based on specific subject matter.

The quilts shown here document the range of styles in the McMinn collection. Libby Lehman, the first quilt artist McMinn collected, explored depth and tonality in her *Wanderlust* series, a signature style in which she worked for several years. The luminosity of Lehman's quilt is similar to that of Carol Taylor's work, *Cymbalism*. It is not surprising that a collector of studio glass would be attracted to this effect in quilts as well. Taylor's quilt belongs to her *Gong Motif* series, with the quilting lines indicating reverberations from

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the cymbals. Susan Gilgen's *The Red Pagoda* is one of the few representational quilts in the collection. McMinn notes that its "beauty is very accessible." Executed in appliqué, the quilt interprets the artist's photographs of a scene in Washington, D.C.

Developed from hundreds of sketches and realized through her gradated hand-dyed fabric, Caryl Bryer Fallert's *Feather Study #14* represents a brilliant feather fantasy. *Nest II*, by Sue Benner, symbolizes maternal feelings, as elements of the composition define and protect the central core. The artist dye-painted fabrics, then assembled each 16-inch section by fusing narrow strips and monoprinting the textured surface. Jane Kenyon's *Lace*, a monochromatic trompe-l'oeil, references vintage

textiles in a monumental mixed-media fiber collage featuring elaborate free-style machine embroidery.

McMinn owns 24 quilts produced in the 1990s, and Joan Schulze's 1990 quilt *Morning Music* is the oldest quilt in the collection. Most of the artists represented in the collection are working in the United States, and all but the piece by Tim Harding were created by women.

McMinn's collection spans nearly two decades of contemporary quilt art and is an important reference to the evolution of the art form. He has adhered to Joseph Campbell's advice to "follow your bliss" and has created a very personal collection. He encourages each of us to support the arts in any manner we can afford—to purchase art that speaks to us. Though

there are no plans currently in place for an exhibition, the McMinn collection includes multiple pieces by several artists, and any future exhibition of these quilts would provide viewers with the opportunity to study not only quilt artists working in a series, but also how artists develop their styles over a period of time. I would like to thank Mr. McMinn for this rare glimpse into the collection of one of today's top 10 collectors of the studio art quilt. ▼

SAQA President Sandra Sider is an artist, critic, and curator of fiber art. Her website is www.sandrasider.com.

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