

# Mary Anhaltzer and her life in quilts

by Sandra Sider

Mary Anhaltzer's love for quilts has been honored posthumously in the SAQA *Sightlines* catalog, funded by her husband Herb Anhaltzer. While most of those who purchased the catalog at the Houston International Quilt Festival had heard of Mary Anhaltzer, many of them were not aware of her importance in the development of quilts as contemporary art.

Born in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in 1938 to Alberta and Miles Kimball, Mary grew up under the influence of her philanthropic mother, who was directly responsible for the revitalization of downtown Oshkosh during the 1960s. When her husband died in 1949, Alberta assumed directorship of the Miles Kimball Co., a mail-order business still operating today. At the impressionable age of 11, Mary observed her mother not only running a thriving business, but also anonymously donating millions of dollars to build a public library, opera house, and other civic improvements, as well as helping to support shelters for abused women. Mary had a role model who would guide her throughout her life, with a special emphasis on championing other women in various endeavors.

Mary's earliest exposure to quilts in a museum setting may have been at the Oshkosh Public Museum, founded in 1905. This museum has a collection of historic quilts and related objects that would have been featured in exhibitions during Mary's childhood. In 1958 she married Herb Anhaltzer while attending Cornell University. They later moved to California, where her husband



Mary at her sewing machine

had a job as the product development manager for S&W Foods. Mary opened a gift shop in Portola Valley, expanding to locations in nearby Palo Alto. At about the same time, Joyce Gross was establishing a quilt group in Mill Valley, not too far away in the Bay area. Mary certainly would have been aware of the quilt contests and patchwork fashion shows organized by Joyce Gross, which were well publicized. By the latter 1970s, pioneering artists in the area, such as Therese May, were exhibiting their quilts as art.

Mary began her life in quilts by making traditionally patterned works, eventually experimenting with original designs inspired by trips to Guatemala. The folk art and textiles of Guatemala are reflected in many of Mary's quilts. In her philanthropic work, Mary often visited villages in Central America and elsewhere to encourage women as they attempted to build small businesses. Her foundation contributed to the Katalysis

Fund, providing loans to (mostly female) entrepreneurs.

When Mary founded Thirteen Moons Gallery in Santa Fe in 1999, she intended for the profits to be donated to the Katalysis Fund, for women establishing textile businesses in Central America. Thirteen Moons, named after the thirteenth month in the Mayan calendar, was the



Mary & Herb Anhaltzer





above: Mary at a Thirteen Moons Gallery opening  
 left: *La Ofrenda para Maria Luisa*  
 71 x 42 inches ©1996 Mary Anhaltzer

first gallery dedicated exclusively to featuring contemporary quilt art. Its opening was hailed across the country by quilt artists, and the shows were extraordinary in the range of quilts presented. Patricia Malarcher was “awed by the quality of the gallery space and the depth of Mary’s commitment to the field.” Wendy Huhn said, “What Mary has done for the quilt world is amazing.” But in July of 2001, Mary died in her sleep,

and eventually the gallery changed hands.

While Mary, at heart a modest person, rarely discussed her own work, she did make this note about her process: “There is a cycle to my process...passionate spurts of creativity and output separated by what I call my ‘hunting and gathering’ periods. These periods are also a time for processing what is happening in my life. Looking back at a quilt I made last

year, I now find more hidden meanings in it. I love having these ongoing conversations with my work.” Mary Anhaltzer is remembered as a driving force in the quilt world. As Judith Content wrote in her memorial tribute, “She lived with vitality, creativity, and determination.” ▼