



Quilter of the Month Ann Foss June 13, 2009

When I first started quilting, I heard quilters talk about working in series and wondered why anyone would want to repeat a quilt. Be careful what you wonder about.

I agree with what Mary Cargill observed last month about it being easier to bring tops rather than finished quilts, especially if you come by subway. I've brought a couple of finished quilts, some that are basted and in progress, and some loose tops. And the first that doesn't fit any of these categories.

Until recently, I enjoyed designing and piecing but didn't care to quilt because I hadn't found the right needle, thread and thimble for me. The thread is YLI or Sulky for machine, not hand, quilting; the needle, Clover, Piecemaker or John James #12; and the thimble is this one that looks like gummy bears. But be careful, not only do they roll away like a metal thimble, but they bounce first.

If you stretch the definition of third generation quilter, I qualify. First generation: My maternal grandmother quilted once. Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Bay Ridge was starting a parochial school and the Dorcas Guild held bazaars to raise funds. One year they made quilts; the fabric was donated by a local factory that produced men's boxer shorts; Prints in multiple colors that you try to count how often they occur in the quilt. Oma crocheted and might have been related to the Hawaiians who were taught to quilt by well-meaning missionaries. In her words, cutting up fabric just to sew it back together again was "dopple arbeit" — German for double work. We bought two quilts anyway and she died under them. The hospital insisted on burning them because, although she had cancer, it was blood poisoning that killed her.

My best friend has a similar quilt the Dorcas Guild made and was going to lend it for show today but, newly retired as principal of North Street School in Greenwich, is off on vacation. We'll bring it another time.

Nana, dad's mother, unloved by her grandchildren and daughters in law for good reason, is surprisingly the one most responsible for exposing me to my first quilt at about age 3 or 4. Early 1950s, dad and his father, both carpenters, are building a house in Marcella NJ for my grandparents to retire to. A lot of the materials were leftover supplies from their various jobs. While building the house, we stayed in what we called the bungalow—three used construction shacks, like you see along Sixth Avenue, patched together to create one large room.

No heat, no running water, no electricity, a walk past the garden to the necessary. But every wall covered by "quilting" which also functioned as insulation for cold damp days. Made from paper. Specifically, the Sunday magazine/rotograveur covers of movie stars, military, politicians. If she had used this year's NYTimes magazine covers, it would look something like this. [Nana's newspaper quilt]

My sleeping space was in a corner beneath the photo of Hopalong Cassidy astride his horse Champion, rearing up on his hind legs. I read recently that by age six our brain has formed a pattern for the rest of our life. By age six, I had been exposed to pattern, design, color, taught to recycle, use up what I had — and a little sex education — remember, Champion was a stallion.

There weren't any other children in the area so I amused myself with crayons and paper, dad's childhood marbles and helping Nana in the garden. And trying to color within the lines of the white birch trees on the property. Precocious. Nana explained about seeds and color and why the trees couldn't change their colors after the seeds had been planted. I tried anyway. When she wasn't looking, I used some of dad's marbles and planted them at the base of the birch trees. Ever hopeful. If you hear of birch trees turning red or blue or yellow, those are mine.

Skip ahead to the 1980s. After we started Empire, I had a couple of false starts, set the quilting aside because while I was adept with color, pattern and dimension gave me *ajeda*. Instead of just tossing those first tries, the result was the scrap or share table as we're calling it now.

I also had trouble with pattern and balance and because I was also attending college at night. Part way through, there was a baby shower for my sister and my godmother (second generation, indirect line) made her a baby quilt, in what I think of as a bright sherbet or Italian ice colors. I looked at the quilt and colors and pattern she had chosen and said, I can do this and picked up quilting again, never to put it down.

I don't have the baby quilt here, but I do have one of Aunt Charlotte's early quilts. After she died, my cousin was distributing her quilts to grandchildren, nieces and nephews and found out that Charlotte had never made one for me—that was because she didn't make quilts for people who could make their own.

One of the first scrap quilts, I guess we should call them share quilts, that I made was a Tumbler. Back in the 80s when we were making our first charity quilts, they were for a women's shelter and we used this pattern. Someone told about charm quilts and how if you made a charm quilt with 999 pieces you would marry the next man you met after you finished it. Just for fun, I started one, trading fabric with others for more prints. This may not get finished because I know too many friends who have gone through messy divorces.

Later on, because collecting the prints were so much fun, I started a second Tumbler, much smaller, called a Thimble quilt. Does anyone collect plates or salt and pepper shakers, spoons? It's the search. The share table is essential for this type of quilt. I've been working on this for about ten years and probably another ten to go. My sewing machine, the timing mechanism, died Thursday and there's three more rows to insert between these two sections. Instead of trying to bind the edges on the thimble, they will be appliquéd to the border as I go along. Also, it's much easier if you press the seams all in the same direction to the side and down. This is so easy to do by hand and take with to meetings, visiting, waiting in doctor's office, etc. This little box has two rows of cut thimbles.

I love baskets and have made a few so it's no surprise that I would make basket theme quilts. I've made about 360 of the folk stamp basket blocks, all by hand. This small one was made with fabric I dyed in a class with Dee Danley Brown; another of Liberty Fabric was in the 2007 show. Another that isn't put together yet because I'm still working on the center, an appliquéd bouquet; that one has the blocks already pieced as they appear on the stamp sheet. This one is second choice blocks. Pat Yamin shared the pattern and I'd share it too, but can't find it. It's not like I'd never make another basket. It's pretty common and should be available in a book.

Button Quilt. Back in 1992, when the economy tanked, although not as bad as this time, I was using up some squares, planning to make a charity quilt, then started falling in love with the way they looked and thinking about making it into a picnic blanket. The corners didn't quite match so I sewed a button on the mismatched. Then, another. 1,296 buttons later, this is what you get. Good way to use up buttons and odd white fabric and something else to concentrate on after interviews, replaying in your head what you should have said.

While learning to work with prints of different dimensions, it was easier to match them up with white fabric. If the following quilts have a theme, thanks to the President's Challenge at the show, they would be called The Crayon Box Tipped Over Quilts.

Kansas Troubles. I like Earlene Fowler's mystery series and each book is titled after a quilt pattern. So as a personal challenge, I've been creating quilts based on the titles (ask me back in a few years and I'll

show you those). The colors were inspired by a quilt Diane was making for her then mother-in-law for an all pale gray guest room.

No name. This, I'm not sure if the block has a name but I've seen it in advertisements, shows, and magazines. I bought 3 inch swatches and marked them for 2 ½ inches and drafted the block to 5 inches. Thinking about a vine and flowers for the border. Also, cut your borders wider than you need them; you can always trim down. Don't ask how I know that.

Not shown. In our 2009 EQ show, I had a white and scrap log cabin, #102 pieced, which started as a red-white-blue quilt one Memorial Day, but didn't have enough reds and how to balance three colors in a four sided log cabin. Instead, I took the cut fabrics and cut logs from more colors; from each fabric, cut only one piece per size, one 2", 3", etc. and used them only once per block. I started quilting it, but removed the quilting and started anew this past winter.

About the same time, I saw a picture of a four patch set on point and found chambray at Dan Sacks Discount Fabrics (now closed and replaced by A&J Fabrics, same block). Hadn't thought about a border when I pieced the blocks together, but something was missing. "Gone With The Wind" was on TV and the part when Rhett and Scarlett are on their honeymoon was key. Rhett asks Scarlett what she's going to bring back for Mammy. She replies, nothing, because Mammy had called them a team of mules in harness. Rhett recalled that his Mammy had always wanted a red silk petticoat. And that's what this quilt needed, a red border, thanks to Pearl Dorn — and the Liz Claiborne sample room.

When in doubt, add red. Diana Vreeland, past editor of Vogue and Harper's Bazaar, loved red, was a grade A character and is worth reading about. She also wrote a column back in the 30s, when Martha Stewart was probably in diapers, called, "Why don't you..." and had to be Martha's inspiration for "It's a good thing." Good summer reading when it's too hot to quilt.

I take poor photographs but take quilt show photos anyway. This was from a Long Island show and is made from Pierre Deux fabrics. Years ago, PD had a sale in their tiny showroom on Madison Avenue. I went from work and just got in before they locked the door. Over a hundred women, cheek to cheek, and I don't mean face to face. There were scrap bags and samples. Heaven. Quilting is almost done on this. Also have PD fabric quilts of baskets and woven ribbons.

Blue and White Wedge. I love blue and white; have a mix of blue and white china and about five or six blue and white quilts. This is the only one in scrap. This was on the cover of a book and I've since seen it in multiple colors, also with the color and white reversed and in black and white with gold quilting. The puzzle is why I only have one of these. The border is going to be white with blue birds and eggs, the edge in curves because the remainder is so angular — Bluebird of Happiness Quilt.

Japanese woven ribbons. I had no intention of collecting Japanese prints, then won a donated packet when Susan Fader was on the program. She also keeps a basket of odd pieces under the table at shows; bargain time. And at our flea markets, one of the ladies has sold rolled up fabrics for \$2 which included Japanese prints. This was done entirely by hand.

Dear Jane Siggie Quilt. I belong to the Dear Jane list and have one basic DJ in progress in blue and white, several others based on block swaps; and yearly, we swap signature blocks, everyone making the same block, signing their name and state, sometimes adding an embellishment. My embellishment has been a rubber stamped rendition of the Brooklyn Bridge, which was based on a Georgia O'Keefe painting of the bridge. As a true Brooklynite, I added a "For Sale" sign next to the bridge. This swap was about 157 blocks. This is something we could do, too.

Arlene Kronenberg string pieced quilt. This last is a string pieced quilt. Diane gave a super program on string quilts back when we met in the basement. As beautiful as her work is, the program didn't

motivate me to start a string quilt until several years after. Arlene Kronenberg died of breast cancer. She had a huge amount of fabric which her family donated to Empire.

The ladies in charge of the share table wanted order, at the time we were called “piranhas at a feeding frenzy” and called us up by the first initial of our last name. Don’t even try that again. There were two large black garbage bags left they weren’t putting out because they looked like garbage—two bags of fabric cut for string quilts. We took control. All but half a block of the strings came from Arlene. Used them all up and then decided to alternate them with solid blocks of similar fabric. Each solid block is going to have a different quilt pattern, redwork or appliqué; it’s a learning quilt. Border isn’t certain.

Over the years I’ve received a lot of inspiration, encouragement, instruction, and help from the quilters at Empire. To repay, I’ve put together a short bibliography of books that inspire me, not all quilt books, and some of these patterns..

So the question isn’t why I have 160 quilts, it’s why don’t the rest of you.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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“Calico and Beyond, The Use of Patchwork Fabric in Quilts” by Roberta Horton, c 1986 C & T Publishing

“Quilts” by Judy Wentworth, c 1989, Crescent Books

“Quilting Masterclass” by Katherine Guerrier, c 2000, That Patchwork Place

“Kaleidoscopes Quilts” by Paula Nadelstern, c 1996, C&T Publishing

“Quilts, An American Heritage” by Terri Zegart, c 1994, Smithmark Publishing

“Quilters Newsletter Magazine”, 1984, 1988, articles on charm quilts

Most of the quilt books by Kaffe Fassett and Piece O’Cake

Other:

“Alexandra Stoddard’s Book of Color” by Alexandra Stoddard, c 1989, Doubleday

“Kaleidoscope Artistry” by Cozy Baker, c 2002, C&T Publishing

“Diana Vreeland” by Eleanor Dwight, c 2002, HarperCollins

Decorating books by Mary Emmerling

Discount Fabric Shops

A&J Fabrics, 8206 Third Avenue, Brooklyn (R train to 86 Street), cotton \$4/yard, cash only, 9:00 to 5:30
Monday thru Saturday

YLI and Sulky Machine Quilting Thread

Clover, Piecemaker and John James # 12 quilting needles