

On the Cover

Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist on May 24, 2010.

Quilts suggest a rich tradition that combines utility with artistic endeavor. They can offer warmth and comfort. They can be bright spots of intense color or tranquil oases of subtle hues. They can be traditional in style and pattern or innovative and original. Art museums are often considered the arbiters of beauty, so why would a world-renowned museum display something that has long been considered folk art? It can be argued that a quilt is an expression of creative vision equal to an oil painting or a watercolor. Peter Marzio, Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, for example, described the quilts of Gee's Bend, Alabama, as "works of art that just happened to be made for utilitarian purposes" (quoted in Arnett, 2002, p. 7). The Gee's Bend quilts were made by women in an isolated community in Alabama, and Ann Harwell, whose quilt *Balance the Scales of World Justice* can be seen on the cover of this issue, saw a similarity between them and her: "We essentially learned our skills and designs from our families and culture."

Harwell cannot remember a time when she was not sewing. She received her first sewing machine at age 8 from Santa, and despite stabbing herself on the hand cranked machine, her enthusiasm for sewing grew. Quilting is often passed down through the generations, and in Harwell's case, her mother, grandmothers, and aunts all sewed. They gave her the fabrics that were the materials of her art education. However, her formal education was in early childhood development, and for many years when she was teaching preschool, her favorite activities were those that used geometric manipulatives such as tanagrams, blocks, geoboards, and kaleidoscopes—all involving shapes basic to quilts.

Both Harwell's father and her maternal grandfather were Methodist ministers, and she remembers sitting in church, imagining the rose windows in fabric. She loved the repeating patterns. This concept of unity provides the essential core of her artistic approach. She does not know where this urge to unite comes from, but she feels it is important "to make things come together." She tried it with people but gave that up and instead works to bring together widely divergent colors and patterns. "I'm doing what I was supposed to do," she says of her quilting.

Harwell made her first quilt for her firstborn son. It depicted a clothesline with little clothes dancing against a blue sky. As her skills developed, she came to feel that she was writing with her sewing machine. She tries not to preach but does want to send a message in many of her designs. She often starts with the design, and as she works she adds a message that someone says to her or that she reads or hears on the radio. "My quilts are to communicate

ideas, express feelings, tell stories, and encourage the progress of anti-entropy coalescing order from disorder" (Harwell, n.d.).

The quilt on the cover is from Harwell's Kaleidoscope series. The concept behind *Balance the Scales of World Justice* seems apt for this December issue because it seems fitting to end the year with the hope that the New Year will see increased justice across the globe. Harwell incorporated fabrics from all over the world, using Native American patterns; English, French, and Dutch fabrics; batik from Indonesia; as well as African and Egyptian images. Look for the child with the red balloon, a globe, a bell, words from the Declaration of Independence, doves, the scales of justice, and so much more! Harwell set out to express her concept of justice and used the words she considered important for people—especially children—to live in peace. She feels that we need justice before we can have peace and knows that although she has no control over peace in the world, she can make a quilt about it.

The process of making a quilt of this size is intricate and precise. Harwell started with a full-sized drawing on graph paper, which gave her the straight lines she needed for laying out the pieces—in this case, thousands of them. She was compulsive about cutting the pieces so they would fit at the end, and she cut all of them before she began sewing. Since this quilt is octagonal, everything was in multiples of eight. She started at the center with eight tiny triangles whose points were fitted together exactly so that the quilt would lie flat. The symmetrical pattern provides balance, and she encased the edges that border the entire quilt to create a sense of unity. She pieced the top first and then began the hand quilting through the three layers of top, cotton batting, and back (which was also pieced). She estimates that this quilt took 800 hours over six months to complete. The finished quilt is now in France, adding beauty to the home of a French couple who saw it while visiting the United States.

The following quote about the quilters of Gee's Bend applies equally to Harwell: "The often incredible internal drive to keep producing quilts can only be explained as a deep aesthetic impulse, for above all, these quilts are statements of identity and individuality, as well as objects of utility and tradition" (J. Livingston, quoted in Arnett, 2002, p. 58).

REFERENCES

- Arnett, W. (2002). *The quilts of Gee's Bend*. Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books.
- Harwell, A. (n.d.) *Artist's statement*. Retrieved from <http://www.quiltart.com/annharwell.html>

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