

# Montage

Art, books, diverse creations



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## The Art of the Quilt

*Fabric art that rises from mattresses to museum walls*  
by JULIA HANNA

**I**N THE SUMMER of 1971, visitors to the Whitney Museum of American Art discovered something new, in a way: quilts, some a century old. Each was hung like a painting, all the better to appreciate the intricate interplay of geometry, pattern, and color in every piece. Until then, quilts had

more or less been lumped into the general category of American folk art, along with carousel horses and tavern signs. With the opening of *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, they were recognized as aesthetic achievements. The critical and popular response was so enthusiastic, the Whitney extend-

**Left: “Interweave,” a 1982 studio quilt by Michael James. Above: a “blazing star” quilt, circa 1880-90, probably from Nashville, Illinois. Both are from the Ardis and Robert James Collection.**

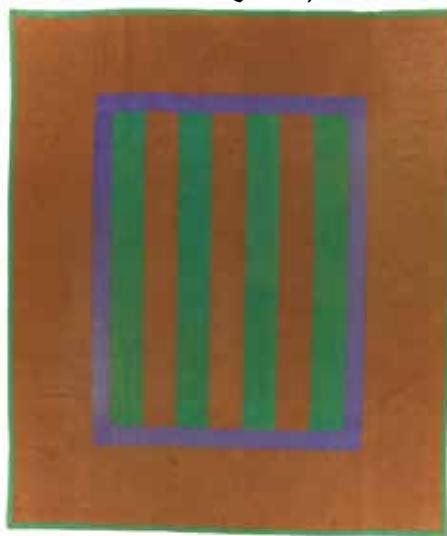
ed the show’s run by two months.

The exhibit was the brainchild of Jonathan Holstein ’58 and his partner, Gail van der Hoof. In the late 1960s, the couple lived in New York City; on weekends they visited friends with a country house in Pennsylvania, where they spent many happy hours combing through antique shops and open-air markets. “I knew of quilts, but never thought of them as anything other than bed covers,” Holstein says. “Dealers accumulated a lot from house sales, but no one wanted them. One day we were going through a pile and one jumped out at me. It was a revelation. I said, ‘My God, it looks like the paintings we’re seeing in New York.’” In retrospect, the comparison seems easy: fawn-colored, with four verti-





Clockwise from below: An Amish bar pattern quilt, circa 1890-1910, probably from Lancaster, Pennsylvania; a "Roman square" pattern, circa 1930-50, possibly from Vermont; "The Women: Mask Face Quilt #1," a 1986 African-American studio-art quilt by Faith Ringgold, New York City; a "spider web and star" pattern quilt, circa 1890-1910, probably from Pennsylvania. All are from the Jonathan Holstein Collection, except for the Faith Ringgold quilt, which is from the Ardis and Robert James Collection.



cal, centered, light green bars surrounded by a box border of violet, the Amish quilt recalled the abstract work of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko.

Holstein and van der Hoof, who married in 1973, were most drawn to pieced quilts—made of cut pieces of material sewn together into primarily geometric patterns—as opposed to appliqué quilts, in which cut pieces of cloth in various shapes,

sometimes geometric, sometimes figurative (baskets, schoolhouses, people) are sewn or stuck to a cloth backing. (Holstein, an art dealer in Cazenovia, New York, wrote the 1973 book *The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition*.) A curator friend suggested contacting the Whitney; the museum accepted the quilt-show premise on the basis of six slides. To select the final lineup of 62 quilts, the couple spread their collection on the lawn of Roy Lichtenstein's Long Island home, ran up to the widow's walk, and shouted down directions for editing out some quilts and reordering others.

Those quilts, and hundreds more they collected, now reside in the International Quilt Study Center & Museum ([www.quiltstudy.org](http://www.quiltstudy.org)) at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. The world's leading center for the display, preservation, curation, and study of quilts as an art form, it also has the largest publicly held collection of quilts (numbering more than 3,500) anywhere. They date from the early 1700s and represent more than 25 countries. The center's 37,000 square feet include research and storage space; a 12,400-square-foot addition is underway. Through an associated academic department, it offers a unique master's degree in textile history with a quilt-studies emphasis.

The center's founders, Nebraskans Ardis (Butler) James and Bob James, M.B.A. '48, Ph.D. '53, bought their first quilt in 1979 and soon amassed such a large collection that they had to add a gallery over their garage in Chappaqua, New York, to hold them all. Their approach, different from Holstein and van der Hoof's, was to create a wide-ranging collection representative of various time periods and styles,

from anonymous works of the 1800s to “studio” quilts made by contemporary artists such as Michael James and Faith Ringgold.

“Our kids were out of the house at that point,” says Bob James, an oil-company executive and real-estate developer. “Starting this, we fell in love again. It was a 50-50 endeavor all the way.” He grew up watching his mother quilt—and paint, and throw pots—on the family farm in Ord. His wife, a great lover of textiles, had always sewed and even quilted herself. According to her husband, she had a fine eye for colors and composition, while he considered factors such as the quality of a quilt’s construction and how it fit into the collection as a whole.

From near and far, aficionados showed up to view their collection. “One weekend, seven Japanese came by to look at our quilts,” Bob James recalls. “It was the most amazing thing.” By 1994, the couple had amassed 1,000 quilts, with no signs of slowing. “We knew we were going to die, and that we had to do something with these quilts,” James explains. They eventually settled on the Lincoln venue in 1997; with the Jameses’ support and university fundraising, the center opened in 2008. Their son, Ralph, M.B.A. ’82, executive director for external relations at Harvard Business School, helped his parents oversee the construction and now sits with his father on the advisory board.

Once hung in a museum, a quilt becomes something more than a bed cover. Yet the question of whether an object not consciously created as “art” should bear that label is not a meaningful discussion for either Holstein or James, who of course have known each other for years. Both men are widowers, but their wives’ spirits and sensibilities live on in Lincoln.

Collecting quilts had its advantages, as compared with other types of art collection. Bob James notes that their relative affordability made the task of accumulating a significant collection easier on the pocketbook. The most expensive piece he ever bought—a Civil War-era quilt depicting a white man and his freed black slave—cost \$200,000, a pittance when compared to sought-after paintings or sculptures. “It’s another kind of art, that’s all,” says James. “If you’re a man on the street, it doesn’t frighten you. Any quilt, you can look at, and say, ‘That’s pretty nice.’”

# Raw Wood Sings

*Bob Childs makes world-class violins.*

by LAURA LEVIS

**A**LONE IN HIS STUDIO, while a radio plays baroque music, master violinmaker Bob Childs, Dv ’92, Ed.M. ’93, holds a flat piece of spruce in his hands and taps it with his finger. He listens. Tap! Tap! Tap! He listens again. It will take him some 200 hours to create a violin worthy of some of the greatest musicians in the world. But the wood must sound right to him—must sing to him—from the very start.

“You’re listening for that bell-like sound, that sustained sound,” Childs says. “A really good violin will sound good right from the beginning.”

After spending so much time with this piece of wood, giving birth to what will be virtually a living instrument—one that will long outlive any of its players—Childs hears his own inner voice saying, “Keep it.” But he does not. His masterpiece will go to someone in the Boston Symphony Orchestra, or New York Philharmonic, or perhaps a violinist in Germany or Scotland who’s waited on his list for at least a year to get it.

There are at least two consolations, he says. Crafting violins is his calling, and with every one he makes, he adds to his legacy. And he is not say-

ing goodbye to this violin forever.

Childs has made 140 violins in 38 years. Those who’ve bought his instruments become eligible for membership in a very elite organization: *Childsplay*, an orchestra whose members all play, yes, a Childs violin. They tour the nation, have a forthcoming PBS special, and play both large and small venues several times a year. At any time, Childs can hear the group’s 20 musicians playing fiddle music on those pieces of wood he tapped and tapped and tapped for hours on end.

“There’s a commonality to my instruments—people can recognize that I made them,” he says. “Just like you can recognize that Stradivarius made an instrument. Really, what you’re after is just to have it be you, and then to have all those voices united together. We think of it as a family choir...a violin choir that’s singing together.”

In his tiny third-floor workshop in Cambridge, Childs sits at a small desk surrounded by plaster violin molds and tools of varying shapes and sizes, with the smell of freshly cut maple and spruce wafting through the air. Holding the beginnings of a violin that he will eventually sell for about \$18,000 up to a window flooded with light, he carefully carves the wood, constantly check-



**A Childs violin typically takes more than a year to obtain and sells for about \$18,000.**