Vanessa Lynn Prize

The Vanessa Lynn competition was established in 1994 at the initiative of benefactors who wished to honor Lynn and to encourage critical writing on the crafts, which was her deep interest. Before her untimely death in 1992, Lynn had dedicated herself to writing, contributing to this magazine, Metalsmith, Glass, Ornament, Art Anewa, and American Ceramics, of which she was associate editor.

The intent of the competition, to be held biannually, is to encourage critical dialogue and to support original, analytical, and clear writing on contemporary American crafts. Submissions were judged on the degree to which they achieved these objectives. The jurors for the competition were Garth Clark, author and owner of the Garth Clark Gallery, New York and Los Angeles; Allan Chasanoff, collector; Helen W. Drutt English, owner of the Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia; David Revere McFadden, assistant director for collections and research, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum; and Lois Moran, editor and publisher, AMERICAN CRAFT.

The jurors awarded two prizes, each consisting of $1,500 and publication in this magazine—on Jenny Clavey of Madison, Wisconsin, for the article “Laura Foster Nicholson: Weaving, Meditations and Maps,” which appeared in the February/March 1995 issue, and to Lois Martin of Brooklyn, New York, whose article “The Making of Quilts: The Maker of Quilts” appears on page 32.

Jurors’ Statement

In choosing the winners of the first Vanessa Lynn Prize, we tried to remain cognizant of the goal of this competition: to recognize exceptional critical writing about contemporary crafts. The number of entries—47—was encouraging. However, strong critical analysis was missing from too many of the submissions, as was a confident understanding of the craft aesthetic and its history.

We found the approach to writing about an artist’s work to be, with few exceptions, promotional in nature, with too little concentration on theory, ideas, and history. While the writers’ enthusiasm for the subjects being appealed, too often it resulted in a too-partisan voice, one lacking the requisite distance and objectivity that give good critical writing its authority.

After careful review, the jury concluded that no single submission deserved to receive the full $3,000 prize. This decision was based on the conviction that the Vanessa Lynn Prize must be given for achievement that is well above the average and not simply for the best among the entries received. However, we were able to select two writers to share the prize. Their writing was solid and well-researched, and demonstrated a strong sense of the fundamentals of their artist subject and particular craft. Both articles are valuable efforts deserving of their awards.

We understood that this decision was potentially controversial, but we felt strongly that the award to a single writer must be withheld until this ongoing competition elicits writing that indisputably deserves the full honor. The jury believes that the current problems in writing about the crafts cannot be addressed by lowering standards. Our decision was also based on personal association with Vanessa Lynn, who set herself exacting criteria in her own writing. This competition carries her name and, in so doing, extends her legacy. We know it will create a forum in which the standards for critical writing in our field will be elevated.
The Making of Quilts; The Maker of Quilts

BY LOIS MARTIN

Although long on display in major museums as part of the decorative arts collections, American patchwork quilts were first presented as works of art in their own right in a seminal exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971, organized by Jonathan Holstein. A collector, Holstein brought together a group of traditional bed quilts which he had selected for their design strengths and visual parallels to the work of contemporary abstract artists—especially the work of the Minimalist, Op and Color Field painters.

This exhibit, and its expanded traveling versions, initiated a revival of interest in quilting in the United States, sparking other shows and attracting critical attention. In the art world, reverberations from its impact helped shape the work of feminist artists like Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago, and that of the "pattern painters and decorative artists." Holstein’s show and his book The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition also gave impetus to an "art quilt" movement around the world. However, these efforts did not legitimate quiltmaking as art or acknowledge quilters as artists. "Implicit in the act of creating a painting is the intellectual process which ties the work of an artist to his aesthetic ancestors and his peers, and places it in the history of objects specifically made to be art," Holstein wrote. "This is precisely the quality which was absent in the making of pieced quilts. The women who made pieced quilts were not 'artists,' that is, they did not intend to make art, had no sense of the place of their work in a continuous stream of art history, did not, in short, intellectualize the production of handcraft any more than did the makers of objects in the vernacular tradition the world over."

For Holstein, the quilts' apparent visual strength (as beautiful objects) derived from their structural basis in geometry. Inherent visual strength (as works of Art) was missing because of their lack of an intellectual context.

Not artists, indeed! As the art historian Patricia Mainardi responded with period fury: "Because our female ancestors’ pieced quilts bear a superficial resemblance to the work of contemporary formalist artists such as Stella, Noland and Newman, . . . modern male curators and critics are now capable of 'seeing' the art in them. . . . What Holstein has done here. . . . [is] turned the innovators into the followers and used quilts to legitimize contemporary formalist painting, while managing to dismiss those women as artists at the same time. It is an historic impossibility for art to 'mirror' (note the passivity of the word) forward into time—when male artists are ahead of their time, they are called the 'avant-garde.'"

Despite the strength and vitality of a contemporary art quilt movement, old prejudices hold, and art quilts are seldom exhibited as an authentic contemporary artistic form. It is as if only Art can be considered the product of Homo sapiens while Craft (including art quilts) is just the product of a capable but less intelligent ancestor, Homo habilis. But as the art historian George Kubler wrote in The Shape of Time: "Each generation of course continues to reevaluate those portions of the past which bear on present concerns, but the process does not uncover towering new figures in familiar categories so much as it reveals unfamiliar types of artistic effort, each with its own biographical roots. The discovery of hitherto unknown painters of the same stature of Rembrandt or Goya is far less likely than our suddenly becoming aware of the
In part, quilts are overlooked because they belong to the fiber arts, which are routinely left out of discussions in the art world. But both the sensual richness and the symbolic, metaphorical aspects of fabrics and fibers are compelling. Although Western art history has traditionally relegated all classes of textiles to the minor arts, this second-class status is not universal. Other cultures and civilizations have revered the textile arts and their special characteristics, placing them at the top of all artistic categories. Textiles were central, for example, to both pre-Columbian Andean and medieval Islamic societies, where they figured prominently, as treasured commodities, in trade, politics, and religion, and also served, in the processes of their manufacture and design, as the bases for theoretical systems conceptualizing time, space, and society. Their qualities became aesthetic criteria and were applied to other media, even to architecture. Fibers and fabrics are sometimes thought to absorb spiritual essence. In Indian society, writes one scholar, "cloth as a transnational medium was conceptualized as a unique convector of spirit and substance, holy, strengthening, or polluting. . . . Cloth was porous, dense and intertwining, and thus could absorb and retain spirit/substance for many years. As an artifact, cloth was much less 'hard' and neutral than wood or metals. . . . Of course, these transformative qualities of cloth were not unique to Indian society. In Islamic societies, the turbans of great teachers could transmit spirit; in medieval Christendom, cloth relics such as the Shroud of Turin were particularly venerated, while even in today's agnostic Western societies, a dead man's clothes are often considered auspicious. A quilt's structure triples the absorptive properties of fabric, and patchwork quilts are always mythologized as producing incorporating scraps of previously used clothing. Although this lends quilts a romantic, nostalgic aspect, as well as, perhaps, a subtly antifeminist bias, it imparts an undeniable psychic weight to quilts in general.

Another characteristic, "spirit catching," takes place in the surface design of many patchwork quilts, whose patterns dazzle and fool the eye, by turns capturing and throwing off the gaze. Often this is carried out through repeating patterns, repetitions that imply notions of infinity. These serve as a target of visual concentration which leads to a meditative state—like a mandala, acting as a means of transcendence to the spiritual plane. Repetition has always been intrinsic to textiles, in the gestures of the maker as well as in the structural appearance and often the decoration of the finished piece. Like other textiles, quilts have an interesting relationship to the idea of "text." Geometric patterns in traditional folk textiles are often associated with words. Some patterns are said to confer a protective status. The nature of this protection is sometimes explained as writing or as a maze or puzzle which tantalizes and then captures an evil eye or bad spirit. The auspicious designs in Ukrainian
embroidery are called writing, as are the woven and embroidered motifs which decorate Guatemalan textiles. The Guatemalans use both abstract designs and Spanish words; warriors’ shirts from Chichicastenango were decorated with verses from the Koran to endow them with protective powers.

American “charm” quilts traditionally are supposed to be made with 999 separate pieces of different fabric. The word “charm,” like “endearing” and “incantation,” is derived from words that have to do with magic songs or spells. Historically, African-American quiltmakers in the South produced dynamic quilts with “hard to read, asymmetrical designs and multiple patterns,” which Maude Southwell Wahlman has compared to the newspapered walls in their homes. These were thought to be protective because “evil spirits would have to stop and read the words of each chopped up column before they could do any harm.”

Another interesting correspondence between text and textile on quilts is the relationship between quilt patterns and their names. Often the abstract, repeating geometric designs on traditional quilts are identified by poetic, naturalistic names that suggest, rather than mean: Drunkard’s Path, Baby Blocks, Flying Geese, or even the familiar Log Cabin. The words neither adhere closely to the image nor delimit it. How are the shapes in the Log Cabin pattern like a log cabin? In the appearance of the stacked logs or the way they are stacked together? The exact relationship between word and image is not literal; it constitutes a verbal/visual pun.

Quilters embrace textiles, but they turn them into a cloth sandwich: top, filler/batting and bottom. This three-layer structure is an ancient fabric construction. The quilting stitches which hold the quilt together and keep the filling from bunching or sculpt the surface of a quilt into a low relief on which light plays. Although these tiny, regular marks often disappear in photographs, they give the quilt an appealing tactility and softness. The tiny pulsing of the quilting thread has its own quiet insistence, in and out, in and out, in and out, in and out, marking time like breathing. Sometimes the quilting lines echo the design of a quilt top; at other times they counterpoint it; at still other times they act as hidden, separate messages.

The quilting stage of construction is sometimes completed at a “bee.” Often viewed as a collective, collaborative part of the process, this group activity does not necessarily dictate the final appearance of traditional quilts. Historically, it was a chance for exhibition of a piece before peers. As “parallel work,” the quilting bee duplicates the situation of Guatemalan weavers who hang their backstrap looms from the same tree, so that they can talk while weaving. The anthropologists Barbara and Dennis Tedlock make comparisons between the running conversation and the lines of thread, and describe the scene as one of “interextuality”—an exchange and interpenetration of spoken words and woven images.

Another reverberating psychological aspect of the art quilt is that it never serves its symbolic association to the bed quilts. What would Freud say? Viewed as an act of “writing on the bed”—symbolic locus of birth, sex and death—quilting has a subversive quality that renders any form of “writing on the wall” paler, less loaded. The quilt is also the cloak of the dreamer; we are wrapped in bedclothes when the unconscious begins to speak. Robert Rauschenberg was hailed as a conquering iconoclast for his use of a quilt-wrapped bed in a work of art. “I once heard Jasper Johns say that Rauschenberg was the man who in this century had invented the most since Picasso,” commented the critic Leo Steinberg. “Perhaps Rauschenberg’s profoundest symbolic gesture came in 1955 when he seized his own bed, smeared paint on its pillow and quilt coverlet, and upturned it against the wall. There in the vertical posture of art, it continues to work in the imagination as the eternal companion of our other resource, our horizontality, the flat bedding in which we do our begetting, conceiving and dreaming. The horizontality of the bed relates to ‘making’ as the vertical of the Renaissance picture plane related to seeing.”

It seems to me that Rauschenberg’s revolutionary act is compromised by its transformation of the bed materials. In the ancient game of Scissors, Paper, Stone, scissors cut paper and stone smash—es scissors, but paper vòng stone. It is an expression of power. Fabric wraps, too. In the West, power is usually expressed in terms of “hard.” Hard is considered good and strong, soft often bad and weak. But hard is brittle and soft is flexible. Rauschenberg’s approach to the bed and the quilt is so hard. Hard head, hard bed, hard wall. Quilts retain the fluid, flexible power of fabric—the power to wrap stone.

In a fascinating essay about still life painting in his book Looking at the Overlooked, Norman Bryson suggests that part of the reason that this genre has always been looked down upon is that it depicts the spaces and objects of everyday detritus—the kitchen
and the pantry—which are the traditional domain of women. Quilts fall into the category of bed linens, similarly cared for and controlled by women. Not only is the bed symbolically the territory of the birthing mother, lovers and the dead, as the "Land of Counterpense" (we are reminded by Robert Louis Stevenson’s poem), it belongs to the sick, the bedridden and the dying. Women in the West have traditionally nursed the sick and washed their bedclothing. And when a man performed nursing functions, like the washerman in Indian society, he had ambiguous status. According to C. A. Barly, such a man was looked down upon because of his contact with filth and pollution; on the other hand, his intimate knowledge gave him a certain power—"[the washerman] was said to know 'the defects of the village'; more precisely and dangerously, he knew its defecations." The quilt’s minor status as a genre may have something to do with its potential for being "dirty laundry."

All of these associations make quilting a provocative medium which many talented contemporary artists are exploring and extending. Among the most interesting is Robin Schwab. Her quilts are dense, delicate patchworks that are modern in their range of influences and concerns while remaining true to traditional roots. Schwab’s choice of the quilt medium was not an intellectual decision so much as a visceral response in childhood to fabrics and thread. Her interest was nurtured by a high school art class taught by an instructor who had been inspired by the rich textile traditions of West Africa. Schwab learned to weave, dye and sew, enjoying the pure pleasure of making things by hand. As an undergraduate at the State University of New York, Binghamton, she majored in fine arts. Later, her first job was as a production weaver for Dan River, the fabric manufacturer, where she first met quiltmakers and found her medium.

Schwab’s early quilts are all of a type known as "contained crazy," in which irregularly shaped pieces of cloth are sewn together into regular units or blocks, which are then joined together in a grid to form the quilt top. "Crazy" refers to the crazed or fragmented appearance of individual pieced blocks and "contained" to their modular construction. Traditional crazy quilts are an American style, most popular in the Victorian period, when they were often made of luxury fabrics like silk and velvet, and lavishly embroidered. The grid of blocks in a contained crazy quilt repeats the grid of the cloth in enlarged form, while the crazing of the blocks reveals the planar surface of the quilt, just as cracked glass announces the presence of a window. Working with these forms leads to meditations about surface, plane and grid, the same ideas that have preoccupied so many 20th-century painters. As Schwab worked in the crazy-quilt form, language intruded, and fragmented shapes within the squares began to remind her of letters and symbols. Partly in tribute to her father, who had inspired her love of language, she composed _L[X-X]_, 1986, whose squares contain fragments of English, Greek, Hebrew and Cyrillic letters, as well as astrological, electronic and mathematical symbols. Its illegibility is confounded by its format—that of an open book. One page is in black and white; the other glows with red, magenta and black. The format and color usage are reminiscent of some of Andy Warhol’s serial silk screens. As with Warhol’s prints, both sign and color are arbitrary. I do not understand how her composition balances, but it is lovely.

Like her interest in fabric, Schwab’s interest in writing and language is more visceral than intellectual, paralleling that of countless artists in this century who have been absorbed by language. Paul Klee played with a "language of signs." Collage and assemblage appropriated text as image, and image as text—from early Cubist collage, to the work of Lenore Tawney, through to the installations of Reeva Potoff. Mark Tobey and Charles Demuth concentrated on the beauty of the shapes of ciphers. Lawrence Weiner and Jenny Holzer stripped materials down to "words on the wall."

What has preoccupied artists has also preoccupied intellectuals. ["Language, with its problems, mysteries, and implications, has become both paradigm and obsession for 20th-century intellectual life.""] As paradigm and obsession, language has been considered from a dizzying number of approaches, hermeneutics, phenomenology, semiotics, reception theory, structuralism and deconstruction being perhaps the best known. All of these attempts to integrate the insights of Marx, Freud and especially the linguist Ferdinand Saussure (and their followers) into humanistic thinking.

Although Schwab’s title _L[X-X]_ comes from a Laurie Anderson performance, it perfectly expresses several of Saussure’s central pronouncements: language is a system of signs; the sign is arbitrary; the sign is dual, both because it is made up of signified and signifier and because it has no inherent meaning in itself; its meaning resides only in its difference from other signs. All of these ideas help explain the difficulty of conceiving of language as man’s "invention," because a signified cannot exist without its signifier, a sign
cannot exist without its "other" (what it is not); like the chicken and the egg, man and language cannot be pried apart.

Next came Schwab's *Rosetta Stone*, 1987, composed, like Let X→X, of fractured squares with symbols, with an arbitrary swatch of color across a graphic image in neutral tones. The work suggests the way mechanically reproduced images—photographs, movies, television, photocopies, newspapers—have been "colorized" in this century. Because its inscription provided a key to the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Rosetta stone has become history's most famous example of decoding. In a positivist, mythic way, its image on Schwab's quilt implies that understanding is possible; that meaning may be gleaned, even after the passage of centuries. Yet the precarious placement of the Rosetta stone—falling off one side of the quilt—counterbalances the positivist reading. With similar irony, Schwab hides alchemy signs in the quilting stitches of the borders, symbols of what was once, as she says, "the cutting edge of technology."

The quilt *Incunabula*, 1987, began as a dreamed vision of a surface first crazed and then, when the cracks opened as fissures, revealing a layer underneath of a network of signs. As a vision of the origin of writing, it fits Roland Barthes's observation that "text" is more like a "network" than an "organism." As a layered construction, it anticipates *PCB Bop*, 1988. This work takes its inspiration from two types of markings not made by man—first from a silvery black-and-white photograph by Edward Weston of eroded sandstone at Point Lobos, and the second from the designs on printed circuit boards. Both types of markings reminded Schwab of scripts—"one of those scripts with a line running through it, like Sanskrit"—and she began an appliquéd which mimicked these shapes quite closely, in neutral tones and with a series of graduated enlargements on one side that refer to Weston's print. The colors allude to the film primaries: magenta, yellow and cyan.

Although the format of *PCB Bop* (a cone of strong primary color cutting into the rectangular composition) seems to echo familiar diagrams from art theory texts, such as those illustrating the picture plane intersected by a cone of vision, perspective or projection, the shapes were chosen simply for formal, not theoretical, reasons. The triangle juts into the ground (continued on page 64)
Quilts (continued from page 37) as if it would slice it apart—it was a way, says Schwab, to visually disrupt and distort the stability of the rectangle, without actually violating its shape or cutting into the frame. The triangle of red seems precarious, ready to fall. The entire composition, a rectangular block fragmented by the jagged shard of red, looks like a borrowing of one piece crazy block. The same type of part-to-whole relationship exists in traditional quilting, where a single motif may be enlarged to form the entire design of a quilt or repeated to form an overall pattern.

PCB Bop is an appliqué quilt. Both appliqué and piecing are "patchwork," but where piecing joins patches side by side, appliqué layers them one on top of another. Appliqué is generally more labor-intensive, as the edges must be turned under and stitched by hand. Despite its nontraditional look, the method of construction in PCB Bop is identical to that of traditional appliqué quilts such as the Baltimore "album" quilts. Indeed, the fineness of the linear designs in PCB Bop makes it a technical tour de force. It received the Award of Excellence at the Dairy Barn Quilt National exhibition in 1988.

In two major works, Babel, 1990, and Gift of Tongues, 1993, Schwab again mediates on the origin of language, inspired in part by a quote from Bruce Chatwin's The Songlines.10 In this book, both an exploration into the invisible "dreaming tracks" which crisscross aboriginal Australia and a meditation on the nature of language, Chatwin retells the Tower of Babel story, calling it "a short history of the skyscraper." Schwab includes a lyrical section from this passage in both quilts—"Language—the gift of tongues ... has a routine and a wearied vitality compared to which the foundations of the pyramids are dust."—quoting it both in its original, printed words, and in repeated printed photographic images of a dynamited skyscraper. Another echo of Chatwin's words resides in the cascade of symbols which falls through the center of both compositions. These recall the forms of children's alphabet blocks and the traditional quilt pattern Tumbling Blocks. The central image of the crumbling modern tower in Babel is shown up on either side by a passage in quilt blocks of traditional Log Cabin squares. All in all, both quilts express visually, and poetically, what intellectuals have been calling the "deconstruction" of language.

Other quilts incorporate the same type of verbal and visual quotations. One series has to do with images from filmmaking and technology, as well as the projectionist's craft—these are somewhat autobiographical, as Schwab is a projectionist at the Metropolita

8. Ford in the Bushes, where barrows between handicraft and art and man and woman were supposed to break down, women were systematically relegated to the textile department. See Sigrid Watters Widdis, Women's Work: Textiles from the Ancestors (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1990).
18. According to my own mother, my great-grandmother, who was an expert traditional quiltmaker, always slept the night after a finish outing one of the thread's her friends had added because they did not even her highest standards.
22. Hal Foster, "A Mode of the Work," in the work of art as a maneuvers and the viewer as an active reader of messages rather than a passive consumer of the artistic aesthetic or consumer of the spectator's"—words which also apply to Robin Schwab's work... "Subversive Signs," Art in Theory, op. cit., 1986.