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The Art of the Quilt

Today's creations are not your grandmother's patchwork throw

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STAFF WRITER

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Bob Adams is a former college football player and a married father of two who made his living as a groundskeeper and property manager of a Colorado ski resort.

Adams also makes quilts. Not the kind you'd wrap around while wearing slippers and drinking tea, but art quilts – fabric, thread, dyes, paints and even metal woven together to create intricate wall hangings that bear only the faintest resemblance to a blanket.

Quilting has come a long way from its origins as a women's-only craft. While many of its estimated 27 million participants still get together to sew patchwork throws, artists drawn to the possibilities of working with fibers and textiles are transforming quilting into high art.

As quilts have moved beyond their place on the rocking chairs of America and into art galleries and museums, a small but growing number of men are putting down their paintbrushes and picking up a needle and thread.

"I don't mind being called a quilter, as long as a person is open-minded enough to understand that an artist can work with fiber, put something together as you would a quilt, and end up with a piece of artwork, rather than something that's just functional," said Adams, 65, from his home in Lafayette, Ind.

Quilting is a \$3.3 billion industry, according to a 2006 survey by *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*, the vast majority of which is driven not by high-end quilt artists but women who get together to talk, share ideas and sew, often for a cause.

San Diego is home to more than a dozen quilt guilds, which provide blankets for hospitalized premies, wounded veterans, women in domestic violence shelters and residents of nursing homes.



ANGELA J. CESERE / Union-Tribune
Ann Olsen (left) and Kristine Herman prepare to hang Bob Adams' "Working Sketch 9."

A homemade quilt given to the parents of a sick child, or to throw over the legs of someone in a wheelchair, sends a message that people care, said Nancy Amidon, owner of Amidon Quiltworks in Poway, who has spent up to three years hand-stitching her best quilts.

"Traditional quilting gives people a feeling of hearth and home," Amidon said. "When you see quilts stacked on a chair or on a bed, you know you're at home. You can put your feet up on the couch and take a nap. I don't get that feeling from art quilts. That's more something you look at in a museum."

The art quilt movement took off in the 1970s, after an exhibition of antique quilts at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York received rave reviews, said Meg Cox, author of "The Quilter's Catalog: A Comprehensive Resource Guide."

"Top art critics came to see it and they just went nuts," Cox said. "They said it was as rigorous and as beautiful in artistry and composition as the top abstract painters."

At the same time, a new generation of art school students was blurring the line between art and craft, working in materials such as glass, ceramics and textiles.

In 1985, a group of San Diego artists got together to form an art quilters organization. They held exhibits every two years in various locations, including Balboa Park and the Oceanside Museum of Art.

Last year, they raised \$80,000 to secure a permanent home – the Visions Art Quilt Gallery – in the NTC Promenade at Liberty Station, a new, 28-acre arts and cultural center in the former Point Loma military facility.

Beginning this weekend and running through July 27, Adams' work and that of two other male quilt artists will be on display as part of the gallery's "Material Guys" exhibit. Organizers hope it will teach the public that quilting is more than bedspreads.

The two other artists included in the exhibit include Tim Harding of Stillwater, Minn., whose water-themed works are made with thousands of layered strips of dupioni silk to create a look of three-dimensional, undulating waves and ripples, and John Garrett, an Albuquerque, N.M., artist who creates vibrant, geometric designs of painted sheet metal, handmade paper, woven metal, buttons and CD cases.

Harding and Garrett's work, which sells for \$5,000 to \$12,500, is also part of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's collection in Washington, D.C.

"Fabric has a richness of color and a tactile quality that people respond to," said Ann Olsen, Visions Art Quilt Gallery president. "When people come into the gallery, they want to touch the art. We have to ask people not to a lot."

As quilting has evolved beyond appliquéd flowers and farmhouses, art quilters have struggled with describing their work. They've considered fiber art, fabric art or textile art, but settled on art quilt. "Quilting is our heritage, so we want to acknowledge that," Olsen said.

Adams, who began his career as an art teacher before getting into property

management, got interested in art quilt about 15 years ago. His wife of 43 years, Natalie, dabbled in traditional blanket-making. One day, she came home with a selection of fabrics from the store. He thought her color choices were too similar in value, or intensity, to pop.

"I told her, 'Next time, you need to buy lights and mediums and darks,' " he said. "And the next time she came back from the store, the fabrics had the same value again. She said, 'They are not the same value. This one was \$2.99. This one was \$4.99.' "

He decided to give quilting a try. "The biggest challenge for me at first was getting the sewing machine under control," he said.

He learned free motion quilting, a technique that enables quilters to draw with a sewing machine needle much as they would pencil. He experimented with using chemicals to remove color from fabrics, called discharging, as well as printing and painting on fabric, then adding lines of thread for texture.


His 14 pieces being shown in Point Loma use black, gray and earth toned fabric imprinted with manhole covers to make a statement about the nation's declining infrastructure.

"The minute you mention quilting, people's eyes glaze over and they're thinking, 'Well, it's something you put on a bed,' " Adams said. "This is definitely not something you'd put on a bed."

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