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A Design Methodology for All: Building a Quilt from the Center Out

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Abstract

There are many ways to create a quilt, but designers and quilters seldom write elucidating statements about their work other than the 'stories' that go into the promotional press. Here the author cites several approaches and describes how her first two quilts were made. The first was prescribed with a very definite brief - to honor Barack Obama after his first election. It was exhibited in a massive show of quilts in Baltimore and other venues across the US. The second just grew in an 'evolutionary' way starting with a small center scrap of embroidery and building organically with other scraps acquired from Nairobi's used clothing markets. At each step in the process, new ideas and associations were made leading to a work that may appear planned but was not. A ten-year-old could have done it. It was this second quilt that won an award from the East African Women's League for best quilt of a year in 2014. The processes of designing each quilt are described in detail including the fabrics, colors, forms, history, ideology and meaning



Wall-Hanging, commissioned by the Obama Presidential Campaign (author)

Introduction

Quilting, the process of layering pieces of cloth and stitching through all of them to create a thicker, more sturdy fabric, goes back thousands of years. Scholarly attention to quilting has been grossly inadequate so we cannot be certain when or where it originated. The best evidence we have we is that it began somewhere in Central or Eastern Asia and that it appears in Egypt at least 5000 years BP (Before Present). (Google 'quilting' accessed Sept 4 2023 <https://quiltinginfo.com/origin-of-quilting/>) Its design prerequisites are cloth, needles and sewing thread. This tells us that the technologies of weaving or felting, needle manufacture and spinning thin threads had to be already in place.

There are many types of quilting determined by materials, colors and esthetics, all topics of many other articles. (Google quilt, quilting). Though they all probably originated to add body and warmth to cloth, and, though most quilts are bed cover size, there is

also what I call 'architectural quilting' as for tent dwellers and the very poor. Over many centuries, the pastoralist communities of Asia have overcome the wind permeability of woven cloth by stitching layers together to retard its passage through their portable tent architecture features quilts that can be easily rolled up and carried to new locations by pack animals. Black slaves in the United States lived in very poor-quality plank-built cabins and lined their walls with quilts made from discarded household fabrics and clothing. There is also 'art quilting' to produce decorative layered textiles of various sizes one of which, entitled *Waheri*, is illustrated in this article.

The First Quilt

In 2008, in the wake of the American presidential election, one of Barack Obama's campaign workers asked me to get a quilt made by Granny Sarah Obama to include in a show that was to be mounted in a Textile Museum in Washington DC for the presidential inauguration. Explaining that quilting is not a part of East African tradition and that Granny Sarah was unlikely to have ever made a quilt or even to know what a quilt is, I offered to try to put an art quilt together and send it to the US with American students who were returning at the end of their semester abroad. Within 48 hours, a group of four women with ties to Luo culture and Luoland put together a small (24" X 36") appliquéd quilt top as a wall hanging that could be quilted in the US by someone who knew how to do it. The author supervised the design and execution, most of which was done by herself with Grace Atieno, Leah Onyango gave advice on Luo language and customs. Jennifer Adero contributed crocheted angels in spite of having died 15 years earlier. We used a black rayon background on which we appliquéd the central

medallion from an Obama *khanga* (East African women's wrapper). We cut up other *khangas* for the flower garland around the President elect's head and cut up a *shuka* for the word *Waheri*, meaning 'we love you' in Dholuo. We then appliquéd an arch of angels around Obama's portrait and crocheted a red ruffle to frame it. 'Waheri' was exhibited, along with dozens of other commemorative quilts in honor of President Obama in January 2009.

The Second Quilt

Several years went by before author decided to try making another quilt. The increasing presence of very cheap second-hand cloth and garments all over Kenya made experimentation eminently possible while obviating the need for a carefully planned design.

Among the many methods of putting a quilt together are the random 'crazy' quilt made from odd shaped random scraps and the 'crumb' quilt made from very small cloth scraps like bread crumbs. Patchwork quilts either in pattern or randomly put together include larger, more regular pieces of fabric. Among these are the checkerboard, and Nine Square assemblages. Nine Square means that the overall format is divided into nine rectilinear shapes that are regular but not necessarily square. Many Nine Squares feature a large central rectangle surrounded by a deep border formed by the intersections of the extended lines of the rectangle. Then there are strip quilts, constructed of strips of cloth. Some of these such as Library quilts include strips that are constructed from many small narrow strips that resemble books on a library shelf. Whole Cloth Quilts are, as their name tells us, whole pieces of cloth with a batting and backing that usually utilize the wove or printed decorations of the cloth or are dominated by elaborate quilt stitching

patterns. My Second Quilt is an example of 'Rhizomal Design' meaning that it is determined by growth something like the roots of a plant, in no particular direction other than the plant's search for water and food. This method of constructing a quilt is an example of 'design for all' in that it is not determined by any rules or pattern but rather, by the maker's thought from moment to moment.



Rhizomal Quilt (author)

There are several points in the design process that yielded the second quilt shown here. Designers and other scholars can take note of them and consider the organic way that the quilt evolved. First, there was no need to make a careful, definite design for this quilt because Nairobi is virtually 'swimming' in scraps of cloth generated by local tailors but especially through the international trade in second hand clothing that, for the last 25 years or so, has revolutionized Kenyans' access to very cheap cloth including clothing and household textiles. Kenyan quilters can but do not have to plan

carefully and estimate the meterage/yardage and cost of quantities of cloth for their quilts because of the huge variety that is available within almost anybody's budget. All the materials in this quilt including the batting and backing were bought in second hand clothing markets in Nairobi. Most, if not all, the cloths come from Europe or American garbage, the discards of a generation that did not value grandma's things or had no further use for the damaged or old items that these fragments were once part of. Some may be mill ends, discards from dry goods shops or scraps from homes and factories. They represent a tiny fraction of a massive global trade in discarded fabrics that are now considered dangerous to the environment. (Google Africa News accessed Sept 4 2023) Back in the 1960s they came to Kenya through charities, both church-based and humanitarian. They came from countries with surpluses to the less developed countries where people desperately needed clothing and household textiles, especially bed sheets, towels and curtains. They come in bales, labelled by type, to wholesalers who then distribute them to Africa's open markets where retailers and ordinary consumers can come to pick and choose what they want. This distribution has been the subject of many papers, articles and documentary videos. (Google Africa News accessed Sept 4 2023) The fabrics, called *mitumba* in Swahili, provide body covering, personal and household cloths to people who cannot otherwise afford these items while at the same time offering variety that local producers cannot produce at affordable prices.

Though it conforms to the requirement for three layers, top, batting and backing, my second quilt it is structurally unpatterned. This means that the quilt top is composed irregularly, not in any of

the standard formats for blocked quilts, like the Nine Square, nor is it a whole cloth quilt nor a series of strips sewn together. Rather than a grid structure it emanates from a center, the small white square of Lagartera embroidery, and spreads out with pieces put together in a random formation. This is because I took one small step at a time with attention to the features of the two or three pieces being joined together and their individual and group relationship to other features of the quilt. These include contrast and harmony with contiguous pieces, distance from similar pieces, distribution of size, shape, color, pattern and susceptibility to nonstructural decoration or embellishment. All the structural components are rectilinear in various proportions, and are composed irregularly.

My original intention was to make a quilt from scraps of blue denim but that quickly fell by the wayside because most of the denim pieces in *mitumba* were too heavy. The blue theme was easily doable as blue and white textiles are plentiful at least in part because they go well with blue and white tableware and other household ceramics.

Starting with the Lagartera square, let us examine each rectangle and its origin and reasons for its selection and placement. Lagartera is one of many small towns in Europe whose unique style of embroidery has become well known among stitchers and consumers of decorative textiles. Instruction books and videos are available so that anyone in the world can try their hand at this very special style. (Milner, 2003). This piece was cut from a worn out tray cloth and used as the center and theme setter for the quilt. It

features a square with pulled thread openings that form a grid in its middle and four corner points extended with crosses and scrolls at their ends. In a futile effort to avoid Christological symbols, I positioned it as a diamond that could establish the diamond shape as a main motif of the total piece. After placing a dark blue square at top and bottom, I added a rectangle on each side, one light weight jeans denim and the other a blue and white stripe/check that had probably been a dish towel. This addition gave me a rectangle that could now be expanded by building other rectangles, strips and squares around it. At this point it became important to avoid establishing any regular pattern so I relied on snap judgement of visual relationships to build outward. The idea was to make the piece look appealing while distributing the patterns and textures with a semblance of balance but not symmetry. To do this, I took each large scrap and cut it into one large piece with at least two smaller ones that could then be distributed in roughly triangulate positions relatively far apart but visually connected. Of course, there were several scraps that couldn't be subdivided and these were left intact. When the whole patchwork approached queen size (82'X 83" I just evened off the edges to accept a binding that would be put on as finishing after the batting and backing. The batting is a bedsheet that was too damaged to use on an outer surface. Because Kenya straddles the Equator, our cold weather is only at high altitudes and only from May to early September. There is no need for the thick, fluffy batting that many quilters from outside the Tropics consider necessary. Three layers of cloth technically constitute a quilt. The backing of this quilt is also a bedsheet, brick red in color to complement/contrast all the blues. This would be added after the embroidery.

The next step was to decide how best to treat each rectangle. Some were solid in various shades of denim/indigo blue. Others were already patterned with printed or woven stripes and crossbars. Others were printed in small white diamonds clustered in diamond shapes on a blue ground. One was patterned with white vines, tiny leaves and flower buds in white on a dark blue ground and another with larger white flowers on a dark blue ground. Two had a graded blue bold floral pattern printed on a white ground. I left some of the rectangles blank just to create empty spaces. Others, both patterned and unpatterned suggested how best to fill them using the Maasai tradition of minimal material input to demarcate and 'fill' space without actually filling it. This was simple for the squares and rectangles around the Lagartera piece. I simply used Sashiko, a Japanese running stitch embroidery, to define nested diamonds and squares. Later, using six strand embroidery floss, I added several kinds of stitch built onto the Sashiko stitches thus creating harmonious patterns with some the stripes of the other pieces and disguising the plain running stitch. In keeping with the diamond theme, I embroidered two squares on one blue and white pinstriped cloth and a triangle built of straight lines on its mate. For the floral-patterned pieces, I used six strand embroidery floss to stitch in color over the printed pattern. On one of these I overshot the joint with the next fabric thus creating an extension of the vine-like floral pattern while the other was left to appear as if it was coming from behind the adjacent rectangle. Overshooting a pattern from one rectangle to another violates quadrilaterality while bringing discrete entities together. It proved useful as the design progressed and enabled establishment of a kind of cohesion that was not rigidly determined.

The blue on white printed florals presented a particular challenge. They did not lend themselves to being geometricized and their motifs were pictorial rather than in repeated small units. While puzzling over a possible solution, it became clear that the nasty dirt spot on the edge of the largest of the three pieces, could not be washed out. Since that piece was already stitched to the dark blue one next to it, I used my habitual remedy which is to embroider a butterfly over the offensive area. The wings, done in long and short stitch, spilled over into the adjacent dark blue piece thus giving me a suggestion of skewed quadrilaterality. The tips of a butterfly's four wings describe a quadrilateral and they can be manipulated in embroidery to range from pointed rectangles to gentle, rounded shapes. I had several crocheted doilies that were diamondlike and one that was composed of four, four-pointed, star like pieces of white cloth. These extended the butterfly/diamond simile and lent themselves to patterning a transition from rounded outline to squarish butterflies. It created a visual continuity from the squares and diamonds to the rounded forms elsewhere in the piece. A strip of white bobbin lace with diamond pattern motifs could now subdivide a too-large piece of dark blue sheeting thus creating two narrow bands of color in harmony with several other narrow bands I had used solely to fill otherwise empty spaces.

I had already used lots of tiny cross stitches and French knots in brick red to create forms and accents on the finely patterned cloths. One large rectangle of blue acorn stripe resented a challenge so I took scraps of a thin open weave white cloth and cut out rectilinear wings, attached them to a body head and antennae cut from a table

napkin and appliqued them on as a blatantly square-winged butterfly.

Now the challenge was to do something decorative but minimal with all the peripheral quadrilaterals. Anyone who has worked from a center outward, knows that the work expands as it progresses. That may seem like a mindless observation but it becomes very real and challenging when it is happening. The answer was to begin by placing several Sashiko butterflies next to the solid yellow, white and blue one covering the dirt spot. They looked good, and they showed me the solution to filling the peripheral space – a flight of butterflies swirling around the edge of the quilt as if they were migrating from some unknown place. They could fly over a piece of cloth or behind the strip of lace. They could emanate from behind the edge of one patch and then disappear behind another. It worked, but only after I had stitched on the backing with brick red 6 strand floss. The swirl on the back sort of disguised the brick red 'real' stitching and made the quilt reversible even though most of the butterflies hang over the edge of the bed. It took some months to find the blue strip that became the quilt's binding. By that time, design considerations aside, I was not willing to carry any of the butterflies over to any kind of binding.

In 2014 this quilt won the Kenya Quilt Guild Cup in the annual craft competition held by the East African Women's league. I was so proud and thrilled that I joined the Quilt Guild and thanked them for the cup. That was when the Guild informed me that it just sponsors the cup but has nothing to do with the League's selection of winners each year. Oh, well! This was my second quilt. Since then, at least

20 more have found their way into reality at my hands. Now, every moth at Kenya Quilt Guild meetings, I meet wonderful quilters, some novices and some seasoned experts, who believe they have to plan and pattern their quilts with store-bought fabrics. Through this article I hope to dispel some of the anxiety that constrains us all, unnecessarily. The Rhizomal method using cheap sources and lots of imagination is truly a form of "Design for All."

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Donna Pido Quilt Guild/EAWL Cup 2014*