



MEG HASKELL | BDN

Quilter Deb Norton, co-owner of A Straight Stitch quilting supply shop, sorts through examples of machine-stitched quilting, applique and embroidery at the shop in Orrington recently. “It’s pretty incredible what you can do with machines these days,” she said.

Quilts

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At the heart of the show hangs her deeply personal 1999 piece, “Distraction,” a meticulously detailed work with a visual intensity that almost burns the wall behind it.

“This I did when my mother was in the last days of her life,” Field said, without elaboration.

In the piece, a center panel hints at order, with small squares of fabric stitched into discernable rows and surrounded by a blood-red border. From there, a confusion of deep color, fractured patterns and jagged edges erupts in every direction. Close-set rows of decorative stitching both ornament and suppress the chaos. Words such as “Love,” Family,” “Dreams” and “Confuse,” written in Field’s slanting hand, loop across a slash of bright-orange fabric. The lower edge culminates in two deep gashes and a formal, funerary tassel.

“My kids have said that this one stays in the family,” Field said. “And that’s fine with me.”

Quilt shows

There are many fine artists in Maine who, like Field, choose quilting as their medium, the way some artists choose to work in paint or clay. But others are more at home in the more structured, but still deeply creative, world of quilting as craft. In a recent show and sale at Ellsworth High School, quilters from the Hancock County Quilters displayed more than 120 bedquilts and other pieces.

The show demonstrated the crafters’ mastery of traditional patterns and techniques as well as their willingness to break with those traditions. Old patterns such as Sunbonnet Sue, Pineapple Log Cabin and Underground Railroad were hung next to more contemporary panels depicting rolling ocean waters, swirling autumn leaves and brilliant rows of garden flowers. There also was a Nancy Drew quilt and a sea kayaking quilt.

The show featured the work of outside groups, too. The Island Quilters from Mount Desert Island sent up a collection of small pieces depicting familiar landscapes of Acadia National Park, including carriage trails, the Otter Cliffs and sailboats off the shore, in recognition of the 100th anniversary this year of the national park system. A display of Quilts of Valor filled one area; the national organization distributes patriotic-themed quilts to veterans and service members. The Studio Art Quilt Association had sent along a traveling exhibit of small quilted panels from every state in the union.

“After a while, you’ve made all the bed quilts you need,” said longtime quilter and show co-organizer Jean Savalchak of Blue Hill. “All your children and grandchildren and nieces and nephews have one, but you still want to keep your quilts going.”

It’s at that point, she said, that traditional quilters often get even more creative and start exploring new techniques.

There are regional quilt shows and small exhibits going on all the time in Maine, Savalchak said. You just have to keep your eyes open to find one.

Though quilting is an age-old craft rooted in utility and frugality, there have always been elements of creativity and pride in creating heirloom-quality pieces. But it

was in the 1970s and 1980s that modern-day crafters began purchasing material specifically for decorative quilting, breaking with the old tradition of using fabric scraps and bits of worn-out clothing. No longer tied to utility, quilting as a hobby or art form has spawned an industry and a culture of its own. There are now about 50 independently owned shops in Maine that cater to quilters and other fabric crafters.

At A Straight Stitch in Orrington, owner Deb Norton said loyal customers have followed the shop to three different locations in 11 years. In addition to selling high-quality fabrics and other supplies, Norton teaches regular classes in quilting, piecing, embroidery and applique.

Most of her regulars are in their 50s or older; few are interested in the painstaking and time-consuming work of hand-sewing. Fortunately, a new generation of “smart” sewing machines makes quick work of it all, including programmable machines that can create elaborate stitchwork with the press of a button.

“It’s pretty incredible what you can do with machines these days,” Norton said, adding that quilting, alone or in the social environment of a class, is “good therapy.”

But the approximately 140 quilts in the collection of the Maine State Museum in Augusta are almost all stitched by hand, according to Laurie LaBar, chief curator of history and decorative arts. The quilts there date from the mid-1700s through the 20th century, she said, and include several from the Civil War era.

“There is a lot of public interest in quilts,” LaBar said, especially those that have a compelling personal story.

For example, the museum

has acquired a quilt from Biddeford that was started in 1942 and completed in 1973.

“There is a square for Pearl Harbor and a square for her engagement to her husband,” LaBar said. “There is a square for the birth of each child and grandchild, for each marriage, for all the family events. And there’s a square that honors [President John F. Kennedy]. It’s basically a quilt of her life and her family.”

Other historic pieces include a quilt made for a minister’s wife by the ladies of the congregation and a fundraising “song quilt” in which each square represents a popular melody of the day.

“We have a lot of crazy quilts, too — maybe around 20,” LaBar said, referring to a style of highly decorative quilts popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s for their elegant fabrics, elaborate stitchery and outlandish designs.

“Every time I say I can’t take another crazy quilt, someone comes in with something really spectacular and I just can’t say no,” she said.

One thing seems certain: there is no shortage of quilts, quilters, quilt shops or quilt shows in Maine. LaBar is already planning a major exhibit of the Maine State Museum’s collection in 2019, which also will showcase pieces from private collections around the state. But for those who can’t wait that long, there are upcoming quilt guild shows in Kennebunk, Standish, Calais and Stetson.

Belfast artist and instructor Dianne Hire has a show hanging through Aug. 26 at the Unity College Center for the Performing Arts. Church fairs, art exhibits, local libraries and county fairs also provide opportunities to view the work of Maine’s many creative quilters.

Museum offers blacksmith demo

DOVER-FOXCROFT — A blacksmith demonstration will take place at 3 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 20, at the Blacksmith Shop Museum on Dawes Road.

Admission is free. The event will feature blacksmith Pat Roy and wood carver Chris Viera.

For information, call 564-8618.

Church offers barbecue dinner

BUCKSPORT — A steak or barbecue chicken dinner will be held 6 p.m. Friday, Aug. 26, at Bucksport United Methodist Church, 71 Franklin St.

The reservation-only event will offer a choice of steak or chicken, cole slaw, potato salad, homemade rolls, beverages and cake. Cost is \$10, \$5 children 12 and under.

To make a reservation, call the church office at 469-3622.

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Classes Starting September!

Watercolor	Sept 6	6 weeks	\$180
Drawing	Sept 17	1 day workshop	\$ 75
Mandelas	Sept 26	6 weeks	\$150
Understanding Color	Sept 28	8 weeks	\$200
Watermedia Montage	Sept 28	8 weeks	\$200
Pastels	Oct 8	1 day workshop	\$ 75
Collage	Oct 6	4 weeks	\$100
Acrylics	Oct 13	6 weeks	\$180
Seniors Oils/Acrylics	Oct 18	10 weeks	\$300
Tole/Decorative Painting	Oct 18	10 weeks	\$300

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