

# Save our Stories – The Quilters’ SOS Project

Gillian Cooper describes how quilters are creating a historical archive

A COMMON WISTFUL desire of quilt historians is the wish for more information about quilts and quilters of the past. How many times have we been exhorted to put a label on a quilt so the details are there for posterity – and how often do we actually do it? What will quilters of the future know of our reasons behind our quilting and the joy that it can bring? In the age of the internet and blogging, there is more information than ever available about current quilters, but it is not generally structured and even then it is limited to quilters with an interest in computers and/or writing, so not necessarily representative of quilting practices as a whole.

An exciting scheme is running in the USA which addresses some of these issues. Quilters’ SOS (Save Our Stories) began in 1999 with a pilot project at the International Quilt Festival in Houston. The impetus to start the project was the feeling that a significant amount of effort went into documenting the quilts, for example by photographing winning quilts at shows, but little was known about the quilters and their motivation and thoughts behind the pieces.

Since that initial pilot, when 50 quilters queued up with the quilts they had brought especially for the occasion, more than 1,000 quilters have been interviewed for the project’s archives. Each interview lasts approximately 45 minutes

and is based around a ‘touchstone’ object, which is normally a quilt, to help get the discussion flowing. The interview is structured around some key questions, which gives a degree of consistency across the interviews. Included on the original team that set up the project was Professor Bernard Herman of the Center for Material Culture Studies, University of Delaware; and so it has been constructed in an academically sound manner. The possible questions include enquiries into any family quilting history, where the quilter’s inspiration comes from, what their process is, what they enjoy about quilting and which bits they struggle with. In addition to the personal, the quilter’s views on quilting in general may also be covered. For example: What do they think of art quilts as opposed to traditional ones? What is their opinion on using a sewing machine for quilting or is hand stitching important? What is their perception on the place of quilting in history? The interviews are generally carried out face to face, but occasionally, due to distance or other logistical issues, they may be conducted by phone or email.

Once completed, the quilter is photographed with their ‘touchstone’ quilt and the interview is transcribed into print. The print version of the interview is uploaded onto the Quilters’ SOS website ([www.allianceforamericanquilts.org/qsos](http://www.allianceforamericanquilts.org/qsos)) along with the photograph. Most



Above: *Hope* by Rosa Angulo, Sinaloa, Mexico

“Each quilter has a story to tell”

Opposite page  
Top left: *Ghost Quilt* by Ellen Kochansky, Pickens, South Carolina

Top right: *Shattered* by Karen S. Musgrave, Naperville, Illinois

Bottom: *Scott’s Victory Quilt* by Pam Neil, Louisville, Kentucky

importantly, each transcription is archived with the American Folklife Center, which is part of the American Library of Congress. This ensures that the project will be preserved for future generations and increases its importance beyond that of quilters into a record of general culture. The Quilters’ SOS project is run by the Alliance for American Quilts, a US not-for-profit group; all the work on this project by the interviewers and transcribers is done on a voluntary basis.

I do urge you to take a look at the archive on the website. There are some fascinating interviews to read, with many top-name quilters, as well as those who are less well known. Many people have already used the archives out of curiosity or looking for inspiration, but it serves other uses, such as quilters researching possible teachers for guild meetings, or history students looking for trends and information on the recent past. Each quilter has a story to tell and this project aims to record it: there are no criteria for being interviewed other than a willingness to talk about your quilting, no matter how humble or elevated. To date, the interviewees have tended to reflect the quilting demographic and have generally been older. This is important to



Find out more about the Quilters’ SOS project and read recently posted interviews at [www.allianceforamericanquilts.org/qsos](http://www.allianceforamericanquilts.org/qsos)



record their thoughts for future generations. However, the project is also trying to include younger quilters, with the hope that they will record another interview in future, showing how their quilting interests and practices have changed over time.

At the International Quilt Festival in Houston in 2010 there was a display of quilts which had been used as ‘touchstone’ objects in their quilters’ interviews. Alongside the quilts were printed extracts from the interviews and recordings which could be listened to. Obviously the quilts had been chosen to display the diversity of quilters who have already made recordings, but even so the variety of quilters and stories was amazing. They ranged from Richard Tims, a man who began quilting because he didn’t know what do on his days off work and if his mother could still be quilting at 85, then there was no reason why he couldn’t start at 65; to Rosa Angulo, who made her quilt in a prison project; and Shoko Ferguson, who was originally from Japan and made a Baltimore quilt by hand because she wanted to keep in with her new American mother-in-law.

Although this project is primarily based in the States, it is

not exclusively so and interviews are welcomed from around the world. To make the enterprise more manageable, it is subdivided into different projects to categorise the interviews. As well as projects covering most states in the USA and various organisations and events such as Daughters of the American Revolution and Art Quilts at the Sedgwick, there are projects covering other countries including Canada, Peru, Georgia and Russia, but to date not the British Isles. This is something that personally I think should be changed. On the Quilters’ SOS website you can download the manual which explains how to conduct an interview. It is easy to follow and full of ideas to put straight into practice. Just imagine a Regional Day where several members brought along their significant quilt as ‘touchstone’ objects and then recorded their interviews in front of the group. Rather than having a speaker, you could interview members, memorialising your group for posterity and improving the knowledge of British quilting for now and the future. Do take a look at the website and think about how you can get involved.

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