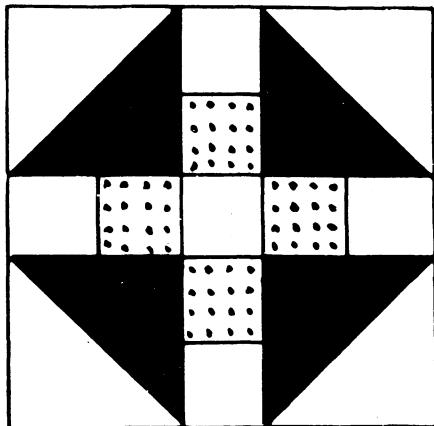
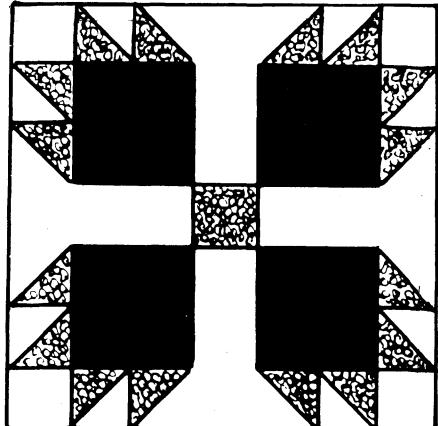


Carrying on a North American Tradition: Eleanor Boyce, Quilt-maker

An Interview with Sybil Shack



CHURN DASH / STANDARD BOOK OF QUILTMKING



BEAR'S TRACK / STANDARD BOOK OF QUILTMKING

Eleanor Boyce parle de son amour pour l'art traditionnel de la courtepointe.

Eleanor Boyce is a short, slim woman, whose rich voice still carries a hint of the Maritimes from which she came and of the Irish that is part of her birthright. Because she has, and has always had, such a commanding presence, I had never thought of her as being short although I have known her for over forty years. When we first met she was principal of the high school at Roland, Manitoba, a village six miles across a main highway from where my sister was struggling through her first year of teaching in a one room rural school. Eleanor was the confidante and friend, the substitute mother and the professional support of all the young teachers for miles around, my sister among them. Later she was to become president of the Manitoba Teachers' Society, a school inspector for the Province of Manitoba, an instructor at the Teachers' College and a member of the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. Along the way she accumulated a Master of Education degree, and earned her PH.D., was a broadcaster over the international service of the CBC, wrote scripts and textbooks, and maintained contact with her large family and host of friends. Following her first of several 'retirements' she acted as consultant to the Winnipeg Hebrew schools. A practising Catholic she has interests that are ecumenical and eclectic. When she taught in a Ukrainian community she learned to work the traditional Ukrainian cross stitch and enough of the language to understand more than her pupils suspected. During her attachment to the Hebrew schools she claims that she learned with and from her pupils, learned a little Hebrew and much of traditions and culture.

And she is still learning, as she told me the afternoon I visited her to hear about the making of patchwork quilts. She has been pursuing this craft for the past few years with her usual enthusiasm for anything she undertakes.

The quilts, neatly folded in plastic bags, were piled six feet high in the bedroom closet. One by one Eleanor Boyce took them out and spread them on the bed for me to admire. Some of the patterns I was familiar with. I had seen them in the early 1930's gracing the beds of farmhouses near Foxwarren in wes-

tern Manitoba, when I was a young teacher there. The patterns—and sometimes the quilts—had been brought in the 1870's from Bruce and Grey counties and the Talbot settlement in Ontario, precious reminders of the homes the women had left behind them as they took the long trek by ox drawn wagon and on foot overland to Grand Forks in North Dakota, on flat boat down the Red River and overland again for nearly two hundred miles before they settled once more and built the brick houses that reproduced exactly the solid farmhouses of the Ontario countryside. The 'Colonial Lady', the 'Bear's Paw', 'Grandmother's Fan' I had seen, many times washed and delicately faded, as spreads in the bedrooms of the Sutherlands, the Grahams, and the Talbots.

I knew that Eleanor Boyce had come to Manitoba from New Brunswick to teach, as so many Maritimers had come after the First World War. Where had she found her patterns? Here in Manitoba? Or had she brought them with her from the province where she was born?

E.B.: Most of my designs are my grandmother's, modified, of course, and adapted. But they are the traditional designs. Did you know that the patchwork quilt is a distinctly North American art form? The United Empire Loyalist women brought their quilts and their patterns and their tradition of quilting with them when they came to the Maritimes and to Ontario. My grandmother taught me how to knit and how to quilt. The Sisters at school taught me to crochet and to tat. I've always loved handwork. How long have I been quilting? Well, my grandmother let me work on a quilt, let me put in a few stitches, before I went to school; I might have been four years old. I have no doubt now that she pulled out my unsteady stitches when I wasn't there to see; but I remember being very pleased and proud that she let me work with her. She died in 1912.

S.S.: Tell me about your grandmother.

E.B.: She was my mother's mother, Eleanor Murphy. She was born in New Brunswick, in 1845, and married Christopher Kierstead. There's quite a clan of Kiersteads and Boyces scattered across the country and around the world. On Monday mornings, she used to say, she would walk along the street and inspect the clothes lines where the quilts were hung out to dry, and take note of the various patterns. She was a great plagiarizer, my grandmother Kierstead.

S.S.: So was Shakespeare! If you are following in her footsteps I assume that she borrowed the patterns, then used her own ideas about their arrangement, their colours and the lines of quilting.

E.B.: Right you are.

At this point we were looking at a beautiful quilt with sweeping, curved patchwork pieces, and quilting in tiny stitches that whirled and whorled around the empty spaces and in the square corners.

E.B.: That's a very old design, usually called the Prince of Wales' Feather. An interesting part of the quilt-making for me is the blocking out of the patterns.

Eleanor brought out a box of patterns, carefully blocked out first on squared paper. Here were the beginnings of her quilts. Combinations and recombinations of the components could be used again and again: circles and semi-circles and segments of circles, lapping, overlapping, straight lines and curves, triangles of all sizes. Put together in endless permutations and combinations they produced the intricate, individual patchwork designs and running, integrating stitches of the quilting.

E.B.: Do you see these circles? Here they are on the pattern and here on the quilt. The small ones are tracings of the rims of juice glasses, the larger ones of water glasses. The long straight lines I mark with my yardstick. The distance between them is the width of the yardstick.

I was admiring the turkey red and white quilt Eleanor had unfolded for me.

E.B.: That's usually called—or at least we have always called it—the 'Bear's Paw'. It's made up of 30 blocks, 71 pieces, 2 inches by 2 inches—I haven't gone metric yet. How many stitches? I can't even make a guess. This I can tell you. There are generally 6 to 10 stitches to an inch. When you have 8 stitches to the inch you have a really nice quilt. Here's another of my grandmother's patterns. It's the 'Triple Irish Chain', 78 by 105 inches, 17 pieces to the block, 63 blocks, 1094 pieces all told.

The large 'Triple Irish Chain' quilt was spread out for me to see in its wholeness. It was in glowing shades ranging from pink to maroon: pale pink, hot pink, a dainty print on a dark red ground.

E.B.: I enjoy the mathematical patterns most of all. There is a tremendous satisfaction in deciding on a motif, in blocking out the pattern, in cutting the separate parts exactly to size, in finding that the pieces fit honestly, that the corners are true. I draw the design, lay it out on this squared paper—my habit of drawing, like my stitching, I learned from my grandmother—and transfer it to the cloth. Did you know that on my quilting frame I use the clamps my grandmother used? As I work on my quilts I have a great sense of continuity. What I am doing my grandmother did, and before her her mother and her grandmother. I said earlier that the patchwork quilt is a North American art form, but of course quilting itself is a much older

craft. The first patchwork quilts were truly patchwork. In colonial times fabrics were too precious to waste. Quilts were made in various weights of cloth, and were originally totally utilitarian. But the human need for self-expression, for beauty and order, soon spurred women to arrange their scraps of cloth in patterned designs. Scraps of silk and lace and velvet were fashioned into elegant spreads, and women dyed cotton and linen and homespun to meet their artistic requirements. Some of the motifs I have used in my quilts are very old, and I think very lovely. As I work on them I feel close to my grandmother and to the many women whose pleasure and sense of achievement I am sharing as I watch the blocks take shape, and the quilt itself grow.

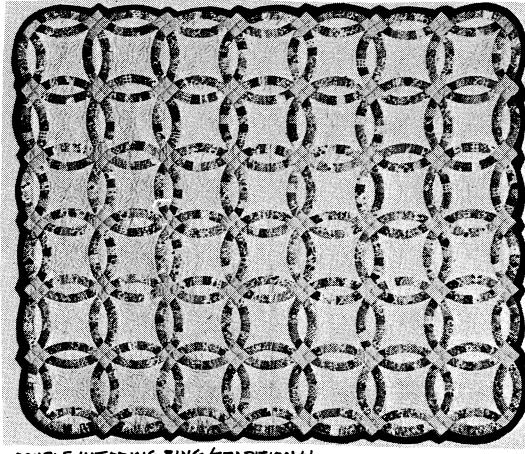
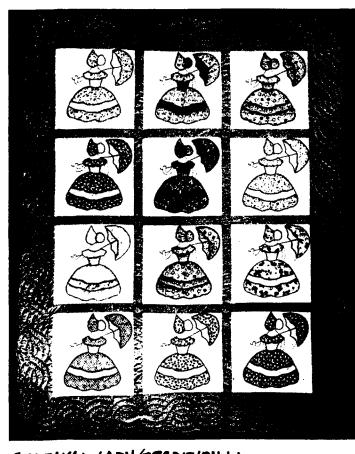
S.S.: Your quilts are obviously not made of scraps. What do you use?

E.B.: You will have noticed that my quilts are light in weight. (I can assure you that they are also warm.) I make use of materials that are available now but were not to my ancestors—cotton and polyester mixtures, mostly, because they wash well, and a polyester bat as fill. It doesn't mat, and the needle goes through it easily. By the way, the needle is important. I know that I have the right needle when I *feel* it. My preference is for an English steel needle. The material for the background and for the designs I buy at a fabric shop. The proprietor knows me, and keeps an eye out for what he thinks I might be able to use. No, not remnants as a rule, although I don't say no to an interesting remnant that might fit something I want to put together. I select my fabrics carefully for quality, colour, design if I am choosing prints, and for texture.

You say I am a perfectionist. Yes and no. Let me repeat myself by saying that I derive pleasure from the mathematical exactness of having everything come together as I had visualized and planned it, but my quilts are not perfect by any means. They are a human product. When arthritis strikes and a stitch goes in badly, I don't rip it out. Deep down in my heart I suppose I feel that the tiny imperfections are part of the individuality of a quilt. And the quilts are individual. The filling of spaces between motifs, for example, leaves room for ornamental stitching that helps bring up the designs in the blocks. Every corner and every interstice is a challenge to one's creative instincts.

S.S.: What about the names of the different designs? I can see the 'Prince of Wales' Feather' and 'Grandmother's Fan'. But what about some of the others? The 'Bear's Paw', for example. I must confess that I didn't see a bear's paw in it until you traced it for me.

E.B.: Ah, there's the beauty of the mathematical forms. They make different images as you look at them from different points of view, just as people looking at the constellations have seen different images in the clusters of stars. The ancients saw Ursa the Bear where we see a Big Dipper. Look at this quilt. Over the decades as women stitched together their quilts they gave them names according to the images they saw as



they arranged the pieces. So the quilt you see here has been called the 'Quilt of Many Names'. Some of the names are 'Monkey Wrench', 'Cow Poke', 'Churn Dasher', 'Barn Door'. All right now—adjust your perception of the arrangement of the pieces according to shape and colour. Don't you see different things in it, different images as you view it from different angles or as light falls on it in different ways? There's the basic pattern; or is it? Don't you see it sometimes as a square, sometimes as a square surrounded by triangles, sometimes as triangles only, sometimes as cubist portraits? Yet from every point of view it is mathematical, orderly, and pleasing to the eye.

S.S.: How did you happen to turn to quilt-making in the last few years?

E.B.: You can't really say that I 'happened to turn' to quilt-making. Actually I have been making quilts almost all my life. It's simply that I have more time now to spend on doing something that gives me pleasure and gives pleasure to other people. (Not always to my immediate family. They tell me that they

are thoroughly tired of seeing me working away at my quilts... although they help me a good deal, and I believe are not a little proud of my accomplishments. My brother—a retired army officer—is most helpful when it comes to laying out my patterns.) I believe firmly that we should all have an occupation, call it a hobby if you will, an expression of, and an outlet for, our creativity. Something in which we can become totally absorbed. That is, a hobby in addition to reading, which for me, as for many others, remains the prime hobby. I have always liked handwork. I have always liked drawing. I have always liked seeing things grow. I have always wanted things to fall into place, to fit together. Making quilts meets all my likes. Don't think for a moment that this is all I do. I read. I write a little. I make cushions, seat pads. I hook pictures. I even cook, although I admit I don't get the same satisfaction out of putting a meal together as I do out of putting a quilt together.

Yes, I have sold some of my quilts, and I suppose I could sell more of them if I made the effort. But I don't make them for sale. I make them for the joy of making them.

Lolita, Lilith

the man's fantasy
not
the Dante's Beatrice

when she was nine

at a private feast
in May
in 1274

nor

Laure, Laureen
when she was twelve
Petrarch, madly
a flower in flight

fell in love
with her
not she for him

though the satisfied become poets, they said
and the false hopes pursued Lilith
female demon or night witch or vampire
adam first refused

failure turned for scapegoat

take black, alter, width of pelvis
a witch is created, never born

all liliths that haunt, lolita,
haunt lies
(what you bore could not be written
down)

not to be
borne
and
times change lives

Cathy Ford