

Roberta Walker, Quiltmaker

ROBERTA WALKER



Quiltmaker Story

Interviewer: Jeanie Low, SFQG historian

San Francisco, California

April 23, 2009

Transcription: Peggy Cleary

Q: Roberta, tell us a little about yourself, your education, work and family.

RW: I was born in Pennsylvania in a small town, east of Philadelphia. I am one of three girls. When I was born in 1938 we lived on a dairy farm and we lived there through the beginning of the Second World War. At some point my parents had to give up the dairy farm because they couldn't get help because of the war. So we moved to a small town that was close to where the farm had been. Then my father worked for Ford Motor Company making tanks and jeeps and stuff for the war.

I went to local schools and in fact my mother was my schoolteacher in the second and third grade. I had my mother as a teacher for two years, which was probably the most outstanding thing in my education, but it was fun.

Then I went to Holcomb, which was a girls' school in Brenmark, Pennsylvania. I graduated from there and then I went to work in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for John Wanamaker and I did various jobs there. I went to night school and studied Interior Design. So I then switched to the Interior Design department at John Wanamaker and I

Roberta Walker, Quiltmaker

worked there two years and then I went to work with a private interior design company in Philadelphia, A.L. Diamond. I worked there until Al and I were married, which was 44 years ago.

When Al and I were married, we went to Chicago, and he went to graduate school. We stayed in Chicago for a while, but we didn't like the weather. So then we moved to California where he had previously lived, although he was originally from Pennsylvania where I met him. So, he went to grad school in L.A. He also went back to Penn State and went to graduate school and eventually ended in San Francisco and that was 40 years ago. We've lived in San Francisco ever since. We have raised our family here and have two children, Channing, our son, and Ellery, our daughter. They are now 35 and 29 or something like that. I have one granddaughter, Kiya. We're all still living here locally.

One of the things I kind of laugh about now is that growing up in Pennsylvania I guess quilts are a big part of the culture there, but I was just vaguely conscious of them. I now wish that I had been more aware of them growing up, because where I grew up, it was about an hour away from Lancaster. I could have seen a lot more of the quilting. Especially back in those days when they did things more the traditional way. Things are more commercialized now.

Q: Did you have other relatives who sewed, or who did needlework or made quilts?

RW: One person who got me into sewing was a lady named Yvonne Benedict who lived across the street with her husband. She's still alive; she's in her 90s now. I visit her when I go back home. I think I was 9 years old when she introduced me to sewing. When I had the measles, my father wanted to keep me in bed so he bought me a White (brand) sewing machine. I think that machine weighed about 90 pounds. I had that sewing machine all the way through college, and I don't remember when I finally got rid of it.

I made clothes; I didn't make quilts. I kind of went with the flow of life. Al and I have moved back and forth across the country several times in our early married days. We went from Pennsylvania to Chicago back to Philadelphia and back to San Francisco.

Al had been in the service, so he got a job through some special program in the city of San Francisco that was special for ex servicemen and he worked for the city for over 26 years.

In San Francisco, I worked with the telephone company in mapping. That was before computers, we had to keep track of all the telephone districts, so when they got a new subdivision, say, up in Santa Rosa, we'd have to get it onto the map, so I worked with a mapping company in Southern California and I had to fly down there and work with them to make sure the maps were accurate with the new subdivisions on, and figure out where people lived. It was a kind of neat job.

Q: So was that involved with drafting?

Roberta Walker, Quiltmaker

RW: Yeah. In fact that was one of the reasons they gave me the job, was because of my interior design work. I knew how to draft.

Q: What year was that?

RW: Let's see, my son was born in '74 so it was probably '71 to '74. We were married in '64. And I decided that, having waited ten years to have my son, I would not go back to work. In fact my husband jokes that I am still on maternity leave which I went on in '74.

Q: You're a home manager, right? We need home managers.

RW: Yes. And, then I couldn't have any more children, because by that time I was 37, 38 years old, so we adopted Ellery as an infant in 1981. So then I had two kids, and then for a while what I'd do was that I babysat for other people's children. I would only take one child at a time. They would arrive when they were three months old and I'd keep them until they were two and there were probably four or five children I did that with. Because I could still do my "stuff".

I also worked for this woman, DeeDee, on Clement Street. She was in the store that is now Satin Moon Fabrics for a while. She designed and taught needlepoint, and I was one of the people who painted the canvasses. It was very precise, detailed work, because she would want ten stitches to the right, and you had to really be very very precise. So I did that for a couple years too. But I never learned to needlepoint! Ha ha ha ha!

Q: So how did you get into quilting?

RW: Okay so the way I got into quilting is when Channing went to Laurel Hill Nursery School, at that point we were just changing over from the Community College System to being just independent nursery schools. And the director left and so we wanted to do something to honor her. And so we had the kids make a quilt. And so having sewn, we made Jan this quilt. I think it was hand prints or something really simple like that.

So then, Channing went to Rooftop for two years, and then my friend Kathy King started Claire Lilienthal. She came to me, her neighbor, because she knew I had been involved in the co-op, and she wanted me to help her start Claire Lilienthal, which I did. I became one of the founding parents of Claire Lilienthal, which I'm very proud of now, because it has become one of the most popular schools in the city. We started the tradition, which is still going on, raising thousands of dollars, that each room would make a quilt. We would have annual auctions, and it has really been a thrill for me to see that it has continued.

Q: What year was that?

RW: That would have been probably '80, '81. It was pretty crude, the way we put these together, I mean there wasn't a lot of planning.

Roberta Walker, Quiltmaker

Q: And how long were you involved?

RW: Well, Channing and Ellery are seven years apart, so he just about got out of there and she came in, so I have a long involvement with that, probably up through the '90s. We made a lot of money on those quilts, and they still are, they're making more than ever on them. We hired dance and movement teachers, and did additional art things and all that, so we could really enrich the program, by having those options and selling the things.

Okay so then, what really really threw me into quilting was that I was at the Pacific art thing that's at Fort Mason every August (I know because it's around my birthday) and I saw the Chigyo sisters and I saw their sashiko and it was like a bolt out of the blue that hit me. I loved the white on the blue and the patterns. I had always been very fond of Japanese and Chinese furniture and fabrics and we had purchased a number of things every year for our house as well. But this blue and white absolutely fascinated me. And so I talked to them about it and they said, "Oh, we teach classes." So I went over there several weeks in a row and they showed me how to do sashiko. And they're still doing sashiko in fact I was just there and visited them a month or so ago in their house in Sausalito. They make mostly clothing, they make some hats and bags and stuff too, and they sell mostly back in New York. They go back to New York a couple times a year, that's their big market, because, they say, people don't get as excited about it in San Francisco because they've seen it.

Q: So what do you sew as a sashiko quilter? Do you make quilts?

RW: No, no, the first thing I made was a jacket. Then I made some table runners for people—it's a really nice thing to make for gifts—I made some carryall bags, and then I started to use it in my quilts. I think it was in the 90's, my first sashiko quilt, and it was a quilt I had made at our QuiltAway, the Miriam Nathan Roberts Microwave Quilt, it's this mathematical system, which is great. I ended up making three quilts. One I sashikoed. That's the one with the red stitching. I put the four big blocks together, then you rotate them so it looks like a kaleidoscope, and I sashikoed the borders. I used different Japanese or pseudo Japanese fabrics in that. I used blue fabric, and put red sashiko but only as a surface design. So then I had to figure out how to quilt it and that's the one where I used echo quilting.

Next, I can't remember what class it was or who the teacher was, it was something about doing circles without pins or something, and I had just visited a friend in New Mexico. I remember walking into Black Cat, and she had all these turquoise and tan, and really New Mexico fabrics, so I selected those fabrics and made a quilt in that class for Carolyn. And then I thought, "Oh, I bet I could put some stitching on." That is the first quilt I started putting the big stitching on and going through all three layers. I also machine quilted just the framework to hold it together.

Q: What type of fabric were you using for your sashiko?

Roberta Walker, Quiltmaker

RW: Well, I was using traditional 14” fabric, because the Chigyo sisters had it, and then they turned me on to Kasuri Dye Works. So I had access to that, and I used the traditional thread, needles, I did it the way they taught me to do it. They had this really dark blue dyed fabric, and I used that. And I still have some of that fabric, because when I’d go to class, they’d have big bundles and small pieces. I still have some of the small pieces.

You can buy it, if you want to pay the price. I showed Amina a piece of what I wanted and she got a comparable fabric, almost as good, for a much more reasonable price.

Q: So you can use the Kasuri blue fabric, or a similar one.

RW: Right. But I always use the thread, which I think is important, because it has a different finish on it. It’s almost like string, if you look at it, it has a lot of texture to it, so I know a lot of people use perle cotton, but it doesn’t give the same look as the traditional sashiko thread, so I’ve stuck with that pretty much.

Q: In terms of quilts, are you doing strictly traditional sashiko type quilts or are you doing a broad range of types of quilts?

RW: I do both. I just made what to me is almost a Baltimore Album quilt but in sashiko, because I used 12 or 14 different sashiko designs in a similar layout to what a Baltimore Album would be.

This quilt in the picture is called Future Wabi Sabi. Which means I hope it gets a lot of wear and get worn, but my relatives will still love it 100 years from now. The story of the quilt, the one with the circles? That was a kimono that was an antique when I bought it. I bought it at Kasuri Dyeworks probably 30, 35 years ago. It had gotten kind of threadbare around the outside, on the neck, and I wanted to preserve it, so what I did was I cut it apart in pieces and backed it with a stabilizer, because being an antique the fabric was flimsy. I knew I was going to put it with all these new fabrics and I didn’t want it to fight as far as what the hand was going to be on it. I had read about the covers the people in Japan made for their beds. And in that they used 14” fabric, but in this one I used various widths, anything from 11” to 7”, and it’s basically a Chinese Coin pattern. I tried to get at least a couple of the antique pieces into each of the stacks of coins.

Q: So now who owns this quilt?

RW: I own it, it lives on my bed. After all these years I made a quilt for our bed.

Q: So I see three ribbons on the quilt, what are the awards?

RW: I won first place innovative large category, 2009, I got the judge’s choice ribbon from Judy Mathieson, and I got the viewers’ choice, which is the people that were at the show voted for their favorite quilt. I’m very very proud that I got three ribbons on one quilt and those ribbons are so beautiful. I would have been happy with one and I got five. I feel like I hit the jackpot.

Roberta Walker, Quiltmaker

Q: Are you going to enter this quilt somewhere else?

RW: I'll probably enter it in PIQF in October.

Now this is another quilt that because it's so big, it's a little bigger than queen size because I wanted it to meet the wood on the bed, I did a wavy stitch all the way across in beige and red and blue, sort of an ocean wave-y stitch. Then of course I had to do something to give it structure so I machine quilted in a similar stitch both horizontally and vertically after I had put the three layers together, so the sashiko on this does not go through.

Q: Are your quilts generally made for yourself, family or friends?

RW: I have been making the quilts for my family. I have four nieces and a nephew and they all have several children, so I have already made quilts for two great-nephews and their wives. I've made quilts for three of the nieces, and one for my oldest sister who lives in Columbus, Ohio, and for my sister who lives in Virginia. So I have two sisters done, three nieces, and two great-nephews, so I still have a lot to go. And I've made my son and my daughter quilts. And, I've made four friends quilts and I'm working on a fifth for a friend of mine in Berkeley. So I've never sold a quilt.

I usually ask them for their favorite colors. My older sister, she not only told me colors, she went to a quilt show and took a picture of a quilt she liked! I drafted it out and made it for her, and she has it in her guest room now. But I got a big kick out of that; I think she was afraid I was going to make something wild.

And there for a while, I was using a lot of sort-of 60's scrap fabrics, like that one I had in Marin, that big sort of sunburst one they were all fabrics that had been given to me.

Q: So generally, how many full sized quilts are you making, on average, a year?

RW: Probably three a year. Sometimes more, like if somebody graduates, like one of the kids I told you I babysat for, she just went to college, so I managed to get one made for her graduation last June. But that was just a single. I mean it seems like, to make a single or a baby quilt is easy, now that most people have queens now, the one I'm working on now is a queen.

Q: Are most of these people hinting for a quilt, or is it like you're sharing...

RW: No, I can't say any of them hinted, it's been my idea, but they seem thrilled. But usually I'll tell them, I'm going to make a quilt for you, and then I ask them what they want.

Q: Have you ever used quiltmaking to help you through a difficult period of your life?

RW: No, I can't say I have, I've had a fairly calm life.

Roberta Walker, Quiltmaker

Q: You've said you don't sell quilts, do you donate quilts?

RW: Oh, I've done charity quilts, or I've taken tops and finished them, that kind of thing. I've gone to the Saturday sewcial and bring home three or four quilts and do whatever needs to be done.

Q: If you quilt a charity quilt, is it machine quilting?

RW: Yes.

Q: If you machine quilt, what kind of motifs do you use?

RW: I don't do motifs, I do straight line quilting. I tried to do motif-y kind of quilting but I really don't enjoy it. I usually try to figure out how to quilt a quilt using straight lines. Especially the ones with sashiko quilting, I don't want a lot of machine quilting, just enough to hold them together until I can get my stitches in. I just don't enjoy that wandering around the quilt.

Q: So you do all the machine quilting yourself? Have you ever sent anything out?

RW: I had Glenda Freiburg quilt a quilt back in '89 or something. That's the only one I've had anybody do, 'cause I enjoy the whole process.

Q: Is your home decorated with quilts?

RW: No, I don't have any quilts hanging in my home except the ones I have hanging in my studio when I'm not working on a project.

Q: Do you receive or collect quilts others have made?

RW: No, I have nobody else's quilts.

Q: Do you share blocks? Exchange fabrics?

RW: A little bit, but not much, because I don't stash fabric. That is, I do have a fabric collection, because you do accumulate it over the years, but I don't buy fabric just to buy fabric. I usually have a design in mind when I buy fabric. Like right now there's a pattern I want to make that's all red stripes, so when I see a red stripe I'll buy it and put it in the box, and someday when I have enough I'll make the quilt. And there's another one I saw that Kaffe Fassett did that was red florals—I really love red—so I'm collecting for that too. But I just don't buy fabric, except dragonfly fabric.

Q: Yes, you have a particular penchant for dragonflies, was there a particular thing about dragonflies?

Roberta Walker, Quiltmaker

RW: It was just a fluke. When the kids were small, I took them every year to Camp Mather (and we're going to re-institute the tradition this year. Ellery and I will take Kiya). They always had the most beautiful red dragonflies there. And so I got a couple little dragonfly things, and then of course once you have a few of something, people think you collect it. People started buying me dragonflies, and I got interested in dragonflies, and I literally have them in my backyard. I started realizing how many dragonflies there are, and when I got my studio, I wanted to decorate it but not just with quilts so I put a few dragonflies, and now I have several hundred dragonflies.

There have been a few times when I have thought, now this is enough, it's getting out of hand, but it's really kind of nice, and people have told me that it's nice when a person collects something because then it helps you choose a present for them. And several of my quilts have had dragonfly fabrics in them somewhere. The one I'm making now probably has four or five dragonfly fabrics in it.

Q: Who's Kiya?

RW: My 5-year-old granddaughter.

Q: Have you participated in group quiltmaking activities?

RW: I've tried, but I really don't get into that. I usually have a project going. My way of quilting is to start a project and to go right through. I very rarely have more than one project going at a time. I think of a quilt, if it has to be put on paper I'll put it on paper, then I'll work on it until it's finished.

Q: Are you ambidextrous?

RW: Yes.

Q: From an early age?

RW: Yes, always. In fact that all sashiko quilt I called "ambidextrous sashiko", I called it that because I had to use both hands. I use the traditional needle and thread, but I pop my knot like in regular quilting, and I keep one hand underneath and throw the needle back up, because you can't do sashiko by threading through the three layers like with ordinary quilting.

Q: Your right hand is the lead and the left is the assistant?

RW: Right hand on top, left hand underneath, and I wear two of those rubber thimbles that Marian Peters makes. I wear one on the middle finger on the top, and underneath I wear it on my index finger. That way I can get really pretty even stitching on that. And I do the same thing when I do the big, I call it sashiko-like quilting, and on that I use a Greek knitting yarn because it comes in all kinds of really bright colors. That yarn is thicker so I have to use something with a bigger eye, like a big cotton darning needle.

Roberta Walker, Quiltmaker

Q: How long did it take you to make the Wabi-Sabi quilt?

RW: Three months.

Q: How about the Ambidextrous Sampler?

RW: That was really fast. When I started, Al said I bet that'll take you a year, but it took about the same amount of time, about three months.

Q: How many hours a week do you work on a quilt like this?

RW: I usually work about 3-4 hours a day weekdays and all day Thursdays, but rarely on weekends.

Q: Have you taken quilting classes? If so, what teachers, techniques?

RW: Well, like everybody else, I started out taking Caroline Leiberman. I don't quilt very well in a room full of people; it's too much movement and distraction. I like to spread out, and I kind of like to quilt by myself, actually. I guess QuiltAway is where I've mainly taken classes. Most of that stuff has never gotten done. It's ended up on the free table. The only one that really stuck with me was that Miriam Nathan Roberts one, because that whole mathematical thing just fascinated me. I made three of those quilts.

Q: Do you teach quilting related classes?

RW: Yes, we know, I've taught several sashiko classes and there are people after me to teach it again so I probably will do a Saturday Social. That's the only class I've ever taught.

Q: Do you teach anywhere except your studio?

RW: No.

Q: Do you enter your quilts in shows? If so, which ones?

RW: San Francisco, Marin (when it existed) and PIQF.

Q: Have you displayed your quilts in public places, museums, and galleries?

RW: Nope, nope, nope.

Q: And what specific ribbons have your quilts won?

RW: I just happened to write this down because I knew you were going to ask me.

In 2005 I got the Featured Artist award from Julie Hirota, that was the last of the Marin shows. It was the only money prize I've ever won, and I got \$500. It was called "you are

Roberta Walker, Quiltmaker

my Sunshine”, and it had a radiating pattern around a circular center, and I did the big stitch sashiko-like stitching radiating out, and I think the borders were three plain colors and I sashikoed on that in a sort of sunburst pattern. I don’t think the people at Marin necessarily liked it, but the award was Julie’s to give and she gave it to me and I thank her every time I see her.

The only other big awards I’ve gotten were the judge’s choice with Judy Mathieson this year and the viewers’ choice this year and they were both for the same quilt, Future Wabi-Sabi.

Q: But those were just your most recent ones. You have a whole slew of awards.

RW: Yeah, but those were just second place, first place. ...Actually the first big one was at a show that was at the Hall of Flowers, so you know it was a long time ago. I got the Best Theme, and I got this beautiful ribbon, with little silk flowers on it, I don’t even know who made those ribbons. Remember Alison Patrick? They were blocks of little dolls that Allison had won in the Block of the Month and she said she didn’t think she could make another quilt right now, so I said, “Oh, give ‘em to me, I’ll make a quilt” and I made the quilt for Allison’s daughter. Her daughter’s nickname was Bobbie, which was my nickname when I was growing up; so then on the back I put Bobbie. The theme of the show was friendship, and these were Friendship Blocks, and I used juvenile kid prints for the borders, because Bobbie was maybe about 5 years old at the time.

Other than that, every time I enter quilts, I always get at least an honorable mention, so I probably have 15, 20 ribbons now.

Q: Have you written articles or developed patterns?

RW: No.

Q: Do you have any advice for future quiltmakers?

RW: Just do what you want to do. I think it’s important to find what you really like to do instead of just going with the latest trend. Explore what appeals to you. Go to quilt shows, look at other people’s work, what speaks to you and then make your own version of that.

Q: When you quilt, do you do it in silence, or do you play music?

RW: Oh, gosh, I usually have music. I like classical guitar and I like cello. Sometimes I even listen to Joe Cunningham’s “Music for Squares”, that’s really happy music. At night I usually watch Comedy Central John Stewart or Stephen Colbert because they make me laugh, but during the day I use music. I think one of the biggest changes in my life in my ability to quilt, is having my studio.

Q: How long have you had it? And where is it?

Roberta Walker, Quiltmaker

RW: Well it's in what was the family room. After Channing moved out, I was sewing in what was his bedroom, a normal size bedroom, and Al was downstairs in the family room with his computer. One day I said I'd love to have more space and Al said he didn't need the whole family room and why didn't we swap. It's great because I can see out to the garden where Al is usually working, and there are birds and squirrels and the occasional coyote, and I have really good light. Though I kind of think they've quietly taken the coyotes away, because I haven't seen them lately.

####