

My Quilting Bio

Helen Blumen

I grew up with Army blankets, not quilts, in the beautiful Finger Lakes region of upstate New York. I didn't get interested in quilts until the 1970s, and then it was not as a maker, but as someone who thought of them as art. As a med student at Cornell in New York City, I'd take study breaks to visit America Hurrah!, where 19th and early 20th century quilts sold for \$200 and up---way beyond my price range. And I was lucky enough to see the Jonathan Holstein exhibit of Amish quilts at the Whitney Museum. In 1973 I moved to Santa Monica, CA to get married and finish my medical training, and there I started an internal medicine practice. I decorated the exam rooms with quilts that somehow had found me, and my patients had something to look at while they were waiting. The first quilt I made was a group quilt as a wedding present for my receptionist. I solicited blocks from her family and friends, and I put them together and quilted it. The sashing and backing fabric came from the store, Crazy Ladies and Friends, which was owned by Mary Ellen Hopkins.

Fast forward a decade, and our family of four moved to Chevy Chase, MD so my husband could take a job on Capitol Hill. By this time, I was working in healthcare management and making some quilts in the evenings. I took a few classes at G Street, but my goal in quilting was to have a meditative, relaxing experience of just being at the sewing machine. I sewed lots of straight seams and made lots of log cabin quilts, one of which still hangs in my current studio.

In August 2001, my husband and I visited our older son in Burkina Faso, where he was a Peace Corps volunteer. That's where I discovered bazin fabric, which is a dyed cotton brocade very much like cotton damask, and I came home with lots and lots of it, in a myriad of colors. From then on, I've used less and less in the way of commercial cotton fabric, and more in the way of dyed solids and batiks.

In the mid-2000s, I joined my first quilt guild, PM Patchwork, because it met in the evenings, and over time I've gotten more and more engaged with quilting and quilting organizations. I'd describe my quilting style as eclectic. What that really means is that I don't use patterns and I try lots of different styles. And (pre-pandemic), I'd been able to do a lot of traveling and bought interesting fabrics in Asia and Africa that I use in my quilts.

Over the past year, I've taken a few classes to experiment with new techniques and designs. My self-portrait shows me with the life-sized avatar that I made for 3-dimensional design at Montgomery College. Together, we're learning from Art Quilt Quarterly. I can't wait until we're together again to see what other guild members have been doing.