

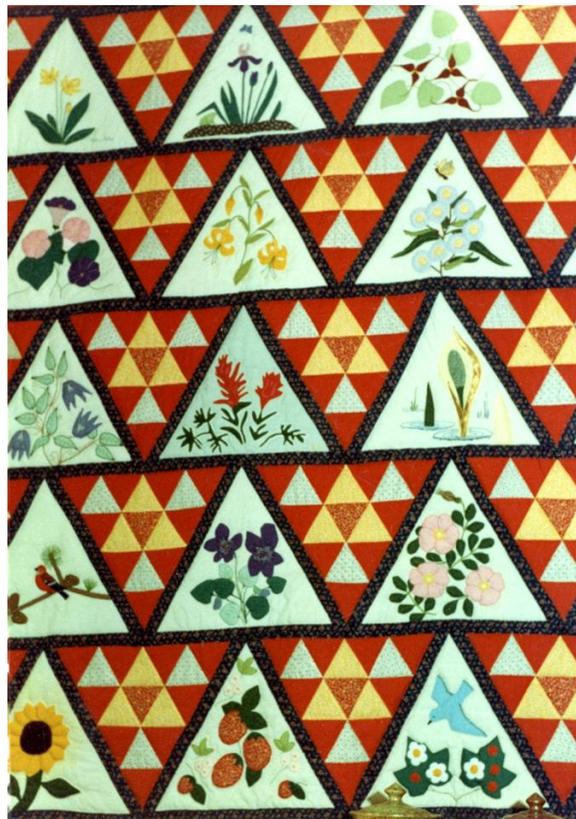
Patterns of Settlement: the Story of the Threads Guild Quilts

By Rita Moir, February 2022

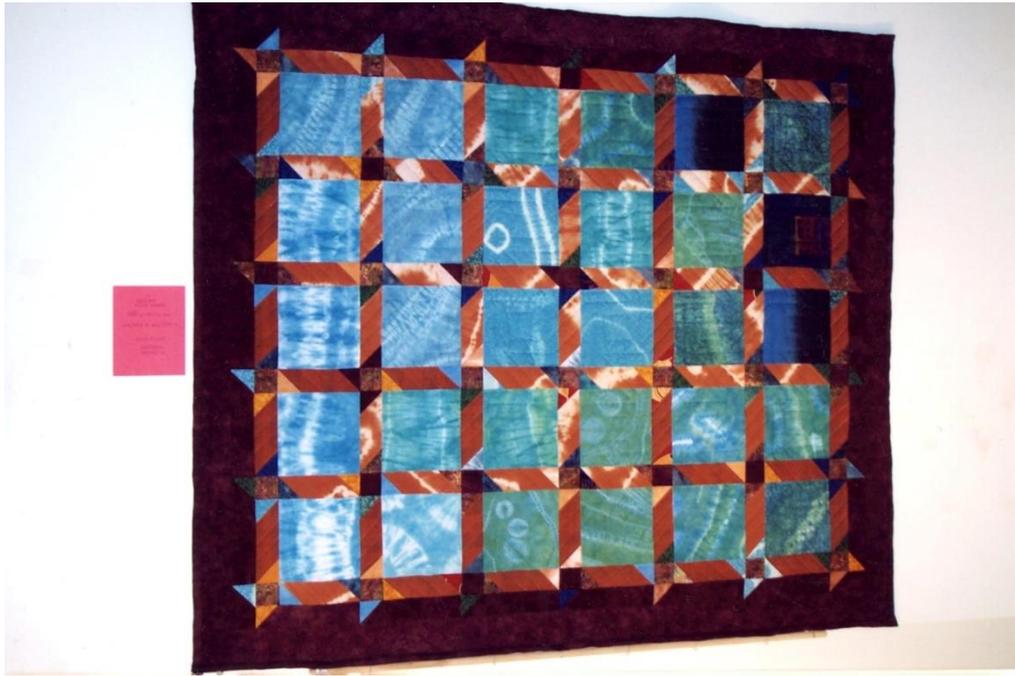
The Threads Guild photo albums provide a history tour of the Slovan Valley; as in most history tours, everyone so familiar now in older age was then so remarkably young, joining the Guild, learning new skills, becoming lifelong friends, with members coming and going, moving, dying, (and dyeing).

Seeing all the people – most are women – is like watching the community quilt itself. They start out as many individuals, then piece the larger group together as they create, experiment, take risks, become friends, and provide comfort.

When Guild members sent me photos and timelines, it struck me how the quilts morphed and changed from the first *Wildflowers of the Valley*, designed by Sheila Griffiths in 1983 – where she taught women who had only done squares, how to make more complex triangles – to those emanating from workshops such as J.C. Bradford's indigo dyeing: *Flowing Threads* in 2006 and *Indigo Connections* in 2008.



Wildflowers of the Valley, the Threads Guild's first raffle quilt, designed by Sheila Griffiths and made by Guild members in 1982. Won by Whitney Zack.



Flowing Threads, 2006, inspired by J.C. Bradford's indigo dyeing classes started in 2001. Won by Ellie Boer's parents.

Indigo dyeing took place over several seasons. Lesley Mayfield explains the process of putting pattern into the cloth, which for the uninitiated, is somewhat like tie-dyeing. "You create stitch resist patterns; indigo is a surface dye, not as penetrating as some, so the stitching scrunches the cloth up (like the shibori process). The thread is strong; you spritz the cloth, then pull the thread very tight. You're creating a physical barrier the dye won't penetrate, so just the exposed surfaces take the colour."



Indigo Connections, 2008. (l-r) Susan Mackintosh, Lesley Mayfield, Jane Armstrong and Brenda Elder. Won by Liz Evans.

In 1984, many members learned silk painting, and the quilt *Blue Heron Moon*, designed by Sharon Pawliw, who painted the heron, is the gorgeous result.



Blue Heron Moon quilt designed by, and the heron painted by, Sharon Pawliw in 1984. Won by Netta and Ed Zebroff.

Sharon had worked on the *Wildflowers* and *Puff Quilt*, and in 1983, when her son Liam was born (that's how she remembers the year), she learned to paint silk. Most of the *Blue Heron Moon* material was coloured fabric, but the heron started as a piece of smooth-textured white silk. Sharon isolated sections with a wax-type blocker to dam the various liquid dyes she had mixed. Later, she hand stitched around those sections and applied the heron onto the larger quilt.



Detail of the heron painted by Sharon Pawliw.

“Each quilt would be started by a small committee, designing, then buying fabric,” says Guild member Julie Davis. “As the project progressed more members would become involved, assembling and quilting. Each quilt would involve a different technique and style for variety. This was also to involve more members in the designing and making process.”



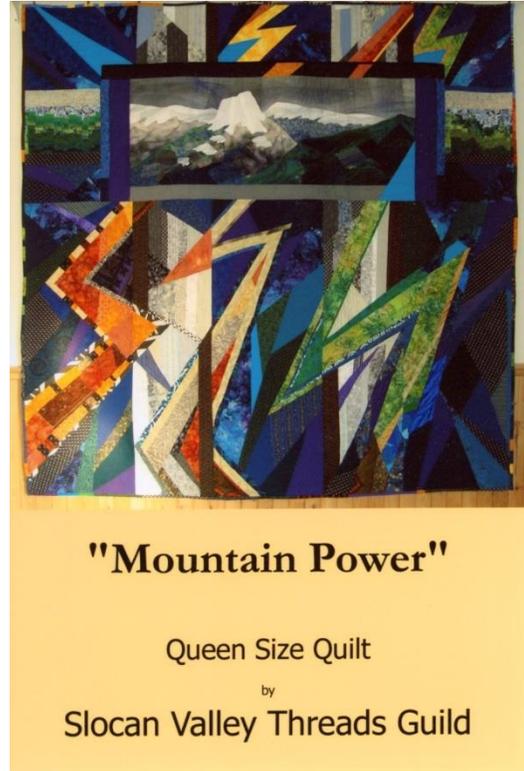
Puff Quilt, 1983, designed by Susan Mackintosh.

Lesley Mayfield describes that evolving process, a big shift when in 2011 she designed and oversaw the production of *Mountain Power*. The dynamic queen-sized quilt is inspired by the view from her window as she looked down the Slocan Valley.

“Everyone could identify with *Mountain Power*’s original design. The mountains determine our life here: the weather, the water and trees, the roads and patterns of settlement.”



Lesley Mayfield and Susan Mackintosh select fabric for *Mountain Power*. (See design in foreground.)



Mountain Power, 30th anniversary quilt, won by Elena Elder

After months of work, Guild members then spent months packing and hauling *Mountain Power* from pillar to post, selling raffle tickets at numerous venues, each time assembling a sturdy and portable metal display stand made by Lesley’s husband, Peter Vogelaar.

The very nature of the quilting itself (putting the top, the batting and the back together) has evolved over the years, says long-time Guild member Brenda Elder.

“It’s an evolution. *Indigo Connections* was hand quilted” (in carpentry terms, you might say you could see the apprentice tracks), “and now often it is professionally quilted, with a long-arm quilting machine.”

For the queen-sized *Mountain Power*, the Guild hired Debra McCracken at Flamingo Quiltworx in Castlegar.

“Without her and her long-arm machine,” says Lesley, “it would have taken the entire winter just to quilt. We showed her the movement in the patterns, how your eyes move over it. She really got it. She quilted jagged lines into the lightning, she quilted raindrops; quilting isn’t just sewing it together, it’s an art in itself.”



Castlegar News photo August, 2012. Debra McCracken at Flamingo Quiltworx.

But despite the evolution and professionalism earned over the years, initiates can still head to the Threads Guild to learn the basics, with members like Carol Andrews guiding the way.

The beauty of the quilts served in some kind of odd but fitting way as a fundraiser for the often unpretty but very necessary maintenance of the aging Threads Guild building, which like all buildings, not only had the regular bills like power and insurance, but needed maintenance – rotten underpinnings, old pipes, worn out heating systems and roofing. Each quilt, and there were ten over the years – made with volunteer labour and mostly donated materials – was raffled off for thousands of dollars. All that money, along with grants and donations, supported the building.

As well, the quilts served as a showcase to the community, with winners from the valley and beyond.

Members learned skills during “Members’ Days”, when one member would share a skill as she did her own work. So not a “teaching day” so much as a sharing day. Members dyed 20 pounds of sheets for the *Rag Rug*, which they wove during 2003 and 2004.

On another Members’ Day in 2005, Teri Jarrett and Donyne O’Coffey shared watercolour quilt techniques. In 2006, members dyed material for the *Flowing Threads* raffle.

Andrea Bryant, one of the main rag rug weavers during her few years with the Guild, recalls that J.C. Bradford was “very technical and was a professional weaver in the 1970s when weaving was all the rage. This rag rug was completely graphed out as for colour combination and pattern placement. This particular project had to be meticulously done by J.C.’s training standards. To get a true solid colour, fabrics need to be continuously rotating in the dye bath to get even colour distribution, quite a lengthy process to dye fabrics by that volume.”

Andrea, who had been weaving since 1993 and was most interested in working with the loom, did a large part of the weaving on the 13-foot rug.



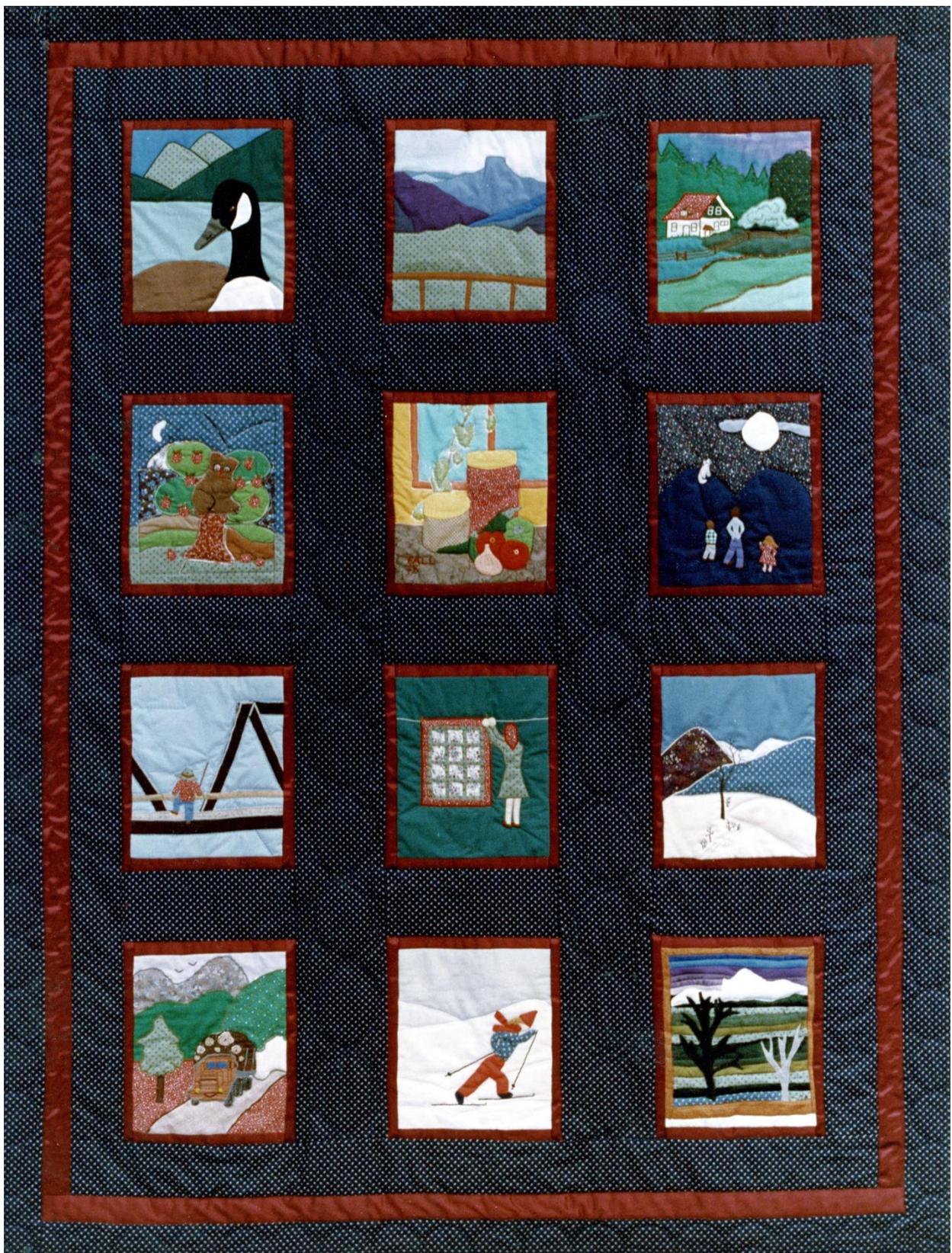
Rag rug (circa 2004) on the Threads Guild loom. Photo courtesy of Andrea Bryant.



13-foot hand-dyed rag rug runner won by Mona Ferguson. Photo courtesy of Andrea Bryant.



J.C. Bradford, Andrea Bryant, Tanya Carter and Jan Fraser span the meticulously dyed, woven rag rug.



Valley Scenes, 1987, where members designed and made the quilt squares. Won by Marion Bullanoff.



Denim and Lace, 2014, a dynamic though simpler design than *Mountain Power*, also designed by Lesley Mayfield, makes use of larger pieces, with contrasting and mixed fabrics. This photo shows the skill of Threads Guild members, not only in drawing together the quilters who raffled the quilts to raise funds for the building, but gathering government funders and those who helped repair the building. On August 18, 2014, MP Cathy McLeod (centre in red jacket) Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Western Economic Diversification, came to celebrate improvements to the building funded in part by WED. The Columbia Basin Trust also contributed. (l-r) Peter Vogelaar, Lois Lawrence, Val Mayes (MC for the day), Ashandra Block, MP Cathy McLeod, Sharon Block (Guild President), Lesley Mayfield, Clark Smith, RDCK Area H director Walter Popoff, Julie Davis, Barbara Mack, and Carol Andrews.

“Going to the Guild with an intention, like quilting, brought a lot of joy,” says Brenda Elder.

“We learned from each other; we shared expertise. When you walk into the Guild when people are working on projects, a hum reaches your heart – a sharing.”



Sheila Griffiths, Brenda Elder, Helen Lee, Sam Sansregret, Sharon Block work on *Snow Scenes*, 1993.

Thanks to Julie Davis, Brenda Elder, Lesley Mayfield, Sharon Pawliw, Andrea Bryant, Val Mayes and Gary Yakimchuk for their help with photos and research. All photos courtesy of the Threads Guild Archives unless otherwise noted.