

FIVE YEARS FROM ROOKIE TO RECOGNITION

Priscilla Bianchi uses bold, bright textiles from her native Guatemala for a decidedly foreign craft: quilting. “I *am* the ‘quilting community’ of Guatemala,” she says jokingly. A quilt artist, quilting teacher, and, more recently, quilt-fabric designer, Priscilla is noted for risk taking and a thirst for experimentation.



When I walked into New York’s American Craft Museum and saw one of my quilts hanging side by side with a Nancy Crow quilt, my jaw dropped to the floor. What an experience! “Here I am,” I thought, “and I didn’t make my first quilt until I was forty-two.”

Not that I hadn’t been surrounded by needlework all my life in a country noted for its textiles. When I was four years old, my mother taught me to use the Singer treadle sewing machine that had been my great-grandmother’s. My maternal grandmother taught me knitting (Grandma’s main thing), crochet, embroidery, and all sorts of needlecrafts. Needlepoint was taught at my school. When I was eleven, my mother put me

in a dressmaking class, and from then on I sewed my own clothes.

But we are *not* a typical Guatemalan family. My fraternal aunts grew up in California and became very Americanized. This came about because my grandfather had been in politics in Guatemala. As a result, he then spent eighteen years as a political exile in the U.S. My father was born there, but in 1933, when he was eight, the family returned to Guatemala. What culture shock for my aunts! In Guatemala, women were (and still are) generally shy, dependent, and subject to a lot of “machismo.” My American-bred aunts were liberated women. They held jobs, managed their own money, drove cars, and spoke their

minds. They have been excellent role models for us of the younger generation. Eating apple pie was as normal in our households as eating tortillas.

This cultural fusion, I'm convinced, had a lot to do with my taking up quilting. I've always kept scrapbooks of American magazine articles. Some from as far back as 1975 were about quilting. Guatemala is exposed to a lot of American media—magazines, TV and radio shows, and music. As in Japan, everyone wants to wear jeans, and many people look to the U.S. as a cultural model.

Then, about six years ago, I hit forty and began gaining weight. I didn't even want to know what my new measurements were, so the motivation for making my own clothes diminished. Still, I needed a creative outlet, some kind of artistic expression.

Simultaneously, I realized I was getting tired of several aspects of my job. I'd done what I wanted to do, and it was time for a change. Quilting had been at the back of my mind for many years, but I'd never had time to pursue it. The quilt books I ran across made it look very complicated. Then I found *Charm Quilts* by Beth Donaldson. That book did it for me! From the minute I opened it, I couldn't put it down. I read it in an evening and immediately started my first quilt. I couldn't wait to finish that quilt so I could do my second—and third! I was ecstatic!

Two years later, I had finished thirty quilts, still working nine-to-five. I admit I had the tremendous advantage of full time household help, something very common in Guatemala. (When I mention this to American quilters, they usually say, "Oh, *that's* your secret!" and they feel better.) Still, I was a veritable Energizer Bunny, staying up until well

after midnight each night. Then in 1999, I retired and started quilting full time.

Art quilting combines many of my favorite things. I'm a visual person, constantly finding inspiration all around me. I sketch, draw and design continually. I love colors. I am passionate about fabric, working with it and *buying* it. For me, finding a great fabric is like discovering gold. (One of my workshops is called "The Fabric Made Me Do It!")

Guatemala has one of the richest textile traditions in the world, but since quilting is not part of our inherited Spanish culture, the quilting movement hasn't caught on here yet. I've had to overcome many obstacles—no true quilting shops, teachers, notions, or gadgets. No support groups or quilting community to network with and learn from one another. No one fathoms what I'm doing, so getting recognized or even understood has been tough.

Yet, despite all the challenges, I realized very early on that I was hooked on quilting. I said to my husband, "This quilting thing is going to be with me the rest of my life. I need to find places to exhibit them." That was in October, 1998. Since then I've had nine solo shows, five of them in Guatemala, three in the U.S., and one in El Salvador.

Given my marketing and sales background, I decided to

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"Starbursts Go Red Hot," 2000, 39" x 50". A self-imposed challenge, stretching the possibilities of the striped and Ikat nature of Guatemalan textiles. I like to choose simple shapes (like hexagons) and fracture them to create surprising sub-patterns along the seam lines.



"Footpath to Todos Santos," 2000, 41.5" x 55". Machine pieced and quilted. Inspiration for this design came from traditional textiles worn by the people of Todos Santos, a small town in Guatemala's mountainous highlands. In their costume, the vertical zigzag symbolizes the footpaths that people leave behind when they walk up and down the steep mountains. Quilted by Laura Lee Fritz.

create a portfolio of my first thirty pieces. Then I made a list of fiber-friendly galleries and museums in the U.S. where I would like my work to be displayed. One of my portfolios went to the American Craft Museum in New York City. They replied they were very impressed with my work and eager to show what was being done in Central America to the New York public. It took a few years, but in 2002 they accepted one of my pieces, "Guatemalan Blocks." Currently, mine is the only piece by a Central American artist in their permanent collection, a great honor and accomplishment. "Guatemalan Blocks" was included in their traveling exhibit, "Six Continents of Quilts."

When I first started quilting, I regretted not having a family quilting background. It seemed a great loss. Then I encountered members of the "quilt police," those experts who insist

that things must be done only one way—their way. How fortunate I am to be free of that! I have no boundaries, no limitations. I can experiment and try a lot of new things. No one is peering over my shoulder, criticizing the dopey, creative, or experimental things I am doing "wrong."

Although I've studied drawing, painting, plastic arts, interior decorating, graphic design, and, more recently, quilting, I consider myself to be self-taught. My studies and travels have taken me to the U.S., Europe, Japan, Costa Rica, and other places.

My work is a fusion of cultures. I use purely American quilting techniques, patterns, and designs, combined with my own native Guatemalan textiles—many of ancient Mayan origins. But I don't limit myself just to Guatemalan textiles. My work mixes-and-matches Indonesian batiks, native African cloth,

hand-dyed and hand-painted cottons, shibori—any fabrics that have the same rustic, hand-made quality, that complement each other in a harmonious, effective way.

I've been fortunate throughout my life because I have loved everything I've worked at. I'm good at what I do because I enjoy it so much. I'm so grateful that I can choose.

The work of quilt artist and teacher Priscilla Bianchi has appeared in *FiberArts* magazine, *American Quilter*, *American Airline's Nexos* magazine, *Spirit Maps* by Joanna Arettam, and *The Designer's Sourcebook No. 15*. She is about to design her first line of fabrics for the Erlanger Group, Ltd.

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"Guatemalan Blocks," 2001, 77" x 70". Machine pieced and quilted. Permanent collection of the American Craft Museum, New York City. The dramatic look was achieved by the exclusive use of Guatemalan hand-woven textiles and plaids. Quilted by Beverly Rodgers.

"Rainbow Oranges," 2001, 59" x 55". Machine pieced and quilted. Traditional "orange peel" design with a twist. Multicolor Guatemalan fabrics were used over a dark navy background to create contrast and drama. Quilted by Beverly Rodgers.

