

international spotlight

Priscilla Bianchi



GUATEMALA



BLACK COFFEE (52" x 67")

IQA Journal: Tell us a bit about your personal background.

Priscilla Bianchi: I was born and raised in Guatemala. When I was 4 years old, my mother taught me to sew using my great-grandmother's Singer treadle sewing machine. I went to a Maryknoll bilingual schools, and then finished high school in Albany, NY. Back in Guatemala, I obtained a teaching degree. I worked for 15 years at private, bilingual schools, occupying both teaching and administrative positions and as headmistress for eight of those years. I graduated from college with a degree in industrial psychology, so for the next 12 years I worked in human resources administration. I was a consultant and instructor, training managers and employees in many different companies in Central America and the Caribbean.

I couldn't have known it when I started quilting five years ago, but I was about to plunge in with both feet, and make a life-changing decision. I quickly realized that art quilting brought together everything I liked! Sewing, fabric, colors, textures, visual images, design, and art. Three years ago I retired from it all, to dedicate myself full-time to quiltmaking.

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DANCING LIONS AND ZEBRAS (49" x 36")



SUNFLOWER (58" x 80")

***IQA Journal:* How did you first get interested in quilting and textiles and what has kept you interested?**

Bianchi: Being interested in textiles has been a natural process for me. By living in Guatemala, I've been surrounded by stunning Mayan textiles all my life. It's very common to see the native women wearing their colorful costumes every day. Textiles are displayed and sold everywhere: at the market, in the stores, and on the street. I started collecting *huipiles* (Mayan women's blouses) 25 years ago, so I own more than 40 handsome pieces that I wear on special occasions and hang on the walls at home.

I also have a passion for fabrics that constitute my palette. I will never have enough of them! I have some fabric that's so special, that I just take it out from time to time, pet it, caress it, admire it, lovingly fold it again, and put it back on the shelf. I derive pleasure from its sensuousness, and don't dare cut into it until I'm ready.

Having been exposed to the American culture in several ways, I knew about quilts and had been attracted to them for many years, although I never pursued quilting for lack of time. About six years ago, I hit 40 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. It was at that time that 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!*

Finding the art of quilting has given my spirit a voice to express itself. I'm sleepless many nights, because of all the ideas, designs, forms, and colors dancing in my mind; the best creative solutions usually come to me in the wee hours of the morning.

***IQA Journal:* You have shown a lot of your works in galleries and museums. How do you get them interested in your work?**

Bianchi: The company I worked for as a human resources administrator is owned by my husband. He took care of the finances, and I was in charge of marketing & sales. This gave me all the background I needed to market myself and my work as a quilt artist later on.

When I discovered art quilting, I knew what I wanted to do from the start. I had clear goals, prepared a strategic plan, set deadlines and projects that would keep me on track. I knew I'd be making so many pieces that I'd need places to exhibit them. This was going to be my new career, my new

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MULTICOLORED SASH

profession, and I'd tackle it with all my might! I started compiling a list of "fiber friendly" galleries and museums in the U.S., places where I'd like my work to be shown.

Two years later, I had finished 30 quilts, still working nine-to-five, and had exhibited them in two solo shows in Guatemala. The time was right to compile a portfolio of my work and send it out. This is how the American Craft Museum in New York City learned about my work. In April, 2002, they acquired one of my latest pieces *Guatemalan Blocks*, making me the only Central American fiberarts artist represented in their permanent collection. What a thrill!

IQA Journal: Your work definitely uses bold, bright colors and takes some risks. What does this "on the edge" approach allow you to do creatively that more traditional methods don't offer?

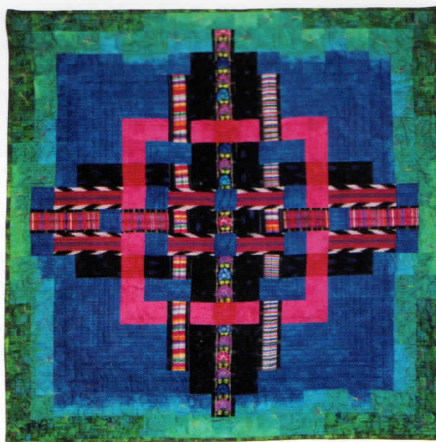
Bianchi: Since I have an art background in other mediums, I mix-and-match techniques, I experiment constantly, my work is constantly evolving. I'm not constrained to the quilting techniques alone.

I believe one of my greatest advantages is that I do not live in the U.S. Therefore, I'm removed from the quilting scene. Being isolated lets me be creative in a unique way, the context I live in influences me and makes my work different from anyone else's. I have no limitations.

IQA Journal: Guatemala has a lot of textile history, but not much in the way of quilting. Why is that, and how do you hope to change that?

Bianchi: Although Guatemala has one of the richest textile traditions in the world, quilting is practically unknown. We do have other forms of needlework, embroidery, crochet, knitting, weaving, but quilting is not part of our inherited Spanish tradition.

My vision is to start a quilting revolution! Five years ago very few people knew what quilting was. Nowadays, Guatemalans are having the opportunity to appreciate quilts as art. I enjoy listening to their "ooohs!" and "aaahs!"



RANDA I SHADOW (47" x 47")

when they stand in front of a piece and finally realize what it's all about.

I consider my May 2002 exhibit at the National Museum of Modern Art in Guatemala City the most significant one to date. This was the very conservative Guatemalan art establishment's way of accepting art quilts as a new genre, as works of art intended for the wall, and not merely bedspreads.

IQA Journal: How do you get your supplies, fabrics, etc. ?

Bianchi: Easy! Aside from the textiles and scraps I get locally, and a few other supplies, everything else I buy online or by mail-order from the U.S. I have an address in Miami and a postal service company that safely takes packages and correspondence to and from Miami to Guatemala daily. Orders take about 7-10 days to arrive, which is really fast and convenient.

IQA Journal: What do you see as the biggest differences between U.S. quilting and Guatemalan quilting?

Bianchi: When people in the U.S. ask me "how's the quilting community in Guatemala?" I usually reply with a big smile and say "you're looking at it!" And unfortunately, I'm not far away from the truth. I know of three small groups of 10-12 women who get together to quilt. They are very conservative, doing everything by hand (and thus, frowning at my machine quilting), mostly copying traditional American designs without changing anything. They do not use native textiles, only U.S. cottons. They were taught by American ladies who lived here 12 or 15 years ago, and haven't evolved since then.



GIANT KITE WITH SHADOW (58" x 68.5")

Incredibly, the average Guatemalan is not aware of how unique and precious our native textiles are, and as a result does not appreciate them at all. Most people dismiss them with a "same-old, same-old" kind of attitude.

So, what's the biggest difference? I admire quilters in the U.S. for their thirst for learning, their open-mindedness to new things, their receptive attitude towards foreign traditions, and their positive attitude towards life in general.

IQA Journal: How does coming from Guatemala influence your teaching perspective and execution?

Bianchi: When I started quilting five years ago, I was aware that I was "importing" a completely foreign tradition into Guatemala. So, imprinting not only my individual

personality and style, but also my Guatemalan identity and my roots became of the utmost importance. I wanted to pay homage to my heritage, my culture, our Mayan influence, and to traditional quilting.

Being Guatemalan is what makes my work different from the hundreds of well-known quilt artists around the world. This is the element that distinguishes everything I do. This is exactly what I try to transmit in my teaching, that different culture, with its different points of view. I like to present students with ideas that will let them see the same things with new eyes, from a different perspective.

I like to encourage students to find their own voice, to express themselves through their work, to give personality

to their quilts. My attitude towards students is positive and supportive. I believe in the creativity and empowerment each person possesses, and like to persuade them to be curious, to take risks, to experiment.

My classes are process-oriented, filled with relevant information, practical tips, and personal insight. I believe that hands-on experience is the way for students to learn. I love to teach and have the opportunity to motivate and inspire students with my enthusiasm and passion towards art quilting, so that they can enjoy it as much as I do!

IQA Journal: What made you decide to join IQA?

Bianchi: It was suggested to me by Roberta Horton, and I immediately followed her advice. I'm always thirsty for information on what's happening out there in the way of workshops, shows, contests, etc. I thought this was a great way to tap into that info and meet interesting people from all over the world.

I needed to find other quilters and artists who share my same interests, a support group if you will. Networking for me is of the utmost importance, since I don't have the chance to do that at home.

It'll never cease to amaze me, how small the world really is, and how people coming from such different backgrounds can share and have so many things in common!

IQA Journal: Finally, do you have a memorable story that has to do with your quilting?

Bianchi: I have a very small design wall space in my studio. Two narrow strips of wall (24" each) with the door

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to my son's bathroom smack in the middle. I used it like this for two years, stretching my imagination to figure out what each half of the design would look like once sewn together. Suddenly one night I had a revelation...what if I covered the door with a flannel-wrapped extra-thick piece of foam board (to level the door's surface to the surrounding walls) and so it'd become an integral part of the design wall? I rushed out the next day, bought the materials, did all the work, and in the evening

it was done, my brand-new re-designed wall! I was asleep when my son came home very late that night. He had no idea what had taken place. Early next morning he approached me with a frown and worried look and says: "Mom, why did you soundproof my bathroom?" ♦

To see more of Priscilla's work, visit her web site at www.priscillabianchi.com



Attention Teachers!

Sign up now to be included in the IQA Teacher Directory in the Summer 2003 issue of *Quilts. . . A World of Beauty*.

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