

STOLEN TOO! To Stop a Thief

An art quilt is a themed, one-of-a-kind creative expression in fabric. The very fact that an art quilt is distinctive and individualistic in nature, can spawn an enticing target for a quilt thief. When a quilter's work is stolen, their world stops turning. Panic, anxiety, and heartbreak can stop them in their tracks. It is one thing to be victimized by a stranger who does not necessarily know what they are stealing – like in a smash and grab robbery or when a delivery shipment goes awry – but something quite different when the thief knows exactly what they are stealing. Exquisite, stunning “show” quilts, stolen during exhibitions are targeted for theft; and the thief could very likely be a fellow quilter, a notion so repugnant as to be beyond belief. Let's face it, to most of us, hearing the words “quilter” and “thief” used together is true paradox.

Trust is implied when an artist displays their artwork in public. Show exhibitors must be relied on to protect a quilter's life work as well as their own integrity. Despite best intentions, however, some creative quilters have been victimized while showcasing their work in public. Imagine the feelings of violation and despair when a quilter's fibre art renderings - beautiful art quilts – find their way out of an exhibition hall in the hands of a thief.

Anne Morrell Robinson of Kingross Quilts & Fibre Arts (www.kingrossquilts.com)

Set in the breathtakingly beautiful hills of the Margaree Valley in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia is Anne Robinson's charming quilt studio. (Insert photo #1) Peace and quiet and inspiration surround Anne while she works creating lovely, themed show pieces like her appliqué quilt, *Birds of Color*. (Insert photo #2) In 2002, Anne chose to enter her art quilt into the New York State Fair, a hustling, bustling Fair catering to thousands of visitors; a world apart from Cape Breton.

Displayed behind a 3' picket fence, Fair organizers hung large quilts like *Birds of Color* (108"x108") from ceiling rods, for all visitors to see but not touch. As the Fair was about to be closed for the evening, unbelievably, a thief managed to not only get behind the fence, but to also remove Anne's quilt from the rod and escape without detection. Seemingly, an unbelievable feat in a public forum! Security officers noticed the missing fibre art as they were locking doors for the evening.

Anne invested two years in making *Birds of Color* come to life, a heart and soul project that disappeared in the blink of an eye. While local area radio and TV stations conducted some post-theft interviews with Anne, the publicity was to no avail; her quilt is still missing. State Fair organizers, while sympathetic to Anne's plight, were not liable for the theft and therefore did not compensate her for her loss. *Birds of Color* was appraised for thousands of dollars, but due to a glitch in Anne's insurance coverage, she was unable to collect on her policy. In true quilter's "bounce back" style, however, Anne has just recently remade her quilt using a similar theme... she calls the new piece *Colorful Birds of the World* (insert photo #3). It is truly magnificent

John Sauls, Antique Quilts Dealer

(johnsauls@tyler.net)

John Sauls is a veteran antiques dealer with a special fondness of vintage quilts. A present day Texan, he exhibits his quilts around the United States at major shows and festivals. It was at the Houston Quilt Festival (a public exhibition) in 2010 that John's antique compass quilt (insert photo #4) was brazenly stolen from his exhibition booth. At a particularly busy time, two women approached John's booth simultaneously...he responded to one of the women; his employee responded to the other. John's customer asked him a few inane questions and then both women left the booth individually. John then went to check on a specific quilt for another customer, and it became immediately apparent to him that the antique compass quilt, the most expensive in the hanging group, was missing. (insert photo #5) In hindsight, he is certain that the two women served as a distraction while a third person removed the antique quilt from its hanger in his booth.

Despite his attendance at many major shows, John is quick to point out that this type of theft has never happened to him in the past. He praises the organizers of the Houston Quilt Festival and blames himself for constructing what he refers to as a "blind spot" in his booth. John says, "Quilt Festival is without a doubt one of the most professional, top notch quilt organizations in the Country".

Nancy O'Bryant Puentes is Executive Vice-President of Quilts, Inc., the producer of Houston Quilt Festival. Nancy warrants that, despite accommodating 60,000 visitors each year, Quilt Festival sustains

only a miniscule amount of loss due to theft. Her 24-hour security staff consist of current or former police officers and they are visible throughout the exhibition; installed both inside and outside the building, at each entrance and at loading docks. Plain clothes officers circulate undetected throughout the crowd; an omnipresent deterrent to theft.

Beverly Fawcett (beverly_fawcett@yahoo.com)

Like so many exhibitors, Bev Fawcett never contemplated quilt theft. That is until 2012, when her Beatle's-inspired, whimsical art quilt went missing from the Lakewood Quilt Show. *When My Mind Goes Wandering* (insert photo #6) was likely stolen during the first few hours of the exhibition, when someone unpinned and removed the small gem (25"x23") from a curtain backdrop. Now, Bev admits she is "a teensy bit apprehensive about showing any quilt in public" and asks more security-related questions of show organizers.

Similar to Anne Robinson's experience, there was interest in Bev's stolen quilt from local TV stations and newspapers. As is typical, a police report was filed, posters of the quilt were dispersed in the neighborhood, and eBay was scoured by family members. But, Bev also took action in a way that was **not** typical. At subsequent exhibitions, (believe it or not!) she wore a photo of her stolen art quilt around her neck! Feeling the pain of Bev's loss, fellow quilters wrapped her in layers of sympathy, but unfortunately, no quilt sighting.

Eric J. Woehr, an investigator with the Ontario County Sheriff's Office in New York State, has delved into art quilt theft in the past. When asked his opinion of the markets available to a quilt thief, he says, "the only avenues I'm aware of would be flea markets, art shows or the internet." As part of his after-theft investigation protocol, Eric sends out a photo and press release of the stolen quilt to local media outlets and also accesses the services offered by Artloss.com, the World's largest database of stolen art and LeadsOnline.com, a website dedicated to recovering stolen property.

Quilters: perform your due diligence before showcasing your work in public. Query exhibit organizers on their security procedures and read, read, and read again, the show's application forms and rules and regulations. Ensure there will be a direct sight line to your quilt; obscured vision is a thief's delight! Pay particular attention to your intuition. If a show's visitor demonstrates peculiar behaviour towards you or your work, take heed. Heighten your antennae rather than reigning them in. Your work is your work . . . it is beautiful and valuable and belongs to you. Take every step possible to ensure a thief doesn't walk away with a piece of your life.