

"Quilting is really two things," Marion says, showing me several layers of fabric. "Stitching together layers of fabric is one aspect of quilting. Creating a colourful pattern, which is then sewn together is another step in the process."

In its simplest form, quilting has been around since the days of the early Egyptians who were known to have sandwiched straw between layers of fabric, and then sewed the layers together to form a warm, if scratchy coverlet. Quilted fabric protected knights from the chafing of their body armour in the middle ages and women quilted petticoats which were often considered too pretty to hide, so fashion often decreed that overskirts were split or hoisted up into a belt to draw attention to the fine stitchery on the petticoat underneath. Stitching could be in the form of elaborate, feathery plumes, hearts, zigzags or scallops, patterns that are still repeated across the face of quilts today.

The art of creating patterns with bits of cloth stitched to layers of fabric was not truly popular until the early nineteenth century when textiles were being created in vast quantities as a result of the industrial revolution. Patchwork quilts became a popular Victorian craft for ladies in sewing circles not too different from the quilting groups today.

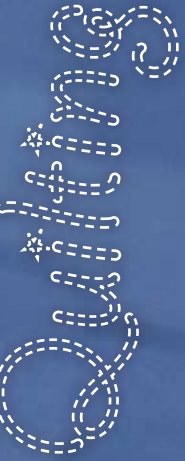
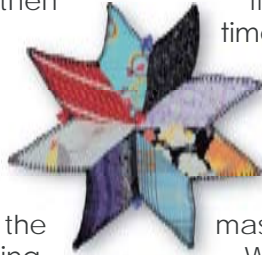
Marion shows me samples of the many stitch patterns – hearts, plumes, curving scallops and sprightly rows of zig zags.

"It really is too bad when quilts are left sitting in a plastic bag waiting for the mythical day that someone will have the time to stitch it together," she says, carefully piling the samples back onto a table.

Traditional hand quilters ruefully understand the time involved in finishing a quilt. Although they acknowledge the efficiency of the machine method, they say that handmade quilts are different.

"The stitches are softer, not so tight," Shirley says, smoothing a hand over one of her many masterpieces. "They just look different"

Which goes back to the romance of it all – the hundreds upon hundreds of tiny stitches plied by hand, in and out, hour after hour, in the company of friends and neighbours or sitting quietly at home. There's something about the process itself, the hypnotic, soothing quality of sewing, the Zen-ness of being in the moment; you, the needle and the thread and the acre of material stretched in front of you. Everyone wants a piece of that spirit, that time stitched into the quilt on their bed; and that's also why there are so many quilts hidden in closets waiting for the time that may never come.



Below, Marion Ferris works on a quilt



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