

Need Inspiration? Channel Helen Kelley

How many of you were quilting while Helen Kelley's column, "Loose Threads," appeared in *Quilters Newsletter* magazine? I always felt like I was visiting with a good neighbor when I read her musings, and apparently many others did too because she successfully marketed three separate book collections of her articles. But after reading her Honoree bio on the Hall of Fame website, I found that I really didn't know much about Helen after all. Click here and see if you learn something new too. <https://quiltershalloffame.net/helen-kelley/>

What's interesting me about Helen Kelley right now, aside from the fact that I missed her birthday last month (I'm going to try to keep up and write about Honorees when their day comes up), is where she got her quilt ideas from, and the lengths she went to in exploring those ideas.

My first volunteer assignment at the Hall of Fame was cataloging books in the Library, and I was overwhelmed with Kelley's donation of 600+ volumes. Thankfully, she had sent them to us with her own digital record system and all we had to do was convert to our Past Perfect format; but it was still a lot of work. Among the usual history and how-to books, Helen gave us so many books on Native American culture that we needed to create a whole new category for them. Some of these books must have been the source for her own book, *Scarlet Ribbons*, in which she explored Native American Indians' use of French silk ribbon for reverse applique floral designs. And here's just one of her quilts in a Native American style:



Kelley, Helen. Indian Dance No. 4 – Osage. 1984. From Minnesota Quilters Inc., Minnesota Quilt Project. Published in *The Quilt Index*, <http://www.quiltindex.org/fulldisplay.php?kid=49-7E-1247>. Accessed: 05/4/2020

Kelley didn't limit herself to North American ethnic groups when she looked for ideas; her vision was world-wide. In 1980, when quilt historian Cuesta Benberry started lecturing on African quilts, Kelley was able to encourage her and share with her a picture from her archives of an African quilt made for Peace Corps workers. So that's one place she got her ideas: world heritage images. And her Norwegian heritage figured prominently too, as seen in this rosemaling design

(with a couple of elves because it was for a grandchild).



Kelley, Helen. Norwegian Elves. 1979. From Minnesota Quilters Inc., Minnesota Quilt Project. Published in *The Quilt Index*, <http://www.quiltindex.org/fulldisplay.php?kid=49-7E-123E>. Accessed: 05/4/2020

If anyone is interested in a research project, you could follow Helen Kelley around the globe and see how she extracted ethnic designs for her own quilting.

Another source of ideas was her actual travel experiences. She created twenty-four "postcard" quilts based on places she visited. Here are a few from the Hall of Fame Collection:





Left: Holland (like a Dutch tile)

Center: San Fransisco (you know where)

Right: Stamp of the back of France

You can read a detailed description of each of these quilts, and see more photos at the following three links. And if you want to go farther down the rabbit hole, use the fourth link.

<https://quiltershalloffame.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/FB7E22A5-500E-4A0B-9B2A-138487097847>

<https://quiltershalloffame.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/83265459-6B29-4B2B-BB2A-883216802964>

<https://quiltershalloffame.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/66CD395F-E987-4637-97AE-116182273970>

<https://quiltershalloffame.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/8590D7AF-F0E2-4606-BCA8-564523183646>

If you checked that last link (welcome back), you may have also noticed another source of Helen Kelley's ideas for

inspiration: Just Do It. Her wall hanging with eleven suns was made to display different quilting techniques. So, if you want to showcase your skills, or try out some different sewing skills, follow a time-honored idea and produce a sampler.

Maybe you're a history buff or enjoyed watching the *Victoria* series on Masterpiece Theater. If you were Helen Kelley, you'd turn that into a quilt idea. I love the way she incorporated the crazy quilt style that's associated with the late Victorian Era.



Kelley, Helen. Jubilee. 1976-1999. From International Quilt Study Center & Museum, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Ardis and Robert James Collection. Published in *The Quilt Index*, <http://www.quiltindex.org/fulldisplay.php?kid=60-DC-428>. Accessed: 05/4/2020

Of course, Kelley's ideas weren't all sophisticated or

Tapestry series (yes, one of the books items I catalogued was about the Bayeux Tapestry, but I haven't found that on a Kelley quilt yet). And there is Helen's quilt, *Renaissance* which was selected as one of the 100 Best Quilts of the 20th Century. It was based on traditional Norwegian tapestry and made in honor of her husband's grandmother.



Where do your quilt ideas come from? I generally just find a pattern and some fabric I like, but after researching for this post, I wonder if I couldn't stretch myself. Helen Kelley had no shortage of sources for her quilt designs. Whatever was part of her world or part of the whole world was fair game. If you find yourself not knowing where to go with your next quilt, take a hint from Helen, look around you with new eyes,

look to a different culture, look into the past. Stay tuned; I might try that myself.

Your quilting friend,

Anna