



What is Modern Quilting?

by Susan Bowslaugh
photos by Monique Kruppa.

Modern Quilting is a recent and growing movement in the quilt world. It has attracted a younger generation of sewists and quilters who have a fresh, modern take on the art and craft of quilting. Self-expression and a fearless attitude towards the rules of quilting are reflected in today's quilts.

In many ways, Modern Quilting is hard to define. In fact, some new sewers reject the term "modern quilting" and refer to their work as "fresh traditional" or "updated traditional". No two modern quilts are alike. Each reflects the personality and style of the maker and like other art forms, changes and adapts from person to person. But as more and more modern quilts are made, a definite style and look has emerged. Once you've seen a number of modern quilts, you'll be able to identify one. It is almost easier to define what "Modern Quilting" isn't. It isn't like traditional quilting with hundreds of pieces sewn together into a grid of blocks with perfectly matching points. It isn't art quilting designed to be displayed on a wall with its focus on mixed media and made with an artist's vision. It is a style that is simple, colourful, yet sophisticated.

One might think that any quilt made in 2013, with tools like a rotary cutter and sewing machine, is modern but "modern quilting" refers to a distinct style. Where traditional quilts feature elaborate piecing or appliqué, a series of blocks and coordinated fabric, modern quilts embrace simplicity, geometry and minimalism. But don't think workmanship is ignored. These quilts are meant to be used—snuggled up in, wrapped around a child, thrown in the washer and are made to last.

Modern quilts are functional rather than decorative and feature graphic designs,

irregular shapes, and improvisational piecing. Modern quilts emphasize colour, negative space, line and texture. They have unusual, often asymmetrical settings, use bold, unexpected colour combinations, and extremely dense quilting—most often done on a domestic sewing machine. A modern quilt may be as simple as reinventing a recognizable block—indeed many feature fresh interpretations of log cabin blocks, stars, 9-patch blocks or as complicated as a piece of art inspired by Mondrian and Picasso. New quilters are returning to basic shapes such as squares, hexagons, circles and half-square triangles. However, these shapes are not the small, fussy cut pieces of the past but are made in large scale using saturated colours that have a remarkable visual impact when made with contemporary fabrics.

One distinct feature of modern quilts is the large amount of negative space—often using white or gray—that gives the impression that shapes are floating. This unoccupied space can be within a block or surrounding shapes on the quilt top. It can form secondary patterns or give the eye a place to rest, if large prints and intense colours are used. It also gives the quilter a blank space to showcase her machine quilting skills. Quilting patterns often feature dense parallel lines, stippling, circles or free motion patterns from the maker's imagination. Another identifying feature is that rarely do modern quilts have a border or borders. Many are made in the "pillowcase" style so edges are finished with no binding.

This new aesthetic puts the emphasis on the fabric design and not the block design. Fabric designers have done a lot of the work

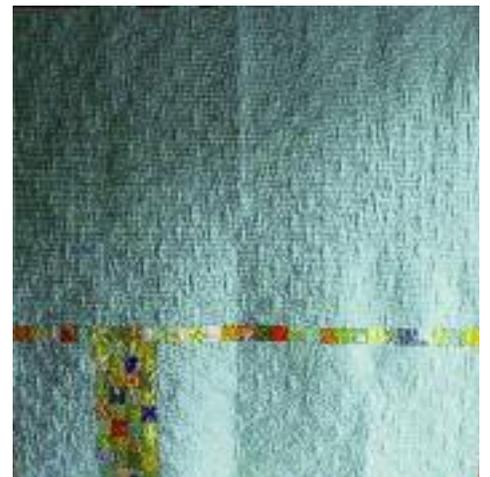
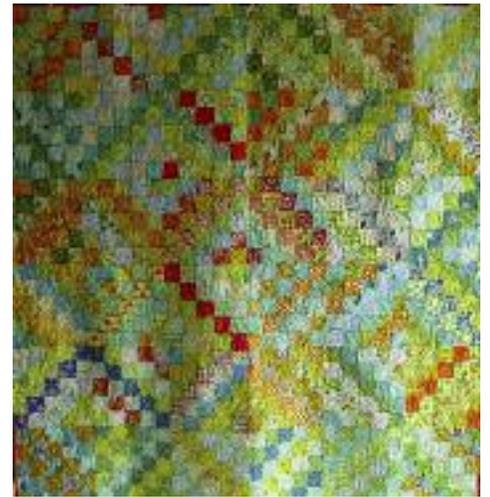


Made by Susan Bowslaugh—rainbow pillow—experimenting with close, parallel lines of machine quilting.

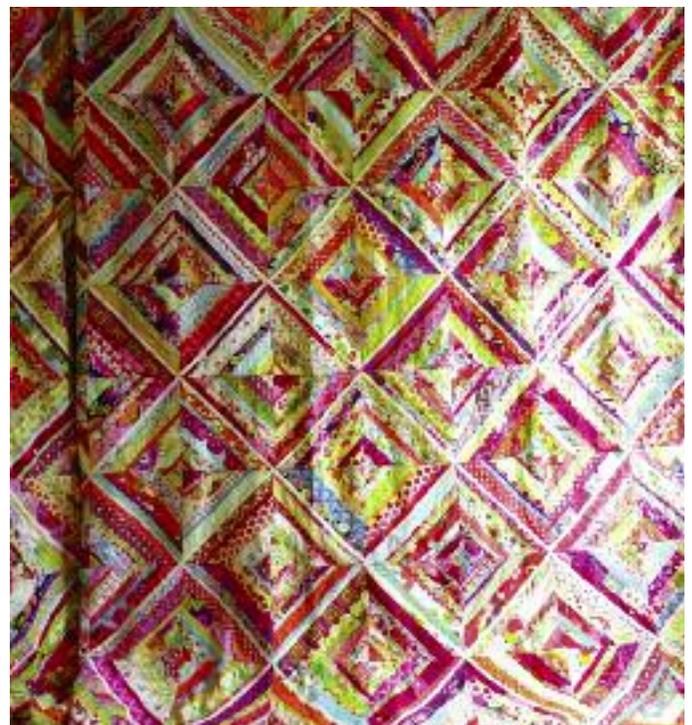
of a quilt's design. Blocks or shapes are often made large because these fabrics can lose their impact when cut into small pieces. Modern quilters do not limit their fabric selection to cotton quilting fabrics but may use vintage or recycled textiles, custom printed fabric, fabric from their stash or new fabric from some of the many fresh modern designers. These quilters combine fabrics from many different sources rather than using a complete fabric line. Solids are used extensively in modern quilts. Without the distraction of prints or patterns, focus is placed on design and craftsmanship. There is, however, a sub-group of modern quilters who believe "more is better" and their quilts are made with a multitude of fabrics still using unconventional colours or patterns.

Many credit quilting pioneers like Nancy Crow and Michael James with first breaking the rules of quilting and developing dynamic designs that inspired new quilters. The geometry and solid colours used in Amish quilts as well as the improv piecing and make do attitude of the Gee's Bend quilters are reflected in today's pieces.

The modern quilting movement started appearing in the early 2000's and has spread rapidly through the use of social media. Affordable digital cameras started the trend of sharing photos online so sewers who were experimenting with simple, bright designs could share with others through Facebook,



CLOCKWISE FROM THE TOP RIGHT: *Trip Around the World*—using maker's extensive collection of modern fabrics, made by Monique Kruppa; reverse side of *Trip Around the World* using leftover squares and flannel, made by Monique Kruppa; *Lotza Dotz*—I love polka dots and used 49 different ones in this fresh take on two traditional patterns—Log Cabin and Dresden Plates, made by Susan Bowslaugh; detail of Log Cabin; *Modern Squares*—several variations on the traditional log cabin offset by lots of white neutral space, made by Susan Bowslaugh;



CLOCKWISE FROM THE TOP LEFT: *Red Frames*—based on a pattern by Kaffe Fassett and showcasing the bright, bold, large prints from the Kaffe Fassett collective, made by Susan Bowslaugh; Reverse side of *Red Frames*. Many modern quilts forgo the traditional one fabric backing for a pieced one; Detail of *Red Frames*; *Colour Study* table runner, made by Susan Bowslaugh; A king sized string pieced quilt, foundation pieced on muslin squares, made by Monique Kruppa; Detail of string pieced quilt; *Log Cabin Variations*, made by Monique Kruppa.

Flickr, Youtube and blogs. The Modern Quilt Guild was founded in 2009 giving the online community a place to connect with other like-minded quilters. There are now almost 200 chapters of the MQG including groups in Australia, South America, Europe, India, U.S.A and 14 here in Canada. Many groups never meet in person but share patterns, inspiration, challenges, fabric swaps and completed projects online. Other groups have arranged quilt-alongs or sew-ins as a way to personally connect with other sewers. Modern Quilting has been featured in many mainstream quilting magazines and new publications are popping up dedicated to this new aesthetic. There was a featured display of modern quilts at the Houston Quilt Market in 2012 and the first Modern Quilt Con was held in February, 2013, in Austin, Texas. The demand for fresh, bright fabrics has fueled a change in the quilting industry and many of the pioneers of the modern quilting movement now design fabric lines for major textile manufacturers. Names in the movement include Denyse Schmidt, Weeks Ringle, Bill Kerr, Alissa Haight

Carlton (founder of the MQG), Elizabeth Hartman, Sarah Fielke, Amy Butler, and Heather Bailey.

The modern quilting community is welcoming to quilters of all ages and abilities and freely shares information and techniques. There are no quilt police in the modern quilting world—no one to tell what size your blocks or borders should be, no one to tell you what colours should go together, no one to point out that your points or corners don't match, no one to insist that only pre-washed, quilting cottons should be used, and no one to measure your seam allowance or count how many quilting stitches per inch you can accomplish. This freedom from the rules has allowed creativity to flourish. Many new quilters dive into their stash of fabric without a plan or templates and instinctively produce a balanced, colourful well-made quilt. Instead of spending months piecing or appliquéing hundred of pieces, a modern quilt can be completed in a short space of time. Many in this group of new quilters are young, working moms, so simple, easy to complete projects are vital

and satisfying. The bright, minimal aesthetic quilt fits into their homes and lifestyle. In addition to quilts, these sewists are making baby accessories, aprons, pillows, tote bags, and clothing in the same fun, colourful, and simple style.

Almost any traditional quilt can be made into a modern quilt. Enlarge the size of the block, use only solids, and make fewer blocks but add wider sashings in white or grey. Set aside the ruler and let the rotary cutter cut some wonky strips or indulge in some new fabrics by today's modern designers.

Modern quilters are no different than today's traditional quilters. Both groups aim to make beautiful, lasting, useful items for the people they care about. All quilters want to instill some of their personality in their work and use whatever tools are available to them. It just happens that the tools of today are technology based. Spend some time online looking at posted pictures of modern quilts, click on links to various blogs or visit the Modern Quilt Guild website to see what might appeal to you.

Susan Bowlaugh

—From Traditional to Modern Quilter

I started quilting in 1980 after many years of fashion sewing and other forms of needlework. I was a self-taught quilter and learned techniques from books and magazines. Like many new quilters, I tried to duplicate the traditional patterns I found there. Gradually I started putting my own spin on those patterns—by changing the setting, combining patterns, until I reached the point where I was comfortable designing my own patterns. I have always been attracted to bright, clear colours and these made their way into my work.

In 2009, I discovered a small fabric shop selling fabrics I had never seen before—vibrant, bold, luscious textiles by designers like Amy Butler, Anna Maria Horner, Phillip Jacobs and Kaffe Fassett. Books, blogs and websites started illustrating “modern quilts” and I was hooked.

I ended up working and teaching at that fabric store—*Bee Fabrics* in Niagara-on-the-Lake and making modern quilts.

I don't think I've completely made the transition from traditional to modern quilter. I haven't yet made a completely minimal, geometric, improv quilt. I still find it hard to break out of the block format but I am trying to incorporate more negative space and solid fabrics and I've eliminated borders on my most recent works. I am learning to machine quilt, although I still love the process of hand quilting.

I am a member and past president of the Niagara Heritage Quilters' Guild and a founding member of the Niagara Modern Quilt Guild. My two sides are often at odds and like most quilters, I have many more quilts planned than I'll ever have time to make—both modern and traditional.

Our Modern Quilt group will be having a display at *Quilt Canada 2014* in Niagara. Hope to see you there.

