



# Jim Wilford The Quilted Path

as told to Marcy Horswill

*Haida Heritage, 44" x 72".* Depiction of theme *Canadian*. Central totem represents totems past and raven heads on the side represent continuing Haida heritage. Hand appliquéd and hand quilted by jim.

Quilting became a path, like many others in my life, I thought I would follow for a while. The problem with quilting is I haven't found a need to branch off that path yet.

## Jim Wilford CONTINUED

### How long have you been an artist?

I think naming yourself an artist is different for everyone. Some people are raw beginners and think they are an artist. I remember doing art pieces in grade school and I did a painting of moths and butterflies as an art project in teacher's college. However, I never considered myself an artist until about halfway through my secondary school teaching period, after many years of practising art.

### What led you to becoming an art teacher?

It just sort of happened. I always said, from the time I was in grade school, I wanted to be a teacher, so when I finished high school in 1948, there was not much else I was interested in. I went to Normal School (a forerunner to teacher's college). When I started teaching I enjoyed the art classes with the students. My peers were always impressed with what my students were doing, so I was encouraged to specialize in art education and thoroughly enjoyed that decision for the rest of my teaching career.

### When did you first quilt?

I grew up in a rural community where the women held regular quilting bees. Quilting caught my attention because making things with my hands always fascinated me. I did a bit of quilting as a teenager—not a major move toward quilting, but one more about curiosity. In the 70s my best friend's widow (who remarried) developed Alzheimer's. I went to her and her new husband's home once a week to help her make a *Dresden Plate* quilt. The quilt was intended to be physical therapy for her, but it ended up being a move in that direction for me as well. In 1991, I joined a guild even though I had no idea what a guild was. When I finally went to a meeting, I was hooked.

### What was your first quilt project?

After the *Dresden Plate* quilt, mentioned above, but prior to joining a guild, I made a *Thousand Pyramid* quilt for my son and a *Star* quilt for my oldest daughter. I made the two quilts because my mother made a quilt for each of my siblings and myself (seven children in all) before she passed away in 1979. My quilt became my youngest daughter's quilt and I felt my other two children should have a quilt.



*Heirloom of Hearts*, 32" x 32". Theme challenge of the Windsor Quilt Guild, *Heirloom of Quilts*. Original blocks and border using hearts. Hand appliquéd and hand quilted. *NJS* entry, Toronto, 2000.

### When and why did quilting become a passion for you?

I retired from teaching in 1985 and my wife passed away in 1988, so I had time to join a guild. Once I joined the Leamington Guild in 1991, I became fascinated by the world of quilting. I always considered quilting an extension of the art world I lived my whole life in. Quilting became a path, like many others in my life, I thought I would follow for a while. The problem with quilting is I haven't found a need to branch off that path yet. I visited pottery about four years ago and then, and I do a small bit of painting; however, quilting is still first and foremost in my daily life.

### What made you decide to become a member of CQA/ACC?

A friend of mine asked me to make a wall hanging from some discontinued Sears® fabrics she owned. She knew I belonged to a guild and was into quilting. I made a piece I called *Summer Bay*. When I showed it at a guild meeting, a couple of members who exhibited with CQA/ACC suggested I put the

piece in a quilt show. I planned a trip to Ottawa, ON that spring to see the National Gallery of Art, The Museum of Human Civilization and other national museums. *Quilt Canada* happened at the same time. I went to the quilt show, decided to become a member and enter *Summer Bay* in the *National Juried Show* (NJS) the next year at Thunder Bay, ON. The piece was accepted, so I went as a delegate.

What an eye opener. The quilts blew me away. Everyone was so kind and helpful. Many of those first people I met are still some of my most dear friends in quilting. I still see them every year or every other year at the conferences. In 1992, one of the greatest parts was the hospitality room where I spent time meeting and conversing with other quilters. It's still one of the best parts of any conference to me, but somehow this part of the conference seems to be getting pushed into the background. The *NJS* is always a high point of any conference, but so are many of the workshop teachers. Once, I took a workshop in St. Catharines even though my friends said, "You won't learn anything new in that

workshop.” I didn’t take the workshop to learn anything new, yet to be exposed to that person’s approach to quilting—what a wonderful experience!

With the exception of a short hiatus in the mid-2000s, I have had quilts accepted—and some rejected—in almost every *Quilt Canada* conference. It is always an honour to have a quilt accepted and a bonus to win an award. I find every show I see the most exciting and inspirational. I didn’t enter shows in Vancouver, Nanaimo or Calgary because I was a judge or juror.

Part of my continuing membership with CQA/ACC is because I want validation of my work (is it good enough?) by entering it into the *NJS*. The other part of my membership is because it enables me to meet such wonderful people who are so kind and helpful.

**Have you had any independent exhibitions of your quilt work? How was that experience?**

I have had three independent one-man shows in galleries: Gibson Gallery in Amherstburg, ON, Saint John Gallery in Saint John, NB and

the Creative Arts Centre in Ingersoll, ON. I also had a quilt-featured artist display in Woodstock, ON. Though I am accustomed to looking at and working with my own quilts and seeing them in shows with other quilts—it is amazing when I see an exhibition of just my own work. It gives me a greater understanding and appreciation of what I am doing.

**What is your favourite aspect of belonging to a quilt guild?**

My favourite aspect, or I should say aspects, of belonging to a guild are: the wonderful social interaction with other quilters and sharing of information, the stimulus of seeing other work, both from my own guild members and from guest speakers and the opportunity to work with other quilters and be able to give back a bit of what I have received from them.

**What is your favourite quilting technique?**

My favourite quilting technique varies with what I am doing at the time. I never work in a series. I like the idea of what is coming around the next corner. As a result, my work

is very eclectic—at times very traditional—at other times very avant-garde. Presently I do a lot of appliqué, both by hand and machine, but I am inspired to work in machine-piecing when an idea pops up.

**What is your favourite style of quilt?**

I am always attracted to scrap quilts. Probably because that is what my mother made, so it was the first exposure I had to quilting. I am also attracted to traditional-style quilts. I find three-dimensional work and the addition of foreign substances (other than fabric) to quilts as being contrived and outside the basic parameters of quilting.

**What advice would you give a new quilter?**

My advice to beginning quilters is to do it. Take as many classes as feasibly possible—I still take workshops although I’ve probably taken 70 to 80 already. I still learn something from every one of them. Don’t be afraid to ask questions. Don’t be afraid to show your work. If you are quilting, you are a winner whether it’s beginner or advanced work. ♦



*Harvest*, 72" x 72". Original design. Central image and corner pieces are batik. Background is machine pieced. Hand quilted. *NJS* entry, Saskatoon, 1996.



*Hang Ten*, 51" x 51". Machine pieced, hand appliquéed, fused appliqué. *NJS* entry, Toronto, 2000.