

Quilting Ugly

By Tammy Harrison

30 years ago, Georgia Bonesteel and Mary Ellen Hopkins were arguably the talk of the quilt town. They were the go-to experts. Many quilters still have their books to this day, treasured above all others.

Mary Ellen Hopkins was the quilter who said there was no such thing as an ugly fabric. She said that using ugly fabrics in a quilt top helped show off the beautiful fabrics better. Many quilters took those words to heart and still live by those words. Many quilt groups and guilds have paid homage to Mary Ellen's insight throughout time, creating challenges for their members or small groups to take an ugly piece of fabric and use it in a quilt top so as to show that it isn't ugly anymore. The sum of all of the pieces...or piecers.

Except, there *are* ugly quilts. Ask anyone who's made one! What in the world do you do with an ugly quilt?

This question was posed on a popular social media site and the responses were not as varied as you might expect. In fact, a number of quilters had the same answers. Here are a few responses to what a quilter does with an ugly quilt that they made:

- Donated it.
- Ended up liking it.
- Kept it as a camping quilt.
- Sent it with a soldier when he served in Iraq.
- Put it in a dog's bed, where the dogs fought over it.
- Picnic rugs/blankets.
- Beauty is in the eye of the beholder so gift it, the recipient may love it.
- Cut them up and repurpose them for dog beds for the local animal shelter.
- Cut them up and made quilted messenger bags out of them.

There are a number of websites devoted to using ugly quilts. The most notable is The Sleeping Bag Project (<http://www.uglyquilts.org>) which has instructions for turning an ugly quilt into a sleeping bag for the homeless. Many non-profit organizations, quilt guilds and individuals take something they feel is ugly and turn it into a much loved cover for a homeless person.

With so many beautiful fabrics on the market today, it's hard to believe that someone would make an ugly quilt. Except they do. One instance could be where the chosen fabrics for a quilt look great in the quilt shop but do not play well together in a quilt top. Another could be that the quilter is unhappy with the way the quilt blocks were placed in the quilt.

For whatever reason, quilts can appear ugly to the person who made them. But there are wonderful ways to make use of an ugly quilt where others will find beauty and warmth regardless of a quilter's opinion of their creation. Take a few minutes to research where you could donate ugly quilts in your neighborhood, community, city and beyond. Everyone deserves to have a quilted hug!

When I was newly married nearly 23 years ago, we were on a very strict budget, too. That is when I took donations of clothes, sheets and blankets from my friends and family to make quilts with. They were sometimes funky looking - no one had heard of using an iron-on stabilizer on knit fabrics back then. Sometimes they were hard to sew, especially blue jeans. Sometimes it was best not to look at the finished project and just give it away, all in the name of art!

Once my husband and I had advanced in our careers, I finally had money to buy fabric but no time to piece and quilt it! By that time, I explained to my husband that it was best if I bought at least a yard extra of fabric for whatever quilt project I was working on just in case I messed something up. It would save me a trip to town, which he was all for since we had four kids all under the age of six at that point!

I am slow to the draw sometimes. In my present sewing room, I set up a dozen plastic baskets on my shelves. In those, I sort my fabric scraps by size. I really thought I had a great and growing stash until a quilt friend burst my bubble. She said a fabric stash is more than just pieces of leftover fabric - it includes yardage, too. I cried, drying my eyes on my 5" square fabric scraps. The very next day, I set out to prove to myself that I *did* have fabric yardage and therefore *did* have a fabric stash. I dumped out my scrap baskets into one huge pile and commenced to resorting everything. And I wept. Again. I had exactly two yards of fabric in all of those baskets. Two yards. That is when I returned to my husband and explained my dilemma, wanting to increase the extra yardage I purchased for quilts so I could have a true quilt stash. He contemplated my predicament and then uttered the words I never longed to hear, "You can make a lot of quilts with those scraps, dear."

Now that hoarders have been exposed via reality television, I believe there are a lot of quilters who would qualify for their 15 minutes of fame. And even though I only have about a two foot path in my sewing room, I obviously am not a hoarder (see above). Face it quilters, those of you with big stashes, you are nothing more than hoarders!

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