



## A Conversation with Pam Holland

The first time Pam Holland stepped into a quilt shop, she was enthralled—and mortified, “you’ll never make a quilter, your color sense is appalling!” said her instructor, an American quilter who traveled to South Australia to teach the class. “I’m lucky I’m resilient and she didn’t give me a complex,” Pam admits, “I could have been ruined for life!”

But luck had little to do with the rise of Pam’s shining career as a quilt designer, teacher, and judge. She started sewing as a way to save money, making clothes for her 15 children. Relying on an unwavering self-assuredness in her own abilities, she continued to sew her way to a successful career in fashion design. And when she and her business partner decided to go separate ways in 1994, Pam chose to try something new—quilts.

I read Pam’s amazing story of “1776”—her mammoth prize-winning reproduction quilt, one of the first quilts she ever attempted—in one sitting as we put together her book *The 1776 Quilt*. As a novice quilter myself, I wanted to learn more about Pam’s path to quiltmaking’s hall-of-fame, so she was kind enough to take time out of her busy schedule and answer a few of my questions. The following are her answers; I hope they will inspire your students and customers as much as they have me. And as Pam says, I’ve done my best to “Keep it all in order, Honey!”

—Kelly Roberts, January 2007

**How did you go about learning the craft of quilting?**

**Did you take classes? Read books? Join clubs? Ask friends?**

In 1994 my business partner and I decided to do other things. It was a hard decision and we kept putting off our inevitable decision to end the business for a long time. There was a quilt shop in Hahndorf, not far from our house (in South Australia). Hahndorf is an old German village and attracts a lot of tourists, and it was during a visit to the town with some guests from overseas that I found a quilt shop called Quilters Cupboard. Having worked with fabric as a fashion designer, I was enthralled by all the fabrics in the quilt shop and decided on a whim to enroll in one of the classes. I guess the rest is history.

I loved attending class. It was the first time I had ever interacted with a group of women who talked about subjects other than children. It was liberating and a wonderful creative experience.

I read everything I could on quilting; I think I was a painful student (for the teacher) because I wanted to learn *everything*. Quilting was a new-found joy.

I often went to classes with my business partner Cynthia; we were in awe of those who know what to do in class with little instruction. We’d sit back and watch quietly and in low voices comment on how clever they were. I took a class with an American Tutor who had been brought to Australia by the quilt shop. It cost an arm and leg for the class. When she got around to seeing my samples, she said “you’ll never make a quilter, your color sense is appalling.” I haven’t heard much about her on the tutor circuit for many years; I’d love to catch up with her again! I’m lucky I’m resilient and she didn’t give me a complex, I could have been ruined for life!

I joined a weekly group and learned most of the techniques from them. It took me a few months to realize that it was actually two groups in one, until I sat at the wrong table one day: “you’re in the wrong group, Honey”...whoops!

## Had you worked with other needlecrafts before you started quilting in the 1990s?

I don't know whether you would call what I attempted "needlecrafts." I guess I dabbled in knitting, cross-stitch, and home sewing for the children. We had little disposable income in the early days and I began sewing the children's clothes on an ancient hand-cranked machine in 1972. I thought I had died and gone to heaven when I could afford a machine that did a buttonhole and a zig zag stitch. It was a brown Lemair Helvetia in an imitation wooden case. Life is interesting...now I'm given the latest machine when it hits the shelves.

I'm actually a Fashion Designer and I had my own label and manufacturing business. I taught myself to sew through necessity (as I mentioned above). Although I attended University to learn Fashion Design in the 80's, I found the classes boring and moving too slowly, and as I already had my own business, I quit and just continued my own way and was happier in that environment.

During the time I designed and manufactured, our garments were sold in the best boutiques in Australia and exported to Japan.

## What has surprised you most about quilting?

Its addictive properties. Quilting sneaks up on you silently and there you are; you can't go without making a block a day. Fabric becomes part of your household linen and has to be sneaked into the house. There is no other leisure occupation with the same characteristics.

## "1776" measures 8'9" X 10'. You were new to quilting when you began this quilt; would you recommend taking on such a mammoth project to other beginning quilters, or would you recommend they steer away from it?

If you have a dream or a passion, you will attempt anything. Passion has no boundaries, and I tend to overdo things so I would be the last person to suggest that a large project is too difficult for a beginner. As a judge I've seen amazing quilts from 1<sup>st</sup> time quilters. It's all in the mindset.

## What element of the original "1776" quilt first caught your eye?

I never ever thought about that question before, thanks for asking.

I think really it was the complexity and the naivety of the figures and objects appliquéd on the quilt. Even though it is in the genre of folk art, there is a symmetry to the quilt that appeals to my sense of "Keep it all in order, Honey." The quilt is surprisingly well balanced in design, with the same appliqué pattern in each corner and repeated throughout the quilt.

## What is your favorite motif in "1776"?

I loved creating the soldiers on the horses. They have a character all their own. They appear on the quilt in formation and give one the feeling of joining in the battle. I enjoyed adorning their uniforms with gold thread and seating them proudly upon their horses. Each one seemed to take on a personality as he was created.

## What do you bring to "1776" that makes it your own?

Oh, I think just about everything in the quilt has become my own in a way. I had to re-draw every pattern using photos as a pattern guide. At times it was quite difficult and I had to pay close attention to detail; I think there are well over 600 images. I had to work out how to make the block I call the Elies block. The original quilt pattern was designed by a talented artisan centuries ago, but never written down or illustrated. I re-created the pattern and made my own quilt with his blessing (hopefully).

I, like those artisans, created every image in fabric and brought the quilt to life to share with the world. In saying that, the quilt was made out of my interest and desire to have one just for myself. I was unaware other people would be as interested as me. I chose a different method of construction and used totally different fabrics. My quilt is made as we would make a quilt today in the year 2007, using the technology of computers, computerized machines and all the fancy tools we have at our disposal. The original quilt was made from the most basic of materials during an upheaval in the lives of the makers—in fact they were at war. Hopefully it soothed their souls and gave them some peace in a time of such disruption.

## Has it ever been critiqued as a copy rather than an original? How do you respond when people suggest that your quilt is unoriginal?

I have only had one quilter publicly say the quilt was a copy. She had never seen it, and felt the need to express her opinion. I guess I could say I was a bit disappointed; after 9,586 hours working on this piece, I know its story, I know every piece of fabric and the details of the quilt intimately, so I take such comments with a grain of salt.

I quote this poem.....

Eventually  
All things decline,  
Everything falters, dies and ends  
Towers cave in, walls collapse  
Roses wither, horses stumble,  
Cloth grows old, men expire  
Iron rusts and timber rots away  
Nothing made by hand will last  
I understand the truth  
That all must die, both clerk and lay  
And the fame of men now dead  
Will quickly be forgotten  
Unless the clerk takes up his pen  
And brings their deeds to life again.

—Wace, Roman de Rou (c 1170)

## What do you plan to do with “1776”? Would you ever consider selling or donating it to a museum?

At the moment the quilt is an integral part of our lives and will remain in our care. With 13 children (and two more who are like our children, but not legally adopted), it would be difficult to share it amongst the family in the event of my demise.

I have many famous artists in my family whose paintings are in art galleries around the world and on view for everyone to enjoy, so I think I will donate it to the South Australian Art Gallery. My children and grandchildren can then share it with everyone else but still claim ownership by heritage, as I proudly do with the art of my relatives.

## Do you sell any of your quilts?

I make my quilts for my own enjoyment and selling one would be like selling part of my soul. I put my creative expression into every quilt I make. I could never sell one. In saying that, however, I have created quilts for charity that were given away to the highest bidder.

## I hear you have 15 children. How do you balance life and work?

Our children are grown up now; our youngest is 21 and the eldest 42. With the exception of two, they all live within 5 minutes of our house and are able to support husband Keith while I'm away. The internet is my lifeline to home and I'm in touch with the family daily. I figure I expounded a lot of energy looking after our large family, now it's my turn. My Husband is very supportive of my travels and comes with me when his practice allows.

### Have you traveled much to teach classes internationally?

In 2005 I had two weekends home.

In 2006 I had two weeks home and I learned to say *no* more often to future bookings so I could complete more work at home. Like most international tutors, I'm booked some 3 years ahead, which is wonderful but it's sometimes a little difficult to comprehend. I need to spend more time writing, designing patterns, making DVDs and completing new works.

### I hear you are working on another big project, can you tell me a bit about it?

I'm re-creating the Bayeux Tapestry. It's 238 feet long by 20 inches wide. It's made up of images of 623 humans, 55 canines (dogs), 202 equines (horses), 41 ships, 49 trees, almost 2,000 Latin words, and over 500 mythical and non-mythical creatures, such as birds and dragons. It's a work in progress!

### What is the best piece of advice you can give a first-time quilter?

Be patient, listen, ask questions, be thorough when you are constructing, and never be hard on yourself.