

# Fabulous Fabric Art

A National Art Museum in a Quaint Kentucky Town



Frank Bennett has a trick he does when he gives presentations. “I put up a PowerPoint presentation with a few slides and I ask the audience what they see,” he explains. “Sometimes they say, ‘Oh, it’s a painting, or a stained glass window.’ but actually every single one of them are quilts.”

As the Chief Executive Officer of the National Quilt Museum, Frank knows that many people do not consider quilt and fiber art as “true art.” “What’s interesting about this place, and what really makes it unique, is that it opens people’s eyes when they come here,” he says. “The comment we hear more than any other is that this is really art. And you can tell people are surprised by that.”

With over 40 thousand visitors arriving from all 50 states of the United States and over 40 countries each year, The National Quilt Museum is the largest quilt and fiber art museum in the world and a true destination. Indeed, it lives up to its reputation as the “Mecca of quilting.”

“The quilt museum’s primary goal is advancing the art of quilting by exhibiting the finest fiber art on display anywhere,” says Bennett. The 27 thousand square foot facility, located in downtown Paducah, houses the museum’s own collection, numbering over 320 quilts, as well as traveling exhibits of quilts from all over the world, which change multiple times throughout the year.

“The most exciting thing is when people who aren’t that familiar with quilting come to the museum and are blown away by what can be done in fabric art,” says Bennett. “Even better is that they go on to tell other people about it. That’s very important to us.” The museum is most often compared to the Chicago Institute of Art. “People who enjoy art museums love our museum,” he says.

The National Quilt Museum is the premier organization in a large and vibrant quilting community. There are currently over 21 million people actively quilting in the US alone. At the helm of the museum, Bennett has become an advocate for the quilting community. In addition to running the museum, Bennett frequently writes and lectures about quilting as art. “The work they do is in every way as much art as sculpture is art, or painting is art. The only difference is that quilts are made out of fabric.”

In addition to providing world-class fiber art exhibits, the museum offers extensive education programs, offering workshops, quilt camps and resources to over 6 thousand people every year. Programs are offered for all skill levels, and quilters come from all over the world to attend workshops taught by master quilters.

Bennett states, “Unfortunately, quilting is sometimes considered less than art largely because most quilts are created by women. It’s not even a statement on the art itself, but a statement on the artist.” That’s why his test, of showing the art on a slide, is always so effective. “We don’t realize how much of a double standard that is,” he says. “The artists that do this work are absolutely phenomenal.”

He’s optimistic, though, not only because other forms of art have overcome the same type of stigma--take Van Gogh and the Impressionists, for example--but also because of the reaction visitors to the museum have after seeing the quilts.

“They’ll say, ‘I didn’t think this was for me,’ but they get taken in and they see the art for what it really is,” says Bennett. “In this museum, you find work from the best quilters in the world. Like professional athletes, these are the top in their field.”

If you go:

The National Quilt Museum is open to the public year-round, Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. (central time).

Between March 1 - November 30, the museum is also open Sunday, 1 - 5 p.m. It is closed on most major holidays.

The National Quilt Museum is a non-profit institution established to educate, promote, and honor today’s quilt maker.