

“Renaissance” Quilt—

A New Birth of Old Traditions

by Helen Kelley



Helen Kelley's "Renaissance" is a quilted interpretation of a seventeenth century Norwegian tapestry.

I married a man with Norse blood in his veins. Coming to Minnesota as an outlander, Scandinavian art, music, food and zest for life were new discoveries for me. Reaching back into the past, I discovered, too, the courage with which the Scandinavian immigrants faced the hardships of this strange, wild, cold new country.

"Renaissance" is a salute to these Norwegians who came to America, made it their home, and combined the rich heritage of the old country with the exciting challenges of the new one.

In 1976 I made a trip to Norway to find the roots of Norwegian-American quilting and patchwork. Displayed in museums were exquisite quilting and lavish appliqué, but there appeared to be no patchwork (*lappetepper*) except that which had been taken to Norway from America by returning visitors.

To make a statement about the courage and creativity of the early Norwegian-American settlers, it was obvious that I must blend the art of the old country with a truly American expression, the patchwork quilt.

Old Norwegian *tepper* (coverlets) were woven in geometrics similar to those found in quilts in America. Over and over on my trip I found *tepper* with starry borders similar to the American Lemon Star pattern. As I searched, I began to notice a second type of weaving—the *billedvev* (picture, or tapestry, weaving). It was a sort of *teppe*, but woven not to cover beds; instead they were intended to hang behind the High Seat to decorate the hall on festive occasions.

High in the Gudbrands Valley in the 17th century this unique style of weaving appeared. The faces of the renaissance folk pictured on these weavings were angular, each with a square nose and eyebrows, dotted eyes and mouth. Repeatedly the same red, blue and yellow horses appeared with arched necks and strutting legs. Each figure was outlined in strong, black lines. Many of them were of religious motifs.

The backgrounds were filled with buildings, trees, banners and geometric flowers. The excitement, the profusion of Norwegian design, was framed on each of the *billedvev* by those brilliant geometric borders that had first attracted me.

The most common theme by far appears to be the Wise and Foolish Virgins. Over and over these women marched, stiff-backed, across the tapestries. They also appeared to me to be stiff-upper-lipped. They seemed to lack the joyful approach to life that I wanted to depict as a part of the Norwegian-American.

A tapestry in the Kunstindustri Museum in Oslo caught my attention. Woven in 1661, this Three Kings tapestry has a variety of close relatives in other museums in Norway, all with the same strong faces, with the red, blue and yellow horses prancing to visit the Mother and Child. This particular *teppe* displays a warmth of color, simplicity of design; a touch of humor and a feeling of reverence. The angels are particularly graceful. The animals are delightful.

Working with an eight-by-ten inch photograph, I prepared for two years. First I drafted the designs. It appears that geometric accuracy was not a part of the art ethic of the time. The star-flowers bloom up and

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Detail of the Renaissance Quilt, upper left corner.

down the borders of the *teppe* in varying numbers. An American quilt must have symmetrical borders. The central oval frame of the weaving appeared to be an egg with a definite collapse of one side. A quilt oval, of course, must be crisp and even to be appropriate for this new expression. Changing any element in the dense design meant shifting and adjusting the entire scene.

Finding fabric in the appropriate colors—those that would simulate the old dyes, many of which have faded over these 300 years—was a challenge that took me into fabric shops across America. And to be a quilt, of course it must contain printed calico fabric—not so much that it would destroy the old identity, but enough to add the new, rich touch of the American quilt.

Many of the details on the original weaving were depicted with single shots of yarn: eyes, tiny flowers and clothing decorations. The decision to include these details in the quilted *teppe* was made easier by the fact that I could quilt in designs that were too small to appliqué. There would be no embroidery on this new quilt.

During the two years that I prepared, I read all of the material on *billedvev* that I could find. There is surpris-

ingly little known about their origins. Some of my research was done with a Norwegian dictionary in each hand, translating with plodding slowness.

When I had drafted and adapted, it was time to begin my interpretation. I began my appliqué, commencing with the oval frame, and I worked at a leisurely pace. I savored each new discovery as each animal took shape, each King became a personality.

By June 1982 I began to work intensely. Somehow I felt an urgency to see the "picture" complete. Working 16 to 18 hours a day, I looked neither backward nor forward, dealing with only the bit of the design before me at the moment. My husband frequently reminded me, "Helen, it's a quilt! It's only a quilt!"

Nevertheless, the creating of this new, American *teppe* became a highly emotional experience. To my astonishment, during Easter Week in 1983, as I was quilting the Baby, the basting stitches that pierced the body so distressed me that I cut them and pulled them away.

Now that the quilt is complete, I can stand back and be objective. I admit that I could probably have woven it in less time than it took me to create the quilt, but if I were to do this quilt at all, I must do it right. My tribute to those early Norwegian-Americans must have tiny stitches and bright colors, it must have strength and grace, and it must have a feeling of reverence for the two fine traditions from which it came.

"Renaissance" is an American quilt tapestry depicting the Christmas story. Three Kings in renaissance costume ride their prancing horses, carrying gifts to honor the Baby. Below, these Three Kings worship the Baby. It is possible that the lowest King who wears no crown represents the landowner in whose home the tapestry would have hung.

The Mother holding the Baby is seated in the High Seat. It is interesting to note that a woman seated in the High Seat with "her man" would have been honored. A woman seated alone in the High Seat would receive the ultimate honor.

A Tree of Life decorates the side of the scene and the battlements of a town form the upper portion of the framed area. The entire background is filled with flowers.

The oval, golden frame contains animals. These are Norwegian renaissance adaptations of the animals that were found in the bestiary books that were circulated throughout Europe in the 17th century. Notice the magpie, elephant and unicorn. The oval shape of the frame may reflect the influence of the zodiac with the animals moving in a circular pattern.

The four angel figures in the inner corners are found frequently in European renaissance art on bedposts, books and tapestries. They represent the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Finally, the outer border displays the star pattern that first caught my eye. It is, perhaps, the Norwegian woven expression of a rose, rather than a star, bound together with a gold line reminiscent of the roofline of the old Norwegian stave churches with arched dragon heads protruding.

This new quilted tapestry is dated 1983 and bears the initials of the quiltmaker, "HLK". □