

# the quilting MAGIC of Terry Lee

A Stitch in Time Can Last for Years

ARTICLE NICOLETTE TOUSSAINT | PHOTOGRAPHY FRANK NORWOOD

AS the Brits say, "Look sharp as you enter the roundabout." And you will—the curves in Terry Lee's Roundabout are so sharp you could almost cut yourself! As shown in the detail at the left, the boundaries between contrasting shades of orange and blue, green and purple in this complex composition of circles and diagonals are so intense they throb like a hotrod's engine.

Any seamstress will tell you that sewing curves is mind-bogglingly difficult; it takes patience, superb hand-eye coordination and yogic concentration.

Because the sewing machine's needle bobs up and down *in place*, a seamstress must *wheel the entire fabric* smoothly around it in order to create an arc. Take a breath at the wrong moment while handling a heavy hunk of fabric and the curve will skid off course. The seam will be crooked—nothing like the seams that radiate in patterns like ripples or seashells within the large turquoise circle at the top of *Roundabout*.

The mastery of machine and medium demonstrated in this 24.5 by 36.5-inch art quilt marks its maker as an artisan of the first order.

Terry Lee also has the kudos to prove it. A Carbondale resident, Lee teaches quilting classes at the Glenwood Sew Shop. She's a member of Grand Junction's Art Quilt Association (AQuA), and her quilt *Secret Garden* was exhibited by AQuA at the Pacific International Quilt Festival in Santa Clara, California. Another Lee composition, *Rayna's Challenge*, is featured in a book titled "Create Your Own Free-Form Quilts" by Rayna Gillman, a New Jersey fiber artist.

Lee first learned to sew as a child. "It was my mother who taught me," she reminisces. "It's funny, but I clearly remember my first project! It was a pair of flannel PJ bottoms in a bright blue." Lee continued making clothes through high school and college. It was her mother's love of collecting fabric from bolt-end remnant stores that ignited Lee's passion for building a fabric stash.

Lee began traditional-style quilting in 1993, later progressing into landscape pieces and finally designing her own work. Locals can see examples of many of Lee's pieces—rendered in styles ranging from traditional patterns to landscapes and abstracts—hung around the Glenwood Sew shop on Grand Avenue.

Lee says that she had a lump of apprehension in her throat for days when, in a class, she began creating her first art quilt. "I was creating a landscape," she says, "and there was always a monkey on my shoulder saying 'you can't do that.'" On the third day of the class, the instructor told her to step back from her work and look at what she had created so far. "Then the fear went away and the creativity flowed," she recalls.

Lee experiences a sense of mindfulness and flow when she's sewing. "It puts me in a head space where time disappears. It's also like that when I'm gardening. It brings me a vacation from the things of everyday life—things like paying bills and washing dishes."

Lee draws inspiration for many of her pieces from nature, and she sometimes designs scenic quilts from photographs. Those realistic images are translated into shapes and a distinctive color palette but not necessarily reproduced in detail. Gesturing to *Secret Garden*, Lee says, "I didn't cut every leaf. That was so much—too much!—greenery. England is always so green and lush, so I had to come up with different fabrics that would represent different foliage. I made different plants with different shapes."

One of Lee's techniques, a trick that she teaches quilting students, is how to use fusible webbing to fix complex edges, freeing the quilter from having turn detailed curves and corners under to prevent them from fraying. She enjoys adding multiple textures and embellishments to her quilts; these include paint, beads, yarns and synthetic fibers. Some of her fabric is commercial—like many quilters, she's partial to the batik fabrics carried by the Glenwood Sew Shop—and some of it is hand-dyed fabric that she makes herself. "I resisted learning to dye fabric for years," she says. "I kept thinking that's just more stuff to accumulate and store! But finally, I took a class in fabric dyeing. And then, of course, I was hooked"

Lee holds a bachelor's and a master's degree in piano performance from the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, and she finds echoes of music within her fiber art. "I believe no one art form lives in isolation of another. Vibrations are color; harmonies and keys indicate dark or bright. Melody and rhythm provide patterns," she explains. "I love the interconnectedness I feel when working creatively with music and with fibers. There's a vibration to color, and both arts are very tactile; the sensation flows through the fingers. It's a good activity for the brain, but it's also creative."

After retiring in 2006 from Colorado Rocky Mountain School, where she served as director of development, the owner of Glenwood's Sew Shop asked Lee if she'd like a part-time job at the shop. Lee, a frequent customer, had no particular qualifications for the job, other than her personal sewing and quilting experience, but found the work fitted her to a "T." When Sandy and Bob Boyd, 39-year owners of the Glenwood Sew shop retired in 2015, new owner Elizabeth Axthelm asked Lee to stay on.

Lee says she loves the job, and she's stimulated by both giving and continuing to take classes. "I get to fondle fabric. I get to help people with their projects. I love to help people make the transition from traditional quilting to art quilting. What's not to love?" she enthuses.

"There's something special about creating with fabric," Lee muses. "With music you do it and it's gone. With art and fiber, it's lasting. If I don't sell the piece, then it's around for me to enjoy for years."



Carbondale resident Terry Lee's quilt "Secret Garden" received special recognition from a juror and will be on display at the Pacific International Quilt Festival in Santa Clara, California.



Art quilter Terry Lee; photo by Bill Parish,



"Canyon Shadows"



"Sixth and Main"