

HOLLIS CHATELAIN: *Using Thread Painting as a Platform for Change*

by Erin Petros

Returning to the United States after living in Africa for twelve years, Hollis Chatelain originally began painting and quilting as an expression of her longing for her former home. She now uses her talents to express her feelings on worldwide social and environmental issues in an attempt to create a public dialogue. Masterful thread painting serves as a platform to illuminate her views in a variety of monochromatic palettes. Turn to page 85 to try Hollis' color exercise with thread.

Precious Water © Hollis Chatelain 2004 (85" x 77"). "In the spring of 2000, I dreamed of a yellow piece that spoke to me of the continual droughts that threaten so many places on our planet. In my dream, the images were from all over the world. They showed our needs for water and how we use it. We need water to drink (like the boy from India, representing Asia), we grow our food with water (like the farmer from the U.S.A. representing North America), we wash with water (like the Ecuadorian woman representing South America) and we share our planet with animals, who also need water (like the kangaroo from Australia). I searched for these types of images and did many drawings to try to represent my dream as closely as possible. Our fresh water is precious and limited. Over a billion people do not have easy access to potable water. This is a worldwide problem that affects us all and we must come to terms with it now for the future generations."



HOLLIS CHATELAIN

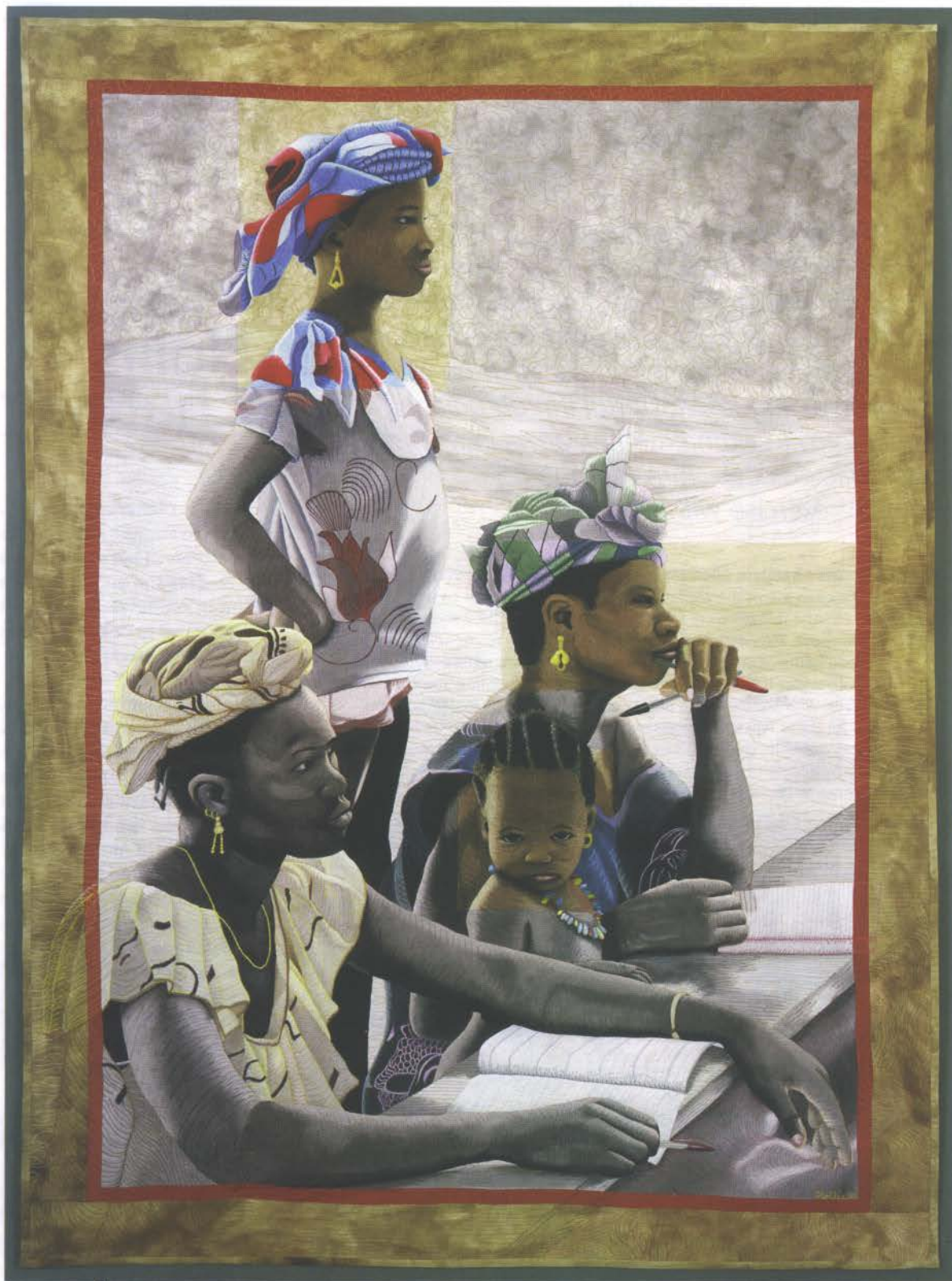


About Hollis Chatelain

Hollis Chatelain was born and raised in Pennsylvania, but lived fourteen years of her adult life overseas in Switzerland and in four West African countries. At the end of 1996, she moved back to the United States. Her current studio and home are in Hillsborough, North Carolina.

Hollis' educational background is in design and photography. She has worked in the arts in one form or another since 1976. Hollis started her career as a textile artist in Africa. Her interest was sparked by the richness and beauty of African fabrics, which are so integrated into the everyday life of Africans. Her distinctive use of colors and imagery, as well as her dye-painted scenes of multicultural life, have brought her international recognition. Hollis' work can be found in public and private collections in Europe, Asia, South America, Africa, and North America.

In addition to creating her textile art, Hollis lectures and leads workshops on drawing, color, dye painting, quilting, design, West African textiles, and activism in art throughout the U.S.A. and internationally. To learn more about Hollis, visit her website at www.hollisart.com.



School—It's Never Too Late To Learn © Hollis Chatelain 2000 (46" x 63"). "Many humanitarian organizations are turning to women to help develop projects to build a stronger Africa. The women are dependable, enthusiastic and hardworking. This quilt was made from a photograph my husband took at a training program he and his organization set up to teach women about running their own businesses. These women are an inspiration to me."

"Much of my work is influenced by personal experiences. I make imagery that evokes an emotional response and creates a mood or atmosphere. My dreams also provide me with an infinite supply of inspiration and reinforce my views and feelings," Hollis Chatelain explains.

A photographer by trade, Hollis began quilting abstract designs, as well as mixing and applying dyes to fabric with the native women, during her years in Africa. When she and her family returned to the United States in 1996, she searched for an outlet for her memories of her time abroad. Though not a painter, using dyes helped her feel connected with the people she'd known.

"It made sense that I would paint the people because when I was a photographer, I photographed people, and when I drew, I drew people. My longing for Africa was so great that I started to paint African images to put me back in touch with the life I loved so much," she says. "The twelve years I lived in Africa have deeply influenced me. I feel Americans should know more about the joy, harmony, and pride of the African people, rather than only hearing about the suffering and turmoil so commonly depicted in the media. I would like viewers to see my African imagery as a tribute to a people I truly admire and respect."

Dreams of World Issues Become Quilts

Hollis painted realistically for about five years, learning how to paint and achieve realism and emotion in faces. "Since 2000, much of my work has reflected my feelings about worldwide issues. Whether these concerns be social or environmental, they have overwhelmed my dreams and manifested themselves in my art." She focused on recreating her dreams as quilts, first painting in black and white and tinting with colored threads, "just as I used to do when I made black and white photos and tinted them with colored inks." The technique led to a new series, starting with three black and white quilts.

When Hollis' dreams turned monochromatic, the quilts followed. "My one-color dreams were actually statement pieces, something I had never thought to do. So I started creating what my dreams were showing me," she remembers. "I realized the one-color schemes had an emotional impact that was different than that of a full-color piece of artwork."

As Hollis worked on these monochromatic pieces, each time she began exploring another color, she thought she knew how to handle it, "but each time it's different. I thought blue would be the same as green, the same as black and white. Each color presents a new challenge for me."

Precious Water, a yellow piece, was a struggle. "Yellow is not at all calming; it's an energizing color. I think somehow it affected me, working with this large piece." Hollis is currently working on a purple piece featuring Desmond Tutu, a renowned South African cleric and activist. She describes the piece as having a wonderful feeling of peace in it, some of which comes from the purple hue. "Of course there are the threads, too. If you place red thread on yellow, versus purple or blue, the plain colors can react very differently on different fabrics."

With the encouragement of students and friends and the growing number of these statement quilts, Hollis decided to create an exhibit, "Hope for Our World." By exhibiting in museums, art centers, and universities to promote social awareness, she hopes her artwork will serve as a catalyst for public involvement. In fact, some of the venues are organizing a day of activism to tie in with the exhibit, inviting local groups dealing



Precious Water detail

with the issues depicted in the quilts to set up information booths. "People can be [so] emotionally touched by the artwork that it will move them to actually do something to make a change in our world. That's what I feel my role is right now," she explains.

Sending a Message with Thread

The heavy dose of meaning imbued in Hollis' quilts lengthens the time required in the creative process. "A friend told me once that she didn't think people realized how much research went into my quilts, so I broke the different aspects of my process down: 15% of my time goes into research, 20% into drawing, 30% into painting, and 35% into quilting," she says. Hollis researches the scene, the environment, the people depicted, and even the tiniest details. For *The Gift*, she wanted to use a photograph she'd taken of a Filipino woman who comes from a shanty in Manila. "We as Americans think of the Philippines as islands, flowers, beauty, and tropical greens, surrounded by an ocean. To the woman, the ocean meant an escape to a better life. My research involved finding out what a shanty in Manila looked like, what kinds of flowers grow there, what the islands look like, what the mountains look like."

Once she finishes the research, Hollis begins to draw, using the photos as guides. For most of her pieces, she works from thirty to forty photos, sketching many small drawings. Using an overhead projector, she blows up the small drawings onto large paper the size of the piece, creating the basic design. After transferring the design to fabric, Hollis uses fiber reactive Procion dyes. "I can easily spend six months painting," she says. The next step is washing out the dyes and drying, ironing, and batting the piece to prepare it for quilting.

Thread choice lights a passion within Hollis. She speaks about it as an artist, describing her work as being "about contour and depth. I want a piece to have volume. If there's a piece of clothing in the quilt, I want it to look like you could reach your hand out and put it in the pocket." Color plays an important role here as well. Lighter and brighter threads will move an area to the foreground, while complementary colors, such as green thread on red fabric, will neutralize an area and make it look shaded.

Hollis estimates she changes threads about 200 times per day and recommends that quilters spend more time auditioning threads. Buying thread specifically to match a project limits the outcome. "If you have twenty-five different choices, you'll audition threads by stretching them across the fabric to see how they look. Your quilts will be more fun; you'll make a quilt that can have texture and come alive." □

The Gift © Hollis Chatelain 2006 (53" x 48"). "Karen is a massage therapist on a cruise ship. The gift she has is her hands. Her salary helps sustain her parents and two brothers in the Philippines. Forty-five percent of the national income in the Philippines is provided by the 8.2 million Filipinos working outside of their country. Economic refugees are in our lives every day, but rarely do we think of the sacrifices they make to support their families. This piece is a tribute to the many people who live without their loved ones in order to provide for them."



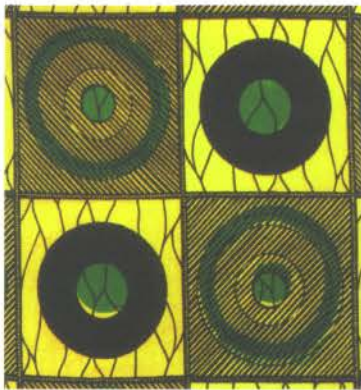
The Gift detail



QUILT STUDIO

with Hollis Chatelain

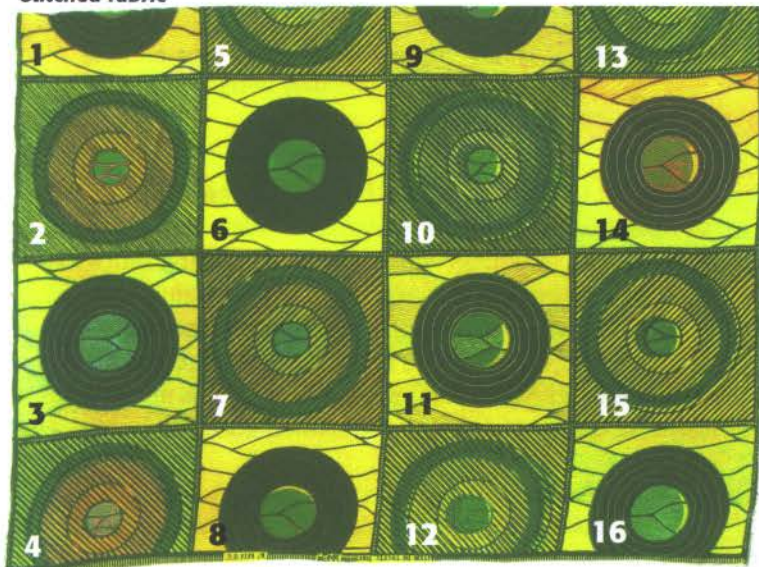
Original fabric



Many quilters tend to match their threads with the colored fabrics in their quilt tops. We "audition" many fabrics when making a quilt top, but rarely do we "audition" thread colors on our finished tops. Thread color can completely change the way a quilt looks, so I encourage you to have a wide range of colored threads and audition them before quilting. In my quilts, I always use at least one hundred different colors of thread.

This is what gives nuance to shading, volume, and texture in my images. All of my quilting is done with the feed dogs down, using an open toe darning foot, and I usually don't draw any lines.

Stitched fabric



THREAD CHART

Square #1	2 colors
Square #2	3 colors of fluorescent thread (same colors as circle #4)
Square #3	5 colors of thread
Square #4	3 colors of fluorescent thread (same colors as circle #2)
Square #5	4 colors of thread (same colors as circle #7)
Square #6	black thread (quilted only on the black lines)
Square #7	6 colors of thread (same colors as circle #5)
Square #8	5 colors of thread
Square #9	2 colors of thread
Square #10	4 colors of thread (same colors as circle #12)
Square #11	3 colors of thread
Square #12	4 colors of thread (same colors as circle #10)
Square #13	3 colors of thread
Square #14	5 colors of fluorescent thread
Square #15	black thread only
Square #16	3 colors of thread

The two motifs shown below have the same design in the same respective squares. To show how different the same color threads can look on different backgrounds, I have used the exact same thread color and quilting design in the same respective squares on both fabrics. Compare the colored threads from one fabric to another and you will see how different they look. Select two different colored fabrics and quilt the exact same quilting design on each one with the same colored threads as I've done. You will see how different each piece of fabric looks and you can apply what you've learned to your own quilting projects.

