

Candace Carmicheal's Reflections on Learning to Quilt

Drawing, sewing, and reading have been a part of my life for as long as I can remember, and my quilts often reflect my enjoyment of these things. As a very small child, my mother says I was the "easy child" – give me a book or paper and crayons and I could entertain myself quietly for hours. When I learned to read in first grade, my goal became to read everything in the Children's Room at the Grinnell Public Library. I don't think this was ever accomplished, but I gave it a good effort. There was even a 1st grade photo of me reading in the library published in the Grinnell paper.

My mother is an excellent seamstress, and the sewing machine and ironing board were always set up in our family dining room. We only ate there on Christmas and an occasional birthday. How can you not learn to sew when you live in that kind of a house? My mother was reluctant to teach me to sew as she didn't want me to learn her bad habits. She wasn't opposed to me playing with the machine, though, and so I taught myself by observation and by trial and error. (Mother was waiting for me to join 4H at age 10 to learn how to sew things the right way).

When I was in 1st grade, I saved up enough dime weekly allowances to buy a brand-new-on-the-market Barbie doll, ponytail, striped strapless swimsuit, and all. By second grade I had taught myself to sew and began sewing Barbie clothes as I didn't have money to buy them (remember the lounge singer dress skintight, strapless and with ruffled netting around the bottom? I coveted that dress, but it cost almost as much as the doll.). Somewhere I got hold of a Barbie sheath pattern and adapted it into all types of outfits that I sewed from scraps of my mom's fabric. I discovered the importance of darts to fitting clothes on Barbie's impossible figure. Soon I set up a business with my 6th grade sister. We made Barbie clothes and sold them on the playground at recess at Bailey Park School. Skirts were a nickel, dresses a dime and you might have to pay fifteen cents for something like a coat. Each outfit came with a little safety pin as we didn't sew on any buttons or snaps and glue-on Velcro was not yet invented. We kept the outfits in a blue velvet jewelry box. As Kirsten's recess was just after mine, I would take the box to the playground to sell first, then pass it off to her

when we went inside and the older kids came out to play. I don't know how much money we made, but it sure felt like a lot to us.

Although I drew all of the time (my second-grade specialty, along with my best friend Marla, was brides in profile wearing huge bell-shaped skirts), I didn't know much about art until 3rd grade, the first year that you got to have a real art teacher and class in the Grinnell schools. Mrs. Case came to our classroom with her "art on a cart" and I was hooked. No matter how sick I was, I NEVER missed an art day -- now as an art teacher, I often get calls from parents saying that their child is crying because he or she is sick or has to be absent on an art day and can he or she come in during recess to make up the project when back at school.

I learned to love making art and also to love looking at art. On a family trip to Washington, D.C. at age 10, my greatest desire was to see Renoir's "Girl with a Watering Can" at the National Gallery of Art. My siblings had other ideas, but my parents made sure that we all trekked through the museum in search of my favorite painting and even bought me a small reproduction of it. I wanted to grow up to be an art teacher just like Mrs. Case so I could paint and draw and look at beautiful art for a living. My parents continued to feed my passion however they could. In a small town in the sixties, though, there were no children's art classes in the community. In 5th grade my father brought home a box of crusty half-filled oil paint tubes and some brushes that he had purchased at a farm auction. I had no idea what to do with them, but we found out that the community college held evening classes in oil painting. My dad finagled my way into the adult education painting class, and I have fond memories of how the mostly senior citizens treated me. I even got to go to their fancy wine and cheese party at the end of the session.

When I got to high school, my career goal switched from art teacher to fabric designer—much cooler than being a teacher, don't you think? When I talked to my high school guidance counselor about this and said that I wanted to study at Iowa State, he said that I needed to load up on math and science. Never mentioned art or home ec, and what did I know? So I took lots of math and science and didn't enjoy them much. When I got to Iowa State and turned in my first project for Color 101, my instructor

asked me "what are you doing in this class?" I was convinced I must be doing very badly indeed. But then he said, "Just show me your high school portfolio, and you can pass out of this class because you don't belong here." I responded, "What's a portfolio?"

Eventually I realized that I wanted to be an art teacher after all and that is what I've been doing for over thirty years. I feel I have the best of all worlds—I get to play and get messy with art and kids all day and I can go home to draw, read, color, and sew. The result is the technique I've been working on with my colored quilts for the last five years and I have so many ideas for them in my head that I know they'll keep me occupied for the rest of my lifetime. Since I started quilting with traditional pieced quilts for beds, I still like to include some piecing in my work and prefer that they be called quilts rather than art quilts.