



MURRAY LEDGER & TIMES

Northern exposure

My father was from Canada, born and raised in St. John, New Brunswick. After serving in the Army during World War I, he came to the United States and stayed for the rest of his life. He seldom talked about his native land, and lost contact with the siblings he left behind.

All we ever knew about Canada was that, according to Daddy, it snowed so much he was forced to leave home by an upstairs window so he could snowshoe to school at St. Malachy's. He also talked about the Bay of Fundy, with its amazing reversing tides, but that is where his stories stopped.

Perhaps my father's reticence about his native land is what sparked my interest in the current exhibit at Paducah's Museum of the American Quilter's Society. "Canada Uncovered" shows quilts by Canadian artists that illustrate the immense diversity of our neighbor to the north. The beauty of the landscape, the remoteness of its icy northern reaches, the impact of industry and the importance of transportation are some of the topics showcased in this captivating display. Every season of the year is represented, and almost every age of history, going all the way back to the birth of the cosmos.

A spectacular triptych entitled "At Day's End" lures viewers to its colorful expanse. A country cottage nestles in the right-hand corner. As the sun rises over the mountains and the forest, the summer morning mist gives way to a glorious summer day in British Columbia. The quilter, Janet Armstrong, spent holidays here in childhood, and was inspired to re-create this beloved vista by using remnants of men's neckties.

"Those little bits of gorgeous fabric that serve no real purpose," she calls them. "I feel I put them to much better use, taking advantage of their bias cut to create organic fluid curves in a quilted landscape, and evoking for me a vivid memory."

Walking through the gallery, visitors to the museum are likely to forget that the works of art are actually quilts. From a distance, they appear almost like paintings, but closer inspection reveals the painstaking workmanship and intricate piecings that create images like the one in "Snowy Owl Meet West Coast Totems."

In this work, another British Columbia quilter, Judy Farrow, has created a magnificent snowy owl aloft on a black background. As the owl ascends, shadowy shapes of other owls against an obsidian background bear witness.

"The Crooked Half-Mile" is representative of the many coastal villages of eastern Canada. The arrow-like shape of this hand-appliquéd quilt begins where the bay meets ramshackle docks, and zigzags past waterfront sheds, snug seaside cottages and passes the local church. The journey ends on the outskirts of town, where the cemetery provides a resting place.

The railroad was pivotal to the settlement of Canada, and a crucial part of industrial development. Donna K. Young's "Railways in a Northern Land" follows the trail of a train traveling at night. The signal lights are cheerful beacons in a barren landscape where the engine chugs on in the blue-blackening cold.

The cold is a shimmering icy-blue in "Sunrise Over Igloo," a quilt by Shawna Lampi-Legaree, from Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. The sky is layers of orange and topaz with ribbons of azure in between. Cheerful white and pale yellow light spills from the entrance to the igloo, beckoning the viewer inside.

Canada's urban side is examined in "The Forces of Nature," by Martha Brown from Pickering, Ontario. This quilt captures the image of the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec. The buildings graceful curves ripple in bands of black, brown and beige, and the quilting shapes in the sides of the building hint at the fossils in the Alberta limestone from which it is constructed.

Each quilt in this exhibition warranted careful inspection and appreciation, but the one from St. John, New Brunswick, my father's birthplace, demanded special attention. Quilter Sandra Betts portrays the Bay of Fundy after a storm. The marshes are tangled and rain-lashed, and the trees still sway with the memory of fierce winds. A few gulls float in the luminescent sky, an effect achieved by using layers of taffeta.

The exhibition "Canada Uncovered" will be on view at the Quilting Museum until July 9. For more information, call 270-442-8856, or log on to www.quiltmuseum.org. The Canadian Quilters' Association/Association canadienne de la courtpoint (CQA/ACC) loaned the quilts. More information about that organization is available at www.canadianquilter.com.

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