

WORK THROUGH TIME

Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea



Anne Morrell Robinson: Quilting in Kingross

Anne Morrell Robinson lives in Big Intervale, Cape Breton, where she has been making quilts at her KingRoss studio for over thirty years. An internationally renowned and award-winning artist, Anne has created quilts for both public places and private homes. She shares her passion for the fibre arts with others and travels to national conferences, guilds and schools to teach. Anne designs her own patterns, which have been published in books and magazines and for use in her classes. Her beautiful and carefully crafted pieces span disciplines, techniques, materials, and markets. Anne shared the story of her work through time with us during in an interview in February 2009.

Christie: If you could tell us a bit about how you came to Cape Breton.

Anne: I came to visit my brother. He was a conscientious objector in the Vietnam War. They were going to send him somewhere terrible so he decided he would come to Canada.

Garry, who was my first husband and my boyfriend at the time, decided we would come up at Christmas to visit him. We loved it, so we came back when he finished grad school. We became the caretakers for Michael Roosevelt's place, where we helped turn the carriage shed into a cabin and turn the farm back into a working farm.

When I look back at it, it's totally bizarre because I had never even heard of Nova Scotia or Cape Breton. We didn't learn about the Canadian provinces in geography in school.

We moved permanently when Garry finished grad school. We filled our 1946 Studebaker full of stuff and with \$700 in our pocket, we moved up [from Pennsylvania].

I think we first came in 1971. We moved [to Big Intervale] the year Amish was born [1974] so we were a couple of years down below [in North East Margaree].

We had animals when we were in the North East, so we moved them up. I started breeding quarter horses, and we had a few dairy and beef cows, sheep, turkeys and chickens. Everything but goats. No goats! Goats were really hard on fences and notorious for escaping and getting into trouble.

Christie: How long was it a working farm?

Anne: I sold the last cow right before Amish went to college. Probably sixteen, seventeen years. I kept it going after [Garry] died for a while. When the kids went off to school, it was too much. One person doesn't need all that stuff or all that work.

Christie: Were you able to focus more on quilting at that point?

Anne: Yes. Plus I realized I could raise a beef cow for a year – so you're taking care of the cow, you're taking care of the calf, you're raising up the beefsteaks, and you're selling it for six hundred dollars on the hoof – but I can make a quilt for three months and sell it for six hundred. It made a lot more sense.

Christie: When did you first start quilting?

Anne: Same time as we moved up here, actually a year before.

Christie: Was it in your family?

Anne: It was, but a couple generations back. It was my great-great-great grandmother, I have some of her quilts. She made a lot of them. My mother, unfortunately, sold most of the really nice ones in the 1950s but she saved a few and passed them on to me. She didn't really know the history of them but when we found the initials and the date we could go to the family tree and figure out who it was. The most amazing thing happened recently, I was at a fabric store and I bought two or three fabrics that were reproductions because I really liked them. When I looked at my old quilts maybe a year later, they had the same fabrics in them! The original fabric, right? I had bought the reproductions of those same fabrics.

When I first finished school and I was living in Pennsylvania, I was working on a horse farm so I would quilt in the evening for something to do. I didn't have a TV or anything. You're outside all day and you're doing physical labour. It was kind of nice in the evening to come down and work on something you could just chill out with.

Christie: What did you go to school for?

Anne: I majored in equestrian studies – stable management and horse care and all that stuff. My minor was art education.

Christie: You would work in the evenings for the most part?

Anne: Yes. When I started, you know, because you had kids and chores and that kind of thing. But then in the winter you had more time, in the winter I would work more. A turning point, too, was having a studio. When I started, I worked in the bedroom and I had that little sewing machine under the window [pointing to sewing machine] because we didn't have power when we first came. My mother bought me that, it was a

prop from the Princeton University Theatre. I would sit and sew under the bedroom window; I had a quilt frame that attached to the ceiling, which I could bring down and tuck back up at night.

Christie: And that was your space?

Anne: Yes. I had one of those old cardboard fold-up cutting boards that I'd put on the bed. Of course, when Garry got sick I lost my space. When he got better, we built that part of the house.

This house has had a couple of additions and that was studio number one. We had a sawmill at the time so we sawed all our own lumber for it, and all the windows were recycled from other places.

Christie: Would you build your own [quilting] frames?

Anne: The first frame, I actually had Reg Hart build for me. It's right there – I still use it. And then Joel built this one [points to large quilting frame]. The very first one was just four boards and C-clamps on chairs like they used to use. The one that would fold up was a little fancy; it had ratchets made out of wood, it was easier. Garry built that one.

Christie: The first [quilts] that you made - were they mostly for the house, or did you intend to sell them right away?

Anne: I think the very first one I made, I made for ourselves. And then people started saying, "Would you make one for my aunt's anniversary? Would you make one for the wedding?" So other than that very first one, we didn't have a quilt on our own bed for probably the first ten years. And the one we did have on our bed, Garry designed it! It was made of great big pieces so it went together in a day. [Laughter] It's the shoemaker's children, right? I probably made quilts for twenty years before I had a decent one on my own bed.

One of first ones I made was for Amish as a baby. Then I have one that Garry's grandmother made for him. I still have it. You can tell the ones that the mother says, "No, you can't use this, it's too pretty" and hang it on the wall, and the mothers that just say, "Wrap them up, that's what they're for!" We've had both kinds.

Christie: When did you start selling on your own?

Anne: I started selling when I still lived in the North East, so that would have been in the early 1970s. The first ones I sold through the Sealladh Breagh Gift Shop – Stephanie May's shop. I also did craft fairs in Sydney. Eventually I started selling out of my old studio.

Christie: Would you get a lot of tourists coming by or was it mostly local people?

Anne: In the beginning, no. But here we are at the end of this middle-of-nowhere dirt road. If people were looking for a quilt then somebody would send them up here. Or they would accidentally stumble upon me. But then it was kind of secondary – pin money, as they used to call it in the old days. When I started to do it more seriously, I had to do a lot of advertising. Then the [Big Intervale] Salmon Lodge went in. So I'd say, probably half my business is just people going by on their way there and half of it is through advertising.

Christie: Where would you advertise?

Anne: In the Buyers' Guide of Arts and Crafts, the Studio Rally, and now there's the Cape Breton Trail Map or the Artisans' Trail Map, so in there. I have rack cards I put out all over – motels, hotels, inns and the tourist bureau.

Christie: Were you always called KingRoss?

Anne: No, I just used my own name before but I changed it when the website was made.

Christie: You used to go by Anne Comfort Morrell?

Anne: Right. My maiden name was Comfort and my first married name was Morrell. When I married Joel, it became Robinson but nobody in Margaree can remember that so I kept Morrell. So now it's too many names! An editor from a magazine told me once that writing my name was like writing a poem. [Laughter.] The reason I kept the "Comfort" was because my sister-in-law, who was also Anne Morrell, used to make quilts too. She was Anne B. Morrell and I was Anne C. Morrell.

Christie: How you start [the quilting process]. Do you sketch out your ideas?

Anne: It'll be easiest for me to show you. I just happen to be starting a new one. In this case I have a commission from people who are serious birders and they travel all over the world birding. This is the way I start, with a sketch. So I do my sketch, which gives me an idea of the size and it's all done to scale. You can see it's pretty rough. And then, this is the centre part. So I usually start in the middle and work my way out.

Christie: Do people ever specify what kind of fabrics they want, or colours?

Anne: Colours. Sometimes, quite often. The fabrics are pretty much a given. I use cottons, good quality cottons. In a commission I'll give an idea of the price range, the size, the colour. I let them look through my portfolio and get an idea of what they like and what they don't like. That gives me a starting point. In this case, I happened

to luck out and find this “Map of the World” fabric, which is perfect for the background.

Christie: Where do you buy your fabrics?

Anne: Everywhere. Quilt shops – there’s not a lot of them around here, but every time I travel I hit them. I hit other shops wherever I go. I used to travel and teach a lot. When you do that you usually stay with another quilter and they’ll take you to their favourite shop.

I used to teach all over North America. I still do but it’s slowing down, which is nice because for a while I was so busy teaching that I said I’m going to limit it to once or twice a month. I got to one point where I was in Maryland and I thought I was in Massachusetts! I said, “Wait a minute, time to slow down.” [Laughter.]

Anyway [referring to drawings], that’s the start and you can see here how I’ve broken it down. They’ve sent me a list of their twenty most favorite birds that they wanted to include. I can put any other ones I want in. I do a full-sized drawing – the square – and then from that I make the patterns. This one’s ready to start stitching.

In this process, there are all kinds of quilting. This is appliqué, but I’m doing a machine appliqué because their budget doesn’t include enough time for having it all done by hand. In this case, there’s a product called fusible web which I iron onto each piece of fabric. I have to trace it from the backs because it ends up reversing. I trace each individual piece out onto the fusible web, iron it to the fabric, cut it out and set it up under here. So these two are ready to stitch; I did those yesterday afternoon. You can usually do one whole one a day or get two ready and then spend the next day stitching. You have to keep changing thread colours, so it makes more sense to have a bunch of them ready. I’d get bored if I had all twenty done and I sat and stitched for four days. It’s better to break it up.

Christie: Did you mostly do handstitching when you first started?

Anne: When I first started off they didn’t have the kind of sewing machines that would do the kind of stitching you need for machine work. Plus they didn’t have this fusible product. The first time I saw it was in the Normaway gift shop – where the Two Macs is now – I saw a pillow with nursery rhymes on it and said, “Oh, look at that! That’s really cool. I have to be able to do that!” So I had to go out and buy a machine. Now I just upgrade my machine every ten or twelve years because they come out with more features.

I find my quilts that sell best are my really inexpensive ones or my totally beautiful, all handmade ones which people want as art pieces or collectibles.

Christie: How many quilts do you think you’ve made?

Anne: Four hundred and forty some. I keep a record. This is the quilt that's right there on the frame [referring to photo album]. I photograph the top of the quilt when it's finished, just for my own records. If something happens to it, at least I have a picture.

This table has wheels so I just move everything out of this end [of the studio] and photograph there through that hole in the ceiling. Eventually I can access over the studio and lay [a quilt] out on the floor if it's too big for the wall and shoot directly down, which is the way the professionals do it. You just have a big grey mat on the floor and spread the quilt out and shoot down.

Christie: How do you say goodbye [to your quilts]?

Anne: I had a quilt last year that everybody really liked and it won a lot of prizes in the national shows. This guy came in and he said, "That's the one we want." And as he was going out the door he said, "Are you going to be okay?" I said, "You are going to give it a good home aren't you?"

Christie: So [the quilts] must be all over the place?

Anne: Yes, they're in Germany, Switzerland, Paris and all over North America. Most of my customers used to be from the east coast of the U.S. Over the last couple of years there's more people from Alberta, British Columbia. I think they won out over the eastern U.S. in the last couple of years.

Christie: At one point did you have to say, "I've given away enough quilts, I'm going to make ones to sell now?" Or do you still always have quilts every year that you make to give away?

Anne: No, I think the transition point came when I became a single mother and I didn't have any money. Somehow you have to keep the money coming in. In the beginning if I could sell one then it would cover the materials to make the next one. So it was a matter of building up that cycle.

It's sad to let them go but you realize if you let them go then you've already moved on in your mind to the next one. So my business, I don't make a lot of money but it supports itself. I can keep buying fabrics and once in a while I can go to a quilters' retreat and take classes with somebody whose work I admire. It's self-sustaining in a way.

I do workshops here as well. I usually do a couple of retreats a year. I have a classroom in the basement. People can stay at the lodge and come up here and do a couple of days of class.

Christie: How did you get into rughooking?

Anne: There was a revival of the old Chéticamp style, “traditional hooking” they call it - with just the rags. I was finding it harder to see [at night] to do hand appliqué, so I thought rughooking would be great to do in the evening. The loops are wide and your eyesight doesn't have to be that great. So I stopped at Deanne Fitzpatrick's, she does really neat rugs. She's from Newfoundland and she's become a leader in reviving the traditional rughooking in the Maritimes. So I stopped at her place and picked up a kit to see if I liked it and I think I've made fifty-some since! So I guess I like it. They're fun! They're a little more rewarding than quilts because they happen faster. Once it's hooked, you bind it and it's done.

I was doing this animal cliché series. I think I did about twelve or fifteen in the series. I finally had the show last year at the Inverness Centre for the Arts.

Christie: Is this the rack you do the rughooking on?

Anne: The bigger ones I do on that and the small ones I just have a little frame on the floor that fits on your lap.

Christie: How long did the Cape Breton Album Quilt take to make?

Anne: I'd have to look in my file to tell you - but hundreds of hours. They wanted some kind of Cape Breton quilt so I decided to do the four main areas - the industry and the fishing, the farming and the tourism.

The other one, the Cabot Trail one, did you see that one? I think it's in the museum in Grand Etang; it was for the “Cabot Trail in Black and White.” [Referring to book.] It had the Cabot Trail as the centre and then the outer borders were scenes from the past.

I'll show you my latest Cape Breton quilt. I made this to market the patterns - ladies in Sydney are making this one. If I had more time for the Cabot Trail [quilt] it probably would have been more like this one, and more hand finished.

We use them to market the patterns. I market the patterns in two places and one is Quilting on the Mira in Sydney. It's nice because quilters travel around and they usually try to buy a pattern that reminds them of where they've been. So when they go to Mabou, they see a Cape Breton quilt and they can sign up and buy the patterns. They can either buy them all at once or the shop will send them one every month, either with or without the fabrics to go with it. Last month at The Centre for Craft and Design, there were two ladies working on theirs and they put a miner's hat in the middle here, which I thought was very clever.

Christie: Your sources of inspiration? You were saying a lot of animal [imagery].

Anne: I think when I stopped farming I missed the animals, so they started appearing on my quilts! That's one source. History's another source. I love the old

museum-quality antiques. Maybe six or seven years ago, I went to a show at the Maryland Historical Society on the Baltimore Album Quilts – which are the high end appliqué quilts from the 1800s – and we just sat in the museum all day and looked at them. I figured out what made them special and why they lasted so long; it wasn't just the fabrics but it was the work that went into them, the quilting. So now my quilts have a lot of quilting on them because I think that's one of the things that helps to preserve them. I did a whole series using reproduction fabrics and trying to make them look like the old style quilts. That's another source. Obviously, what's around me and folk art. I like folk art and whimsy and all that stuff.

I did a whole series of Americana ones when I was living in the States. Quite often it's the fabric that inspires me.

Christie: Have you found like any particular changes or evolution of your quilts over time?

Anne: I started like everybody else – traditional, simple, nine patch and eight point stars, that kind of thing. But I don't like to do what everybody else does, so I started putting my own twist on it. I started doing art quilts, which were more like statements. And now I've gone back to more traditional just because there's really not many people doing it anymore. Like this last May, I judged the national show and the category that had the least amount of quilts in it was the traditional bed quilts and the hand-quilting section.

I'm sure there are more traditional quiltmakers out there than contemporary [quiltmakers], but they don't show [their quilts]. So when you go to the big shows, the art quilts take over.

Christie: So do you find you get the most out of the traditional style?

Anne: Well, for me because I sell, I've only had one person walk in the studio and say, "This is what I'm looking for – I'm looking for a contemporary quilt." You know, one out of how many thousands of people?

Christie: Did you think when you were younger, and you were into horses and then the farm, that quilting was going to become your profession?

Anne: No, just happened. I never really thought about it – kind of a natural extension.

Christie: So do you sell in the winter?

Anne: I don't sell in the winter at all. I just do my commission work. I mean there might be the odd person that walks in, but it's pretty rare. Once Celtic Colours is over I might as well just take down my sign and close the door.

Christie: Traveling around, do you feel like there's still a lot of people interested?

Anne: Yes, I think so. Judging by the number of people I get who come in, I'd say there has to be.

Christie: So sewing, that was it for you?

Anne: I tried spinning a bit. I had a spinning wheel for a while, the one that came with the house, and then I bought a little Ashford wheel. We had sheep, so I figured I might as well do something with the wool. I did some spinning and felting but, you know, weaving looked so complicated. I find it hard to remember sequences. I tried macramé and I kept forgetting what knot goes here, what knot goes there.

I like being spontaneous better, I guess.

This piece was edited from an interview with Anne Morrell Robinson, conducted at her home in February of 2009 by Christie Macneil and Erika Shea, members of the *Work Through Time* project team. For more information on Anne and her beautiful work, please visit her website: <http://www.kingrossquilts.com>

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