



# Wings of a Ragtag Quest: Chronicles of a Passionate Pursuit of Appliqué by Nell Battle Booker Sonnemann, edited by Patricia Malarcher, designed by Sarah Bodine

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# Book Review

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***Wings of a Ragtag Quest: Chronicles of a Passionate Pursuit of Appliqué* by Nell Battle Booker Sonnemann, edited by Patricia Malarcher, designed by Sarah Bodine, Hopewell, NJ: Sans Serif Studio, 2015**

As so many projects do, *Wings of a Ragtag Quest* started in one place and ends in another. Editor Patricia Malarcher candidly explains the project “began as an earnest scholarly effort to find and document traditional appliqué that was still being made around the world. It ended with a motley array of writings: a few completed chapters by the author, a random assortment of field notes based on encounters with appliqué makers, contributions from others assigned to continue the search when Nell’s declining health forbade further travel” (6, book 1). Twelve illustrated booklets based on a range of photographic research and writing collected from the early 1970s through to the late 1990s record American artist Nell Sonnemann’s global search for appliqué. Presented as an artist’s book complete with an appliqué front cover, the project is housed in a gray archival box reminiscent of a miniature filing cabinet that evokes the informal handwritten notes, receipts, and recordings that inform its content.

*Passages* covers the first set of booklets and begins with the journeys Nell completed and wrote about: northern Canada (spring

1975), Syria (summer 1975), Egypt (summer 1975), and Peru (winter 1976). India (1984) is written by Malarcher, largely based on research conducted in person by Elli Pavloff when illness and accident beset Nell for much of the trip. Next are the booklets included in *Passages Extended* which document the trips others undertook: Maura Malarcher’s (daughter of the project’s editor) accompanied Nell to China, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia and recounts her travels alone in Indonesia (summer 1986); Claudia DeMonte to Bhutan and Tibet (1996); Jill Loveland’s trip to Bangladesh (summer 1997); Malarcher and her husband to Mongolia (summer 1997); Joyce Koskenmaki’s journey to Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian Lapland (autumn 1997).

Patricia Malarcher introduces the final booklet, *Remnants: Field Notes*, explaining, “Nell ... had requested that *Wings of Ragtag Quest* be published with all its loose ends and frayed edges ... Although the information is sketchy, her interest in the origins and present-day meaning of applied patterns is always apparent.” Included are short texts based on trips to Panama (1976), Japan (1977), Senegal (1977),

Nigeria (1978), and Palestine (1978). Malarcher is forthright throughout in her account of the quality of material collected. The majority of the photography included is not professional; the contributors' voices are similarly varied. Some of Nell's writing does not conform to the vocabulary now considered politically correct when discussing cultures found in regions we now call *emerging economies*. But these quibbles are small. The existence of the project at all is testament to Malarcher's considerable tenacity to realistically corral the material compiled.

Nell recounts her own journeys in the third person, but at the time of her writing—much of it from the late 1970s—she likely enjoyed precious few alternative scholarly models. She even renames herself “in the waters of an equatorial jungle, in company with a priest, a bell was rung. Nell became Knell ever, ever so slowly” (15, book 5). Even as Knell, her writing does not attempt to conceal her personal emphasis on the spiritual. Instead she recounts a paralyzing tension in the project's ambitions: “I started off determined to be scholarly and factual; however, another determination I had was not to write for the highbrows or the elite, but to write for Everyperson [*sic*]. Those two directions nearly tore me apart and in the chapter on Amazonian appliqué, entering the world guided by shamans, I was stopped cold” (13, book 1).

The single authoritative voice Nell once imagined instead exists as a collection of voices. Nell's voice—often ambitious and overwhelmed in equal measure—is placed alongside others who traveled at her behest,

often to regions only recently open to foreign travelers. Many of the texts read like journal entries. Contributors share a common challenge of traveling to often remote locations in an attempt to record and, where possible also purchase, examples of appliqué. The majority of these trips were organized long before the Internet put remote travel closer to hand. Inevitably, gaps and dead ends can be spotted in the plans for a project which sprawled over four decades.

Instead it is an account of the messiness and uncertainty that so often accompanies an investigation. Malarcher refers to her trip to Mongolia as “an adventure we would not have dared to choose for ourselves” (2 book 11). The project was audaciously large, but also sincere. Most of the authors refer to doubts—doubt that they handled a social situation adeptly, doubt that too much or too little compensation was paid or bartered for the textiles they collected on Nell's behalf, doubt that their journeys had taken the right paths out of so many to choose from. I am struck by how much more useful these encounters will be to students than the impossibly rational accounts of research peddled by popular “how to” methods publications awash in arts education today.

Nell did not live to see this publication, but in many ways this is not a project about the physical stuff of appliqué. It is a project about curiosity and friendship. Perhaps most crucially it is a lesson about living. As Malarcher reflects, “In the end, like Nell's other questors, we found that ‘appliqué’ was not just a means

of sewing one piece of cloth to another; it was also a metaphor for our patched-together experiences” (31 book 11).

Nell Battle Booker Sonnemann passed away on August 23, 2004.

The Nell Battle Booker Sonnemann Collection of 500 appliqués

from 20 countries is held at the Gregg Museum of Art and Design, North Carolina State University at Raleigh, USA.