

# Jane Sassaman

## Shape Shifter

From an early age, I knew I wanted to be an artist and a master of some arcane craft. I tried many mediums over the years. In college, I concentrated on textiles and jewelry. By the time I left school neither medium stepped forward.

When I moved to Chicago, I kept up my search by going to galleries, reading magazines, etc. This was in the latter 1970s—there was a buzz in the air about the ornamental/decorative/pattern movement, which evolved from feminism. Since females are the traditional “decorators” in our culture, people started to put everyday ornamental elements in their work, such as fabric, lace and pattern. Eventually pattern and ornament took over the entire surface of their work. Artists like Joyce Kozloff, Miriam Schapiro, Robert Zakanitch and Robert Kushner were all part of this decorative wave.

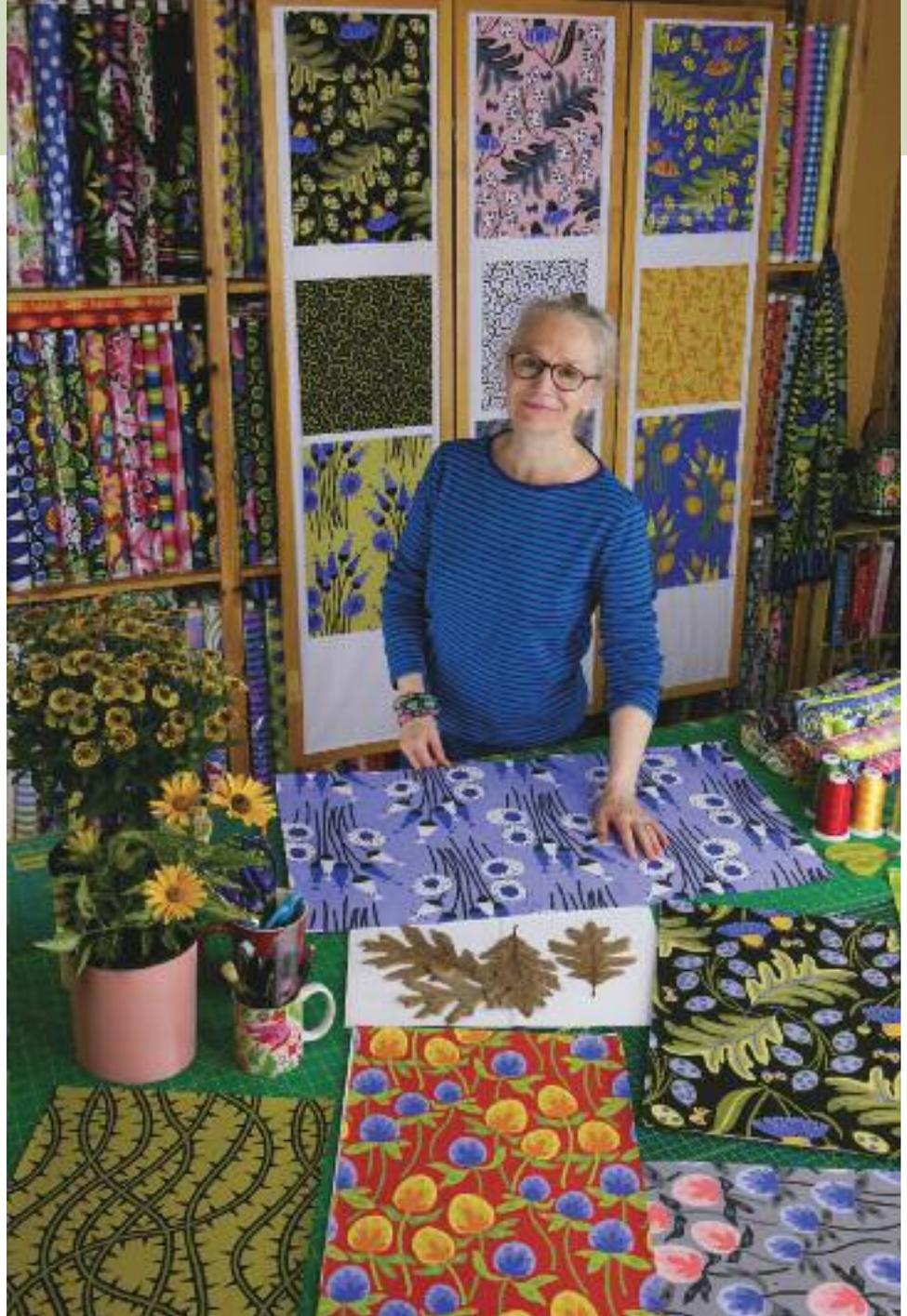
It was one hundred monkeys\*—I was doing the same decorative wave with cut paper at the time. I was cutting and pasting very quilt-like designs to satisfy myself. When I discovered this new-wave, decorative group of kindred souls, I felt I might indeed, find a place in the larger world of art and design. I felt *in tune*.

In 1980, Nancy Crow’s quilt was shown on the cover of *American Craft*. One look and I knew I’d found my medium. This design is exactly what I was making in paper, but it never occurred to me to do the same thing with pieced fabric. I was off and running.

### Tell us about your attraction to design

I have a basic art training, but I don’t think in formulas and colour charts when I work. Since junior high my work has been graphic, solid-coloured with well-defined shapes. For years I quilted in the closet when my children were small. I didn’t go to classes and I learned the hard way, by trial and error. Sometimes I think this isolation kept my voice clearer, however all artists and designers learn a lot by looking at other people’s work.

I was a designer of decorative accessories for many years—plates, vases, picture frames, etc. I looked at lots of work and picked up little decorative devices that I applied to my



own work, especially from the arts and crafts movement. The decorative arts are a major influence on my work. The sense of formality is a definite characteristic of my designs.

### How do you approach a new design?

I sketch all the time and I collect shapes. Shapes are really what I am playing with—I make collages with shapes. Nature is another huge influence. I love discovering the patterns

and characteristics of plants. I rarely know what a quilt will look like before it is finished. I start with contrasting shapes and let them react to each other. That’s the fun part, seeing where they take me. I have creative decisions to make all through the process, which I like—I have no preconceived idea.

### How did you become involved in textile design?

My professors at Iowa State University were fibre artists and turned us on to all the exciting textile activities in the early seventies. The art department was in the School of Home Economics and we were sharing the

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\*The hundredth-monkey effect is a fascinating new term for me, so I thought I would share what it meant with our readers. Japanese research scientists studying macaque monkeys on an island in the 1950s discovered if one or two monkeys learned a new behavior, such as washing a piece of food, gradually the behavior was learned by other monkeys in the group (by observation and repetition). Once a certain number learned the new behavior—around the hundredth monkey mark—the behavior would spread like wildfire to other monkey groups (even from island to island).

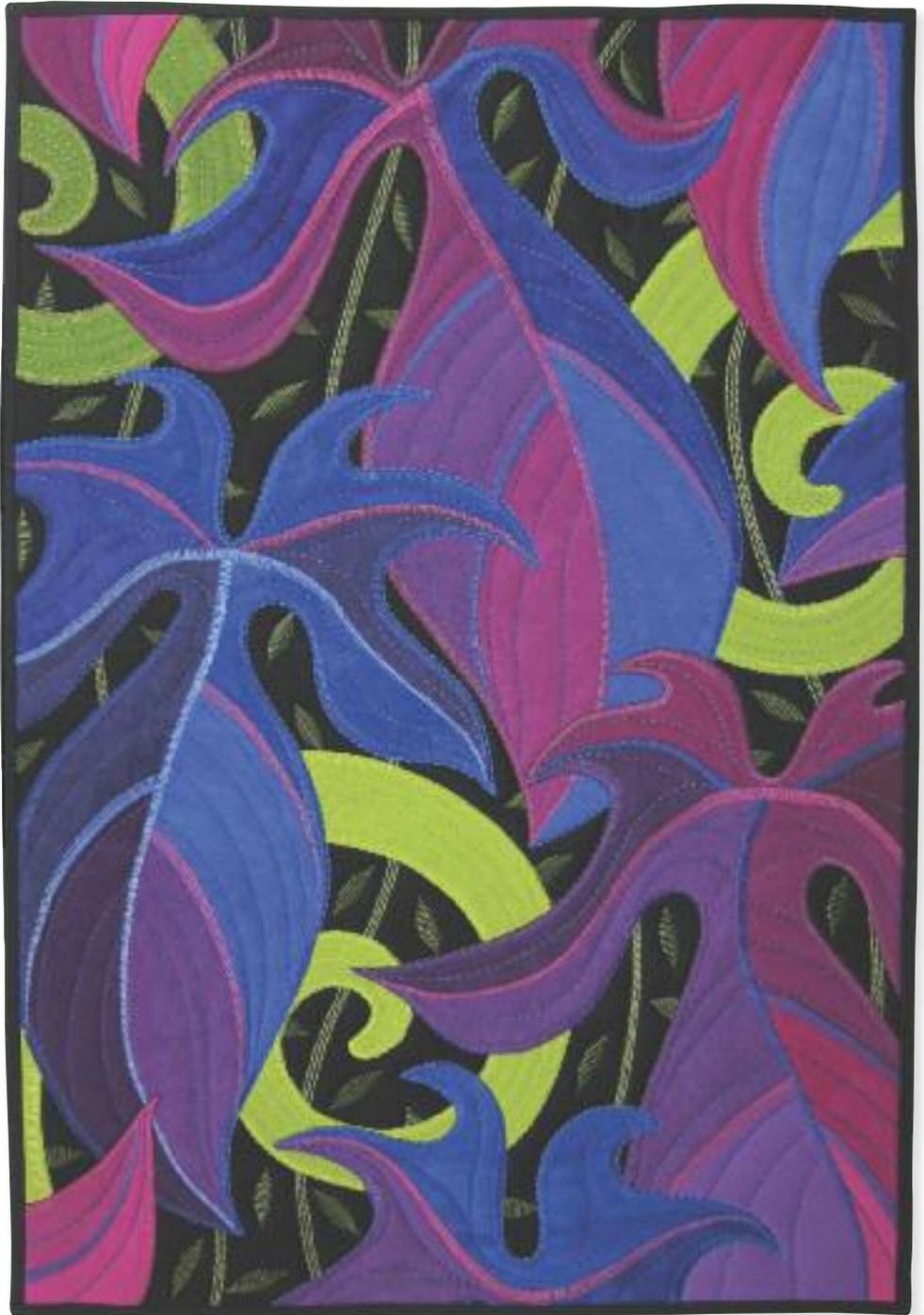


halls with the textile and clothing department. There was some nice cross pollination between the two.

Designing textiles has always been a desire. I idolized all the Marimekko® designers and hoped to get a chance to add some of my designs to their collection one day. Still dreaming.

#### How long have you been a quilt teacher?

I started to hit the road seriously when my youngest child was in high school, so my workshop schedule has been busy for about fifteen years.



#### What is the highlight of teaching quilting?

The nicest thing about being a quilter is the wonderful people you meet on your travels. Wherever you go, you are welcome and well cared for. If you have a nice location that's icing on the cake.

#### What advice do you share with first-time workshop students?

Relax! ♦

Special thanks to Jane for taking the time to answer questions for *The Canadian Quilter* during her hectic schedule. Jane is teaching at **Quilt Canada 2016**, in Toronto! Please check out her classes, and the multitude of other classes, available during this epic conference!

[www.canadianquilter.ca/events/quilt-canada-2016.php](http://www.canadianquilter.ca/events/quilt-canada-2016.php)