

Not your grandmother's quilt
SICA brings folk art to area barns

By JOSEPH PERSINGER

A barn quilt won't keep you warm at night, but it may warm the hearts of passing motorists. At least, that's the hope of members of the Southern Indiana Center for the Arts (SICA) who are promoting the latest folk art craze in Jackson County.

Dick Parman, executive director of SICA, explained that barn quilts are sheets of plywood painted with colorful designs and displayed on barns or other outbuildings.

"They haven't caught on yet in Indiana, but they're very popular in other states like Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Iowa," Parman said. In Tennessee, for example, there is a "barn quilt trail" motorists can follow while attempting to spot all the "quilts."

"It's just a novelty item," Parman added. "They don't serve any practical purpose." He compared them to the concrete geese people dress in various costumes and put out on their porches.

The local project got underway in April when Parman's wife, Jane, taught a barn quilt painting class at the art center in Seymour. A \$300 grant from the county visitor center provided materials.

Judy Carter, a member of the Wednesday group and a volunteer at the art center, noted, "If you took the class, you agreed that after you painted one for yourself you would paint one for the art center to sell, and we had quite a few take the class."

Many of the geometric designs are based on traditional cloth quilts, and one of the challenges was to transfer those designs to a large piece of plywood while retaining the correct proportions. That task has fallen to Wendell Geurkink of North Vernon, the only man in the Wednesday group, whose professional background is in furniture design.

Geurkink has the skill and experience to take small snapshots of traditional quilts and, using simple tools like a T-square, straight edge, compass, and triangle, transfer the designs to a large sheet of plywood. Then the ladies do the painting.

"It's simple once you understand the basics," Geurkink said, displaying a complicated-looking pattern he had just drawn in pencil on a two by two board.

Donna Heiman, a member of the group, said painting the barn quilts is easier than doing a landscape or still life painting "as long as Wendell draws the pattern!"

In addition to geometric designs, quilts can be customized to reflect a family's interests. The group has already done pieces featuring IU and Purdue logos, and members are prepared to take other custom order requests.

The quilts also can be done in different sizes, depending on where they will be displayed. Since they are based on a standard four by eight-foot sheet of plywood, quilts are typically two by two, four by four, or four by eight.

One of the quilts is currently displayed on the sign at the entrance to the art center on N. Ewing St. in Seymour, and the center has a number of finished quilts available for purchase.

“We have reduced the price,” Judy Carter noted, “so we can sell all we have and make some new ones. We have already sold several.”
For more information, contact the art center at 522-2278.