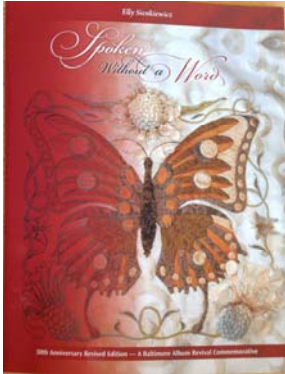


# Spoken Without a Word: Book Review

by Janet Esch



**30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Revised Edition SWAW, 1983. Butterfly block, designed by Eileen Hamilton-Wagner (Elly's mother), was created by Bette F. Augustine.**

appliqué quilters themselves. Throughout the book, in blue print, contemporary appliqué artists give tribute to BAQ's and their makers and to the fulfilling experience of creating such quilts, themselves.

The book begins with a dedication to Eileen Hamilton, Elly's mother, with a heartfelt letter to her, a photograph and then the frontispiece of the 1983 edition, a delicate 1944 pen and ink drawing created by Eileen Hamilton. It sets an emotional tone that is carried throughout the book



**Eight Pointed Star blocks by Teri A. Young, Cathy Graves, Nancy Chesney-Smith, Cheri Leffler and Marcie Lane**

Cluster in the Shape of a Cross within a Circle." The book is infused with images of needlework of the same patterns made by different quilters.

The foreword, written by Jan Vaine, states that Elly is a "visionary forever ahead of her time." She saw the early Baltimore's as "treasure troves of beauty and history." The history, referenced by information garnered from Dr.

"*Spoken Without A Word*" by Elly Sienkiewicz is a book that must be read—carefully—studied really. If you love the Baltimore Album Quilts, you will enjoy finding your way through the numerous metaphors, allusions, literary references, and poetic language and much more which fill the pages of this book. But expect to work at the reading of it. It is not a primer. The sentences are long and imaginative. You must take your time and contemplate Elly's beautiful images and thoughts.

This book is a 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Revised Edition of her first SWAW, 1983. It is divided into three sections. "Gallery of Quilts," is the most traditional part of the book with photographs of nineteen stunning whole quilts. Part II, "Spoken Without A Word," combines the appliqué patterns that were used in the 1983 black and white edition with numerous examples of the same patterns created by many quilters in the following years. Part III, "Building Blocks in Baltimore's Album Movement," is a study of the renaissance and revival of Baltimore Appliqué Quilts. This book is an homage to appliqué—the original Baltimore's of the 1840's and 1850's—"the old ones" and to those that followed and to the



**Black and white pattern of Eight Pointed Star and appliquéd blocks by Karen Pessia and Ardie Sveadas**

in the discussion of needlework of past and present. The layout of the book is interesting. Each page, including the table of contents, preface, introduction, biographies of quilters and epilogue, includes examples of Album blocks—in side margins and on the top and bottom of the pages. On page 98 the black and white pattern block, of the 1983 edition, the "Eight Pointed Star with Sprigs of Berries" is presented and on the opposite page appears the same block by contemporary quilters, Karen Pessia and Ardie Sveadas. On pages 42-43 the same pattern by five contemporary quilters is colorfully used in blocks across the top of two pages. The variety of muted and bright fabrics, embellishments and background is an appealing way to show the creativity of the "daughters" of Lady Baltimore as Elly calls them. The total effect is remarkable. The same technique is used for the pattern, "Strawberry



**Pattern from 1983 edition of "Friendship's Offering" with appliquéd blocks by Jeanne Sullivan and Lynne Huneault**

William Dunton, Dena Katzenberg and others, is an important part of this story; but historical inquiry remains; much is unknown. The fascination with the mystery continues. Once again in this book we are presented with Elly's vision, a vision that can inspire and motivate us to see beyond the number of stitches to the inch and the questions of who created these quilts. She speaks of the spiritual quest that we take as we study the fabrics and patterns of the old quilts, follow the intriguing stories and mysteries of the lives of the appliqué quilters, and invest our time and skills in the making of our own Baltimore Albums, with their metaphors. No one but Elly can say it better. "...all that remains uniquely 'Baltimore' in those old quilts still matters. We have not forgotten their vivacious asymmetry, their warmth of character their optimism, their joyous patriotism, their steady faithfulness, and their idealistic intent." Her words thrill me as I look ahead to my future work and recognize the symbolism that I have used in my own Albums to honor my

history.

Part II enfolds the entire 1983 volume that has long been out of print. The cream-colored pages present 24 blocks in black and white from the original book and compare each block to colorful contemporary versions. Direct source identification, "Pattern Notes," accompanies each block. In the preface, Elly tells us of the beginning of her journey with Baltimore Album quilts in 1972. Her "intrigue" was inspired by a block of an epergne of fruit on the frontispiece of *America's Quilts and Coverlets*. She calls the rich details of the block an enigma.



**Jeanne's variety in the greens of the leaves and the bright blue bird give balance to the dark urn**

The mystery story had begun. A decade later Elly attended the 1982 exhibit of twenty-four BA Quilts at the Baltimore Museum of Art and the enigma became the "Fascinating Lady of bygone Baltimore." Elly has been true to her odyssey: the pursuit and devotion to Lady Baltimore.

In the introduction of the 1983 edition of SWAW Elly tells of the process of album quilt making. We are familiar with her determination of symbols---what Elly calls "iconography of the quilts." She developed a lexicon of symbolic meaning. In the 2014 edition Elly stands behind the lexicon. She says, "...this present edition does not correct theories about the pre-Civil War *Baltimore's*, not even theories since found to have been insufficiently substantiated. For history's sake, such initial 'misunderstandings' appear just as they did in the original text and Pattern Notes." The Lexicon was taken from "enduring Western Civilization sources dating back to Biblical times...and from post-Album era genre books on the Victorian 'Secret Language of the Flowers.'" We can enjoy her treasure hunt to find meaning of the images, which the early ladies may have used in their patterns.

Part III gives the story of the Baltimore Album Quilt Movement. Included are Elly's essays and speeches given from 1990 to 2003. I hope you will take time to read these essays carefully and slowly. They show Elly's thoughts and questions of the appliqué quilt renaissance and revival and are filled with information connecting appliqué quilt making to aesthetics of classic art.



**Note Jeanne's hand work on the close-up of the heart**

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**Black and white pattern from 1983 edition of "Central Medallion" with appliquéd blocks by Janet Esch and Evelyn Crovo-Hall**



**"Triple-bowed Garland Borders" 1983 pattern with blocks made by Delia P. Kane and Janet Esch**



**Note the special cutting of the blue fabric for the bird's wings and tail above the Album family of Jacob Daniel Esch and Barbara Naomi Zehr**

The first essay, "Dr. Dunton, Mary Evans and the Baltimore Album Quilt Attributions," was first presented as a rebuttal of the "single-artist attribution theory" in 1989 at the AQSG seminar in Bethesda, MD. It defines the early details of research and conclusions made. It is a scholarly and well-documented piece about the continuing saga of Mary Evans.

The second essay, "Myths, Dreams, Metaphors and Magic: A Exhibition," is more informal in its discourse. Given at the preview of the opening of C&T Publishing's Baltimore Album Revival Exhibition and Contest in 1994, Elly is at her best in connecting the making of a Baltimore Album to realms beyond, above and beneath and I would say around us. Included are quotations from Joseph Campbell, Ira Progoff, Norman O. Brown and others. She asks questions and challenges her readers (I can just imagine the possible incredulity of her audience in 1994) to see the enormous and vital connection between the making of a Baltimore Album and the spiritual world. This picture of quilt making is filled with much hope and inspiration.

The third article "Are Quilts Art?" uses a different tone, but shows the same passion for the BAQ's. The article is serious and scholarly, but the voice is amusing and amused. I suspect that those who believe that art is not copying another's work have challenged some of us: ergo, reproducing an antique Baltimore Album Quilt cannot be art. A friend once said to me, "But you just follow the patterns." Within this article Elly speaks of the questions that surround quilt making as art or craft. Is it the quality of the quilt? Is it the age of the quilt? Why do these questions mean so much to quiltmakers? She ends the piece with impertinent and light-hearted words: "We live in the land of the Free. In quilt making still, we can do whatever we jolly well please...And besides, what's it to anyone, more than to you or I who made the quilt." To Elly's conclusion, I say "Amen!"

"The Baltimore Album Legacy, Briefly" looks more at the present and future than at the past. The side quotations from Louis Armstrong, "What we play is life." to Gerard Manley Hopkins, "What is all this juice and all this joy?" to Walt Whitman's, "As to me I know nothing else but miracles," reflect Elly's passion and joy in the journey of quilt-making. She says, "These are the quilts that make you cry." She connects us to the worlds of intellect and art and spirit through the creation of a Best of Show Baltimore Album Quilt.

The final essay is "Elly's 2003 Silver Star Address." Here you will find personal stories of how family members have influenced her—Aunt Alma of West Virginia, her grandmother and her artist mother; and of her emotional experience as a young mother viewing a red wheel of hearts. And again she equates appliqué to the spirit: "I believe doing appliqué also beautifies our souls."

*SWAW, 2014 edition* is truly a literary work. "The Gallery of Quilts" illustrates the labor-intensive beauty that appliqué quilters have achieved. But it is the inquiry, Elly's passion, scholarship, spirit, and imagination, that makes this book the opus of appliqué. I think of a well-known poem by John Keats, "Ode On A Grecian Urn," a study of classic beauty. Elly Sienkiewicz in an emotional, well-documented and delightful way has composed a study of the classic beauty of the Baltimore Album Quilts that are spoken without a word. And the words, from Keats echo throughout the book, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, --that is all/Ye know on earth and all ye need to know."