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Quilter's vision is anything but patchwork  
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During her first year in Raleigh, in 1998, **Roxane Lessa** visited the now-defunct Archangel Fabrics to buy material to decorate her daughter's bedroom. An expert seamstress with a degree in costume design and textiles from the University of Minnesota, Lessa was comfortable making anything from clothing to curtains.

"I saw they were offering a beginning quilting class," she recalled. "I'd never quilted, and I decided to take it. I kept thinking, 'I shouldn't be doing this,' because I was thinking of doing a line of children's clothing. But it was just one of those things. But once I took the class, I said, 'Oh, forget all the other stuff. This is good.'"

So, it turns out, were Lessa's quilting skills. In the past decade, the former professional ballerina has become an award-winning fabric artist specializing in fine-art quilts. She'll display and sell her work at two shows this month, the Piedmont Craftsmen Fair in Winston-Salem and the N. C. Designer Craftsmen Fine Craft and Design Show in Raleigh on Thanksgiving weekend. For that show, she will be among the artists displaying a masterwork, a one-of-a-kind piece meant to push the boundaries of a craft.

Fine-art upbringing

Lessa, who grew up in the Boston area, was surrounded by art at home and in the world of ballet, which began for her at age 8. "My mother is an artist and my sister also," she said. "My mother was an interior designer for a while and then went into glass. I was exposed to beautiful fabric. My mom would take me to the decorators' building downtown, and we'd wallow in it. My Brazilian grandmother taught me how to crochet. I was always interested in textiles, fabric, clothing and fashion."

To learn quilting skills, she took more classes, read books and went to quilt shows. "I made quite a few bed quilts, not real traditional, but more than now," she said. "I'd become friendly with the ladies who worked at Archangel and I asked them, 'Surely there must be people doing more contemporary things?' They showed me examples of art quilts, and I said, 'Yeah, that's what I want to do.' I hadn't seen anything like that with fiber."

Lessa, 50, views the fabric as a giant canvas. "The thing I like about quilting vs. apparel design is you don't have the limitations of the human body. You don't have any limitation. I love the creativity of it. It can be any shape and any color. So your design principles and color sense have to be strong. If I see a piece of fabric, that's enough to get me started on a design." Wall pieces are especially challenging, she said, because "they have to be noticeable and effective across the room and close up. I don't have any trouble close up because of all the stitches and details, but it's got to have punch and power across the room, too."

Color and curves

Lessa designs both abstract and realistic quilts. "I concentrate on color and texture," she said. "I love to work with curves, though some of my abstract pieces have more squares and rectangles."

A few years ago, at a workshop in Italy, she learned how to make a pattern from a photograph and to paint on the fabric to create depth, using the Tuscan landscape as her muse. "It was amazing," she said. "I came home and finished a piece I was working on and finished four others."

Using those skills, Lessa has become known for her botanical and landscape quilts. "The shapes of nature really inspire me. I know that sounds so cliché", but it's true. Last year I did a big piece called 'Jungle Boogie' inspired by Canna leaves at the arboretum, with all their shapes and shadows. That's one of my best quilts."

Her masterwork for the Designer Craftsmen show, at 38 by 48 inches, was inspired by crape myrtles in Oakwood. "This is the third piece in a series, the winter version of the summer one. It's very stark and sculptural. With the afternoon shadows you get those curvy shapes. What's different about this piece is I used batting, which usually goes inside the quilt and you don't see it, and painted it, and I quilted on top of that, so it's a lot of texture. It's almost like you're standing in front of a tree."

Because most fabrics Lessa uses are hand dyes and batiks, she decided to finally learn to dye her own fabric. Using a grant she received this year from United Arts, she attended an intensive dyeing workshop at the Quilt Surface Design Symposium in Columbus, Ohio. "Now I dye quarter yards and half yards," she said. "I do it on the back porch in plastic tubs. We learned how to get specific colors, but I love that accidental mixing, or scrunching-up fabric, when you never know what you're going to get."

Passing skills along

Lessa started teaching her trademark quilting techniques at Bernina World of Sewing and is seeking a high-end art gallery to represent her work. But until her daughters, 14 and 8, are grown, she'll fit in the quilting where she can.

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