

# The Art of Hawaiian Quilting

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*Cissy Serrao, Marenka Thompson-Odlum*

In 2020, Marenka Thompson-Odlum began working with Cissy Serrao and the Poakalani Hawaiian Quilting group as part of a contemporary collecting project at the Pitt Rivers Museum. The aim of the project was to challenge the static narratives often presented in museums through contemporary commissions that illustrate how cultural knowledge and practises are continued even though the medium through which they are transmitted may change. The museum commissioned Hawaiian quilts from Poakalani with the simple brief that the quilts should reflect the stories and knowledge that the group would like to share with our audiences. Hawaiian quilting is a perfect example of a cultural group adapting to new circumstances and materials, but continuously caring for their Indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies through their practice. The notion of care was a key theme and concern throughout the commissioning process. The quilts represent material forms of care – pieces that provide spiritual care achieved through the understanding of the quilt designs, many of which are linked to Hawaii’s environmental history and ways of being. Through conversations around care and Hawaiian quilting, we considered how intangible heritage is conveyed through Hawaiian quilting, Indigenous Intellectual Property, and the limits of Eurocentric forms of preservation when confronted with material culture whose purpose is to provide care through use.

*Fig. 1: Nā Mea Ali 'i Wahine. Quilted by Nobuko Nakagawa. Designed by John Serrao. © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.*



Along with her sister Raelene Correia, Cissy Serrao teaches the traditional art of Hawaiian Quilting at the Higashi Hongwanji Mission in Honolulu. Continuing the Hawaiian Quilting Class Poakalani Hawaiian Quilt Designs that was originally founded by her parents John and Althea Serrao in 1972, Cissy lives by her family's mission statement to preserve and appreciate the cultural legacy of Hawaii's quilting tradition and to teach it to anyone who want to learn. In conversation with Marenka Thompson-Odlum, Research Curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum, she shares her thoughts on the cultural significance and symbolism of quilting in Hawaiian culture, why it is so important to keep the patterns and tradition alive, and how she teaches this art form.

Fig. 2: *Kukui 'o Hale Ali 'i*. Quilted by Yuko Nishiwaki. Designed by John Serrao. © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.



**Marenka Thompson-Odlum (MTO):** Tell us about Hawaiian quilting, how did it come to the island?

**Cissy Serrao (CS):** Hawaiian quilting is one of my passions. It started over forty years ago with my parents, who wanted to share this amazing art and tradition with anyone who wanted to learn. The history of Hawaiian quilting itself began when the first missionaries came over to Hawai'i. In 1820, the brig *Thaddeus* brought the first missionaries to the islands and within a few days with the Royal women in attendance, the first quilting circle was held on the *Thaddeus*. The missionaries taught us how to appliqué and how to quilt, but their style of sewing and quilting as well as their designs had very little meaning to the Hawaiians. The missionaries had a patchwork style of hand sewing and the Hawaiians wouldn't adapt to that style of sewing. They didn't like cutting fabric into pieces only to sew them back together again. So eventually the smart and ingenious Hawaiians were able to find a new technique to create patterns that not only reflected Hawai'i, their island home, but also their traditions and culture. The Hawaiian quilt patterns are cut by folding the top design fabric to an eighth or quarter fold. It doesn't matter what colour fabric

you use, the pattern was always cut out in one piece using the eighth or quarter fold that opened to a beautiful symmetrical design, similar to making paper snowflakes. The tradition included not only the fold but also the design and the story it told and that is why my parents wanted to stay with that tradition and it is why we teach this style of quilting. Some people say that the Hawaiian quilt motifs that we see today on Hawaiian quilts may have come from the kapa – the old fabric that the Hawaiians used, and the designs that were printed on them. Between the 1820s and the 1840s, patchwork style quilts were more common. Around the 1860s, as new fabric arrived, the traditional Hawaiian quilt style that we see today was beginning to appear across the Hawaiian islands. Hawaiian quilts are so unique that you can go anywhere in the world today and you will recognize a Hawaiian quilt and hopefully also what it means and its tradition.

**MTO:** What does Hawaiian quilting mean to you, and why do you quilt?

**CS:** For me, Hawaiian quilting is a traditional art that was handed down to me through my parents from their parents and so forth, spanning over four generations. It's not just a generational tradition that I can now pass on, but it's also part of Hawaii's culture. The designs tell the story of Hawaii's people, and some quilt patterns that my father designed even tell my story. The Hawaiians today are still trying to preserve, recapture, and pass on many of their traditions that have been lost. If I can add even a small part to preserving that part of Hawaii's culture and tradition that comes from my ancestors, then we as a family and as a people will never be forgotten and will live on. The number one thing about Hawaiian quilts that makes them so unique are the stories. All Hawaiian quilts tell a story. The stories are embedded in the pattern and even the fabric that is chosen. Who is it for? How long did it take you to make it, six months or twelve years? What significant events took place when you made the quilt? It takes us a long time to make a Hawaiian quilt, you can't just make it in a day, or two days, or three days. It takes time. It's passing on a tradition – we really need to keep this going. It frightens me that if you go out into Hawai'i there are fewer people who teach the Hawaiian style of quilting as we do. It is a very small group. It is a very small niche. We don't want this tradition to stop and die; we want to keep teaching and passing it on. For us, by telling you these stories – it's not just about tradition or culture, these are actual beliefs in the Hawaiian system that the spirit is part of the quilt. When you make a quilt, your spirit becomes part of the quilt and with that we believe that it heals and soothes you. Every time a quilt is given to someone you love; you are giving love. You are absolutely giving love because it takes so much time to make a quilt. Another important factor of the quilt is the community of quilters. Hawaiian quilting guilds or classes bring people together. When you make a quilt, you put your mana, your spirit, into the quilt, and I think that's part of the community, too, that energy.

**MTO:** What is the cultural significance of Hawaiian quilting today?

**CS:** The cultural significance of the Hawaiian quilt today is that it keeps some of Hawaii's old traditions alive. Some quilts speak of old legends, there are some traditions on not only how to make a quilt but even how and why we display them. Some quilt patterns are still inspired by the traditional use of meditation of prayer and spiritual inspiration.

Here are some examples: When you finish your full-size quilt, you sleep with it for one night to seal your love into that quilt, because there are thousands and thousands of stitches in there and each stitch was sewn with love. A quilt made with love and given with love is love in its purest form. Another tradition are the echo quilting lines: In quilts that encompass a border lei, for every quilt line that comes out from the centre of the quilt, there's a line that comes in from the lei border of the quilt. Eventually, these quilting echo lines meet, and many people believe that it's the love coming out from the centre, from you, from Hawai'i. And it goes out into the world, and then it is returned.

Another tradition we have is that you don't sit on the quilt, and this is out of respect for the quilter. So, if you are in a house where there is a quilt on the bed, then you lift the quilt and sit on the corner. Another tradition is that if you are having a party in the house, you display all the quilts on the beds: your family members who own or made the quilts are there at the party with you. And so every time we would have a party, we would say, 'We've got to get out the quilts, so our family who have since gone will also be with us celebrating at the family gathering!'

I don't think many people realize that the older quilts, the vintage quilts, some of these quilts that we inherited tell the stories of old Hawaiian legends, such as one quilt that tells the story how the Hawaiian people may have originated from India, and that's why we have the Indian breadfruit pattern called the 'Ulu Elekini – the Indian Breadfruit has larger leaves and smaller fruit than our own 'Ulu Tree.

**MTO:** How do you feel about the fact that some of these historic designs are available through the internet, and museums, and that people are maybe copying them but they are doing so without thinking about Hawaiian tradition or respecting the kinds of things that you teach in your quilting school?

**CS:** I think that's one of the reasons why Mom and Dad started the quilting class. They wanted to teach others that Hawaiian quilting is not just sewing a quilt but that it also has its tradition, restrictions, and boundaries. They themselves would not have taken any historical patterns unless it was from their family's collection, or if they knew the designer. They wanted to keep within the old tradition of the quilt-making but still add their own family tradition as well. They never touched or copied historic patterns. We, who were raised in the Hawaiian culture, we know better and unless we share our knowledge with others about it, it is hard to tell them that they may be stealing. Just because the designer or family member is no longer with us,

that doesn't mean the quilt patterns those people created are available for others to use. For us, the legal law doesn't supersede years of tradition.

I always think that those who work with museum collections are in a very fortunate situation where they have visual and physical access to the collection – to the museum. That way, they can see the objects up close while also caring for them. I sometimes feel extremely emotional looking at quilt. It's just that as a cultural artist you also connect to artists, weavers, quilters on a very emotional level. Every stitch is so wonderfully made, and so beautiful. And you know that is when your imagination takes you to what they were thinking when they were creating the quilt. But obviously it's extremely important that not only do we have that level of empathy, but that we can also collect these stories to bring them to life and share them with museum visitors so that people respect the tradition.

**MTO:** Tell us about the quilts that have been made for the Pitt Rivers Museum.

**CS:** The quilts took over two years to complete. One reason of course was Covid, which completely shut down our fabric shops, where we needed to purchase our supplies. Second, we were originally commissioned to create only one 90 x 90 inch quilt complementing a feather ahu that is in the Pitt Rivers Museum. After several conversations with Marenka, however it seemed that one quilt couldn't really tell the story of Hawai'i. So, we decided that we would make 5 smaller 45 x 45 inch quilts, but when word got out to our quilting classes about the commission many of our quilters wanted to be part of this amazing project. That is why we decided to open the project to all the Poakalani quilters who wanted to participate. Therefore the Pitt Rivers Museum will have fourteen new Hawaiian quilts in their collection. All fourteen quilts together tell an even broader history of Hawai'i. It reflects who we are as a people, our culture, and traditions, but the quilts themselves also tell the personal stories of the amazing quilters who created them. While some of quilts are being made in Hawai'i, others are being quilted in the various regions of Japan. One quilt was even sewn on the ocean in the region of Papahānaumokuākea.