

## Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

**Interviewees:** Sandra Mollon (SM)  
**Interviewer:** Tom Martin (TM)  
**Subject:** An Artist's Toroweap Overlook Quilt  
**Date of Interview:** 12/19/2021  
**Method of Interview:** By telephone  
**Transcriber:** Stacy Birk  
**Date of Transcription:** February 2022  
**Transcription Reviewers:** Tom Martin

Keys: Sandra Mollon, quilt, Grand Canyon National Park, Toroweap Overlook, traditional patchwork, hand applique, National Quilt Museum, raw edge, hand dye, batik-grade fabric, John Slot (photographer), California's Butte Fire, North Rim, collage, quilting popularity, portrayal of light, creativity, Sedona, social media, art legacy, teach quilting, sewing machine, quilting machine, stitches, exhibition, textile arts.

TM: Today is Sunday, December 19th, 2021. This is a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Sandra Mollon. My name is Tom Martin. I would like the listeners to know this interview came about just this morning. Yesterday, while on Facebook, I saw a photograph of a quilt. And the quilt was showing an upstream view, from the Toroweap Overlook, in Grand Canyon National Park. This is a classic upstream view; you're above Lava Falls, and Vulcan's Anvil. And anyone who's an aficionado of Grand Canyon will know that scene. And the quilt just took my breath away. I put it up on Facebook last night; this morning, there's 500 Likes and 100 comments. It's just stunning. So I thought, I'll reach out to Sandra, who made this quilt; and here we are talking today. Sandra, thank you so much for your willingness to speak with us today. Where did you...? Let me back up a minute. How long have you been quilting?

SM: I started quilting in the late 1980s, doing very traditional patchwork, and then hand applique. I actually have a very traditional hand-applique quilt in the National Quilt Museum, in Paducah, Kentucky. After that point, that quilt won that Purchase Award in 2019, but at the -- when I finished making that quilt, let me say, I went into more art quilting from photographs. And I've been just working in this genre for, maybe, four or five years.

TM: So, when I think of quilts -- I'm sitting on one, on the bed here -- they can have designs, or they can be patchwork. But I don't think about art quilting, where you're trying to quilt a photograph, or some sort of landscape scene. What are the challenges between a traditional design quilt, whether, you know, that we might see as just patterns, and actually then making an art quilt?

SM: All right, first let's talk about how they're the same. You can't talk about their differences without talking about, you know, how they are the same. It can't be a quilt unless it's made out of layers of fabric with a layer of batting in between. So a quilt isn't a quilt until it's quilted. So quilting is a stitch that forms the layers of the fabric on the top of the quilt, a layer of batting, and a layer of backing. So I am making quilts. They are quilted and then, whether it's traditional, applique, patchwork, or in my case, of fused layers on the top with a solid backing, it's still stitched together, in my case by machine. So that's how all quilts are the same.

So now, the construction differences. You know, patchwork you sew patches together; and actually, in wonderful renditions of landscape quilts that are sewn -- patches of fabric essentially, or

pieces of fabric, sewn together, either by hand or machine. Applique is when a piece of fabric is applied to the top of another fabric. It can be turned under an edge and hand-sewn, or machine-sewn; or it can be raw edge. So what I'm doing is raw edge; that means all the pieces of fabric I use are just cut, but not turned under.

So when I adapt a photograph, I get that enlarged, do my tracing of the basic outline of the shapes, and then I, onto a piece of freezer paper, I iron that freezer paper -- which has a plastic-coated side -- to a base fabric. And then I cut the little -- I cut every little line that I drew, basically, or almost every little line; and I pick that little piece of paper and I go find a piece of fabric that looks like what I can see in the image. So of course, that's the challenge. It's hard to walk into a fabric store and find every shade of, say, rust! That I needed for this quilt. So, I'm also a hand dyer. So I started with white fabric; I usually purchase something that's a batik grade. In other words, a finely-woven fabric with lots of, high thread counts, but thin threads. So that they don't fray as much. Either batiks can be traditionally purchased in stores, too, but the hand-woven, or the hand-dyed, batik-grade fabric will give me the consistency of the thread count, and fineness. Then I manipulate it, in the dye bath. Sometimes, in order to get the long streaks that I needed, I would paint the dye on and then, kind of, gather it into, like, folds, so that I could get more streaky lines. Or sometimes, it probably needed a crumpled look; I would crumple the fabric into, like, a container with a dye. You know, there's so many different ways you can manipulate the dye, and the fabric.

So I started with white fabric. But I want to talk -- I want to go back a step further -- about how I got the photograph, in the first place. I live in Valley Springs, California, and there was a photographer here, by the name of John Slot, who made kind of a -- also on Facebook and social media -- he kind of made his name as a photographer out here during the Butte Fire. Because some of his images were just, like, amazing! This guy was willing to just get out there and take, you know, images of the fire in progress, and the planes. And so, once I started following him on Facebook, I saw that he was also an amazing landscape photographer. You know, a lot of images from San Francisco, and the Golden Gate Bridge, and Grand Canyon; cause he would get in his truck and he drives everywhere, I assume.

So he and I met, because we live -- we lived at that point -- just four or five miles apart. So I met with John, and talked to John, and I asked him if he would be willing to allow me to adapt some of his images for quilts. And I asked first for a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge; and I did that quilt, and it just was, Wow! You know, it turned out really great; and I did sell that one this year. Then I said, well, let me do another one; and he said, Do Yosemite. And I'm like, nah, nah -- not yet. I said I kinda want to do this one of the Grand Canyon. And he said... So he had an image of the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, and I did that. And I just loved it, I loved that quilt. So when I finished that one, at some point this year, he said, Hey, I have a picture I want you to do. And so he says, I'm gonna send it to you. And it was Toroweap Overlook. And I looked at it and I'm like, oh my God -- I don't know if I can do that one!

TM: So John actually sent you the photo of Toroweap, and said, what do you think?

SM: And I saw the image, and I loved it. Who wouldn't love it? I mean, I will admit to some artistic license. In other words, where I saw, in the part of the canyon that's to the right side of the photo, I would see some images of reds and purples and rusts and stuff; and sometimes, I made the saturation just a little bit more color saturated. And sometimes I wondered if I was on the right track or not. And in all honesty, when I started this image, I wasn't sure I could do it. But I had two choices: either try it, or not try it. So I'm like, well, I'm just gonna try it. And so it challenged me; and I wound up going back into the dye studio a couple of times. You know, with yards of fabric to try to get that color, that I wanted for those, kind of burnt oranges, and rusts, and reds to purples. And then the sky was a challenge; and so, lots of almost prestos, to grays, to purples, to blues in the sky. And so I spent a lot of time dying the fabric first, to get the colors I wanted. I did use some commercial batik fabrics that I have

on hand, but very little. Most of them are too printed to work; sometimes they work in small bits. But if you have a printed design on the fabric, and you're going for realism, which I certainly am, then you don't want like, say, a flower peeking out at you.

TM: Right. What is the finished size of this quilt?

SM: This one, right now, is about 36 inches by 48 inches. So it's fairly big, and it's gorgeous! It's up on the wall, on my design wall, in my studio right now; and every time I walk in there with the lights on, and I look at it, and I think, oh my God! I don't know if I can ever part with this quilt! I love it so much.

TM: Wow! You mentioned you draw this out, and then you end up cutting out all these little pieces. For this quilt, how many pieces of paper did you have?

SM: I have no idea! If I'd counted them, you would be very busy! So, I never count. People ask me, how long did it take you? And I can tell you, it took me nine weeks. But I -- and that's a relatively short amount of time for that, just a top. It's not even all the way finished yet. I am about to layer it, and quilt it. So, I've got more weeks left to go in it. I would say that the total amount of time, typically, a size like this, is three months of pretty solid work. And I work in my studio almost every day. Not every day, but pretty darn close to seven days a week; which sounds a little bit compulsive. But I work only 'til I'm tired; and as soon as I become fatigued -- even mentally fatigued from choosing fabrics -- because honestly, I had to canvas, you know, probably a 100 different pieces of fabric in my stash -- to find all of the little bits that looked like what I was seeing in the image. So I have to keep a mental inventory of fabrics, so that I kind of know where I'm going; and then sort all my fabrics by color and texture. So that I get, you know, to choose them correctly. In the end, when I was finished with the piece, I was like, oh my God! This is amazing! I surprised myself.

TM: Well, you know, no one would say to Michelangelo, hey, you're working on this too much! And that's what I think about this; I mean, this is just an incredible piece of art. And, so working on it too much, I don't know. That doesn't compute!

SM: Well, I think -- you know, I've had people criticize; well, not criticize, but suggest that possibly I was a workaholic. And I was like, no, you have to look at, you know, artistic people are, you know; we maybe are hard-wired a little different because for me, if I'm in my studio working, for me it's meditative. Because if you are working on something, and you're concentration is solely in that thing, it's like anything else. It's like knitting, or gardening, or any, or painting, or any other thing that distracts your mind from whatever's going on in your life. And all of us have hardships. I was widowed this year; my husband was a Stage 4 cancer patient since 2017, and passed away in March.

TM: I'm sorry to hear that.

SM: So it's... So what I'm saying is, for me, it's a joyful process, and almost meditative. So I don't see it as a sacrifice; it's not... It's time well spent, let me just say; that goes for me mentally, as well.

TM: When I look at your quilt, it is joyful!

SM: It is joyful.

TM: So your work is showing up -- your mental attitude, your meditative approach, the joy this gives you -- is showing up in your quilts.

SM: That's right; I agree. I think that the hand of the maker is present in any artwork, for those who really want to view it. And there isn't anger; it's joy, and a celebration of the complete beauty of the Grand Canyon. I knew I wanted to do a Grand Canyon quilt back in, when my husband and I traveled there, with our youngest daughter. Probably about 12 years ago? And we just went to the South Rim, on that visit, but I was astounded with the Grand Canyon; and I left the Grand Canyon saying, I am going to make a Grand Canyon quilt someday. And so I have made two now.

TM: What's the other one of? You mentioned the North Rim.

SM: Yes, and I'm gonna send you a better image of that, and you can share it with your group. I sent you an image from my iPad, and I don't think it's the right one. I think I have to give you the more high-res image, and I'll send that to you.

TM: Okay. Thank you.

SM: But it's also another John Slot-derived photograph. And I love that piece, too; but I think the Toroweap, which is done a couple years after North Rim, is a better quilt. I just, you know, it's more -- the composition in it was a wonderful photo to start with, and the colors.

TM: Just, your work on the sky, that just blew me away. It's having been there, a number of times, you have captured that place so well. And that is a reflection back to John, of course, the photographer; but it seems like this is a combination of artists. Your skills...

SM: Yes, together.

TM: ...together -- just has done something really magical there.

SM: I think -- I agree; I will tell you that I think that people have compared it to paintings, in many of the responses I've gotten through social media. They said, Oh, I thought that was a painting at first. And then when they realize it's a quilt, they're... I think they're more surprised by that, because they don't -- number one, a lot of people don't know that quilts can be art quilts; and maybe they're not exposed to that genre of quilting. But also, a lot of them just can't fathom the idea of a, basically what is a collage of fabrics, to make a more realistic image.

TM: Yes. And that's what struck me, as well. You know, the quilts we have are not -- are nothing like this; and it is very much, it does look like a painting. But it's painting with fabric, which is really lovely.

SM: Yes. I think that -- you know, people have said that the reason why quilting is popular -- and there are one in five, one out of every five households in the United States has a quilter, which is a pretty big percentage of people. In the country, you don't realize; and it's a lot of big quilt shows across the country, and around the world. And I think that the one thing that draws people into it is the tactile

nature of fabric; is something that feels more approachable than maybe paint for some people. And it certainly was for me. And there's such a variety of things that you can do, whether you do simple patchwork, or applique, or whole cloth. But I do want to express that I did not -- there are people out there that can take a photograph, and then send it off to a company that will just print that image on a one-piece fabric. That is not what I did. And I think that those quilts are cool, in a sense, but they're not -- for me, they don't have the artistic -- ah; they're just a simple rendition of the photo. they're not an artistic interpretation of that photo. Which I think that I do; I think that's the difference.

TM: That's what adds the charm to your quilt. Yeah, I can see -- well, the color isn't quite right, or it doesn't look quite like this, or that. But what it is -- how can I express this? It captures what Grand Canyon is, changes it in an artistic manner, to make a stunning quilt. It's definitely not a photo on a piece of cloth. That just makes it hard for me to comprehend; my brain is like, My heavens! How did you do that? Absolutely beautiful. So, are you thinking about doing another quilt on Grand Canyon?

SM: Ah. I, believe it or not, I've had so many people either offer me images, or, you know, contacted me with images of their own, of that, even of that area; including one that was taken from a skydiver. Which I thought was the funniest one of all, really. But I definitely will go back and revisit the Grand Canyon again, because I'm just drawn to that image. But I want to also, I have some other obligations to do, for a couple of other commission pieces that I have to do. And then I'll be back, probably -- and I want to do Yosemite; really a couple of good Yosemite National Park pieces, too. I actually live close to Yosemite. But I'd like to, you know, visit Sedona, and do some images from there, as well. And of course the Grand Canyon could be done ad nauseum; you could never get tired of it. The colors, and the sky, and, I even -- you know, if you look at the Toroweap image, and you see that the light, the angle of the light, is catching the rocks on the one face. And reflecting off the parts of the river, to give it almost -- you know, I used some yellows and other tones in there to show that reflection. And I also used hand-dyed fabrics, which gave some movement to the water. So that it doesn't look like it's completely flat, but reflecting in some areas. I put a lot of thought and time into that piece, and I feel like at some point I'd like to have it in a collection that showcases art from the Grand Canyon area. Or a museum out there. You know, I would be not -- I would be more likely to want to sell it -- at some point, down the road -- to a place where it would have a public exhibition, versus a private exhibition would be my choice. Because I think I'd like to continue to share my work with the world. And I think that, you know, inspire others to create, of course, in their life. I think that creative people are mentally happier and healthier people -- mentally healthier and mentally happier people. Because creativity -- ah, it just feeds your soul. And then it gives back to the world as well.

TM: That's lovely, and I sort of think that the world is your canvas; and when you're an artist that can create images to the level that you can, I'm just thrilled! I'm like, oh, what are you gonna do next! So this is just really beautiful.

SM: Yes. I'll come out to Flagstaff and visit you guys out there, for sure.

TM: That would be lovely.

SM: In fact, I'm driving through there the week after -- the day after Christmas. On my way to Albuquerque. But not this year, but at some point, I will definitely come out. And I'm gonna visit Sedona and the Grand Canyon, myself, again, and take some photographs. And I'll continue to work in this genre for whatever years I have left. It's been an amazing journey, from the first quilt that I ever made, to today. And I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunities I had to create; and I feel very, very, very lucky.

TM: Well, we as a species are very honored by you and your work. It's clearly -- everyone who's seen this is just stopped in their tracks. And so I really thank you for...

SM: Well, that's -- thank you so much for telling me. The response I got to social media was beyond gratifying, and exciting. I was glad that other people thought that this piece was beautiful. I certainly did. When I was working on it, and when I finished it, I was like, you know? I think this is a gorgeous piece.

TM: It is; it absolutely is. As they say, may you live long and prosper!

SM: Thank you. Well, I certainly appreciate your well wishes, because I would like to continue for many more years, making art quilts, and leave that legacy for my family. I'm hoping that, you know, -- none of us know how long we have on this Earth, but one thing I can tell you for people who create, and do something with their hands, is you do leave a part of yourself behind for others, your descendants, to see. And they will know you by the work of your hands, or your art, what you cared about. That's a legacy. That's amazing!

TM: Yeah, that's truly lovely. Sandra, is there anything else I haven't asked you, that you think I should have, and that you would like to say?

SM: Oh, I'll tell you a little bit about my personal history. I grew up on a small farm in Michigan, on Lake Huron. So, you know, I was always tromping around the fields, and walking down on the beach. And my heart is still there, even if I physically don't live in Michigan anymore. I live in California, as I said earlier. I do have a college degree, but my major in college was biology. I wound up using that by working in research labs for a while, but that wasn't something that fired up my soul. I realized I'd majored in biology simply because I just loved life. I loved the study of life, and growing things, and... But I really didn't love research. And so I started teaching; I substitute taught science in California for -- beside some other topics -- for 14 or 15 years out here. And then, encourage by my husband to stop doing two jobs, cause I was teaching quilting at the same time I was teaching student in public school; he's like, pick one job or the other, cause you're never home. And I'm like, well, then it has to be quilting. If I had to pick one or the other, I'm doing that. And he's like, fine.

TM: Sandra? When you were growing up in Michigan, on the farm, did anyone in your family quilt?

SM: My mother did a little bit of cross-stitch on a quilt, and hand-quilted it. And she says that descendants on her side of the family were Pennsylvania Dutch, through Pennsylvania, and did make quilts; but I didn't have any of those, or see any of them. So there was -- I do have ancestors who

quilted, but in the Pennsylvania Dutch part of the country. And that might be why I immediately -- the first time I saw a quilting magazine in, around 1987, I'm like, oh, okay, I have to make a quilt. And I just told my husband, I have to make a quilt. And he's like, Okay. The one thing about my husband that I can say, is that, without his support all these years, I could not have done it.

TM: Nice, nice. So it wasn't like growing up as a teenager, you were into quilting. This came to you a little later in life.

SM: Yeah. Well, really, actually in my late 20s; or I wasn't really that -- oh, almost 30 maybe. Late 20s is when I made my first quilt, and I simply never stopped. I just kept going. And, I got better sewing machines over time, and more fabric, and more thread, as you collect stuff. And I was interested in other things; you know, I've done other types of arts and crafts. But, quilting was my thing! And even my kids growing up with it, they knew that mom was a quilter. And I had my third child and at six weeks I handed her to my husband, when he got home from work; and I'm like, I'm off to my quilt meeting; I will see you in a few hours! Here's the baby, here's the bottle, I'm off! Because this is something I had to do. But like I said, I had the support of my family; I would not have been able to do it without that.

TM: Nice, nice. I'm going to go back for a minute, cause it suddenly occurred to me -- do you use a machine...? I mean, it seems like sometimes there's a machine that will -- you know, you've got to sew the pieces down. And so you have to turn it through your sewing machine; you have to bunch it all up and then get in there to the small area you're working on?

SM: No, it's not that hard. So, I do hand-guide all the stitches. And I don't pre-mark them per se, except with the lines and stuff that I will add -- usually with like Fabrico markers. I'll put in a little bit of line work here and there. And then I go in and I follow those lines with threads; and I choose my thread color to match, or to accentuate. So if I want something to go a little bit darker, I can use a black thread, for instance. The machine I have is called a -- it's like a mid-arm quilting machine; and it's on a table, so I don't roll my quilt into a row where it's like a long-arm quilting machine. But, I do move the quilt around; I will fold it in half, a little bit, from the back; but I have about a 20-inch throat space, so it's not wadded up. It would be very hard to wad something up of that size, that I'm working on. So I have a really great machine; and then I hand-guide; you know, I have a bobbin thread, and a top thread, just like any sewing machine. And, guide the stitches where I want 'em. The stitching does two things: one, it keeps structural integrity, between the pieces that are fused; so that they can't come off. You know, it holds the whole thing together. The fusing is very lightweight, and it would not be permanent. It'll hold for some time, but you could peel it back; I could go in and peel off any one of those pieces right now. I mean, I don't want to; and I could hit it; but sometimes they come loose. And I have to hit 'em down with a hot iron. And you can only do that so many times before it stops sticking. So I try to not move the quilt around a whole lot, until I get the stitching down; and of course, like any quilt on a machine, you start in the middle of the piece and you work your way out towards the edges. Then you can block it to get it flat, if you need to; and then sewing facing strips and the sleeves, so that you can hang it. Or, I sometimes will mount it on stretcher bars, if I want a piece to be up for permanent exhibition; that maintains, you know, a structural wooden frame underneath. But I'm careful not to let any of the wood touch the fabric; so that it -- of the quilt itself -- so that it remains a space, or something in between it,

so that it's acid free; so that no wood touches the cloth for the period of, you know, so that it's preserving the work.

TM: Right. And a 20-inch throat -- I'm thinking that where the needle is, it's almost two feet away to where the rest of the machine is.

SM: That's right! Where the arm is; yes.

TM: So a 48-inch quilt, you almost get to the middle of the quilt. Not quite, but real close. Yeah.

SM: Almost. Near, yes. And so, you know, I will fold, fold it in half maybe, sometimes when I'm working; and towards one edge, and -- but that's about as much as I do. And then I've got both hands on the surface of the quilt, moving it around, and my eyes are like right there. I change the needle every six hours, pretty much it works, so I have a very sharp needle and a very clean machine. I don't want skipped stitches or flaws; so I try to make sure that the stitches are all the same length, that the thread color is one that complements the fabric. It's a lot of thought and time that goes into that part of it, as well.

TM: I bet. You mentioned you're an award-winning quilter, and that some -- your quilts are in the National Quilt Museum. How many...?

SM: I have a quilt in the National Quilt Museum.

TM: A quilt. that's just amazing. How many quilts have you made by now? Roughly. Do you have any idea?

SM: Oh, golly. Um. I don't really know. I would say somewhere between 50 and a 100, but I couldn't give you an exact number. I'd have to count them, really. And I've given away, and sold pieces, throughout my lifetime, so... I've donated quilts, of course, to charitable causes. And I have given quilts to family members, and friends. And made baby quilts, and grandkids quilts, and bedquilts, and wall quilts, and seasonal quilts and, you know -- hard to say! But I will tell you that the art quilting that I'm doing right now, I am limited to about three pieces per year, or four, potentially, that I can produce of this quality. Because it takes me three months to do a piece this way; on average, of this size.

TM: Yeah. it's just -- that limits it right there. Wow! Well, you do incredible work. It's been a real honor to speak with you about this. And, anything else you want to add?

SM: No. I think that does it. And I do, I really am honored that you chose to interview me. And I hope that it increases interest in the textile arts, which I like to continue to see grow throughout the United States and the world.

TM: Nice. that's very nice. Well, it's an honor speaking with you. This has just been really wonderful. And with that, I think we'll conclude this Grand Canyon oral history interview with Sandra Mollon. My name is Tom Martin. It's Sunday, December 19th, 2021. And, Sandra, thank you so very much.



SM: Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

END of Sandra Mollon interview.