

# About Kintsugi Quilts

by Pepper Cory

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“Kintsugi I”



Host Susan Brubaker Knapp with Pepper Cory

The story of *kintsugi* is that the Emperor of Japan once dropped his favorite tea cup. He sent the pieces of the broken cup back to the potter who made it in hope that the potter could mend his own work. But when the cup came back, the Emperor was disappointed—the cup was mended with ugly staples. The Emperor then sent the cup to a jeweler. The jeweler re-broke the cup into pieces and carefully mended the pieces with many layers of lacquer mixed with gold dust. When the cup came back to the Emperor, he was delighted with the result. He thought the mended cup, with its cracks defined by veins of gold, was even more beautiful than when the cup was whole. It became his favorite tea cup again and he took pleasure in his cup with its gold cracks every day when he drank tea.

*Kintsugi* (‘mended with gold’) has become a metaphor for gathering up shards and all manner of broken things and bringing them together again. Not

with the expectation of making the object exactly as it was before but rather to mend and accept and admire the repaired object. *Kintsugi* means to love and accept the mended object since it reminds you of the process of repair and you appreciate the object more in its battered glory.

I’m now applying the concept of *kintsugi* to a whole new generation of quilts and I have plenty of ‘shards’ to choose from since I’ve taught quilting for more than 35 years. I never throw work away. All those sample blocks and class samples were worth doing once so now these little pieces will finally find their home in new quilts. The *kintsugi* quilt I showed on *QUILTING ARTS TV* has samples from classes I’ve taught in the past: two signature blocks, a little pieced Schoolhouse wall hanging, some *sashiko* (Japanese hand quilting), plus some tiny blocks that were gifts from friends. The only block I made for this quilt was the little blue star in

the middle. The small appliquéd heart block is a sentimental nod to my belief that quilts need a center—a heart—in their composition.

To start a *kintsugi* quilt, I gather like-minded small pieces of work and arrange them on the gray carpet of the spare room in the studio, leaving space between the blocks. It might take days or even weeks to finally decide the blocks’ arrangement. Then I transfer the arrangement to graph paper. Sometimes I have to cut down or frame (build up) a block. Since I like usable-size quilts, I am not averse to large open areas between the patchwork pieces. These will be well-quilted and add to the overall effect.


Choosing the ‘mending fabric’ is the biggest decision. The question is this: what will do the most good for the quilt? This time it was a shot cotton composed of black and bright gold. The overall effect of the color of this fabric showed as a subtle mustard color.

I consulted a long time with my favorite longarm quilter about the quilting. She wanted to use metallic gold thread to further emphasize the ‘mended with gold’ idea but I nixed that since it seemed like stretching the metaphor too far. A bright royal blue thread was chosen and I’m very happy with the way the blue stitches draw together the diverse blocks and the way the quilting shows on the teal back. The title of the quilt is “Kintsugi I.” Even its binding was pieced from long strips of different bias binding scraps left over from other projects.

“Kintsugi II” is still a quilt top and has a lot of sentiment in it. The crazy strip

patchwork was my mother’s work and I found it in her sewing basket after her death. Not quite sure what she had in mind to do with it. I combined her blocks with a printed napkin I got in France. In the middle of the napkin, I big stitched a spider web and plan to embroider a small black spider. Spiders were my mom’s totem animals and she never let us kill a spider. This top will likely grow larger. Got to admit, before I cut up Mom’s work, I said a prayer, hoping she’d approve of my use of her patchwork. So far so good.

I feel that *kintsugi* quilts are going to be important to me from now on. While I still begin new work, being mindful of

the concept of *kintsugi* means I still don’t throw anything away and am constantly taking out old work and looking at it with a new eye. I really enjoy puzzling over how to bring diverse pieces of work together and am pleased that each *kintsugi* quilt will be unique. There will never be any kits or patterns made of *kintsugi* quilts as each one is distinctly different. 

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Detail of “Kintsugi I”