

Quilters without Borders:

Piecing Together a Better Future for Mongolian Women

BY MAGGIE BALL



Maggie Ball (left) and Selenge Tserendash

Mongolia is a developing nation struggling with high inflation and increasing divisions between wealthy and poor. Despite not having a native quilting tradition, one Mongolian woman, Selenge Tserendash, had a vision of creating a community center in Ulaanbaatar where low-income and unemployed women could come together to learn to quilt, make items to sell, and give each other moral and social support. In 2003 she sent appeals for help to 70 U.S. quilt teachers, and I was one who answered her call.

In her impassioned email, Selenge asked for a volunteer to teach quilting and provide expertise for her organization, Shine Zamnal NGO. She explained how unemployment in the Mongolian capital was over 40 percent and alcoholism

and abuse were rampant. The women were left to hold the families together without support systems to help them. She saw quilting as an excellent activity for Mongolian women, as they are good seamstresses and even nomadic families have

old hand-cranked Russian sewing machines and recyclable materials to use.

In 2004, I went to Ulaanbaatar with my daughter, Hazel. Working with Selenge, we gave presentations and taught beginning quilting at the newly opened Mongolian Quilting Center. I taught women how to piece the *Ölzii* pattern, a traditional Mongolian symbol often painted on the doors of *gers* (Mongolian yurts), and thought to bring long life and prosperity. In Tibetan Buddhism, which is practiced in Mongolia, it is a never-ending knot signifying the universe and continual cycles of life and death. This symbol is featured on many attractive products made at the Center, appealing to tourists and Mongolians.

When funds that had been pledged from Japanese donors fell through later that year, my church, St. Barnabas Episcopal Church on Bainbridge Island, Washington, sent \$4,000, enabling Selenge to open a new Center in the basement of a block of apartments. However, there were



Designers, teachers and other employees of the Mongolian Quilting Center



Garment designed by Shiilge Bat-Ulzii

major problems with inadequate lighting and heating as well as flooding. In 2006, I returned to Mongolia with Carol Gregory. In collaboration with quilters from Japan and England, we organized the First International Quilt Show in Mongolia to raise funds to rent a new location and increase local awareness of the Center. It was a thrill to see the beautiful work of the Mongolian women who had started from scratch just two years earlier.

By September 2008, aided by a capital campaign hosted by St. Barnabas Church, we had raised \$82,000, enough to purchase a facility with a retail area, classroom and small office. In 2012, Selenge came to the U.S. and we hosted a special exhibit and booth at the Sisters Outdoor Quilt Show in Sisters, Oregon.

At the Center we encouraged the women to develop silk products to sell since we knew these would be popular with tourists. Silk is manufactured in China especially for Mongolians and is readily available in



Mighty Three, 52" x 38", 2014, by Byambalaa Lhagvansuren

the market in Ulaanbaatar for a cost of about \$4-\$5 per meter. The Mongolians make colorful silk *deels*, tunics worn with a sash, which they wear on special occasions. At first a clothing manufacturer gave the silk scraps to Selenge rather than burn or discard them,

but when the manufacturer saw the nice products being made, they began to charge for the material. The cost is minimal and the women use even the smallest pieces to make foundation-pieced fan blocks, table runners, wall hangings, crazy patchwork cosmetic bags, log ▶



Salkin zeerd, 27½" x 32½", 2014, by Byambalaa Lhagvansuren of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia



CLOCKWISE from above:

Ball with **Crazy Patchwork Horse** by Shiilge Bat-Ulzii of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Magnificent Horse, 37" x 47", 2014, by Byambalaa Lhagvansuren

Composition with deel-III, 36" x 42", 2014, by S. Ganchimeg of Ulaanbaatar

Farewell, 33" x 42", 2014, by Byambalaa Lhagvansuren

cabin blocks to go on denim long-handled bags, and more. They are becoming increasingly creative with the designs and it is exciting to see their new pictorial and contemporary wall hangings, such as Mongolian women in traditional dress and the amazing horses. While quilting is not a traditional craft in Mongolia, Buddhist monks used to make exquisite silk applique wall hangings depicting gods to adorn their temples. It seems appropriate that the women at the Center have returned to this tradition with their own innovative interpretations.

In August 2014, I returned to Ulaanbaatar accompanied by three others from



Portland, Oregon, to assist with the Second International Mongolian Quilt Show celebrating the 10th anniversary of the founding of the Center. In addition to quilts from Mongolia, the U.S. and Japan, quilters from the U.K. and Australia contributed to the exhibit.

The quilt show took place in The State Department Store in the center of town. For the 2006 quilt show in the same place we had used safety pins to tether the quilts to beds in the furniture department on the fourth floor. This time we had a fabulous location on the second floor in a large space between the up and down escalators, but hanging the quilts on fabric-covered

wooden panels was time consuming, requiring us to work until late at night. The quilt show opened with much pomp and ceremony the next morning. We began at 11:00 with music and speeches by Selenge, Ogawa Hiromi of Japan and me. A fashion show of amazing dresses followed, all of which were designed by the talented Shiilge Bat-Ulzii, one of the Mongolian designers at the Center. The show was declared open after an elaborate ribbon cutting ritual attended by the Mongolian Minister of Labor as well as by TV and radio representatives. After we had cut the ribbon, we were presented with fancy champagne flutes filled with milk



for us to drink. Traditionally this would be *airag*, which is fermented mare's milk and not a delicacy I would choose to drink. Fortunately, they used cow's milk for this ceremony. The best of show as judged by Nancy Watts and me was *Mighty Three*, designed and made by Byambalaa Lhagvansuren, a luscious silk piece that depicts three horses. The grand prize was a sewing machine donated by the Singer sewing machine shop in Ulaanbaatar, and runners-up received rotary cutter, ruler and mat sets, which are very hard to obtain in Mongolia.

The quilt show was well received and we sold many quilts and Mongolian products. As quilts were sold, new ones were hung, so the whole thing evolved and changed on a daily basis. After the show, we had a celebratory barbeque at a park just outside the city. The Mongolian women came with their kids and there was much merriment, games and singing. They presented me with one of Byambalaa's beautiful silk wall hangings depicting a horse with flowing mane set with a rich royal blue border. I felt the love and warmth of these women and was privileged to be part of their community for this brief stay.

This project is unusual in that it was initiated by a Mongolian woman and not an overseas aid or charitable organization. Selenge Tserendash has shown extraordinary tenacity and perseverance through times of hardship to make her dream a reality. She gave up a career as a lawyer to help

her fellow countrywomen. I have enormous admiration for her devotion, tireless energy and gift for networking. The Center now employs Selenge as the director, three seamstresses, three designers, a manager and five part-time teachers. There are 20-30 piece-workers – low-income, unemployed and disabled women who work at home and bring quilt blocks to the Center for the seamstresses to assemble into finished products. Teachers at the Center have taught hundreds of women in Ulaanbaatar and rural Mongolia and broadcast classes on Mongolian TV. The Mongolian government sponsors them to teach courses to unemployed women. Various organizations such as World Vision, the German Development Agency, the International Women's Association in Mongolia, and the British and American Embassies have all provided grants for teaching and supplies. Goals for the future are to become self-sustaining and to expand the Center, providing free or low-cost legal aid to needy women, and establish a nursery.

Selenge and I are in frequent contact and I sell the Mongolian products when I lecture and teach at quilt guilds around the U.S. My life has been enriched and rewarded by participating in this project from its inception, and I feel as though I have family in Mongolia.

Please visit www.mongolianquilts.org and www.dragonflyquilts.com for further information on the project and to see more photographs from the quilt show. You may contact MAGGIE BALL through the Dragonfly Quilts website.