



BY Lauren DeLuca

Rod Buffington

PATCHWORK PAINTINGS

As a child growing up in northern Illinois, Rod Buffington watched the Chicago Cubs and aspired to become a sports writer or broadcaster. Instead, he became a watercolor quilter.

The painting part came along when he took a drawing class at Rockford College (now Rockford University) as a young man. In that class, he discovered not only that he had natural artistic talent, but that he liked making art ... a *lot*.

He made the decision to study art education at Eastern Illinois University, after which he taught high school art classes while earning his master's degree. Rod was eventually offered the director of art education position at the University and directed the institution's galleries.

Rod's father had passed away while he was in college, and the chair of the art department became an important mentor in his life. But of all the relationships Rod developed throughout his studies, meeting and marrying his first wife, Carol, also an art educator, is the most important of them all. Sadly, after 14 years of marriage to his college sweetheart, he lost her to cancer. He, and their two children, needed to adjust to a new way of life.

It was during this difficult period that he came to terms with the fact that he was a full-time educator, not the professional artist he longed to be. Though times were tough, he decided to shift directions.

A portrait of the artist on a winter's day in Springfield.



ABOVE, L-R: *School Houses* (ca. 1980) was Rod's first watercolor quilt painting, inspired by his grandmother, who lived to be 104 years old and made quilts all her life; Rod's pencil work comes first, then it's onto the fabric. **OPPOSITE:** When he uses an architectural ruler to mark his quilts, Rod averages 20 stitches per inch.

Rod's grandmother, who made quilts until she was in her late 90s (and lived to be 104), had always been an inspiration. One night, he had a dream about painting, making collages — and adding stitching.

Intrigued, he painted his first watercolor quilt, hand stitching actual Schoolhouse quilt blocks into the painting (using silk buttonhole thread). When a colleague saw it, he urged Rod to further explore his unique approach.

Rod's face lights up when he shares his process. Working from a sketch, he completes all of the painting using a tiny brush on 32" x 32" handmade watercolor paper. Using a T-pin, he then pokes holes into the paper where he'll take stitches. If he makes one mistake when pre-punching these holes, the painting will be ruined. (Thankfully, after more than 200 quilts painted, this has only happened

once or twice.)

The fabric is then applied to the painting with translucent adhesive sheets. After that comes the hand or machine stitching through the fabric and paper.

Though most of his works are 60 percent painting and 40 percent fabric, the act of hand cutting, applying, and stitching the fabric takes the longest. "I can do a cut-out as small as a hole punch in a paper puncher," shared Rod. "I can cut it perfectly to fit."

The artist's sole subject matter varies. Though he had previously dreamed of announcing at the big games, Rod's current ambition is to display a series of watercolor quilts inspired by Major League Baseball logos at the National Baseball Museum in Cooperstown, New York. (There are surely a few Cubs fans in Chicago who would be interested too.)



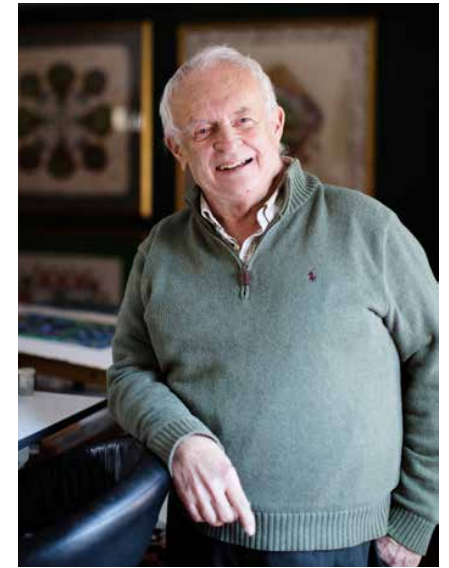
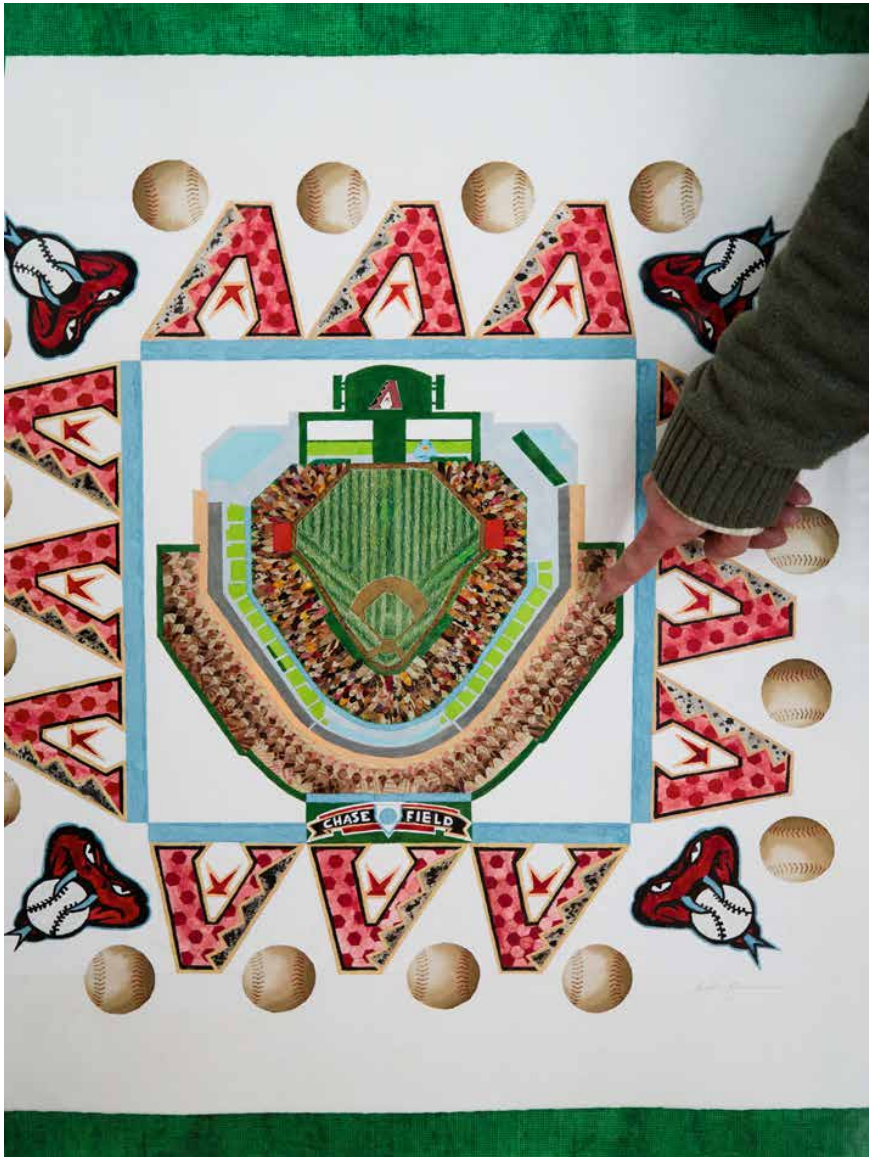


L-R: Rod's baseball-themed work shows his versatility with subject matter; like any quiltmaker, Rod frequently rummages through his fabric stash; a Log Cabin quilt provided inspiration for this brown-toned watercolor quilt.



ON THESE PAGES: One portion of *Double Wedding Rings*, composed early in his painting career, features paint exclusively, while all other sections are composed of hand-inlaid, 100 percent cotton material.





ABOVE, L-R: A few of the hundreds of lapel pins from Rod's collection, many of which commemorate Rotary events; artist, collector, and lifelong Illinoisan Rod Buffington. OPPOSITE: In *Arizona Diamondbacks* (2020), the "fans" watching the game were created using hand-cut fabric pieces about the size of a hole punch.

In 1983, Rod married Rosemary, a pastel artist, and relocated to Springfield. The couple had a daughter named Jill (who tragically passed away at age 28 from an arrhythmia attack).

Within a few years of living in Springfield, Rod became the director of the Springfield Art Association and went from exhibiting his watercolor quilts at the Old Capitol Art Fair to winning best of show by 1989. Rod would go on to exhibit at the National Quilt Museum in Paducah, Kentucky, as well as at the International Quilt Festival in Houston, Texas. In 1999, he started creating watercolor quilts exclusively using fabric from specific companies, who, in turn, hung his custom work in their booth. He also published a book, *Double Vision: Companions and Choices*, featuring works based on a collaborative exhibit he curated in 2001.

And as if there isn't already so much to admire about Rod, here is more: He is a proud, longtime member of the Rotary Club. Each international president decides on a theme for their year, and a logo is created for that theme. Over the past six years, Rod has reimagined each year's logo, gifting his original watercolor quilt painting to the president, and donating profits from prints sold to the foundation's Polio Plus Program.

This artist's passion for his craft has made him many friends. He has connected with fans and other artists locally and nationally. There are many sports writers and broadcasters out there. But as far as anyone knows, Rod Buffington is the only one painting watercolor quilts — and quilters and artists alike are cheering for him.

