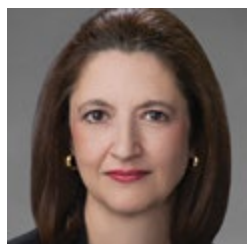


Detail Work

In Robin Russell's world, practicing law and quilting are both fine arts.

BY MICHAEL CORCORAN



Robin Russell

ANDREWS KURTH
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To most people, a quilt is just a comfy bed covering. But for Robin Russell, managing partner at Andrews Kurth Kenyon's Houston office, it's a means of artistic expression that belongs on a wall or a table.

Her whimsical work "Summer Salad" was chosen for display at the 2015 Houston International Quilt Festival. It looks good enough to eat—until, on closer inspection, you see that Russell has sewn ladybugs into the lettuce and broccoli. In art—as in law—it's all in the details.

"My grandmother taught me how to sew and embroider when I was very young," says Russell, who started making her own school clothes at age 10. "I try to always have a small piece of needlepoint in my purse." She's the woman in the Brooks Brothers suit stitching away on business flights. "Handwork is very therapeutic."

But Russell has learned to keep her artwork out of the boardroom. "I remember one day at a CLE session, I went up to a speaker and told him how much I enjoyed his talk," Russell recalls. "He said he was surprised I was paying attention because I was doing needlepoint. But when I'm doing handwork, I can follow every conversation."

Growing up 35 miles south of San Antonio, Russell's dream was to be a home economics teacher. But after the Devine High valedictorian scored off the charts on her SATs, a school administrator suggested she might be suited for a career in medicine or the law. After a semester at Texas Tech University, where she received a valedictorian scholarship, she changed her focus and ended up with a degree in international business. Russell eventually followed her two older brothers into law school. But she never stopped sewing.

She was more of a needlepoint artist when she met her quilting mentor, Frances Holliday Alford, 12 years ago in Vermont. When Alford, also a native Texan, showed Russell her studio, the lawyer's eyes opened to the possibilities of art quilting.

Any piece of material can be used for decoration, so when Russell says she's going "sale-ing" on a Saturday morning, she's not going out on the water, but to garage sales and thrift stores. The last time she was in New York City on business, Russell stopped on the sidewalk outside the

Metropolitan Museum of Art to pick up the metal admissions buttons patrons discarded.

Russell won a national needlepoint competition run by the Women's Educational and Industrial Union of Boston in 1991, also a pivotal year in her legal career. Just three years out of Baylor Law School, Russell joined the firm's Boston team in representing the Bank of New England in a \$32 billion bankruptcy case. Russell was inexperienced in the area, but was tagged so she could be with her husband, Jim Paulsen, who was accepted to Harvard to get his LL.M. He now teaches at South Texas College of Law.

She's one of the country's leading bankruptcy experts, having co-written *Last Rites: Liquidating a Company* for Oxford University Press in 2007 and presented countless papers on bankruptcy law. She has also written a biography of her mother, *Our Honey*.

Russell sees a correlation between her art projects and her complex bankruptcy cases. "You learn to step back every now and then," she says. "When you spend so much time working on a brief, you sometimes have to set it aside for a while and then come back with a fresh perspective."

And in both art and law, she gives back. For 12 years, she's hosted an annual Vintage Valentine Party—inviting other women attorneys to her home



to gussy up antique valentines from Russell's collection—as a fundraiser for Christ the King Lutheran Church, which her family attends. "It's great when you have a group of people creating art together," Russell says. "You feed off each other."

In her law career, Russell has a pro bono niche defending attorneys she feels have been wrongly hit with sanctions.

"Patience and attention to detail are very important in both [art and law], as well as creativity," Russell says. "When you're doing art, you need to envision what it's all going to look like at the end. You have a strategy for how to handle that project, just like you have a strategy for how to handle a transaction or piece of litigation." 